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Reforming the Republic

Between the Revolution and the 1820s great changes took place in the US. Independence, war, market and transportation revolutions, expansion, migration and immigration, the beginnings of urbanization and industrialization and the rise and collapse of political parties all occurred.

Many people became concerned with rapid changes in society and the dislocation they caused. Crime, alcohol use, prostitution and gang violence, as well as economic dislocation caused by depressions led to much uncertainty about the future.

Western expansion also concerned people, even though many thought that Americans should occupy western territories. Some families moved 4-5-6 times in the span of a few years. Thus, people were restless and few people knew their neighbors.

Some conservative people increasingly believed that the legacy of the American Revolution was too much liberty. Some thought that Americans were so independent that they thought they could do anything.

Many began to desire order and control, stability and discipline. But what had been the controls in the past? Deference, patriarchy, and religion were. Of the three, it seemed that only religion might possibly be useful.

The Second Great Awakening

In the wake of the Revolution, religion had declined. The Enlightenment had eroded the power of Calvinism, as people became more rational and skeptical. Many Americans turned to deism, universalism, and Unitarianism.

These, though, failed to soothe some people, especially on the frontier. People in isolated frontier areas actually seem to have wanted old time religion and were hungry for the sense of community that religion might bring.

A new religious revival swept the nation, beginning in 1801 at Cane Ridge, Kentucky. Over the next three decades religious fervor spread across the country, especially in upstate New York, swept by so many religious revivals that it was called the “burned-over-district” because religion swept through like a series of fires.

The religious groups and the people that preached focused on the individual’s ability to save him or herself. It was an anti-authority message that indicated a person did not need a trained or educated minister. In fact, the uneducated person who understood and spoke the language of the common person was preferable. These untrained, itinerant circuit riding preachers, men like Francis

Asbury and Charles G. Finney converted many people to Methodism or to Baptist.

Not only did the individual need to reform (save) themselves, they also had an obligation to help save society through advocating reforms.

Reform Movements

As I see it, there are two main strains to the antebellum reform movements that sprung up in the wake of religious revival:

Utopian/Sectarian movements.
Main stream movements.

The first groups tried to reform society by providing “alternative” options for a smaller group of people, hoping that their ideas might be spread by a core of committed members.

Those belonging to the second group believed in engaging society to proactively reform society.

Utopians/Sectarians –

a) Mormons – Founded by Joseph Smith, who claimed a revelation from God in the form of a set of gold plates, Smith’s Church of the Latter Day Saints was a uniquely “new world” religion.” Smith’s ideas, including polygamy, and the political and economic power that Mormon’s could wield, angered many of those near where they settled. The group was forced to move often and after Smith was assassinated, the bulk of the Mormons traveled to Utah (a smaller group eventually settled on Beaver Island, located in Lake Michigan).

Smith generally believed in the perfectibility of humans, not due to liberty or individualism, but through a highly organized, centralized, and controlled experience.

b) Millerites – William Miller also claimed a revelation in which God revealed the date the world would end. Miller gathered many adherents, who were directed to sell their worldly possessions in anticipation of their rapture to heaven. The donned white garments on the evening before the appointed day and gathered at various locations. Nothing happened! Miller claimed to have miscalculated the day. The second and then third time around still nothing happened and the movement collapsed resulting in the development of the Seventh Day Adventists with very different views than the Millerites.

c) Oneida Community – John Humphrey Noyes was actually converted by Finney, then created a perfectionist community that rejected traditional notions

of family and marriage. At Oneida, all men were married to all women, a practice Noyes called complex marriage. There were no permanent monogamous ties and Noyes determined which couples would have children. Birth control was based on interruption. Noyes was really an early practitioner of eugenics who tried to create super humans by mating the strongest, most intelligent men with the smartest, best-looking women. No surprise that he considered himself the best male companion in the community! Children were raised communally and Noyes argued that his social concepts freed women from male lust.

His unconventional views, though, angered many Americans and he eventually fled to Canada.

d) Shakers – Founded by Mother Ann Lee, who believed she was the female incarnation of Jesus, the Shakers held views opposite of Noyes in that they practiced celibacy. Their name came from a complex religious dance that appeared to observers to be a mass shaking. Obviously, no one was born into the Shakers, so new adherents must convert and thus, prepare for perfection.

Women in the group shared power and equality usually prevailed. Work and property owning were communal and Shakers, like those at Oneida, claimed that their methods freed women from the inequality of male-dominated American society.

Reform Movements

The energy directed towards religious revival spilled over into reform efforts aimed at making society better and reformers targeted a wide variety of problems.

Prostitution reform – many areas, especially urban areas like Five Points in New York City had been overrun by prostitutes and their customers. Middle-class women believed that the impact of prostitution on women was significant and so moral reformers created groups, known as “societies” to assist prostitutes financially and through persuasion. These efforts often failed and reformers turned to the legal system to crack down on prostitution.

Prison and Asylum reform- in the antebellum period there was virtually no distinction between crime and mental disease. Indeed, criminals and the mentally insane were usually housed in the same institutions. These prison/asylums were run by private companies for profit, rather than local governments. There was much corruption and abuse. Reformers, most notably Dorothea Dix reacted to the way that people were treated (she noted that some “were in cages, closets, cellars, and stalls, chained naked and beaten”). After a sustained campaign, was able to get Massachusetts, New York, and Pennsylvania to separate the systems into a prison for criminals and an insane asylum for the mentally disabled. By 1860 20 states had

instituted these reforms.

Women's Rights – many of the people pushing reforms were women who believed that they too deserved certain rights. In 1848, at Seneca Falls New York, they gathered for a convention and issued a "Declaration of Sentiments" based on the Declaration of Independence. Some also pressed for suffrage rights. The general philosophy was that voting would provide the ability to secure equal rights later. So the women involved, Susan Anthony, Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton did not press for equal rights per se.

Temperance – Many of the nation's problems seemed to be tied to alcohol use and abuse. Americans consumed a per capita average of 4 gallon of hard liquor per year (25 million gallons from 14,000 distilleries for 7 million people). One English visitor was surprised to find whiskey served at the breakfast table!

Reformers believed that drunkenness accounted for crime, gambling, prostitution, domestic abuse, work-related injuries and nearly every other problem.

Again, reformers sought to persuade Americans of the dangers of alcohol use and created temperance societies for this purpose. Many reformers also saw this as an opportunity to socially control the lower class. The effort had some impact, but reformers also turned to government, which passed laws, often known as "Maine Laws" after the first state to act. Many of the laws prohibited the use or sale of alcohol. Others placed a minimum on the amount that could be purchased at 15 gallons to end individual sales.

Even working class people eventually formed their own societies like the Washington Society to combat alcohol use.

These efforts seem to have succeeded as the per capita use fell to 1.8 gallons by 1840 and below 1 gallon by the late 1840s.

Racial reform – Of all the reforms of this period, the anti-slavery movement was likely the most important.

Colonization – some believed that the best course for reforming race relations was the effort to send free blacks and ex-slaves back to Africa so that they would be free from American racism. The American Colonization Society, run by a host of American elites, including James Monroe, Henry Clay, Andrew Jackson, and Francis Scott Key, actually purchased land in Africa (present day Liberia) and began to recruit African- Americans for transport. Many did volunteer, though others believed that they were Americans and should not have to return to a "home" that they did not know. In fact, Southerners saw the movement as an effort to abolish slavery while Northerners believed that colonization, by transporting free blacks, actually

strengthened slavery. The movement continued for many years – even into the 1960s, but failed to live up to its initial promises of ending racism.

Anti-slavery – While some believed in colonization, many others believed in the complete abolition of slavery. Adherents to immediate abolition though faced a difficult time and often were attacked in the North, as well as the South, because of their beliefs in racial equality.

William Lloyd Garrison, the founder of the immediate abolition movement, was himself attacked and beaten in Boston. Northerners feared that if slavery ended many ex-slaves would migrate north.

Efforts at abolishing slavery revolved around the oppressive violence of the institution in the South. Northerners should pressure slaveholders to free their slaves (thus saving themselves). Moral persuasion had almost no effect, though a few slaveholders did free their slaves. Only later, when politicians and abolitionists began to argue that a “Slave Power” had come to control the nation’s government and was denying white Northerners their political liberty did people pay attention. Still later, Southern efforts to turn western territories into slave areas motivated the mass of Northerners to oppose slavery.

Conclusions – As the United States matured, many Americans sensed that the nation had gotten off track. They sought out the causes of problems and tried to resolve them, either by forming closed communities or through broad and proactive intervention in society. Though they had many adherents; they also offended those who opposed reformers that sought to infringe on their liberty.



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