

Lecture 2

THE ORIGINS OF THE US SYSTEM OF GOVERNMENT, 1

The American Revolution

Objectives

By the end of the lecture, students should be able to identify the different ideas and concepts at origins of the US system of government. They should be able to comprehend the philosophical, intellectual, and economic principles, and the historical experiences that led to the Declaration of Independence (1776), the War of Independence (1775-83); and how these latter generated the US system of government.

1. The Development of Pre-democratic societies in the American Colonies

Many factors contributed to the development of some democratic principles in the colonies. The first is to be found in the conditions of pioneer life in the colonies. The wilderness forced self-government upon the settlers. Clearing the forests, taming the land, and conflicts with the natives were tough experience. These harsh conditions ruined those who viewed as lazy and inefficient, and rewarded those who were capable and self-reliant. Pioneer conditions did not encourage a fragile or submissive spirit. To the contrary; hostile conditions fostered independence and individualism. Additionally, the spirit of equality tended to become a dominant feature of American life, for despite the existence of social classes, the great majority of the population had to rely for their living upon their own efforts. Under such conditions self-reliance and self-government were natural developments. These aspects of American life are well described in Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur's "What Is an American?"

The peculiar emerging character of the American colonist is another element for the rise of what can be seen as democratic principles in America. These colonists, who left European monarchies, moved to a new land. Once there they often found the older American communities intolerant, and so moved into the wilderness to found new and more "democratic" place to live.

One should not forget also that English colonists brought with them some new conception of what the rights of man should be and what freedom consists of. The belief that all men were born free and equal, and that government derives its powers from the consent of the governed, became prominent in early American politics. Despite their practice of slavery,

American colonists believed in their right to detach from the mother country and develop their own self-government. The democratic tendencies of the settlers were reinforced by traditions they developed during the 17th and 18th centuries, During that colonial era, their belief of what was considered an oppressive government could not last. In Carolina in 1670, for example, an attempt to set up a government they considered as undemocratic failed, and when half a century later a similar attempt was made in Georgia, the settlers objected so ardently that the founders of the colony were obliged to grant the privilege of self-government.

Another explanation for the rise of democracy in America is that, left to themselves, the settlers came to feel that self-government was morally right. Largely removed from the traditions of monarchical systems, they soon realized the essential significance of government. Seeing government as a device to help people get along together and enable individuals seek progress and prosperity, they concluded that that government is best which most helps the masses of the people. The existence of a British monarch was a small factor in the everyday life of the early settlers, for Britain was far away, and communication was rare, and from this it was a short step to asserting that the control of the Crown over them was unjust. Living under primitive economic conditions, the minds of the people turned naturally to freely formed agreements as a basis of group action. Under such conditions democracy appeared to the colonists as moral, just, and natural.

2. Self-Government in the American Colonies

From the early days of Jamestown, the first successful English settlement in the New World (1607-8) to the Declaration of Independence in 1776, the thirteen English colonies of Northern America were under the political authority of the British crown. Though most of American colonists were of British descent, the environment they lived in and the geographical remoteness of colonies from Britain made them develop their own way of life. British political and economic interference was rare. The colonies implemented some kinds of self-government, they practised trade freely, they enjoyed a great deal of social, political, and religious autonomy and freedom. Out of this context, a new “American” identity emerged.

More than 150 years of quasi-autonomy far from direct authority of the British rule, together with an adaptation to a new land, made colonists conceive themselves not entirely as British subjects but more as “Americans.” After the French and Indian War (1756-1763), the British Crown and Parliament imposed taxes and trading restrictions on the colonies. Colonists started to complain that their individual rights and liberties were being violated by the English Empire, thought these rights were supposed to be guaranteed by English Constitution. Very quickly, American colonists viewed the British monarchy as some kind of despotism and tyranny.

3. Protest & Rebellion against British Rule

Colonists protested against trade regulations, new taxes, stamps, and quartering of British troops without compensation. They convened to begin legitimating rebellion, and their arguments were based on:

- Their historical experience as self-governing colonies due to the remoteness of their situation.
- The ideals put forwards by Enlightenment thinkers
- Civic republicanism
- Religious and ethnic considerations

During the fight for independence (1776-1783), and during the early years of the American Republic (1780s-1790s), revolutionary leaders, political activists, and thinkers debated the true meaning of democracy.

On the eve of the American Revolution, Thomas Paine published a pamphlet, *Common Sense* (1776). That pamphlet was the most important writing denouncing British constitution and monarchy. Paine denounced the idea that the King represented order and power or that he had any prerogative or power to rule. He also criticized the privileges of inherited wealth and political power owned by the British aristocracy. To Paine, the English Constitution was too complex and promoted tyranny. Paine's pamphlet called for unmediated, direct democracy, or at least representatives of the people, in a unicameral body (one legislative house), elected by all citizens.

John Locke was the most influential thinker underpinning American Revolution. Locke was a contemporary of the English Civil War (1640-1649) and witnessed the rise of Absolutism in England and the Parliament's resistance to it. Locke argues that men have natural rights and that these rights are independent and prior to any form of government. He emphasized

- Property rights, life right, and security rights.
- People's consent to follow laws under conditions; express and tacit consent
- Government as a trust.

Thus people can withdraw their consent when rights are violated. They have right to protest and rebel against the ruler who fails to guarantee and protect their rights, freedom, and/or property. To Locke, even after successful rebellion, society or community of people still exists.

4. The Republican Option

Some revolutionary leaders and founding fathers of the American nation (such as John Adams) criticized direct democracy in the form of country-wide election. Adams (1735-1826) argued that democracy needed mediation, and thus, republicanism. To him, the functions of government should be divided.

Additionally, most founding fathers argued that government should be "majoritarian." They thought that the Republican state cannot be too big (from Montesquieu) and that homogeneity (i.e., a common sentiment) was necessary. They rejected monarchy and viewed that the state should be based on republicanism with knowledgeable and civic-minded citizens.

The debate over the true motivations behind the American Revolution involved whether the latter was primarily about liberal ideals (Locke, Paine,...) or about republicanism (Rousseau). Principle of republicanism was central to most American revolutionaries. Another important theme behind the American Revolution was the rejection of the abuse of power. To the founding fathers, concentrated power leads to abuse, corruption, and the demise of the common good.

Terms and concepts to be identified

- Enlightenment
- Despotism
- Absolutism
- Unicameral/ bicameral body
- Liberalism
- Republicanism

References

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