

BOOK REVIEW

THE LANGUAGE OF LIBERTY, 1660-1832: POLITICAL DISCOURSE AND SOCIAL DYNAMICS IN THE ANGLO-AMERICAN WORLD by J.C.D. Clark. (Cambridge University Press, 1993) 404 p.

Reviewed by William B. Allen*

Large sympathy must inform a reading of *The Language of Liberty*, for its heterodox reading of the *substance* of the American Revolution strains against its very helpful survey of the *rhetoric* of the Revolution. That the American revolutionaries were, in the main, a religious and not a secular people is obvious and beyond cavil, despite the impression conveyed by secular historians of later eras. Clark conveys this suitably and accurately, justifying throughout the book his conclusion that “democracy—in the sense of debates over the franchise, the distribution of seats, or the representative machinery in general—was not central to the conflict which rent the English-speaking world in the early-modern period, and was not at the heart of the self-image of any of the societies which made up that world. Its key term had been not ‘democracy’ but ‘liberty,’ and liberty was a term which had its ramifications chiefly in the vast intellectual territories then occupied by law and religion.” This largely accurate (leaving aside the inappropriate separation of law and politics), general view of the Anglo-American socio-political development veers off course, however, when Clark seeks to localize it in the United States. His argument presupposes Americans who could not think around more than one important question at a time. Thus, he jettisons their legitimate interests in constitutional reform in order to arrive at the view that the Revolution was centered in “utopian millennial expectations.”

About this conclusion two things must be said. First, abundant evidence exists that the Americans were *independently* energized around the broad constitutional questions and the broad religious questions, however much the two came to be assimilated to a single set of contingent references once the need for social construction—as opposed to preservation—became unavoidable. Second, “utopian millennial expectations” were rooted in the “New Israel” wholly independent of the eventual political solution which addressed social contradictions that were evident—but not resolved or even systematically addressed—as early as the Massachusetts “Body of Liberties” (1648).

Nothing illustrates the first consideration so tangibly as the broadside found in Ezra Stiles’s papers, and which announced the formation of the “American Society for Promoting Religious Knowledge among the Poor, in the British Colonies.” This advertisement, declaiming against the “prevalence and increase of vice among us,” was published between 1772 and 1775, on the very eve of the Revolution. The names of leading members, those designated to receive subscriptions, include such revolutionary activists as William Smith, Elias Boudinot, and John Lathrop, as well as the evangelist, Jonathan Edwards and the lawyer, Tapping Reeves. No evidence exists that the society ever func-

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tioned, and I presume that its good work was swamped by the rising tide of Revolution. Thus, the constitutional question did not co-opt the religious question. Rather, the constitutional event displaced attention from the religious project, suggesting that “liberty” was far from a code word for religious awakening.

This argument may be sustained, I believe, even when Stiles resurfaces in his election sermon of 1783, “The United States Elevated to Glory and Honor,” and charts a millennial, providentially inspired course for the new polity. The millennial end, however, is nothing other than the triumph of religion on grounds of constitutional liberty much like those addressed to Charles II by Massachusetts in 1662. That is, the earlier view of the *need* for moral regeneration (under the old constitution) has been reformulated as an *expectation* of moral regeneration under a new constitution (“we have realized the capital ideas of Harrington’s *Oceana*”). Stiles discussed the equal franchise and an equitable distribution of property as conditions of this unique opportunity: “Religion may here receive its last, most liberal, and impartial examination. Religious liberty is peculiarly friendly to fair and generous disquisition. Here Deism will have its full chance; nor need libertines more to complain of being overcome by any weapons but the gentle, the powerful ones of argument and truth. Revelation will be found to stand the test...” Thus, far from being ignorant of the war between secular constitutional principles and evangelical faith, it would be fairer to say that Stiles revealed in that war as an opportunity for faith (Sidney Mead to the contrary notwithstanding).

Much less need be written concerning the older—indeed original—roots of “utopian millennial expectations.” Pastor John Robinson in 1620 addressed the Pilgrims departing Delft Haven with an injunction to keep peace with God and man and a promise of God’s ordinances to sustain human innovations. Similarly, the General Court of Massachusetts answered Robert Child that “we account all our countrymen brethren by nation, and such as in charity we may judge to be believers are accounted also brethren in Christ,” doing which under “the rules of God’s word, the civill prudence of all nations, and our owne observation of the fruite of other mens’ follies” the General Court anticipated a “peace, unity, prosperity, &c.” Of course, this was also the case in which the General Court heralded the superiority of Massachusetts’s constitution to the English constitution after a detailed, side-by-side comparison of the two. Finally, none can read Mather’s *Christi Magnalia Americana* (his imitation of Plutarch), and its rich praise of religious devotion *and* secular knowledge (as in the life of William Bradford) without discerning the powerful belief among Americans that God’s grace would conduct their affairs, as a people, in this world as well as in the next.

Accordingly, it is fair to say that Clark has exaggerated the transformation of American evangelism into political utopianism through the American Revolution. Unlike the French Revolution (however philosophically consanguine) the American Revolution *never* hazarded the Gnostic presumption. Human nature was relied upon rather than jettisoned in the United States.

This reckoning raises the interesting question, therefore, of exactly what bearing should inform the reading of Clark’s book. In a word, I believe its true bearing is to reconstruct the seriousness of the language of faith and what I call voiced differences, not as some Golden Age myth but as a continuing if infrequently resorted to resonance in

Anglo-American social reflection. To understand this one must rather review the demonstrations than the conclusions of this book

Perhaps one can account for Clark's misreading of the nature of the American identification with England by the opening observation of the work, which relies on David Fischer's *Albion's Seed: Four British Folkways in America*. There Clark recounted the ritual, religious, and political celebrations the colonists shared with their cousins, including "the birthday of the reigning monarch." Clark omitted the significance, however, of New England's celebration of "Fore-fathers Day" each December 22. These forbears were not ritually shared with Englishmen, and the rite emphasized the pre-existing sense of difference between Americans and Englishmen. Still more importantly, that combined religious and political holiday was replaced, most prominently, by "Independence Day," the celebration of the "Declaration of Independence." Thus, the colonists-turned-citizens of the United States symbolically provide witness of both the true nature and extent of their prior identification with their cousins and of their self-conscious political separation.

Clark's belief that the two shared one history led him to ignore the most fundamental reason for the divergence of American and English common law (a point which William Nelson's *Americanization of the Common Law* misses for different reasons). Though Blackstone spoke but briefly on the subject, the area in which he spoke directly addresses a central constitutional dilemma. English law did not "unify" the colonies for the sufficient reason that English law itself created the exception to the reach of English law in proportion as a colony was considered "conquered" or "discovered" (1 Blackstone, p. 46). The difference often served, in the colonies, to place the monarch in the room the common law would have occupied. The same problem, in a far more intensified degree, informed the trial of Warren Hastings twenty years after the American Revolution. The legal separation of Americans and Englishmen was an accomplished requirement of English legal practice long before the political separation of the American Revolution. It constituted the heart of Thomas Jefferson's *Summary View of the Rights of British America*, in which Jefferson rejected Blackstone's conquest theory for a discovery theory. Ironically, had the American constitutional theory been prevalent in Britain, Clark's analysis would now be correct. Unfortunately, it did not prevail. Moreover, it serves to demonstrate precisely why Lord Bryce's observation that "natural rights" was a "mass" of political dynamite in France (as Clark cites it) cannot be applied to the Constitution the same Lord Bryce celebrated as the "greatest work ever struck off by the mind of man."

In a word: the political history of the United States unavoidably shapes the rhetorical context in which the "language of liberty" must be weighed, not the reverse. Clark's survey, therefore, is the survey of a single set of meanings and symbols in the employ of two different people. Only the illusion of a single English-speaking political universe (which Churchill knew himself to be using when he spoke thus) permits the view that an inadvertent rupture resulted from little more than rhetorical excess.

Now, this political account does not militate heavily against Clark's claim: "In this study the American Revolution is analysed theologically as a rebellion by groups within Protestant Dissent against an Anglican hegemony... A rebellion of natural law

against common law and a rebellion of Dissent against hegemonies Anglicanism were the same rebellion, since their target was the unified sovereign created by England's unique constitutional and ecclesiastical" blend. For the truth is that evangelical religion plays a large role, such as he recounts, in advancing modern principles on both sides of the Atlantic. That very observation minimizes, for the Americans, the role of the monarch, since the ecclesiastical authority of the monarch was rejected in the colonies from the outset. Nothing highlights this so well as the appeal of the General Court of Massachusetts to Charles II that "we might enjoy divine worship without humane mixtures." For the same reason it minimizes the claim that this was a revolt of natural law against common law, inasmuch as the monarch sought to maintain an authority in America based on a right of conquest. That leaves us with only the serious claim that we may analyze the public opinion of the Revolution in terms of the concerns of Protestant Dissent, and that those are similar for America and England.

The dimension of Clark's analysis that benefits from his patient, if somewhat disorderly excavation appears in chapter one, "The Conflict of Laws." He argues that "The sovereignty of the people, under God, was an idea which led away from the ancient constitution or from English liberties as a set of positive privileges and immunities, and towards a unified society whose fundamental laws ... mirrored and expressed the eternal principles of natural law." The centuries-long religious war, then, became the precondition for the separation of "liberty" out of the merely contextual, blood bound concept of nationality and into the status of a truth of nature and nature's God. By this account one conceives of an American Revolution growing "naturally" from the soil of piety—perhaps even on account of the historical accident of internal British political disorder—and assimilating to such philosophical or Enlightenment concepts as strengthen the intrinsic tendency of the movement. This view contrasts sharply with the notion of a pious people upon whom steals unperceived a godless faith to create a new secular state.

Clark succeeds in drawing this picture rather more because he succeeds in revealing how extensive was the disorder and the extent of religious contest in England, which in turn enables the reader to imagine how far evangelical principles might advance in the absence of the Revolution. The answer is, "quite far indeed." In fact, one may plausibly derive the democratic revolution in Britain, slow and incoherent as it has been, from the religious struggles chronicled here. Thus, when a people similarly engaged found themselves imbued with the ideas but liberated from the systems of political control (well before the military victory!), it brings no surprise that they concretize liberty, popular sovereignty, equality, and all such fundamental principles as came to find permanent residence in the Constitution of 1787.

The great mystery of *The Language of Liberty* is that Clark fails to realize that this is the story he has presented. He believes, for example, that the Constitution of 1787 "in a fundamental sense reversed the verdict of 1776." One suspects that he is rather uncritically reading Wood's *Creation of the American Republic* (which even Wood no longer reads uncritically). Clark seems to conceive that generative political discourse should be judged by the speed with which it generates clichés (hence the erroneous discussion of the first relevant uses of "socialism," "capitalism," "individualism," "Americans," etc.), when one should rather look to the speed with which generative political dis-

course changes or introduces ideas. Nothing can be clearer than, by the end of the eighteenth century, notions of “liberty” and “self-government” had prevailed powerfully over public opinion in the United States. The fact that such movement was advanced by evangelical dissent in company with enlightenment rationalism reveals well the sources and powers of political change. Indeed, to judge by the measure of religious establishment, the cardinal index for Clark, the change was wholly worked in the United States before even the political clichés associated with it came into general usage; for 1832 witnessed the end of establishment in the American states (though Clark is silent about this fact, it greatly amplifies his argument). The book is far less about the “language” of liberty than it is about liberty’s overthrow of establishment once liberty itself was emancipated from mere custom, or what Washington called in 1783 the “gloomy age of ignorance and superstition.”

Britain existed within the context of a species of political irony: its constitution was rooted in an Anglicanism to which relatively few adhered and which displayed little capacity for independent existence. “Even within England, the position of the Church was hegemonic not consensual...”(p. 203) As dissenting faiths challenged Anglicanism, having already (in company with Anglicanism) dislodged Catholicism, they served not only to undermine meaningful establishment. They also exposed ill-defined and ill-defended constitutional foundations. Thus Clark turns our attention away from the reification, “Revolution,” and towards the social condition, “the contingent features,” that invited fundamental change. This very framework makes it unnecessary to lean on such intellectual placebos as “paranoia” (p. 222) in order to explain these large events. Where there is room to dispute Clark’s fairly idiosyncratic reading of the ‘contingent features,’ it ought not to be denied that his recovery of the seriousness of voiced differences—the arguments people actually had—goes a long way to re-invest the period of “movement toward revolution” with historical significance.

In order that the judgment of Clark’s reading of historical contingencies as idiosyncratic should not be seen as an *ad hominem*, a postscript example should suffice. That is his rather quirky view that the term “America” had only a geographical meaning until the King conceded it a national meaning in the 1783 Treaty of Paris. William Gordon’s history urged a different construction before mid-century. Nathaniel Ames’s 1758 Almanac connected “utopian millennial expectations” with the term. George Washington’s first official address to the troops of the Revolutionary Army, not to mention his dramatic correspondence with General Gage (among many other and still more emphatic examples) sets forth a clearly national—if incomplete—meaning. Not only did various usages among Americans explicitly urge such meanings, but even speeches in Parliament sometimes made use of the separately cognizable political existence (and what else can he mean by a “national sense”?) of America. Clark’s ill-advised vendetta threatens, then, to undermine otherwise able scholarship. As Ames opened his paean to the growing America of the next two centuries in the 1758 Almanac, “America is a subject which daily becomes more and more interesting.”

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