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A NEW LITERARY HISTORY OF AMERICA

EDITED BY

GREIL MARCUS AND WERNER SOLLORS

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1776

John Adams disclaims authorship of *Common Sense* but helps declare independence

A Dialectics of Radical Enlightenment

Thousands of political tracts were printed during the British-American taxation crisis of the 1760s and 1770s. One of them turned the dispute between imperial center and colonial provinces into a revolution in the modern sense of the term: *Common Sense,* published anonymously on January 10, 1776. Arguing that England's taxation policy violated the natural rights of the American colonists, rather than their inherited privileges, *Common Sense* effectively replaced a rhetoric of grievance and petition with fierce invective against "the Royal Brute of Britain." The pamphlet also played masterfully on the religious sensibilities of its colonial audience by providing a providential reading of the crisis: even "the distance at which the Almighty hath placed England and America" was cited as proof that the colonies' subjection "was never the design of Heaven." Altogether, *Common Sense* blended traditional themes from English protest rhetoric and Reformation pamphleteering (such as the Norman Yoke and resistance against "low papistical design") with the Enlightenment's confidence in human self-creation, based on a radically new concept of "nature." The result was explosive: "We have it in our power to begin the world over again . . . The birthday of a new world is at hand."

Interestingly, the author of *Common Sense* was a newcomer to the American scene: Thomas Paine had arrived in North America in the winter of 1774. It proved to be the right moment for radical thought in a political environment that was predominantly conservative. After Parliament had frustrated all the colonists' hopes of pursuing their interests *within* the British Empire, the only legitimate position left to them was precisely the one that Parliament had always

suspected they secretly favored: independence on the basis of universal human rights. "The cause of America," Thomas Paine explained in *Common Sense,* "is in a great measure the cause of all mankind."

Paine's universalist formula filled a strategic gap by providing a rallying cry for the many competing interest groups within the patriots' ranks. Behind the scenes, however, the struggle over the meaning of the revolution was already well under way. John Adams, for one, read *Common Sense* with mixed feelings. When some of his friends asked him if he was the author of the celebrated pamphlet, he was aghast. An absurd thought, Adams maintained in numerous letters: never, he told his friends, would he have been able to produce such a well-written text. Yet this literary praise contained stringent theoretical criticisms. Although he honored the author of *Common Sense* as a brilliant rhetorician, Adams also dismissed him as a demagogue—a hot-headed populist rather than a sober republican. "Indeed, this writer has a better hand in pulling down than building," Adams wrote to his wife, Abigail, on March 19, 1776. "I should have made a more respectable figure as an architect if I had undertaken such a work." To prove his point he composed *Thoughts on Government* in the spring of 1776.

At first glance, it is hard to see what the debate was all about. *Common Sense* and *Thoughts on Government* agreed on fundamental issues. Both affirmed the sovereignty of the people as the guiding principle of an independent America. Both demanded a written constitution to limit legislative authority. Where Paine stated that, "In America THE LAW IS KING," Adams held: "The very definition of a republic is 'an empire of laws, and not of men.'" Given such consensus, the intensity of Adams's attacks on Paine—whom he called the "Star of Disaster" and the "Disastrous Meteor" of American politics—seems peculiar. No less peculiar, however, was Paine's conclusion, after a conversation with his critic, that "[Adams's] head was as full of kings, queens, and knaves as a pack of cards." The inability of these two founding figures to find common ground anticipated the militant clash of opposing interpretations of the American Revolution that would shake the new United States in the 1790s and that would become a defining mark of American culture throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Like those later conflicts, the quarrel between Adams and Paine was based on shared assumptions and values. And yet, each man accused the other of betraying fundamental revolutionary principles. It is tempting to read this early controversy as one that pitted a nascent democratic tradition against an established elitist tradition. Indeed, Adams's distaste for Paine's populist language—a distaste that also guided his aversion to Benjamin Franklin, whom he thought too folksy for his country's good—was riddled with class prejudice. Significantly, however, Adams objected to Paine's demotic rhetoric on pragmatic grounds: it was not the idea of popular government that bothered him but the possible danger of that idea turning into a utopian faith.

Finding more "common-place" than common sense in Paine's pamphlet, Adams disapproved in particular of Paine's "crude, ignorant Notions of Government by one Assembly." According to *Thoughts on Government,* the unicameral system proposed in *Common Sense* (a system also favored by Franklin) would be "liable to

all the vices, follies, and frailties of an individual—subject to fits of humor, starts of passion, flights of enthusiasm, partialities, or prejudice—and consequently productive of hasty results and absurd judgments." In other words: if identified with the voice of natural reason, speaking truth "in a language as plain as A, B, C" (as Paine wrote in *The American Crisis* in December 1776), the voice of the people would turn dictatorial. As unanimous as Rousseau's General Will, it would silence all counterspeech as unreasonable.

Adams concluded that enlightened politics needed to take a realistic view both of human psychology and of the nature of political power. One way to do this would be to strike a balance between conflicting interests in a deliberative—rather than expressive—legislature: "[The representative assembly] should be in miniature an exact portrait of the people at large . . . [I]n other words, equal interests among the people should have equal interests in it." This representative assembly would in turn be integrated into a classical system of mixed government, which in Adams's description looked like an early version of what came to be known as the checks and balances among competing branches of government.

The logic of Adams's argument was intricate; it already took account of a dialectics of radical enlightenment. Natural-rights populism may have been what the colonial campaign for self-government needed in 1776, but Adams understood that the principle of home rule and the principle of human rights could be at odds. Enlightened patriotism and enlightened universalism made conflicting claims on the American revolutionaries.

Another document of the same year took a different rhetorical approach—and found Adams's approval. Like *Common Sense,* the Declaration of Independence based its call for self-government on "inalienable rights." But Thomas Jefferson addressed his audience (supposedly "a candid world") in a calm, objective, almost lawyerlike tone, stating with authority: "We hold these truths to be self-evident . . ."

Still, this was a chancy opening, as the nation's history would show. Strictly speaking, self-evident truths require no holders. The "we" of Jefferson's sentence unwittingly called into question the timelessness and placelessness of the propositions that followed. Evidently, the truth that "all men are created equal" was not so self-evident as to prevent dispute over its meaning—neither in 1776 nor later, when this statement's implications for the nation's unity became increasingly contested. The very fact, then, that "these truths" had authors and supporters who signed the document and put a date to it attests to their interestedness. The Declaration of Independence was, among other things, a declaration of war, a propaganda tract, an offer of coalition to France. But it claimed to be all these things in the form of a philosophical treatise, argued in the irrefutable logic of a syllogism, written—as Jefferson put it two years earlier in *A Summary View of the Rights of British America*—in "the language of truth."

By basing colonial resistance against then-existing law on the most forceful legal foundation imaginable—the idea of a law of nature that is valid anywhere and anytime—*Common Sense* and the Declaration of Independence together endowed America with a compelling sense of its own inevitability. As Jefferson explained in 1821 in his *Autobiography,* "The question was not whether, by a declaration of independence, we should make ourselves what we are not; but whether we should declare a fact which already exists." Thus rights were no longer demanded but declared. Subjects no longer negotiated with their rulers but reminded their governors of their obligations. In this sense, the Declaration of Independence, while giving notice of its signers' revolutionary intent, claimed simply to express an empirical state of affairs—as if the revolution was nothing but an opportune instrument to communicate natural facts to the people's consciousness.

In fact, however, the revolutionaries argued in an openly counterfactual manner when they postulated their legal autonomy in 1776. At that time, the claim of de facto independence was self-evidently false: the colonies had not yet constituted themselves as a distinct political entity, nor were the truths of the Declaration of Independence imperative enough to command assent throughout Europe or even throughout British America. America's new language of reason still had a world to convince—or, rather, America's new language of reason still had to bring the world into accord with its propositions.

John Adams was not the only one who was troubled by the utopian cast of this enterprise. Jefferson, too, was acutely aware of the risky novelty of the American position. Thus he composed his radical declarations in the reassuring classicism of syllogistic reasoning and spoke of all men being *created* equal, rather than being born equal. (Natural rights gain nothing in self-evidence, but much in legitimacy, when they appear in the guise of *ius divinum.*) But Thomas Paine, too, knew that his enlightened universalism needed more than a belief in the inevitability of revolution. Exactly because independence could not be avoided, Paine thought it essential that an independent America must not fall victim to a revolutionary demagogue "who laying hold of popular disquietudes, may collect together the desperate and the discontented, and by assuming to themselves the powers of government, may sweep away the liberties of the continent like a deluge." According to Paine, this development could be averted only if Americans decided "to form a constitution of our own in a cool deliberate manner"—a *written* constitution, authoritative and binding upon all lawmakers and all successive governments under that constitution. The most heated controversies in American history, starting with Adams and Paine's 1776 dispute over *Common Sense,* have not been between local interests and universal principles, but almost always centered on the question of how to coordinate universal principles and local realities.

To found a country and to constitute a "people" on the basis of natural rights—rather than to commit an existing country or an existing people to such principles—is an improbable thing to do. It marks that country for utopian overreach or constructive despair. It produces forms of self-obsession that often lead one to forget that there is a world outside one's own country. It produces perennial disputes about the meaning of one's communal existence in the world. To the extent that the United States was founded by force of documents, texts, and clashing forms of rhetoric, the United States is bound to be a nation of competing readers and competing readings. And to the extent that even the most self-evident propositions are invariably confronted with local meanings and interests, the United

States has always been a nation divided in trying to become one nation. There can be, then, no such thing as a nonpartisan American literature—political, historiographical, or otherwise.

While Jefferson, Paine, and Adams were united in their belief that a republic of reason was possible and necessary, this confidence has served as a frame for numerous quarrels of faith and conviction in American history. In all these conflicts, the appeal to a natural order of things—to a universal human longing for freedom, democracy, prosperity—has been a forceful political instrument, both of liberation and coercion. If invoked from a position of substantial power, such liberation offers an absolute choice to its addressees: either participate in the natural course of events or be run over by it. Each reference to a "common sense," each invocation of "self-evident truth" includes the covert assumption that those who see things differently are not competent to use rational speech or to take autonomous action. Rousseau had another way of putting it: the enlightened citizen is asked to act according to his innate freedom—and when he refuses to do this, "one has to force him to be free." This is the lasting dilemma of modern politics, in 1776 and today: its hope to establish a social order that is considered natural but does not arise by itself.

What conclusion can be drawn? Perhaps this: the language of the Declaration of Independence laid the intellectual foundations for a powerful nation and a world-shaping culture, but at its most convincing, this language has been spoken by those who were either maligned in the original document (Jefferson's "merciless Indian savages") or quietly removed from it (when the Continental Congress deleted Jefferson's long paragraph censuring colonial slavery) or not mentioned at all (as Abigail Adams reminded her husband in a letter of March 31, 1776, asking him to "remember the ladies"). Thus, the Declaration of Independence and *Common Sense,* each in its own way, has spawned adaptations, references, and rewritings beyond their authors' wildest dreams: from William Lloyd Garrison's and Frederick Douglass's uncompromising nineteenth-century stem-winders against slavery to Bob Dylan's surreal dropping of Paine's name on his album *John Wesley Harding* (1967, four years after Dylan received the Tom Paine Award from the Emergency Civil Liberties Committee); from the feminist Seneca Falls Declaration (1848), modeled verbatim on Jefferson's document, to a drunken barroom toast to "the pursuit of happiness" in Thomas Pynchon's *Mason & Dixon* (1997).

It is certainly justified to say that American literature starts with political tracts and philosophical treatises. But to read that literature in any meaningful way is to see what those writings about common sense and the self-evident forced into existence: myriad minority reports, many of them collected in the disturbing and disturbed stock of imaginative literature written after 1776. Perhaps the true American literature—true to its nation's wish for local circumscription as well as to its yearning for boundless universality—can be found after the Declaration of Independence, indeed provoked by it: fictions obsessed with their own provenance, mongrel genres, faux classicism, expatriate fantasies and regionalist tales, stories of migration and adventure, visions of deception and passing, raptures and

conspiracies. There is almost everything—but no self-evident truth—in these innumerable competing voices.

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FRANK KELLETER