

Gordon Wood, *Empire of Liberty: a history of the early Republic, 1788-1815* (Oxford, 2009), ISBN-10: 0195039149, hardcover, RRP £25.

Empire of Liberty is the culmination of a remarkable career, and of an important body of work, beginning with *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1789* (Chapel Hill, 1969). The consistency of Wood's ideas across this stretch of time, bridged by one other major work,¹ illuminates precisely why he has been so successful, if not without critics, and why *Empire of Liberty* is so significant. In Isaiah Berlin's terms Wood is a hedgehog: he knows one big thing.² His insights into America, its revolution, constitution, and the early decades of its independent life, are structured by a single narrative, and at that narrative's core is the libertarian ideal of individual pursuits of happiness. He has created a stripped-down conception of America's beginning that at once defies traditional, public-historical accounts, and champions the values that America conventionally signifies.

In the early twentieth century the founding fathers ceased to be portrayed as the infallible heroes of America's creation, and became self-interested historical actors like us all. Charles Beard did most to popularise the idea that not only were the founders mortal, but they had, with the constitution, actually turned back the democratic tide unleashed during the revolution. Neo-Beardian accounts continue to be published, tracing injustice and elite control back to the founding. Wood both builds on and undermines this narrative. Although the constitution was indeed 'intended to restrain the excess of democracy' (see page 31), in Wood's version it failed. Federalists, the elite who wrote the constitution and staffed its first governments, 'could not endure' in an America that had been liberated by the revolution: 'they became heretics opposed to the developing democratic faith... the libertarian impulses of America's republican ideology' (276). Thus Wood condemns the framers of the document without, as Beard had done, condemning the system of politics that operates under its rule.

¹ *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York, 1992)

² Berlin's classic essay, *The Hedgehog and the Fox*, categorises thinkers according to the maxim of Archilochus: 'The fox knows many little things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing', see *The Hedgehog and the Fox* (London, 1953), p.1.

That ideology, that democratic faith, he says, was more than just a system of politics. It was a new form of society, one dominated by what Wood calls ‘middling sorts,’ with ‘middling aspirations, middling achievements, and middling resentments’ (218). In sections dealing with the arts, religion, economic life, and women’s rights, *Empire of Liberty* describes the way ‘Americans in the years following the Revolution set about reforming and republicanizing their society and culture’ (471). In the process, they created a consumer-capitalist culture, a ‘fast-paced, democratic, and commercial society’ (432) adjusted to the needs and ideas of average people rather than traditional elites. The power of Wood’s central idea is that it becomes a glass through which to analyse so many different aspects of his chosen place and time. Its weakness, as his critics have observed, is that very universalising tendency, which subjects all phenomena to one ultimate cause. When things don’t fit his picture, Wood uses paradox to hold the fabric of his narrative together.

If the middling man is *Empire of Liberty*’s hero, his champion is Thomas Jefferson. His ‘radical belief in minimal government’ (10) prefigures Wood’s own celebration of the libertarian ideal. ‘As long as there is a United States he will remain the supreme spokesman for the nation’s noblest ideals and highest aspirations’ (277). Jefferson becomes Wood’s greatest paradox: a ‘slaveholding aristocrat’ who ‘ended up becoming the most important apostle for liberty and democracy in American history’ (278). For Jefferson, as sage of the republican faith, and as the President from 1801 to 1809, is subject to many of the gravest charges to be levelled at this period. His policy towards the Indians was ‘for the most part... a disaster’ that saw ‘Indian society and culture... disintegrate’ (398). His followers turned back the clock on women’s suffrage, in the states where revolution had won them the vote, because they tended to support the other party (507). And, of course, his ideology served as a shield for slavery until the Civil War (738).

But in line with Wood’s emphasis on capitalist freedom, the real paradox of Jefferson’s career was his embargo against Europe in 1807. Ostensibly retaliating against mistreatment of American ships by both the British and the French during their war with one another, Jefferson attempted a test of commercial strength, withdrawing all American exports from European markets. ‘The embargo ended up seriously injuring the American economy and all but destroying the Jeffersonian

principle of limited government and states' rights' (647). James Madison, Jefferson's successor, inherited the mess in Europe and plunged the United States into a war with Britain. If the embargo was 'a very strange act' (650), the 'War of 1812 is the strangest war in American history' (659), not least because it was launched by republicans who were supposed to hate war. These two great leaders did as much to undermine the libertarian ideal they were supposed to represent as any Federalist in the 1790s.

In a way, though, that is exactly Wood's point: not the politicians but the people defined the spirit of the early republic. America, as 'Empire of Liberty,' was a unique place where the 'ordinary folk were collapsing traditional social differences' (710) and shaping society in their own image. Although egalitarianism was a 'psychological more than an economic reality' (712), this was essentially a classless society where almost everyone was 'middling.' 'These middling men invented America's sense of itself as a land of enterprising, optimistic, innovative, and equality-loving Americans' (733). The shadow of the south, of slavery, and of the Civil War, lies over the last page of Wood's book. But it does not obscure what has been the significance of the preceding seven-hundred-odd. Like the Cold War consensus school, Wood finds in middle-class America the ultimate triumph of the capitalist doctrine as expressed by Thomas Jefferson: the marvel of the individual pursuit of happiness.

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