

The Origins of the American Politics and Society

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In the American Society, there are traditions come from the American Revolution and the dynamics of the society affect domestic and foreign policy issues. However, there are also debates which have their origin in the American Revolution and the foundation period. In that sense, there is still race issue, big inequality of wealth, the myth of liberty, and the idea of the American Society is chosen by the God because of their significant revolution in the human history.

In the foreign policy, these sociological dynamics take place in the role of isolationism and expansionism. In other words, the deeper idea of liberty in the American Society pushes the isolationist policies against the nations who were imperial and the Americans were the subjects of those emperors. The other one is the expansionism which includes the proud ideas of the American Revolution and the aim of spreading those ideals to rest of the world. Since those ideals are the results of Enlightenment of the human beings. In other words, those basic two traditions can be listed named as Wilsonianism and Hamiltonianism in expansionist side, Jacksonianism and Jeffersonianism in the nationalist or isolationist side. Both of those two sides of the American politics have influenced the policies when they have power to apply their policies. As a result, it will be a better perspective to analyze the United States in that comparative approach between the influential themes in the American nation. In other words, it should be tired to find the origins of those themes into the American Revolution and foundation period.

On the other hand, there is another big struggle between the American Democracy and American Capitalism. Those two are the brilliant productions of the American history and they are the important tools for American politics in contemporary political issues. However, they are also in a rivalry with each other.

In that sense, American Democracy is based on equality among through out the society and it had an important role in the independence movement during the foundation period. Since, the idea of equality motivated people to create their own country. However, the counter

side of the American Democracy is based on inequality. For example; the American Society fought against the empire of the Great Britain for their liberty. They assumed a more equal society but the egalitarian ideals in social issues couldn't be found in economic issues. In that sense, after the Revolution, the wealth was redistributed more unequally in the post-revolutionary period.¹

Another social struggle in the American society is the race issue. The *overclass of white man* in American society has always seen the black man as a problem for the American ideals. Those black men were the slaves of their fathers before the 20th century. Therefore; because of the social and economic reasons, the American society couldn't eliminate the race issue. However, during the WWII, there was a softening of white American racism. The reason of that was the needed black domestic support for the war effort. In that sense, the US is a class base society which is originated in the race issue and this will be explained later.

In the contemporary American politics, there is also a problem of the expansionism of the executive body in the government. In the explanation of Noam Friedman, there is the supremacy of the presidential office over the Congress. Thus, the Supreme Court of the US becomes an actor who follows political issues. In other words, because of the nature of the cold war, the American democracy was corrupted by the American capitalism. As William Appelman Williams says that there is the *elitism* in the American democracy.² It means that the important decisions are taken by a small group and there are no discussions and getting arguments of the American public. The political parties become more coherent in their beliefs and ideas. The state system also becomes more centralized and the federal system becomes more rigid. As a result, this contains big threats to the American democracy.

Due to the universal significance of the American Revolution, the American society has seen itself as a "God chosen" society and their way to order their society is the best for human beings. Therefore; those American ideals should be given or forced to rest of the world. This is another expression of American society of itself as a responsible nation in the world. However, the current debates show the serious challenges the American ideals especially about their national expressions. In that sense, the American politics is a scope that contains

¹ Gordon Woods, "Republican Society," *The American Revolution*, Random House Adult Trade Publishing Group, 2003 p.121.

² William Appelman Williams, "Introduction," *The Tragedy of the American Diplomacy*, p.6.

ironies and paradoxes. In order to analyze those issues, the foundation period and building of wealth in the American society should be well understood.

I

By the beginning of the 1775, the British government built up its army and began restraining the commerce of the colonies. In the American side, in November 1774, George III had told the North they must decide whether they will be the subject or independent.³

The Second Continental Congress appointed George Washington of Virginia as a commander, issued paper money for supporting the colonial troops, and formed a committee to negotiate with foreign countries.⁴

On July 1776, the delegates formally approved the Declaration of Independence which was written by Thomas Jefferson of Virginia⁵. In the Declaration of Independence, there was the idea of that *“all men are created equal and they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights.”* Those rights are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. The government is to secure those rights. However, those principles carried some problems about slavery issue. Since, the blacks were also created by God equally and they were also endowed by God with those unalienable rights. In that sense, South Carolina and Georgia objected that passage. There were also some the northern delegates who objected the passage since they also had slaves. In 1776, one fifth of the total American population was enslaved (500.000 men, women, and children). Virginia had the most slaves (200.000 or 40% of its all population). As it was said before, there were also slaves in the northern states. For example; 14% of the New York population was enslaved. New Jersey and Rhode Island held 8% and 6% of their populations.⁶ According to Gordon Wood, slavery was a national institution and nearly every white American directly or indirectly benefited from it. However, every American leader knew that the slavery was a controversial issue for the ideals of the American Revolution.

On the other hand, the Declaration of Independence had a brilliant expression of Enlightenment ideals and it had a set of philosophy of human rights that could be applied to all

³ Gordon Woods, “American Resistance,” pp. 52-53.

⁴ Gordon Woods, “American Resistance,” pp. 54-55.

⁵ Gordon Woods, “American Resistance,” p. 56.

⁶ Gordon Woods, “American Resistance,” p. 56-57.

over the world. That was a remarkable achievement of the American Revolution to gain a universal significance.

Political leaders had the idea of that they were protecting what Englishmen had valued from the beginning of their history and after those events, the Americans believed that their country was the only place where a free popular press still existed and where the people could elect their representatives who spoke only for them.⁷

According to Gordon Wood, the new American states became republics in 1776 *inevitably* and this republicanism was a radical ideology to reorder their lives. In that sense, the republicanism challenged all the conservative assumptions and practices of monarchy by throwing off the monarchy.⁸

On the other hand, because of the nature of the republics, the individual ownership of property, especially landed property was essential for their republics. Ownership had a role to show their individual independence and the permanent attachment to the community. Therefore; the idea of private property and liberty have had very important factor in the American society for ordering themselves.

Another assumption for the American society is the equality. In the 18th century, they were the only education and cultivation separated one man from another man. This was a theoretical assumption but in practice by the lights of John Locke, there were great doubts about the intellectual abilities of blacks and that was another implication of class struggle in social matters. This can be also called as the race issue. The race issue has also some implications about economic inequalities. As it can be seen there is no black overclass who earns like white men do.

As Wood argued one sudden effects of the revolution was the departure of loyalists. Many of them returned after the war (they fought for His Majesty's Army in the war) and they were reintegrated into the American society. Most of them belonged to the upper political and social levels of the society.⁹

⁷ Gordon Woods, "American Resistance," p. 58-62.

⁸ Gordon Woods, "Constitution Making and War," p. 91-93.

⁹ Gordon Woods, "Republican Society," p. 113.

The post-war trade quickly reached the earlier level and the society was formed to promote protective legislation for the American manufacturing. Another event after the war was the establishment of the American military industry. The necessities of army in the war create the new trade and as it will be shown later, the military industry is the most benefited part from the wars which the US involved such as; Civil War, WWI and WWII.

The 1780s saw the fastest rate of demographic growth of any decade in the American history.¹⁰ There were also growing egalitarianism in the American society but as it was said before, the Revolution didn't redistribute the wealth more egalitarian. On the contrary, wealth was far more unequally distributed after the revolution as Wood argues.¹¹

In 1786, for the first time in American history, employees participated in a strike against their employers. This is another important assumption to note here.

About the education issue in the US, American national obsession with education was born with the Revolution. As Wood illustrates the data, by 1776 there were only 9 colleges and 16 more new founded in the next twenty five years. There was a republican idea to educate its citizens in the common schools within the American states in the early 19th century.¹²

In the American society, the family has been an important social institution and it had directly been affected by the revolution. The revolution abolished the older English patterns of inheritance and legacy. Many of the states passed new inheritance laws which recognized equally among sons and daughters. The revolution also made Americans' conscious about the equal rights of women and new republican states recognized women's rights to divorce, to make contracts, and do business in the absence of their husbands.¹³

If we come back to the slavery issue again, far more slaves lived at the end of the revolution era than at beginning. As Wood talks about; during the war, Congress and the northern states together with Maryland gave freedom to blacks who were enlisted in the armies. By 1810, the number of the free blacks had grown from several hundred in 1770 to

¹⁰ Gordon Woods, "Republican Society," p. 117.

¹¹ Gordon Woods, "Republican Society," p. 121.

¹² Gordon Woods, "Republican Society," p. 123.

¹³ Gordon Woods, "Republican Society," p. 125-126.

nearly 50,000. The new Federal Constitution in 1808, abolished the international importation of slaves.¹⁴

Another social dynamic in the American society is the religion. It has always played an important role in the American history. Unlike the churches in Europe, American churches got no threat from the revolution or republicanism. Except for the Anglicans, Protestant ministers were in front of the political movements. Many of the political leaders were not emotionally religious but they always referred to God. Many of the ordinary Americans have been very religious and they still explain the world in religious terms.

II

As Kevin Phillips argues neither the north nor the US government had enough resources to free the four million slaves –they were worth \$2-\$4 billion- by compensating their owners as the British did in 1834 to free 130,000. Without that possibility, the Southern's options to orchestrate a peaceful secession or win the war. The elimination of slavery cost for the Southerners about \$2 billion and they lost their land values. Between 1860-1870, the south's agricultural and manufacturing capital declined by 16%, while the north's one increased by 50%.¹⁵

In the post-war period after the Civil War, the manufacturing level rose from \$1 billion in 1860 to \$10 billion in 1900. This speed and mass of investment enabled the US to achieve in four decades what had taken the UK nearly a century and by 1890s, the US had passed Britain as the world's leading industrial power.

As it was said before, by the help of the Civil War, the war related industries boomed. By 1896, the riches of the new top ten had doubled or tripled from 1873. In the beginning of the 20th century, steel magnate Andrew Carnegie was taking in a personal income of over \$23 million and John D. Rockefeller's income in 1907 was \$100 million and there was no income tax to pay. In comparison, income of the ordinary American family was earning under \$500.¹⁶ This debate also continues in the American society. For instance; Michael Lind illustrates in his book, there is the issue of "*white overclass*" in his terminology. He tries to show us that

¹⁴ Gordon Woods, "Republican Society," p. 128.

¹⁵ Kevin Phillips, "The Great Waves of American Wealth," *Wealth and Democracy*, Broadway Books, 2003, pp. 31-33.

¹⁶ Kevin Phillips, "Serious Money," p. 49.

the average American CEO makes 109 times as much as the American worker. In Britain, CEOs make 35 times as much as the average worker.¹⁷

As the Civil War made it, the WWI had given great chances to industrial barons to double their incomes. For example; duPont –an American chemical company- profited from the US’s wartime seizure of German chemical patents to become global force in that sector by 1920s. The company’s profits jumped from \$6 million in 1914 to \$82 million in 1916. The American Mercury called them in 1935 as “*merchants of death*”.¹⁸

In other words, after the WWII, average weekly pay had been increased from \$24,20 in 1940 to \$44,39 in 1945. This was not only because of high wage rates but huge overtimes and the earnings of 6.5 million women engaged to labor force play a role in the US.

As it saw shown above, there has been a gap between the riches and the ordinary American people in the US history. Economist Claudia Goldin and Robert Margo named the as the Great Compression.¹⁹

According to Kevin Phillips, the US society began to display many symptoms of the twenties in the 1960s: youthful iconoclasm, the sexual revolution, short skirts, and exciting technology, etc. In other words, Michael Lind calls the 1960s and 1970s as a “third republic” in the US history. In his terminology, the first republic was Anglo-American, the second republic was Euro-Americana with the huge migrations from Europe between the 1815 and 1914. Most of the fifteen million Europeans who migrated to the US were Czechs, Galican Poles, Jews, Slovaks, Magyars, Croats, Serbs, Slovenes, Italian, Russian and Greek. While those migrations were taking place, there was a discussion about the immigrants to integrate them into the society. There were two major approaches for that issue. Those were the Anglo-conformist approach, the melting-pot nationalism, and cultural pluralist approach. In the second republic, there was an extraconstitutional bargain between the northern elites and the southern planter class. Additionally, white overclass built its supremacy with a second bargain with white masses about the fear of the Negro.²⁰ In the third republic, instead of a single national community, there are five official races. Those five official races are white, black,

¹⁷ Michael Lind, “The White Overclass and the Racial Spoils System,” *The Next American Nation*, p. 154.

¹⁸ Kevin Phillips, “Serious Money,” p. 55.

¹⁹ Kevin Phillips, “Serious Money,” p. 57.

²⁰ Michael Lind, “Second Republic” p. 59-64.

Hispanic, Asian, and the American Indian.²¹ There was a movement of “civil rights revolution” as Lind named it. This contained the intent to create a multicultural America and instead of the Protestant-inspired Christianity, the ideal authenticity in the third republic was a secular ideal of authenticity. However, this was ended with the establishment of a system of racial preferences. Lind also argues that: “each American republic was assembled by the victors of a domestic revolution that followed a great transformation of America’s geopolitical environment.”²² For instance, the US victory in Mexican War raised the question of slavery. In the new territories, this caused the breakdown of the Anglo-American sectional compromise and the outbreak of the Civil War.

Within the categorizing the American history about the political origins, Lind says that: “The political ideal of Anglo-America was federal republicanism; of Euro-Americana was federal democracy. In multicultural America, the political ideal is multicultural democracy.”²³

III

On the other side of the American society, there should be a deeper analysis about the nationalism issue in the US. Since, it has a descriptive power in the American society about the domestic and foreign policy. It means that there are two popular traditions in the American society among the national issues. Those are isolationism and expansionism. In the explanation of Anatol Lieven, the American nationalism takes two faces. In his analysis, there are “American Creed” and Jacksonian “white” nationalism.²⁴ American Creed is an idea which includes the democratic, legal, and individual beliefs and principles on which the American state and the constitution is founded. Those principles are the main ideals of the expansionist (or Wilsonian) approach about the American politics.

The second form of the American nationalism is the Jacksonian nationalism or “*white nationalism*.” Lieven calls that tradition as “American anti-thesis”. In that sense, this white nationalism includes nativist elements on the part of the American original white population, the particular culture of the white south and beliefs and agendas of ethnic lobbies. As Lieven argues that the American anti-thesis is a main feature of the American radical conservatism.²⁵

²¹ Michael Lind, “Third Republic” p. 118.

²² Michael Lind, “Third Republic” p. 103.

²³ Michael Lind, “Third Republic” p. 127

²⁴ Anatol Lieven, “Introduction,” *America Right or Wrong*, p. 5.

²⁵ Anatol Lieven, “Introduction,” p. 7.

In the problematic version of the American nationalism, there are several problems for the rest of the world. In other words, after the end of the cold war and in the particular time of globalization, the American nationalism carries the possibilities of crisis for the world nations. The national ideals of American society as they were discussed above create ironies for the contemporary world affairs. For example; the idea of “God chosen” society and of that the American model of society is the best model for human beings push the American nationalists or patriotic leaders to force their ideals to the developing world. In other words, the US tries to reorder the world as the imperial interests of its nation in the time of globalization. However, this is also an irony for the American politics since the process of globalization doesn’t lead any actor in the world politics to order the world as an empire. In order to pass those problems for Americans, Lieven suggests that the US should become a civilization empire. It means that the empires of the past were not the only leading powers. They had also suggested the world civilizations. The central requirement of the civilization empire is the willingness to replace qualifications for membership based on languages, Creed and culture.²⁶

There are also some doubts about the American version of world order but especially after the cold war, the United States has tries to set up its order as the hegemon of the world. There are also some approaches to call the American hegemony as an empire. In the domestic issues, during the cold war, the race problem and black treatment undermined its power and influence during the struggle with communism. However, in today’s world, the American expansionism is obeyed less than the past. In that sense, Abdelwahab El-Affendi gave us the picture about the survivability of world empires. For instance; he says that when the barbarians took the power in Roman Empire they broke down the empire culturally and then militarily. The same type of death is essential for the British Empire: he says it met its fatal and final setback in Suez and The French Empire collapsed in Algeria. In that sense, the American lastly expansionist policies look like the siren of their empire’s death.

Another irony for the American politics is about the contemporary or current policies of the US. The irony is about the rivalry of the American ideals and the American interests. It means that the US nation has the world’s one of the significant revolutions and it has represented the ideals of democracy, liberty and equality. In order to make those ideals more systematic, the US built up the institutions and mechanisms to order the system. For instance, they invented the international law and human rights issue. They used those instruments in the

²⁶ Anatol Lieven, “An Exceptional Nationalism,” p. 20

cold war against their big enemy to eliminate its power. However, after end of the cold war, the US ironically started to attack those institutions and mechanisms as a barbarian.

In conclusion, the American society and the politics have historical experiences of the American nation or society. Most of the features of the society come from the foundation period and brilliant ideals of the American Revolution. However, as it was severally explained before, the American society still tries to eliminate the race issue form its sociological frame. It should be understood that, the race issue is not just a historical phenomenon. It is also another explanation of the class base structure of the American society. In other words, sometimes the system pushes the issue on the society in order to continue its order. Therefore; the solution of that problem requires more structural reforms. Another still existed problem of the American society is about the American nationalism. There are several approaches about the American nationalism and they tries to explain the fact. However, in today's world, most of the assumptions about the American nationalism should be changed since the American expansionism in order to spread the American ideals to rest of the world carries such big problems which can be caused the end of American hegemony or empire. Lastly, another controversial issue for the American society is the struggle between the American capitalism and American democracy. Because of the elitism in the politics and great expansion of money as a power tool in the political issues carry some possibilities about the corruption of the American democracy by the American capitalism. If the US wants to continue its hegemonic role in the world politics, it should immediately solve those structural problems. Additionally, some those problems also increase the anti-Americanism among the world nations.