

America's Culture of Interaction

Diversity & Otherness

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HIST 532 – Dr. Kornfeld

Final Paper – Question # 5

“Why couldn't intellectuals of the Revolutionary generation define American identity without also constructing an ethnic or racial Other? Can we do so today?”

07 May 2009

In July 1776, thirteen colonies declared themselves independent from the unity they once shared with the British Crown. The American Revolutionary War followed, and upon its conclusion the Articles of Confederation were ratified, thus creating the United States of America. Within a decade, however, the loosely confederated states sent delegates to a Constitutional Convention that debated the creation of a central government. American intellectuals and statesmen were well aware of the difficulties in maintaining a union of diverse and independent states. Nevertheless, they were united in their efforts “to form a more perfect union.” Outside of the political machinations that developed in Philadelphia, however, was the need for an American cultural union. Revolutionary intellectuals agreed that an American cultural unity was necessary in order for the nation to endure. Ironically, while the political union was formed according to compromises that allowed for political diversity, the cultural union that intellectuals sought left little room for cultural diversity. Given their experience with Britain, America’s leaders understood that unions are rarely successful when an imbalance exists between sovereignty and subjection, but they failed to realize this on a cultural level. As America’s civilization was defined antithetically to Europe’s degradation, its culture was also limited to binaries of opposition. In Eve Kornfeld’s *Creating an American Culture*, these binaries are reflected in social constructions based on an inferior Other that involved categories of gender, class, race and ethnicity. The failure of American intellectuals in creating an identity that fostered equality in diversity is most likely due to various circumstances, but prejudice and power were the greatest factors in maintaining hierarchical structures within America’s culture of interaction.

The cultural structures of hierarchy that influenced efforts of America’s intellectuals are also evident in the political landscape that developed. As Kornfeld explains, the ideology that

dominated American intellectual thought, republicanism, was “based on English and European ideas reaching back to the Renaissance.” American republicanism highlighted not only the virtues of independence, but limited those to whom these virtues were bestowed. Citizenship in the new republic could, therefore, only be limited “to free white males with sufficient property to sustain their independence.” Class, race, and gender were thus embedded within the contemporaneous theories concerning viable political activity.<sup>1</sup>

While American intellectuals attempted to justify structural hierarchies based on natural differences, history demonstrates how divisions were clearly political. In her study of women in Revolutionary America, Linda Kerber also turns to republicanism. “Since republican theory emphasized that the right to participate in the management of a political unit stemmed from ownership of property,” Kerber explains, “the denial of political rights to women seemed quite natural.” It was not nature, however, that prevented women from owning property. It was due to legislative action and the laws of coverture that swallowed up women’s rights, but what of all the single women? As Kerber further illustrates, “while the *feme sole* clearly had property rights that she might vigorously protect, she was not permitted to exercise the political rights that theoretically accompanied them.”<sup>2</sup> Politically, women were simply denied representation on the basis of sex rather than property. As Joan Hoff Wilson, explains, however, this was not uniformly the case. In New Jersey, “unmarried women worth fifty pounds could and did vote until that right was rescinded in 1807.” Why was this right rescinded, and on what basis other than gender? Perhaps New Jersey’s legislators finally decided to follow the lead of their neighboring states. “New York was the first state in 1777 to disfranchise women voters by

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<sup>1</sup> Eve Kornfeld, *Creating an American Culture, 1775-1800: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, 2001), 7.

<sup>2</sup> Linda K. Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980), 120.

inserting the word *male* into its constitution, and the other original eleven states soon followed suit by specifically forbidding women or actively discouraging them from voting.”<sup>3</sup> As far as American intellectuals were concerned, women had a place in society that did not include the political sphere.

In addition to politics, women were also limited with respect to other essential characteristics of republicanism, including education. When female education was encouraged, it was usually limited to the ideal of republican motherhood, wherein women were given “limited instruction ‘in the principles of liberty and government’ and a thorough inculcation of ‘the obligations of patriotism’” to be passed down to their sons.<sup>4</sup> Female domesticity was never to be challenged but supported by such things as education. Even though the different roles of men and women could be exercised without hierarchical requirements, women were still placed as an inferior Other in America’s identity. Rather than limiting female education entirely because of domestic concerns, intellectuals maintained the belief that women were simply intellectually inferior to their male counterparts. Those women, whose voices could not be silenced, however, contested these notions in their own writing. Judith Sargent Murray, for instance, spoke for women’s equality when she argued, “we can only reason from what we know, and if an opportunity of acquiring knowledge hath been denied us, the inferiority of our sex cannot fairly be deduced from thence.”<sup>5</sup> Murray and other women like her challenged prescriptions of gendered Otherness, but succeeding American generations would continue disputing male-dominated structural hierarchies even to the present as contemporary politicians

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<sup>3</sup> Joan Hoff Wilson, “The Illusion of Change: Women and the American Revolution,” *The American Revolution: Explorations in the History of American Radicalism*, ed. Alfred F. Young (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1976), 418.

<sup>4</sup> Eve Kornfeld, *Creating an American Culture*, 33.

<sup>5</sup> Judith Sargent Murray, “On the Equality of the Sexes,” in Kornfeld, *Creating an American Culture*, 129.

discuss targeting gender issues in legislation, such as requiring equal salary in comparable business positions.

Hierarchical structures are most often evident in economic configurations, as illustrated in the difficulties women faced in property ownership. However, women were not the only “class” of individuals that were constructed as inferior Others. In Revolutionary America, even white males could be found in this category. Following the mid-Century wars, relations not only intensified between the Colonists and Britain, but between those with money and those without. In his research of the years leading up to the Revolution, Gary Nash found the development of “the language of class consciousness,” especially as working classes began to see “the new wealth of the urban elite, in some not yet fully comprehensible way, was based on class exploitation.” American elites did not take this language lightly, and understood the danger posed toward their own interests if conflict arose out of class division. Just as a “language of class consciousness” threatened their interests, America’s leaders turned to other forms of language to gain support. Nash explains that while “the elite was divided, their attempts to activate and obtain the support of the lower classes were unusually strenuous, the presses turned out polemical literature as never before, the clergy became deeply involved in politics, and electoral participation reached new heights.” Publications were effective in preventing the blame from falling upon America’s wealthy and instead placed responsibility solely on Britain and her loyalists.<sup>6</sup>

By the time of the Revolution, anxiety over class conflict lessened but remained a concern to many intellectuals. As Kornfeld illustrates, “many class distinctions between white males temporarily dissolved in militias and Revolutionary councils.” Men of different

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<sup>6</sup> Gary B. Nash, *The Urban Crucible: The Northern Seaports and the Origins of the American Revolution*, Abridged Edition (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986 [1979]), 166 & 183.

backgrounds fought side by side for causes they felt were equal. Nevertheless, when faced with the consequences of blurring distinctions between those in power and inferior Others, America's elite had to "laugh nervously" as John Adams did in response to Abigail's request that he "Remember the Ladies." In his reply, Adams spoke of how the Revolutionary "Struggle has loosened the bands of Government everywhere." The lines that follow, however, refer more to a disruption of social norms that prescribed hierarchical structures rather than legislative or governmental issues. Adams was worried "That Children and Apprentices were disobedient – that schools and Colleges were grown turbulent – that Indians slighted their Guardians and Negroes grew insolent to their Masters." These lines illustrate that America's conflict had threatened hierarchies of patriarchy (children), class (apprentices), education (schools), ethnicity (Indians) and race (Negroes). Abigail's request simply introduced "another Tribe" that challenged America's hierarchy of gender (Ladies). By essentially forgetting, or ignoring, the ladies, American intellectuals were able to focus their concerns on other social disturbances.<sup>7</sup>

The worry of apprentices and Negroes growing disobedient and insolent was not new to America's elites in times of conflict. As other historians have noted, a class consciousness had begun to develop before the eighteenth century. In their study of race relations during the mid-Seventeenth Century, Breen and Innes explain how white servants and black slaves regularly ran away together. In addition, during Bacon's Rebellion, whites and blacks in the lower classes fought side by side. At the end of the rebellion, what remained was "four hundred 'English and Negroes in Arms'" that were eventually promised to be "pardoned and freed from their Slavery." The interracial unity of black slaves and white servants threatened the economic monopolies of the ruling class, but the racial hierarchy was in danger as well. The succeeding

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<sup>7</sup> Eve Kornfeld, *Creating an American Culture*, 5-6; John Adams to Abigail Adams, April 14, 1776, quoted in Kornfeld, *Creating an American Culture*, 5.

years saw the gradual separation of the races through legislative action, such as Virginia's 1680 statute preventing "any negroe or other slave to carry or arme himselfe with any club, staffe, gunn, sword or any other weapon of defense or offence." By 1738, such restrictions were increased beyond mere slaves to include "all such free mulattos, negros, or Indians as are or shall be listed [in the militia]."<sup>8</sup> By the time of the American Revolution, therefore, concerns over blacks and whites fighting together and the dangers this posed to class and racial hierarchy required additional efforts to separate them.

To ensure that racial and ethnic hierarchies remained after the Revolution, American intellectuals argued that natural distinctions explained the emergence of white men as the dominant social group. In his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Thomas Jefferson attempted to explain racial differences in natural, or God-given, terms. After discussing the physical characteristics that set blacks apart from whites, Jefferson concluded "that the blacks, whether originally a distinct race, or made distinct by time and circumstances, are inferior to the whites in the endowments both of body and mind." Not only were whites considered superior to blacks, white dominance was threatened by any mixture of blood between slave and master. As such, if blacks were ever to be "freed," Jefferson argued, "he is to be removed beyond the reach of mixture." Racial Otherness, therefore, needed to be protected by all means. Of course, to what degree these threats were seriously considered is left to speculation in the wake of controversial assertions that Jefferson himself fathered children with his slave Sally Hemings. Nevertheless, intellectual rhetoric maintained that non-whites were inferior Others that required segregation.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> T.H. Breen & Stephen Innes, *"Myne Owne Ground": Race and Freedom on Virginia's Eastern Shore, 1640-1676* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 27.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (Philadelphia, 1788), reprinted in Kornfeld, *Creating an American Culture*, 244.

Racial hierarchies were commonly justified in the binary language that placed civilization against savagery. Even in instances where intellectuals tried to represent Indians as less-savage than contemporaneous theories, the language of Otherness was difficult to escape. In her discussion of William Bartram's traveling records, Kornfeld explains how "Bartram's apparent celebration of primitive virtue and noble savagery [was] presented in the standard language of the dominant discourse." No matter how insistent Bartram was in challenging the social constructions that existed, he could not escape the "difficulty in reconciling his society's representations of the savage Other with his own, more complicated experience of encounter."<sup>10</sup> Bartram insisted that it was "moral principle, which directs the savages to virtuous and praiseworthy actions." In other words, their inferiority based on nature was refuted, but Bartram did not go as far as abandoning the inferior Otherness of Indians. Whereas nature or God may provide the "savages" with virtue, "it is certain they have not the assistance of letters, or those means of education in the schools of philosophy, where the virtuous sentiments and actions of the most illustrious characters are recorded."<sup>11</sup> Whether by nature or education, Indians remained inferior Others meant to be subjected to the hierarchical structures that favored America's elite.

Constructing America's Indian population as a racial Other allowed American expansion to continue without impediment. Westward expansion was clearly on the minds of many Americans before and during the Revolution. In 1774, Ebenezer Baldwin responded to Britain's Quebec Act as a violation of the "civil rights and privileges" of current settlers, "and all such as

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<sup>10</sup> Eve Kornfeld, *Creating an American Culture*, 75.

<sup>11</sup> William Bartram, *Travels through North & South Carolina, Georgia, East & West Florida, the Cherokee Country, the Extensive Territories of the Muscogulges or Creek Confederacy, and the Country of the Chactaws* (Philadelphia, 1791), reprinted in Kornfeld, *Creating an American Culture*, 253.

may settle any where within that vast extended province in future time.”<sup>12</sup> Any legislation perceived as hindering future expansion threatened to lead America’s colonists to hostility. The failure of Britain to acknowledge the degree that Americans were dedicated to expansion reflects what I.R. Christie saw as “a story of the misjudgments and the inadequacy of British politicians.” According to Christie, the Quebec Act was “primarily an attempt to stabilize the frontier region, reduce the pressure on the Indians [...], maintain peaceable conditions for the fur-trade [...], and win the loyalty of the French frontiersman.” Americans had no intention, however, in stabilizing relations with Indians (or even the French for that matter) if they were to continue westward.<sup>13</sup>

Whether it was westward expansion or cheap labor that fostered racial Otherness, American intellectuals were united in focusing their efforts on society at the top of the hierarchical structures. In *The History of the American Revolution*, David Ramsay argued that slavery allowed Americans to be idle and was, therefore, detrimental to the happiness of the nation. Ramsay was concerned with the “baneful consequences” for the white race rather than the ill effects slavery had on blacks. To Ramsay, “the evil has outweighed the good.” The evil of idleness in whites endangered the nation, but it outweighed the “good” of something. Was Ramsay acknowledging the value in cheap labor? Even if blacks were to be freed, Ramsay agreed with Jefferson when he wrote, “Let the hapless African sleep undisturbed on his native shore.” Perhaps the “good” that Ramsay was alluding to was the work that blacks were given, as opposed to their natural idleness in their native land.<sup>14</sup> This conflict between cheap labor and racial Otherness may even be compared to how modern American politics are embroiled with

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<sup>12</sup> Ebenezer Baldwin, “An Appendix Stating the Heavy Grievances the Colonies Labor Under,” *Colonies to Nation, 1763-1789*, ed. Jack P. Greene (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1975 [1967]), 215.

<sup>13</sup> I.R. Christie, *Crisis of Empire: Great Britain and the American Colonies, 1754-1783* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1966), 111 & 88.

<sup>14</sup> David Ramsay, *The History of the American Revolution* (Philadelphia, 1789), quoted and reprinted in Kornfeld, *Creating an American Culture*, 43 & 160.

concerns over “immigrant workers” and illegal immigration. With arguments that immigrant workers take away jobs from Americans or that those opportunities for labor do not exist in their own native lands, the construction of an inferior Other may still be alive today. Of course, without a higher education, immigrants as well as many minorities within America are faced with fewer opportunities for work than the more privileged.

Following the Revolution, intellectuals attempted to create a unifying American identity through education, but it was to remain an education built entirely on the notion of inferior Others. Based on the availability of education, one can already surmise that “few intellectuals even considered the question of education for people of color or women.” Racial and gender hierarchies were not the only structures, however, that education was meant to uphold. Even class played a prominent role in the curriculum envisioned by America’s intellectuals. America’s cultural identity was to be secured by “schooling that would promote the cultivation of civic virtue, or the willingness to sacrifice natural self-interest and familial or local attachments for the public good.” As Kornfeld further explains, Americans were taught “to fortify the moral faculty, restrain the natural passions, and form the lifelong habits of ‘republican machines.’” By seeking to provide an education that reinforced “subordination” to the dominant power structure, intellectual elites sought an American identity that had neither the enthusiasm nor the capacity to challenge the new social order.<sup>15</sup> As Michel Foucault would explain, American education developed “not simply as consequences of legislation or as indicators of social structures, but as techniques possessing their own specificity in the more general field of other ways of exercising power.” Educating American citizens was a “political tactic” meant to create disciplinary systems subordinate to the intellectual-power-elite.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Eve Kornfeld, *Creating an American Culture*, 32 & 38.

<sup>16</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995 [1975]), 23.

American identity since the Revolution has been constructed through distinctions of gender, class, race or ethnicity. The formation of Otherness has had a prominent role in maintaining hierarchical structures. For over two hundred years, America's identity has been challenged through legislation, wars, and civil movements that have sought to change Otherness into diversity. Distinctions in people will always exist, and attempting to erase differences between men and women, whites and blacks, or rich and poor will most likely fail. It may be argued that early American intellectuals failed in their efforts to create a unified American culture, and that Americans are still seeking this cultural unity today. An American culture has existed since the colonies first united, but it was a culture of diversity. Unfortunately, while political distinctions were overcome to create the United States of America, cultural distinctions have yet to be united. If America's culture of interaction is ever to overcome the social hierarchy that has been built on these characteristics, it will be by embracing them in a unity of diversity that balances sovereignty and subjection much in the same way the Constitution brought the states together. If modern America is ever to establish a strong and unified American culture, America's leaders must understand that unity can not exist in the midst of an imbalance that favors one cultural idea over an Other.

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