Agrarian Problems in the New Republic

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POPULAR PROTESFT ACCOMPANIED BY COLLECTIVE ACTION was a frequent phenomenon in the last quarter of the eighteenth century in British North America, both in urban and rural areas. Protest movements against established authority are often associated with the American Revolution, but precedents for their actions can be traced back to the colonial period. Beginning with Bacon's Rebellion in Virginia in the 1670s, protest, rioting, and various forms of collective action became widespread as the colonial population grew and diversified. In the years between the Seven Years' War and the outset of the Revolutionary War, while there was more urban than rural rioting, agrarian movements had greater amplitude than urban ones, lasted longer, and probably left a more durable impact on the areas they affected, particularly in shaping political attitudes within the struggle for independence (Brown).

Rural discontent was manifest in the middle colonies well before the movement for independence, in the shape of tenant riots (New Jersey, 1745-54), anti-rent wars (New York, from the 1750s through the 1770s, coming to a head in the Great Rebellion of 1766), and the backcountry uprising of Pennsylvania known as the Paxton Boys' movement (1755-1764). Agrarian conflict was also present in Maryland and Virginia without reaching the state of organized protest achieved in the two distinct movements of Regulation in South Carolina (1766-68) and in North Carolina (1768-71). Nor was New England exempt from rural protest

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before the Revolution. In New Hampshire, warring factions fought over land grants from 1769 to 1791, their disputes bridging the formative years from the end of the colonial period to independence and the creation of the Constitution. In some areas of Massachusetts, popular protest in the countryside, associated with resistance to Great Britain during the war, developed into internal discord during the debates over the framing and ratification of the state constitution (1777-80). Some of the impetus for the Shays Rebellion derived from these earlier political differences.

Although each movement had its specific context and set of problems, several issues were common to all of them, before and after the Revolution. Among the most significant were:

(1) land problems—insufficient acreage, inequality of access, or the menace of expropriation;
(2) taxation policies and, directly related to tax burdens;
(3) the shortage of currency and the question of paper money versus specie, or hard money, and also
(4) institutional inadequacies, such as corruption in the court systems, abusive legal fees, as well as the lack of representation, or under-representation, in provincial assemblies and, after the Revolution, in state legislatures.

This last problem was specially true in Massachusetts whose state capital remained in the east when those of other states were relocating in the piedmont regions of the Appalachians. Many Massachusetts towns perceived themselves as being too far from the capital to afford maintaining representatives in office when the legislature was in session, and, hence, claimed to be politically isolated. This perception also contributed to secessionist projects in the north-central part of the state.

Two postrevolutionary agrarian movements sharing these problems were the Shays Rebellion, centered in Massachusetts in 1786-87, and the Whiskey Rebellion, which spanned the first years of the 1790s in Pennsylvania before its suppression by federal troups in 1794. Both movements encompassed a larger area and a longer moment in time than these dates imply, as is pointed out by historians attempting to interpret them beyond their immediate agrarian grievances in a broader framework of nation-making.

The continued presence of organized rural protest in the years following the revolutionary war—seen as an aberration by conservative contemporaries—has divided scholars in our own times as to its

significance. The historiography of agrarian protest tends, not surprisingly, to reflect the epoch in which it is written, as well, of course, as changes in historical methodology and approaches. How have studies of the Shays and the Whiskey rebellions evolved in their assessments of the meanings of these movements, and to what extent do they appreciate (or belittle) the impact of agrarian protest on the revolutionary settlement and its place in the history of the new nation?

A consensus view of the American Revolution, and with it agrarian conflict, dominated historical studies from the end of World War II until the 1960s. With the exception of Staughton Lynd's work on class conflict in Dutchess County, New York (Lynd 1961 et 1962), the radical dimensions of agrarian unrest remained nearly invisible in historical writings. Although New England town studies revealed differences in land holdings and social status, conflictual issues were not seen as destroying the social fabric of the community. Rural uprisings began to be seen as reflections of earlier, traditional peasant behavior, and by linking the strategies of these eighteenth-century movements with British and continental precedents, scholars often tended to downplay whatever elements of potential change they contained, associating them with a pastoral ethic, rather than a forward-looking political vision.

In the late sixties the historiography of dissent took a new direction. The research of Jesse Lemisch, Alfred Young and Dirk Hoerder (Lemisch 1968, Young 1976, Hoerder 1977), focusing on popular protest and crowd behavior, gave agency to ordinary people and found in their movements and actions a radical challenge to established authority. At about the same time several studies on the structure of wealth in the British-American colonies on the eve of the Revolution quantified and underlined the differences and cleavages in societies (Main, Zemsky, Jones). These studies informed my own research in the late seventies and early eighties and led me to formulate a synthetic analysis of agrarian protest movements (Karsky 1976, 1983).

The first book-length study of agrarian protest in Massachusetts since the 1950s was David Szatmary's *Shays' Rebellion: The Making of an Agrarian Insurrection*, published in 1980. Szatmary situates the movement in the larger framework of postrevolutionary New England, a world he finds divided between two different cultures: that of traditional subsistence agriculture and that of an expanding market place. Western Massachusetts rapidly becomes the center of his focus, for it was here that the Shays

Rebellion had its epicenter. He depicts the life of the independent yeoman farmer, his uses of the land, his choices of crops, and establishes the farmer's ties with the community through the barter and labor-exchange system. After demonstrating that farmers and country artisans followed traditional paths, he contrasts their ways with those of merchants and farmers in market-oriented towns where "an ethic of competitive individualism" prevailed and where new methods in agriculture were more likely to be applied (Szatmary 1-18). While Szatmary's portrait of rural Massachusetts is not wholly inaccurate, it is very narrow. It tends to restrict the principal actors to two separate spaces, neither allowing for much possibility of interaction or change. Szatmary's vision of subsistence agriculture lacks an adequate margin for manoeuvering and fails to explain how, for example, farmers planned their agricultural cycle so as to be able to meet their fiscal burdens, and how taxes were paid. Taxes and lack of liquidity were, of course, two of the most pressing problems shaping rural protest in the 1780s. Szatmary does point out how state policies in New Hampshire helped farmers by reducing taxes and in Rhode Island by issuing paper money, measures which Massachusetts refused to adopt.

After delineating the main problems besetting Massacusetts farmers and their attempts to remonstrate by peaceful means, Szatmary examines the attitudes and fears of men of government. He exposes the exaggerated fears and accusations of conservative leaders which finally were so influential in persuading people of the need for a stronger national government. Here again, as in his depiction of New England farm life, the author approaches the subject in a dualistic manner, opposing two groups against each other, rather than exploring the plurality of views and the complexities within Massachusetts society.

Following a linear demonstration of the actions of the Shays Rebellion in four successive stages, Szatmary's final chapter on the relation of the movement to the creation of the Constitution concludes that Massachusetts Antifederalists represented a society on its way out, a sort of last stand to preserve an old way of life against encroaching commercialism. In his own words, "the insurrection illustrated the tumultuous effects of the transition from traditional society to merchant capitalism." (Szatmary 14). Certainly postrevolutionary society was changing, but merchant capitalism had existed all along.

In his monograph on agrarian protest in Pennsylvania, *The Whiskey Rebellion: Frontier Epilogue to the American Revolution*, Thomas Slaughter

stresses the frontier nature of the movement. He argues that rural resistance was extensive, surpassing the boundaries of Pennsylvania, where textbook accounts usually locate it. Slaughter situates the Whiskey Rebellion geographically along the frontiers of several states and politically in the midst of the struggle for the creation of new states and of the internal conflict of the revolutionary period itself. If the federal constitution was the culmination of that epoch, the Whiskey Rebellion was, in Slaughter's words "a violent epilogue to the confrontations that racked the nation during that tumultuous period." (Slaughter 1986, 4). Unlike Szatmary, Slaughter insists on the violence of the frontier. "Violence was endemic to the western counties,» he writes, in reference to Massachusetts in the 1780s, and concerning Pennsylvania: "The western country was perhaps, most of all, a place of conflict. Violence between Indians and whites was already legendary on the frontier, and hostile interaction among the frontiersmen was even more common." (39, 62)

In keeping with his insistence on frontier conditions, Slaughter argues that many of the grievances of the Whiskey rebels were related to the west, such as unequal access to land, insufficient protection against the Indians, the westward expansion of markets, linked with navigation rights on the Mississippi. Other grievances of a more direct political nature concerned civil liberties and the right of protest. The immediate source of conflict was the excise tax passed by the federal government in 1791 which burdened western distillers disproportionately to eastern citizens and which was to be paid in specie rather than in kind.

Slaughter traces a tradition of excise resistance back to the British Isles where poems and ditties popularizing opposition were passed down from generation to generation, as well as to examples of protest in New England in the mid-eighteenth century. He associates excise opposition with the idea of divided sovereignty , an important issue of ideological conflict between patriots and the British Parliament during the revolutionary conflict, which came to the fore again in the debates over the Constitution. Antifederalists held that internal taxation should be a concern of the individual states, while the federal government should handle external taxation. In Slaughter's words: "… as a matter of logic and political theory, those who opposed the Constitution strongly resisted the idea that two sovereign governmental bodies could coexist, share concurrent jurisdiction, cooperate, and survive. They believed that sovereignty could be divided but not shared." (1986, 26.)

Thomas Slaughter's approach to the Whiskey Rebellion has certain similarities to that of David Szatmary for the Shays Rebellion. Both consider their insurgents as outmoded, as standing for a vision of society which had no place in the changing world around them. While Slaughter situates the Whiskey rebels in the effervescence of revolutionary politics, he interprets their resistance as an epilogue, a conclusion to that period. The two historians share a view of agrarian resistance playing itself out in a primitive economy: for Szatmary, centered entirely around household production and the community, for Slaughter, demanding easier access to markets, but still in a frontier-stage of development. One can only regret that Slaughter failed to define and nuance his conception of frontier. As shown in my own earlier study (1976), the heart of resistance came from the southwestern area of the state with the greatest density of population west of the Appalachian mountains. By the 1790s a considerable number of small manufactures existed in the towns of the region, and a local aristocracy lived in material comfort and considerable ease. While the area was changing, it was substantially settled and could no longer be considered frontier (Karsky 1976, 87-114). Since Slaughter uses the notion of frontier as an operating concept to explain the motives and the violence of the Whiskey Rebellion, he times the transformations in the region as coming later, shortly after the Whiskey Rebellion, when, he argues, "western Pennsylvania no longer defined an edge of settlement" because people had moved further west (Slaughter 1986, 224).

Like Szatmary, Slaughter tends to interpret events in a dualistic manner, pitting one side against the other in a battle between "the center and the periphery, cosmopolitans and localists, East and West, between those who favored strong central control and those who demanded local autonomy" in an "either-or" rhetoric, permitting little space for alternative opinions or explanations.

This binary mode of thinking is an easy trap for scholars. A year before his monograph on the Whiskey Rebellion was published, Slaughter had contributed to a collection of essays on the same subject, edited by Steven R. Boyd. In his earlier essay Slaughter had already resorted to this binary pattern of reasoning, contradicting himself in calling for scholarship which would no longer lock itself into a who-was-right/ who-was-wrong debate but would take *both* sides into account (Slaughter 1985, 9-30).

In the same collection Mary K. Bonsteel Tachau analyzed the role of Kentucky in the Whiskey Rebellion. She demonstrated that, contrary to

what occurred in Pennsylvania, violence was not the hallmark of resistance in the frontier state of Kentucky where people actively opposed the excise tax until its repeal in 1801—one of the first acts of Jefferson's government. According to Bonsteel Tachau, opposition there was basically non-partisan. People refused to comply with the excise law or help in its execution. Excise collectors could not be hired (unlike Pennsylvania), and both in criminal suits and civil cases, the innocence of distillers was upheld by grand and petit jurors. Regardless of political or factional persuasion, Kentuckians refused to inform on one another and were basically mutually supportive in resisting the excise law (Bonsteel Tachau 97-118). Their unified response to federal efforts at enforcement would suggest that, in the long run, passive resistance on the frontier could achieve more than violence

In bringing together the historiography of their movements, as well as the fruits of contemporary research on eighteenth-century American life, the works of David Szatmary and Thomas Slaughter have earned an important place in the scholarship of rural protest. Since theirs are the only monographs in recent years devoted to the Shays and the Whiskey Rebellions, they are sometimes considered the definitive studies of each. But subjects so open to questions and doubts can hardly be treated once and for all, and, not surprisingly, scholarly skepticism continues to produce further analyses of these rebellions and others in colonial and revolutionary North America.

The bicentennial of the Shays Rebellion in 1986 was the occasion for a renewed investigation of that movement and brought together scholars working on various aspects of Massachusetts society. *In Debt to Shays: the Bicentennial of an Agrarian Rebellion*, edited by Robert Gross, was the result. In its diversity this collection of essays presents agrarian unrest in a far more complex light than previous works have done. The contributions of Stephen Marini and John Brooke, particularly, analyzing the relationship between protest and religious dissent, open a new dimension to the research on the Shays Rebellion (Gross 205-280).

Marini's earlier *Radical Sects of Revolutionary New England* shows how the revolutionary war drained the Congregational Church of its ministers, leaving vacancies which opened the way to radical sects or simply to a vacuum of power in many of the Massachusetts hill towns. He argues that the growing plurality of society challenged established religion, paving the way for the political defiance of agrarian rebellion. Marini associates the use of Revolutionary ideas in the newer towns with the desire to remodel

the social order and establish self-government (Marini 1982). His farmers are the chosen people of the Jeffersonian vision, taking their destiny in their own hands, not harking back to former times.

Marini's work informs Brooke's study of Hampshire County protest, concerning the impact of clerical vacancies and the absence of leadership as a creative force in shaping protest. But Brooke finds that the language of protest in the more remote towns of Hampshire and Worcester counties reflected the older provincial culture, one of personal independence coupled with collective obligation. Brooke's study of central Massachusetts locates the Shays Rebellion in the midst of a larger debate on the significance of republican and liberal ideologies as formative principles in the political and social life of the new nation (Brooke 1989).

Other historians considering agrarian protest in this light have examined the links and differences in political thought between the Whiskey Rebellion and the Democratic-Republican societies of the 1790s. A recent study demonstrates how these societies, which were organized in towns and cities all over the nation (except for Georgia and Rhode Island) combined elements of both republican and liberal ideologies: while recognizing the right of ordinary citizens to pursue individual visions of happiness, the societies centered their activities on the interests of the community (Schoenbachler 1998). The role of the Democratic-Republican societies—to keep an eye on government—linked them with classical republican philosophy, but by the last decade of the eighteenth century, the key tenets of that philosophy had been redefined and a synthetic language of politics, not entirely liberal nor strictly republican, formed their thought. In his study of the dissenting tradition in America, Saul Cornell argues that the distinguishing feature differentiating the political persuasions of the republican-liberal ideology of the societies and the radical message of the Whiskey Rebellion is the issue of violence. The recourse to violence by Pennsylvania militants of the Whiskey Rebellion, when peaceful measures had failed, tarnished Democratic-Republicanism in general and had a decidedly negative effect on the life of the societies .

In one of the first studies of rural protest to appear in the twenty-first century, Terry Bouton argues that agrarian protest has not only been cut off from the mainstream of American political thought, but also divorced from historical significance. In a new look at the Whiskey Rebellion, in which he refreshingly reinstates economic grievances at the center of the movement, Bouton claims that historians have downplayed the

importance of rural protest by their frequent failure to see it in its full duration, or by canalizing it into sporadic outbursts of protest by specific ethnic or frontier groups. "For two hundred years," he objects, "historians have marginalized rural people, diminished their ideas, and discounted their protests…." (Bouton 887) Rather than erasing them from historical memory, he contends, we should restore them to it by relating them to the larger process of revolutionary history.

As we have seen, Bouton is not alone in wanting to keep the memory of popular protest alive. The historians and works we have mentioned in passing, regardless of their conclusions as to the role of agrarian radicalism in shaping the course of the revolution, have all contributed in keeping alive the memory of those sometimes hidden from history. In the words of Alfred Young: "In a time of upheaval, ordinary people make events possible, and they have done so time and time again in American history …. This long struggle to achieve equal rights and to expand the meaning of liberty … is one of the grand themes of American history. We do well to keep it in public memory." (Young 1999, 206-207) The need to reexamine the closing decades of the eighteenth century for clearer evidence of popular political involvement in the larger life of the new nation is still very much alive and challenges historians of early American history on both sides of the Atlantic. "What happened to the white farmers who fought for home-rule when they were faced with an even greater, more intensive threat from their own new national government?" asks British historian Michael McDonnell (McDonnell 504). While the historiography of agrarian protest has tended to focus on the political significance of the small farmer in the new nation, it might be useful to turn to recent scholarship on early American agriculture in order to reexamine agrarian movements in a larger context. Still a divisive issue among historians of the Shays and the Whiskey rebellions is the extent of farmers' involvement in the market.[1] Situating these movements in a broader, more dynamic economic and

[1] The literature on changes in early American agriculture and in pre-industrial economic developments in general is extensive and controversial. A convenient overview exists in Richard L.Bushman, "Markets and Composite Farms in Early America," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d Ser., LV 3 (July 1998) 351-374. One of the best monographs is that of British historian Christopher Clark, *The Roots of Rural Capitalism: Western Massachusetts, 1780-1860*. (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell UP, 1990). A new synthesis of the agrarian economy of the colonial and revolutionary periods can be found in the latest work of Allan Kulikoff, *From British Peasants to Colonial American Farmers.* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

social framework than the frontier-backcountry context which has been the basis for analyzing them until now would not only provide new elements for understanding agrarian protest, but might also help to clarify some of the problems of discord among historians of agrarian America. As new works appear will they refocus agrarian protest in a larger context or resuscitate the older arguments?[2] Decidedly, the last word has not yet been written.

[2] The most recent study of the Shays' Rebellion, is by Leonard Richards and was published in June 2002.

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