

The Origins of U.S. Liberalism and Contemporary Democracy

By Arnold August, March 2012

Slogans such as “Liberty and Property” constituted the banners adopted by the English Glorious Revolution of 1688 “before being adopted more systematically by the American Revolution and then by the French Revolution in its first phase.”¹

[However] the French Revolution, like all great revolutions, was ahead of its time and projected itself far ahead of its immediate demands. It was both a bourgeois revolution ... and a more advanced breakthrough, a popular revolution, and can be interpreted today as starting the socialist criticism of the bourgeois system.... The popular property of the French Revolution [which it] thought it could and must guarantee was [the popular property] ... of millions of peasants and craftsmen.²

In fact, these were the segments of the population that stormed the Bastille in 1789 and marched on the King’s residence in Versailles. The popular neighbourhoods surrounding the Bastille were those of the craftsmen and working population, even though the leadership of the French Revolution was in the hands of the rising bourgeoisie. However, the bourgeois French Revolution was “ahead of its time” because, among other reasons, it had to take into account the portions of society beyond the scope and interests of the nascent capitalist class and landowners. The American Revolution, on the other hand, was always firmly in the hands of the wealthy few who were also slaveholders, such as George Washington. It was closer to the Glorious English Revolution of 1688 as far as domestic politics were concerned. Even though the parliamentary structures were different than those developed in the U.S., the conflict in England involved the Lords versus the monarchy.

Given that in reality the American Revolution’s mottoes of liberty (to accumulate wealth) and happiness (tweaked from property) were the basis of American ideology, it meant the retreat from the thinking of the French Revolution and even the abolition of the French Revolution’s values.³ This is an important point to keep in mind as we review the historical evolution of the U.S. Attempts by the U.S., through its leading political actors, to associate superficially its tradition with great watersheds in history, such as that of the French Revolution, are totally unfounded.

U.S. liberals themselves confirm the view that their ideology is against substantial change and that the U.S. historical experience is not at all similar to that of the French Revolution. Arthur Schlesinger Jr. wrote:

With no social revolution in his past, the American has no sense of the role of catastrophe in social change. Consequently, he is, by nature, a gradualist; he sees few problems which cannot be solved by reason and debate.... The American Revolution was thus a revolution of limited liability, aiming at national independence more than at social change. And since independence, American political conflict has taken place in an atmosphere — sometimes felt rather than understood — of consensus. The tensions of the French Revolution still vibrate in the Fourth Republic.⁴

¹ Amin, Samir. 2009. "Eurocentrism." NY: *Monthly Review Press*, p. 15.

² *Ibid.*, p. 18.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

⁴ Schlesinger, Arthur, Jr. 1962. "Liberalism in America: A Note for Europeans (1956)." *The Politics of Hope*. Boston: Riverside Press.