

How radical was the american revolution?

[History](#), [Revolution](#)



The American Revolution was seen as a crucial event in the 18th century as it was the first time where a colony that Britain controlled was able to successfully declare independence. Historians have been debating whether the Revolution was radical or whether it was conservative. Graham Wood writes in his book *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* the “we measure the radicalism by the amount of social change that actually took place- the transformations in the relationships that bound people to each other- then the American Revolution was not conservative at all... it was radical”[1] due to the fact that the American Revolution disputed existing social structures and then radically brought the idea of equality. However, the American Revolution could have been conservative because they wanted to preserve American rights and the property from the Government. This essay explores the political, social and economic aspects of whether the American Revolution was radical or conservative.

This paragraph explores whether the American Revolution brought radical political change or whether it was conservative. The declaration of Independence underlined many radical ideas whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or abolish it, and to institute new government. In addition in 1818, John Adams wrote: “The Revolution was in the minds and hearts of the people; a change in their religious sentiments, of their duties and obligations”.[2] Murray N Rothbard sees the Declaration of Independence as a helpful source to get a clear insight into the revolution. Rothbard felt that if it took such significant period of abuses to persuade the mass of people to throw off their own commitments and to make revolution; then it cannot be

possible for the revolution to be conservative.[3]It can be said that politicians may have had radical ideas as the things that the Declaration of Independence was proposing was escaping existing habits and wanting to eradicate anything to do with the British. However, it can be said that not all revolutionaries and politicians did not want complete radical political change. Even though Thomas Jefferson's Declaration of Independence outlined radical ideas, Jefferson himself did not want complete change as it seen in his letter to Henry Lee in May 1825, " Not to find out new principles, or new arguments, never before thought of, not merely to say things which had never been said before"[4]. This demonstrates how Jefferson did not want completely different ideas that did not represent American culture and tradition which shows a sense of conservatism from Jefferson. Also, the revolution was all about protecting and conserving the American colonist's rights as they wanted to prevent social mobility so they can be the ones running America when the revolution was over. To add to this after the revolution, even though Britain's influence in colonies had not completely disappeared, Congress had control of politics in the colonies which is what the American leaders wanted to protect. Taking all of the factors into consideration, in terms of the revolution was conservative in bringing political change as leaders wanted to preserve their own rights so they could lead the country when the revolution ended. However, there were some radical aspects as leaders would use radical quotes such as " All men are created equal"[5], which was said in the Declaration of Independence by Thomas Jefferson, to get their ideas across.

It can be said the American Revolution was radical as it transformed American society into a society with revolutionary and radical thought ready to rise against the abuses of the British. However, there is an argument that the revolution was conservative in a bid to preserve the rights of the Americans. During the Revolution, the revolutionaries used tactics such as revolutionary songs to bring revolutionary spirit among the American people and inspired the people in America to rise up for change as the song mentions, “sprightly youths attend, Leave their sweethearts and risk their lives, Their country to defend.”[6] This shows the revolutionary attitude that was being instilled in American society to a point where they had to leave the people that were most important to them and fight for their rights which demonstrates if the American people were inspired by this song then radical revolution was more important to them than their own relatives. John Franklin Jameson argues due to the American Revolution, “The relations of social classes to each other, the institution of slavery, the system of land-holding... the forms and spirit of the intellectual and religious life all felt the transforming hand of the revolution”. [7] Gordon Wood argues that how society “radically and thoroughly transformed” and turned into one “unlike any that had ever existed anywhere in the world,” shows the social outcomes of the American Revolution were far more dramatic than what was imagined. For example, religion changed during the American Revolution as now it was used as a moral sanction to oppose the British as to the American people, the revolution was justified by God whereas before Religion was ignored and there was more of an emphasis on religious freedom. However, not everyone in America wanted to fight a radical revolution and have radical

change The planter-merchant class who were the main class leading the revolution did not experience poverty or British oppression and they were not aiming to promote social mobility and they did not want to remove artificial privilege. The merchant class had different aims to the rest of American society as they wanted to prevent Britain from enforcing their rights on American culture and tradition. This shows rather the Revolution taking a radical approach it was more a defensive movement in order to keep the liberties that the Americans enjoyed. Taking the aspects into consideration, it can be said that the American Revolution was radical in bringing about social change as the way American's would live their lives would never be the same as they now had a revolutionary spirit which made them be viewed differently around the world. However, it can also be said that the merchant class attitudes going into the revolution that they wanted to preserve American tradition and culture suggests that there was not entirely a radical social change.

This paragraph examines whether the American Revolution brought radical economic change or whether it was conservative. Before the initial American Revolution, there were signs of radicalism as when the American people felt threatened they were willing to risk their economic well-being for the sake of liberty. This is seen through the Boston Tea Party where America felt economically threatened by the Tea Act in 1773 so they protested by dumping 342 chests of British tea into the river. Wood argues the Revolution brought radical change in the economy as the revolution, “ released powerful entrepreneurial and commercial energies that few realize existed and transformed the economic landscape of the country”[8]This is evident as

before the American Revolution there were heavy restrictions on tea, paper and other resources that were introduced by Britain which was Britain's attempt to increase revenue. However, after the Revolution, the trade restrictions that had previously limited American trade were canceled as Britain's presence in America was no more which also meant the trade economy in America between the colonies was very successful. Similar to Wood's view, Clarence L. Ver Steeg also sees Trade as being, "never the same as the result of the Revolution"[9]. In his Journal he continues to argue that the opening up of China for trade was due to the revolution as when Britain was in control of America, that was as an unattainable dream to the Americans. The fact that American colonists had achieved this "unattainable dream" shows there was a radical change in economic life after the Revolution. Also, manufacturing industries continued to expand, particularly in consumer products and military weapons which would strengthen their military defense. This shows the radical change in the economy as the course of trade completely changed leading to American colonists not feeling limited by Britain. However the fact that the elite class wanted to protect their land and their property even though leaders constantly said "All men are created equal"[10] shows the aims of the revolution was to conserve their land and prevent the lower class from attaining it.

To conclude, the American Revolution was radical to a certain extent as it did not bring a complete change in every aspect of America. In terms of political change, the main aim was to preserve their own traditions and customs and also to stop social mobility from happening to show it was conservative. However, the radical tactics that were used by leaders such as Thomas

Jefferson definitely show that there radical aspects in ensuring change. The American Revolution radically transformed American society as social functions in society such as Religion and Education was to change forever as now America were seen as more liberated. In contrast to this, the merchant class still wanted to protect their own traditions that were there before the revolution. The American Revolution definitely transformed the economy as the trade was completely modified as there were no more restrictions which greatly benefitted America.

Bibliography

- “ Founders Online: From John Adams To Hezekiah Niles, 13 February 1818”, Founders. Archives. Gov, 2018 [Accessed 8 December 2018]
- Murray N Rothbard, *Conceived In Liberty* (Auburn, Ala: Mises Inst, 1999).
- Wood, Gordon, *The Radicalism Of The American Revolution* (Knopf Doubleday Publishing, 2011), p. 5
- Gould, Neil, *The American Revolution: Documents Decoded*
- Jameson, J. Franklin, *The American Revolution Considered As A Social Movement* (San Francisco: Papamoa Press, 2017), p. ix
- Clarence L. Ver Steeg, *Huntington Library Quarterly* Vol. 20, No. 4, *Early American History Number* (Aug. 1957), pp. 361-372 (12 pages)
- “ Declaration Of Independence: A Transcription”, National Archives, 2018 [Accessed 11 December 2018]

[1]Gordon Wood, *The Radicalism Of The American Revolution* (Knopf Doubleday Publishing, 2011), p. 5.

[2]“ Founders Online: From John Adams To Hezekiah Niles, 13 February 1818”, Founders. Archives. Gov, 2018 [Accessed 8 December 2018].

[3]Murray N Rothbard, *Conceived In Liberty* (Auburn, Ala: Mises Inst, 1999).

[4]“ Founders Online: From Thomas Jefferson To Henry Lee, 8 May 1825”, Founders. Archives. Gov, 2018 [Accessed 9 December 2018].

[5]Declaration Of Independence: A Transcription”, National Archives, 2018 [Accessed 11 December 2018].

[6]Neil Gould, *The American Revolution*. P256

[7]. Franklin Jameson, *The American Revolution Considered As A Social Movement* (San Francisco: Papamoa Press, 2017), p. ix.

[8]Gordon Wood, *The Radicalism Of The American Revolution* (Knopf Doubleday Publishing, 2011), p. 8

[9]Clarence L. Ver Steeg, *Huntington Library Quarterly* Vol. 20, No. 4, *Early American History Number* (Aug., 1957), pp. 361-372 (12 pages)

[10]“ Declaration Of Independence: A Transcription”, National Archives, 2018 [Accessed 11 December 2018]