The History of American Literature ~ S16

DongA University Humanities

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**The American Revolution: A Country Written into Existence**

It is perfectly fitting for us to study the rise of American democracy in a literature course such as this. Perhaps no other episode in modern history clearly demonstrates the power of the written word like the American Revolution. It was a supreme example of the power of ideas to change the world.

1. What is “government” and why does it exist? This is an obvious and important question. Why are there governments? What is their purpose?

a. Security. One answer as to why people joined together into groups, long ago, probably has to do with safety. In a dangerous world it was important to have friends. The stronger your friends, the safer you were. Of course, in time, the strongest people eventually became the leaders.

b. Economics. One of the inevitable outcomes of security is the accumulation of wealth. And the strongest person will of course want more than anyone else. This led to things like “tributes,” gifts that were given to leaders in return for their protection. These tributes could be food, labor, or participation in the military. Eventually, once economic systems became complex enough a more advanced way to give gifts to the leader was developed: money, in the form of taxes, was demanded from citizens.

c. Religion: Leaders were very interested in keeping their wealth, even after they died. The easiest way to do this is to pass the wealth, along with the power and authority needed to keep the money coming, along to a son. This idea, that the son should inherit the power of the father, is called “hereditary rule.” But why should a son be given this right? In order to justify their claim leaders invented religion. Leaders said that God had chosen them (this is called “Divine Right”), and complex religions were created to justify the claims of hereditary rule. A new kind of leader was born: the King (monarchy).

2. Why didn’t the American colonists like the king? There are many reasons. (See the “list of grievances” in the “Declaration of Independence” in the lecture notes from last week.)

3. How did American Revolutionary writers justify their “independence” from the English king? There were many different sources from which the “Founding Fathers” drew their philosophical justification for American independence.

a. The Bible: Somewhat ironically, one of the primary justifications for American democracy was religion, sourced in the Protestant idea that each person could study the Bible for individual truth and communicate with God directly. This was very different from the centralized, government controlled religion of the Old World Christianity. It also meant that the king was no different from anyone else in his relationship to God. Anyone could be king.

b. Neo-Classical Thought: As we have already discussed, the political theories of ancient Greek and Roman philosophers had a profound effect on American democracy. Chief among these perhaps were the writings of Cleisthenes, the creator of the first democracy, and the essays of Aristotle on the varieties of government, including democracy.

c. The Scientific Revolution: As scientific study became more advanced during the 18th century, “reason” (n. the human ability to understand things, apply logic, verify facts, and change or justify practices, institutions, and beliefs based on new or existing information) became the source of personal political authority. Sir Isaac Newton’s *Principia* outlined the laws of motion and the principle of gravitation. This completed studies begun by Copernicus and Galileo, both of whom were harassed by the Christian church for questioning the “biblical” interpretation of reality.

d. The Enlightenment: The reliance on reason, rather than Christian teachings, called into question not only scientific theories, but social theories as well. Philosophers began to write about a new kind of society: one based on the idea that individuals have rights.

i. John Locke and Social Contract Theory. Locke believed that people were born in *tabula rasa* (Latin. Tr.: “a blank chalkboard”), and that all of our ideas are shaped and conditioned by our experience. He said that all of our sensations and experiences, especially when we are infants, create the conditions for our later mental development and our concept of “self.” He believed that governments had no right to tell people what to think or to believe. People should not be forced by the government or anyone else to do what they believe in their hearts to be wrong. It is the function of government then, not to force us to be good, but to preserve our right to do what we think is best: “The State, according to my ideas, is a society of men established for the sole purpose of the establishment, preservation and promotion of their civil interests… life, freedom, the health of the body, and the possession of external goods…”

ii. Jean-Jacques Rousseau and the Theory of Natural Human. Rousseau believed that government and society are to blame for causing humans to become evil and that humans were probably much happier when we were “wild” creatures living in close contact with nature: “The more one reflects on it, the more one finds that this state was the least subject to upheavals and the best for man, and that he must have left it only by virtue of some fatal chance happening that, for the common good, ought never to have happened. The example of savages, almost all of whom have been found in this state, seems to confirm that the human race had been made to remain in it always; that this state is the veritable youth of the world; and that all the subsequent progress has been in appearance so many steps toward the perfection of the individual, and in fact toward the decay of the species.” (from *Discourse on the Origin and Basis of Inequality Among Men*)

iii. David Hume and the Rule of Law. Hume (who was hated by Jefferson and others for his support of the monarchy) was still a very influential figure in the development of legal theories on private property, separation of powers (legal, legislative, and executive), government by consent, and freedom of religion. He wrote: “Every wise, just, and mild government, by rendering the condition of its subjects easy and secure, will always abound most in people, as well as in commodities and riches.”

iv. Thomas Paine and *Common Sense*. Paine was very vocal in his call for revolution. He said that the only way mankind was ever going to be truly free was if they fought for their freedom. In his most famous text, *Common Sense*, he called for American independence and the creation of a representative government based on individual freedoms. “O! Ye that love mankind! Ye that dare oppose not only tyranny but [also] the tyrant, stand forth! Every spot of the Old World is overrun with oppression. Freedom hath been hunted round the globe. Asia and Africa have long expelled her. Europe regards her like a stranger and England hath given her warning to depart. O! Receive the fugitive and prepare in time an asylum for mankind.” And in *The Rights of Man* he wrote that religion was not an aid but an interference to man’s relationship with God: ““I do not believe in the creed professed by the Jewish church, by the Roman church, by the Greek church, by the Turkish church, by the Protestant church, nor by any church that I know of. My own mind is my own church.”

4. How did Thomas Jefferson and the Founding Fathers use these ideas in the formation of American democracy? Paine and other Enlightenment thinkers profoundly affected the development of the American government. The *Declaration of Independence*, the American *Constitution*, and the *Bill of Rights* all echo the writings of these revolutionary thinkers. Thomas Jefferson believed that the American government should, above all else, protect the freedom and dignity of the individual.

a. *The Declaration of Independence*, as we have already seen, established that the rights of the individual supersede the rights of any man-made authority.

b. The American *Constitution* established a system of government designed to protect American citizens from a potentially “tyrannical” government. The first three sections (or Articles) develop the principles of “separation of government” meant to keep any individual from becoming too powerful. The three branches (the President, Legislature (House of Representatives and Senate), and Judiciary) all have different responsibilities and keep the other two branches from having too much control. In this way, the Founding Fathers sought to limit government power and protect the rights of the individual. The document opens with a declaration that the power of the government comes directly from the American citizens: “***We the People*** of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.” In this, it was unlike any political document ever created before.

c. The *Bill of Rights* was a radical document that protected the individual from the tyranny of government in many important ways, including specifically the freedom of speech (even speech against the government), the freedom of religion, the right of individuals to own guns (thus protecting themselves from the government if necessary), freedom from oppressive government police activities, the rights to a quick, fair, public trial in case of arrest, and the preservation of certain powers for local government.