THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION, MODERNIZATION, AND MAN

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In an article on the American Revolution published in 1973 I expressed a certain skepticism concerning such a big word as "modernization."\(^1\) I was skeptical about it as it applied to colonial and revolutionary America, and so tried to describe a more limited, complex, contradictory, and inadvertent socio-political process which seemed to be taking place there, a process which altered men's interests, provoked defensive responses, "modernized" perhaps a few men, but whose "modernizing" was chiefly in the creation of a political framework which made the nation-state more able to accommodate the rising interests of a diverse society. In general I did not posit any massive re-structuring of human relationships or of the human psyche, but chiefly only of interests, their interaction, expression, and means of accommodation.

Lately I have become even more skeptical about modernization in this and in later contexts. True, western historians have extended the process of modernization in the West over a vast span of time, making it more subtle in the process. They now speak of a long stage of attitudinal preparation or modernization lasting from perhaps 1500 to 1850. Yet even this initial stage is still seen as a process whose chief product was presumably a self-conscious, rational, calculating, choice-making, planning, manipulative individual. This individual was to some degree a pre-condition for the subsequent stages of urbanization and industrialization which utterly modernized society, in its external aspect, and presumably altered men still further internally.\(^2\) Thus historians, at least, still tend to regard even the first stage of western modernization as a more total transformation of human relations and the human psyche than I find consistent with the evidence. I am not so sure about the later stages either. It seems possible that
the human personality has changed less than the literature on modern-
ization would have us believe.

Today, let me once again use the literature on the American
Revolution as a point of departure in expressing this enhanced
skepticism. There has arisen in recent years an immense literature
which speaks in terms of the progressive social modernization of
colonial Americans and speaks above all of the boost given this
modernization by the processes of the Revolution itself. This liter-
ature concentrates mostly on the years during and after the Revolution,
and it speaks in terms of the nearly total modernization of the American
individual and so of American society. What I would like to do is to
present this literature to you, in its widest and most persuasive
aspect, and then proceed to comment upon the view of modernization
implicit in the works of my colleague, Professor Charles Tilly. My
specific point is that I am both sympathetic to and skeptical about
this growing rage for modernization in the America of 1750-1830, and
that I would like to develop a more limited way of viewing the vast
social changes experienced by western man.

The essential feature of this new literature on early American
society and on the American Revolution is its insistence, implicit or
explicit, on the ultimate production of a "new man" very like "modern
man" as defined by Professor Alex Inkeles.3 This man is the opposite
of traditional, collective, localistic, and fatalistic; he is modern,
individualistic, cosmopolitan, active and optimistic. The existing
literature speaks first in terms of the innately liberating effects
of the raw American environment, and then shifts to the increasing
degree of geographic and social mobility and of social diversity and
choice in eighteenth-century America. In crudest form the result is John C. Garraty's "new man, facing westward." Bernard Bailyn's "typical American optimism, individualism, and enterprise" is the same thing in another guise, as is Richard Bushman's new "Yankee" of the pre-revolutionary era. James Henretta's modern American of the revolutionary era is of the same bloodline. 4

Recent historians of the American Revolution build onto this basic outlook, by emphasizing that the political mobilization and contentions of the revolutionary era further accustomed men to an individual, supra-local, activist and optimistic political outlook. In J. T. Main's Political Parties Before the Constitution, silent agrarians awake from deference into an active prosecution of their economic interests in the political arena. They succeed in obtaining their ends. Gordon Wood is more subtle and, with others such as John Murrin and Rod Berthoff, stresses the inadvertence of the whole process by which revolutionary Americans sought to restore the past and instead tumbled backward into modernity. But it is modernity into which they tumbled, the modernity of Jefferson's individualistic "yeoman freeholder" and of a society of co-equal individuals bound by no tradition or hierarchical deference but only by those transitory "horizontal" associations of equals necessary to accomplish tasks too large for the liberated individual. As Richard D. Brown puts it, "it was during the American Revolution that the balance of traditional and modern elements in American society was decisively altered. Without generating any radical or spontaneous disruption of American society [Note: most of these "modernists" want to envision transformation and the birth of the modern individual totally without serious social conflict or upheaval.], the political revolution provided overwhelming leverage for further modernization. Its impact was experienced
directly on the political structure and indirectly on social expectations and behavior." The result was "the modern personality."5

Historians of subsequent decades stretching into the nineteenth century take this new individual, liberated and transformed by social processes and by the Revolution, freed from traditional authorities down to and including his own parents, and they make him the basis for the good bourgeois citizen of a progressive middle-class society, controlling fertility because his education and mentality tell him this is practical and wise, living in short the model life of a model modern citizen, a thoroughly new man.6

How are we to regard this school of thought? Its essential feature is an emphasis on a nearly total psychic transformation as the key to the modern individual and on the modern individual as the key, or at least one key, to modernity. This at least is the ultimate tendency of this line of interpretation. In some ways, I am sympathetic to this sort of emphasis. My own article contained hints of it, and my subsequent researches have turned up two pieces of evidence that such an individual was indeed evolving in early modern Anglo-America, even before the American Revolution. First of all, in New England, Virginia, and in England, persons who left wills were systematically withdrawing from the voluntary charitable contributions which had characterized a majority of the wills of all social classes in late-medieval England. By the time of the Revolution only 5% of testators bothered to leave such contributions. This is consistent with the idea of an emerging individual who withdraws from traditional social involvements, concentrating on his or her own family and interests, and leaving wider social needs to voluntary organizations and to the state. In the middle of the eighteenth
century some of these same testators also began to write their wills ever farther in advance of death, a possible indication of an increasing focus on planning and on rational calculation in the disposal of individual and of family property. For some, then, behavior could have been changing on a broad enough front to suggest possibly an entire new mentality of calculation and of rationality.

Within these limits, one could accept the idea of a transformation of the human personality, though I might add that this new personality where and when it occurred must be seen in a more sophisticated perspective than most writers on early American society are always willing to see it. First of all, it was not peculiar to American but was in most aspects a western phenomenon. Insofar as there was a new, modern man he could be found in many of his features earlier in England and soon enough in France. Secondly, the evolution of any "modern personality" was almost surely inadvertent, through an ironic process by which men tried vigorously to restore the past in the face of new conditions and succeeded instead in enshrining new conditions, new experiences, and new attitudes. This, according to Gordon Wood, John Murrin and Rod Berthoff, Robert Gross, and now Harry Stout, is how modern man and his mass or "horizontal" society emerged from the initial, socially defensive stances of the American Revolution. Inadvertently, finally, the modern individual, as first presented to us by Alexis de Tocqueville in the 1830's, is not necessarily to be viewed only as optimistic, and enterprising. Not by any means. Tocqueville invented the term "individualism" and here is how he described it:

As social conditions become more equal, the number of persons increases who, although they are neither rich nor powerful enough to exercise any great influence over their fellows, have nevertheless
acquired or retained sufficient education and fortune to satisfy their own wants. They owe nothing to any man, they expect nothing from any man; they acquire the habit of always considering themselves as standing alone, and they are apt to imagine that their whole destiny is in their own hands. [These men are individualists.] Individualism is a mature and calm feeling, which disposes each member of the community to sever himself from the mass of his fellows, and to draw apart with his family and his friends; so that, after he has thus formed a little circle of his own, he willingly leaves society at large to itself. Thus, not only does democracy make every man forget his ancestors, but it hides his descendants and separates his contemporaries from him; it throws him back forever upon himself alone, and threatens in the end to confine him entirely within the solitude of his own heart.

The Marxists would have us believe that this troubled modern individual is a feature of bourgeois capitalist society rather than of modern western society in general, and that he is a hopelessly warped product of a warped system. They have only to look to the satellite states of the Soviet Union to see that modern man is a western or European creature who emerges under all systems. And this universal modern man, withdrawn into the solitude of his own life, family and heart, does have problems of identity, as Tocqueville suggested, and the problem is put in a beautifully balanced perspective by the American novelists James Agee; describing life in a late nineteenth-century American family:

On the rough wet grass of the back yard my father and mother have spread quilts. We all lie there, my mother, my father, my uncle, my aunt, and I too am lying there . . . They are not talking much, and the talk is quiet, of nothing in particular, of nothing at all in particular, of nothing at all. The stars are wide and alive, they seem each like a smile of great sweetness, and they seem very near. All my people are larger bodies than mine . . . with voices gentle and meaningless like the voices of sleeping birds. One is an artist, he is living at home. One is a musician, she is living at home. One is my mother who is good to me. One is my father who is good to me. By some chance, here they are, all on this earth; and who shall ever tell the sorrow of being on this earth, lying, on quilts, on the grass, in a summer's evening, among the sounds of the night. May God bless my people, my uncle, my aunt, my mother, my good father, oh, remember them kindly in their time of trouble; and in the hour of their taking away.

After a little, I am taken in and put to bed. Sleep, soft smiling, draws me unto her: and those receive me, who quietly treat me, as
one familiar and well-beloved in that home: but will not, oh, will
not, not now, not ever; but will not ever tell me who I am.

For that individual, in the sanctity of a small circle of family, the
problem is identity. And more, such identity as modern man does have is
that of a liberated individual whose personality is shot through with
self-control. We can see this in the poignant modern individuals
described in the works of Daniel Scott Smith, Maris Vinovskis, and Alex
Inkeles, their attitudes transformed by circumstances and education,
rigorously controlling their fertility so that they may get somewhere.
Clearly this personality is not an unmixed blessing. 10

But was there such a personality in the first place? Did an
individualistic, rational, calculating, planning, instrumental man,
moving with his family through a horizontal, mass society really
emerge to an unprecedented degree in western society, before, in the
course of, and after the American Revolution? This is the larger
question which arises from the current literature on the American
Revolution-and-modernization and from the wider literature on modernization
in the early modern West. It is an essential question. For, whatever
the structural aspects of any modernization which occurred, we are
speaking of an entire transformation of the human personality in the
recent course of western history.

It seems to me that the evidence available from American and from
other western societies in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries
permits us simultaneously to take a much more limited view of the whole
impact of social change on the human personality. Let me take one
example, the voluntary organization. Under the assumptions of the
"modern personality" school, the voluntary organization is only a
transitory, horizontal association of equals created to accomplish a
specific functional task which cannot be accomplished by one individual. Once the task is carried out, the modern individuals go their own ways without further allegiance. Thus, a street-paving association or a local militia organization does its job and no more. Even in this form, incidentally, and as Tocqueville observed, the voluntary organization is the one force which can unite individuals for effective action, and so remove them from isolation and give them a sense of effectiveness vis-à-vis the overwhelming tides of majority opinion and the immense power of the nation-state. Still, the evidence is that the voluntary organizations which sprang up like wild grass in the decades after the American Revolution served far more varied and covert functions than even Tocqueville was aware. To take only one instance, the Adrian, Michigan, Guards was last and least a militia unit. It was more a means of identifying and re-enforcing the hierarchy of wealth, status, and leadership in this new town, of absorbing recent arrivals into the mutual relations and assumptions which pervaded this hierarchy, and of binding all together in certain common feelings and ceremonies. While in some towns such organizations were several and separate, in most towns they overlapped considerably, and in early Adrian there was essentially only one. Regardless, what such voluntary organizations represented was the adoption of new tactics in order to reconstruct the social and emotional realities of a stable community under the changing structural circumstances of a mobile and developing America. To the extent that this effort succeeded, what we have underneath is a homeostatic human personality, adapting its constant end, community, to changed circumstances, mobility, through the adoption of new tactical behaviors, such as voluntary organizations. The question arises, "how many new tactical behaviors can this human
personality adopt and still remain in large part constant? The answer could be, many more and to a much larger degree for much longer than has been thought.

Admittedly, at this point we need a theory of the personality to clarify the issues involved. For virtually no historian has offered a clear definition or theory of the human personality to buttress claims for or against cumulative personality change. The modernists seem to feel that behavior is equivalent to personality and assert that when some behaviors and to a degree the associated culture change, this implies a change in personality. Perhaps, but an amazing number of behaviors and an unrecognized proportion of culture remain essentially constant through long, long spans of time. And more, the family context which does so much to shape the human personality has changed only in subtle and contradictory ways over the centuries of supposed modernization of the personality. This is a fact we must consider. Beneath all this lies the evidence of certain constant human motives and of the homeostatic capacity to adopt new tactical behaviors to keep these motives and the ends they imply constant community, a share of perceived resources, security. Surely this is not so obvious that we can ignore it in constructing a total view of the western personality in the course of centuries of structural change.

While no adequate theory of the human personality or of its changes has been used to support the historians of the modernization school, and while I can offer no such total theory to confirm my own skepticism about the degree of personality change in the process of modernization, I can turn to the work of Charles Tilly to buttress my skepticism about personality change. Tilly is no theoretician of the personality; he is a student of such things as the decline in fertility
and the rise of formal education in early modern Europe, and above all of the changing levels and forms of collective action, particularly collective violence and strikes, in the eighteenth and nineteenth-century West. I have spent the past several weeks reading his publications together with some unpublished manuscripts, and it seems to me that his work, coming as it does from an entirely different evidential perspective than the works on revolutionary America, offers an essentially homeostatic view of the human personality in the era of social change. Charles Tilly stoutly resists positing a new or transformed human personality. His work is significant for all of us struggling with this issue.

For example, consider the decline in fertility and rise in formal education which began among bourgeois households in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century France and which spread to most of western society in the nineteenth century. Tilly explains these changes in terms of a constant human personality marked by a desire to be cared for in old age. This personality initially adopts the tactic of high fertility, hoping that a few of the many children born will survive into adulthood, marry, and prosper, thereby providing old-age insurance. Under certain conditions a sudden fall in infant mortality persuades this person to adopt a new tactic: fertility is lowered and fewer children conceived because it is more probable that they will survive to adulthood. The investment of resources which formerly went into conceiving and feeding many fragile children now goes into educating a few sturdy children in formal schools, with the hope that these educated children will provide old-age insurance. This is a simplification of a speculative argument, but you can see that Tilly does tend to assume a constant underlying personality with continuing goals, adopting new fertility and investment tactics in the face of altered structural conditions. 11
The difference between Professor Tilly and such other students of changed fertility behavior as Maris Vinovskis, Dan Smith, and Alex Inkeles can be drawn out by means of a diagram which Tilly himself has used in a forthcoming review of a book on the evolving modern personality by Alex Inkeles. Basically, Inkeles and the others regard lowered fertility and all other "modern" behaviors as the products of a process which looks like this:

Social Conditions $\rightarrow$ Type of Learning $\rightarrow$ Attitudes $\rightarrow$ Behavior $\rightarrow$ [Personality]

The implication is that changed structural conditions create new "learning environments", among them schools, in which the lessons of the new social environment are learned, lessons which alter attitudes and ultimately the whole personality, and finally change behavior. Thus, improved social and economic prospects are conveyed via schools and labor unions, altering the personality in the direction of a belief in rational planning and progress, resulting in decisions to control fertility in order to get ahead. In this instance, to focus the example further, literacy could be a useful intervening variable in the process leading through new types of learning to a new personality and to lower fertility. Tilly suggests a very different diagram of causation:

Social Conditions $\rightarrow$ Type of Learning $\rightarrow$ Behavior $\rightarrow$ Attitudes $\rightarrow$ [Personality?]

Again, to take the specific example of lower fertility, Tilly's explanation would be that fertility limitation is a specific tactical behavior designed to preserve constant goals under changed conditions of child mortality. Whether wider learning or changed attitudes or changed personality ensues is not only problematic but in fact unnecessary and
possibly even unlikely. Incidentally, in Tilly's scheme literacy would therefore have a lessened role, appearing possibly as a useful tool in learning how to control fertility, and certainly as an indirect result of the larger investment in children's education, but not necessarily an intimate part of a linear process which first educates, then changes attitudes, and then alters the human personality and so leads to controlled fertility. In fact, to Tilly, literacy becomes chiefly an epiphenomenon in a continuous struggle for human adequacy in the fact of changing structural conditions.

Some of these points can be seen more clearly though in a more implicit form in Tilly's work on collective violence in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe. For fertility and education are not his home ground and, as he says, "if there is a Grail (of social change) I expect to find it in changing class structure and power relations." In this area, Tilly has explicitly thrown away "the blurry word, modernization" except as a set of specific structural changes. Most prominent among these are the rise of the all-powerful nation-state and of new power relations between that state and corporate industrial powers on the one hand and the peasant or worker on the other hand. The consequence of these changes and of these new relationships is not an anxious, future-shocked, and violent modern personality. Nothing of the sort. The consequences revealed by Tilly's researches can be summed up as follows: between, say, 1600 and 1825 reactive forms of collective action and of strikes and violence predominated, as social groups resisted the encroaching claims of the state and of market forces on all areas of their lives; by the middle nineteenth century the state and large corporations had succeeded in nearly monopolizing social resources, and so they became the targets for "proactive" collective actions in which social groups
made new claims, claims aimed to better their position versus these extremely powerful organizations; the result was not any particular increase in the level of collective violence, so much as a shift in the aims, forms, and tactics of collective action and of its natural extension, collective violence. Local protests over taxes or over food prices, and tax and food riots, gave way to the organized interest group seeking to gain its aims by parliamentary elections, by lobbying, by mass meetings and demonstrations, by marches and at times by new forms of violence. Partly as a consequence of the new goals and forms of collective organization the number of strikes did increase and these tended to become large, dramatic, and brief—public, one might say. But the increase in strikes is not so significant as the overall change in the forms of action.

This icy, objective portrait of modernization and of human change speaks not a word of a new personality, and we know from Tilly's other work of his skepticism on this count. Men faced changing structural circumstances, he seems to be saying, and so they changed their tactics and in a limited sense their goals. But beneath it all runs the distinct impression of a constant man adapting himself to changed power relations in order to preserve his interests in a world of structural forces essentially outside of his control. Tactics change, but does man?

Tilly's work is more a query than an answer, but in the context of the existing literature it is a terribly important query. And we can see Charles Tilly's implicit skepticism dramatically juxtaposed on the more cataclysmic modernization literature in the specific case of the American Revolution. For, where others have looked at the Revolution and seen the multiple origins of an utterly new "modern" personality, Tilly, in his recent paper on "Collective Action in England and America," takes a more limited approach. He seems to be saying that the Revolution
was a sort of pressure-cooker, in which the colonists quickly and of necessity transited from old forms of collective action—the tax and food riots so characteristic of eighteenth-century society—to such new forms as the association, the strike or boycott, the demonstration, and the committee of correspondence. These were the forms simultaneously emerging among the radicals in London, and would be the characteristic forms of collective action in the nineteenth century. Now, from the draft I read it is difficult to guess exactly how far Tilly would take the implications of his view of these revolutionary tactics in America. On the one hand he seems to be saying that the level of mobilization and of effectiveness of these new forms of action became so high in the colonies that a true revolution emerged and the collective associations in fact became a new government. How revolutionary the ultimate implications of this event were, however, is another matter, and Tilly's own work may set the limit. For modern America seems to emerge in Tilly's larger view rather like modern Europe, as yet another society dominated by the state and by large corporations, in which groups continued pressing their "proactive" claims by means of the forms of action first perfected in the Revolution. And in no case does Tilly speak of the Revolution, any more than he does of any other event or events, as the birthing ground of an utterly new human personality.

I think we must agree that the issue is open. One body of evidence, which draws in part upon the experiences of the American Revolution, suggests that a new, modern personality evolved. In this view mankind may also be more anxious and more controlled and is certainly cut off from mankind in the past. Under another view we are descendants of the Revolution merely in the sense that we are now the latest participants
in a tactical struggle for human adequacy in the face of structural changes largely beyond our control. This view has its benefits, however, for some of our latest tactics seem to be as effective as those employed in the past, and we are in general more closely linked with our fellows in the past.

It is all very well to say that reality must lie between these interpretative ideals types of man. For the moment these are the ideal types we are presented with. Each has implications for the way we view the American Revolution, or voluntary organizations, or literacy or fertility. Each has implications for psychohistory, too, since the former view suggests that a psychological discipline based in twentieth-century man cannot be applied to an understanding of man in the past, while the latter view shows less hesitancy on this score. And, before the synthesizers begin their blurry work, let me say that I am inclined to the view which keeps us closer to the past, simply because I find it more comforting.

In a more moderate perspective Charles Tilly's work and a little common sense in the matter of "personality" are useful levers on a serious scholarly question: how different are we from humankind in the past? A serious consideration of man in the past would be helpful in all of this, too. Perhaps man in the past was fully as manipulative, possibly even as rational and certainly as "intelligent" as man today, for example, leaving aside for the moment the issue of total personality. As the Swedish scholar Egil Johansson has put it, the mental toy box of mankind was as full three hundred years ago as it is today. In this sense there has been little change in manipulativeness and possibly in other important properties. The "toy box" is yet another lever in
the effort to construct a metaphor of the personality by which we can recognize the persistence of man in the midst of contrapuntal changes.

At issue finally is the whig metaphor which has dominated western history for the past two hundred years. "Modernization" is often simply this metaphor in scientific disguise. Partly true, this metaphor is also profoundly chauvinistic and in its final view of man, isolating. It isolates "modern" man from the past and likewise from one another. Certainly in the United States, the modern personality and the partly arbitrary myth of such a personality, armed with the revolutionary legacy of individual rights, have been characterized by a savage disregard of all human commonality. The first step in reviving a sense of our common humanity, toward one another and toward others abroad might be a scholarly recognition of that humanity which we have carried with us all along. This would be no betrayal of the American Revolution, for the most important inheritance from that Revolution has been a desire to deepen its own legacy.
Footnotes


7. Both these developments were discussed in the outlined second half of a paper on "Attitudinal Modernization" delivered at the University of Edinburgh Conference on Anglo-American Society in June, 1973. (A copy and a letter annotating these points were sent to Daniel Scott Smith, who then raised one of them in his 1975 review of my *Literacy in Colonial New England*. Smith was apparently unaware of their provenance. He seems also unaware that such forms of behavior were evinced by literates and illiterates alike and so only confirm the essential irrelevance of literacy to any changes in attitudes -- which was the thesis of the book on *Literacy*.)
8. Again, see E. A. Wrigley, op. cit., and also Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, Les Paysans du Languedoc, 1966. The specific mix of features in the hypothesized American "modern" personality may differ subtly from the mix hypothesized by Wrigley and implied in Le Roy Ladurie, and both may differ a bit from Inkeles' "modern man" as derived from developing nations today, but right now the common features are most impressive and seem to justify considering the hypothesized modern personality as a western and perhaps as a universal phenomenon.


10. Alexis de Tocqueville, Democracy in America; abridged edition ed. Richard D. Heffner, 1966, pp. 192-4; James Agee, "Knoxville, Summer of 1915," fragment toward his novel A Death in the Family, included as libretto to Samuel Barber's song, "Knoxville, Summer of 1915," sung by Eleanor Steber, with Columbia Records ML5843; see also Harry Stout op. cit. for this same awareness of the liabilities of any new personality; Smith, op. cit.; Vinovskis, op. cit.; Inkeles, op. cit. book and article.


15. Thus, while a skeptical view of the modernization of the human personality checks some of the excesses of some psycho-historians, it rewards them with a less restricted understanding of the human personality in the past.