

Precis and source analysis of the radicalism of the american revolution by

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Precis and Source Analysis of The Radicalism of the American Revolution By Charlie Hwang History of the Americas I Dr. Drouin Word Count: Gordon S. Wood's *Radicalism of the American Revolution* challenges historian's views regarding the nature of the American Revolution. *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* is an academic monograph written in 1991 in the midst of age long belief that American Revolution was not radical. *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* reevaluates the American Revolution in a unique angle to highlight its historical significance the impacts it made on the American society. Wood argues that the American Revolution was radical by outlining how historians misinterpret the American Revolution through an incorrect definition of the word " radical". One significant value to Wood's monograph is his scope in which he specifically focuses on the social changes of the American Revolution. However, his lack of primary sources to support his argument limits the validity of his work. Wood first argues that historians often misinterpret the American Revolution in terms of its radicalism. As evidence provides ways in which most historians view the American Revolution. Wood gives a specific quote from Hannah Arendt that states that other historians seek to evaluate the American Revolution in light of the French Revolution in the terms of radicalism (Wood 1). Such evidence highlights the misinterpretation of the American Revolution by many historians as they judge its radicalism by the physical violence or conflict. Wood explains that this view on radicalism is erroneous and should be measured in the terms of social changes. Wood's second argument is that the word " radical" is incorrectly used by most historians. In other words, he argues that the word " radical" should be defined by the " amount of social

change that actually took place" (Wood 2). As evidence Wood looks to the dramatic and indeed radical impacts of the social change of the American Revolution. Example of such evidence used to support this argument is a quote from historian J. Franklin Jameson in which Jameson states that " the stream of revolution, once started, could not be confined within narrow banks, but spread abroad upon the land" (Wood 2). Wood uses such evidence to highlight the flaws in confining the definition of the word " radical" to only physically violent events. Social changes can make an impressionable impact just as physical violence can. Therefore the correct definition of " radical" includes social changes as well. Wood's third argument is that the American Revolution was radical in its drastic social changes. For evidence, Wood provides some specific social changes of the American Revolution. Evidence used by Wood to support this argument is the destruction of hierarchy during the time of the revolution. Wood provides the example of elder Charles Carroll and his son in which the elder Charles Carroll raised in pre-revolutionary generation shows his emphasis on hierarchy by scolding his son who antagonized the governor of Maryland in a newspaper. However, his son who is from the revolutionary era was not contempt to " abide the insincere dissembling of that older monarchical courtier world" (Wood 4). The American Revolution changed social relationship amongst the people in the revolutionary era. Such evidence along with examples of other social changes during the revolution show that the American Revolution brought upon drastic social changes. By the definition of the word " radical" from his previous argument, the American Revolution was radical due to the social impacts it had on American Society.

Such changes allowed the people to see each other on equal footing, equally able to create change in their government particularly by the voting rights. Wood's final argument is that the radical changes of the American Revolution continue to influence society. As evidence Wood gives specific events that were influenced by the social changes of the American Revolution. These changes include the abolition of slavery and the women's rights movements of the nineteenth century (Wood 3). The social changes that destroyed the hierarchy embedded in colonial society allowed the people to value themselves as equals with each other. It allowed people to see their voice equally important. This brought waves of movements of further equality by the groups that were oppressed such as the black slaves and women in future American society. This sense of equality embedded in American society during the revolutionary era persists through present day and allows all people to voice their opinions. These social changes are significant as they have direct impact on politics; it is the votes of these people that decide the government. The new relationship amongst the people in American society served as a catalyst in the people voicing and acting out for their beliefs. One of the greatest values to Wood's monograph is his scope as he focuses on the changes in colonial society during the revolutionary era in evaluating its radicalism. Not only is his scope relatively focused, but previous historians have rarely evaluated the radicalisms of the American Revolution in regards to the social changes. Wood explains that many historians "admit only a political, not a social radicalism" of the American Revolution (Wood 2). Thus many historians believe the American Revolution was not very radical as they limit themselves to only the political

changes. Wood argues that due to the destruction of hierarchy in colonial society, people began to grasp the concept of equal rights. Through voting rights, the equal opinions of the people were able to directly influence the government. Wood, in viewing the social changes of the American Revolution, is able to display the social radicalism of the American Revolution to other historians. This is significant as such drastic social changes not only affected the revolutionary society but continues to influence American society. However Wood's arguments also have some limitations. One of the most significant limitations to Wood's work is the lack of primary sources used to support his work. Throughout his work Wood makes many claims and arguments. However majority of the evidences supporting his arguments tend to be secondary sources or simply direct quotes or opinions of other historians. For example in his claim that most historians misinterpret the American Revolution, he simply borrows the words of Hannah Arendt, another historian, rather than giving specific evidence of other historian's misinterpretation of the American Revolution (Wood 1). Throughout the work many of Wood's arguments are not confirmed through primary evidence but depend on the opinions of other historians. Such lack of primary source evidence depreciates the validity of Wood's work as it lacks the necessary evidence to support his arguments. While much of Wood's analysis is well organized and structured, they require more primary source evidence to be strongly supported. Historians studying this topic should read Wood's work with this issue of validity in mind and research specific primary sources to confirm questionable claims made by Wood. Gordon S. Wood's *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* brings a

rather sensational new view on the American Revolution for the scholars studying the topic. Most significantly by focusing his scope specifically on the social changes of the American Revolution, Wood allows scholars to see the radicalism of the American Revolution. However the lack of primary sources to support his arguments devalues the usefulness of his work to other scholars studying the topic.