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Religion, Communications, and the Ideological Origins of the American Revolution

Harry S. Stout

. . . I saw before me a Cloud or fogg rising; I first thought it came from the great River, but as I came nearer the Road, I heard a noise something like a low rumbling thunder and presently found it was the noise of Horses feet coming down the Road and this Cloud was a Cloud of dust made by the Horses feet; it arose some Rods into the air over the tops of Hills and trees and when I came within about 20 rods of the Road, I could see men and horses Sliping along in the Cloud like shadows and as I drew nearer it seemed like a steady Stream of horses and their riders, scarcely a horse more than his length behind another, all of a Lather and foam with sweat, their breath rolling out of their nostrils every Jump; every horse seemed to go with all his might to carry his rider to hear news from heaven for the saving of Souls, it made me tremble to see the Sight . . .

NATHAN Cole's description of George Whitefield's appearance before four thousand avid listeners in Middletown, Connecticut, in 1740 captures our attention at least partly because Cole's voice is one that is rare in early American literature.¹ The crude spelling and syntax signal a vernacular prose composed by an ordinary man, whose purpose is less to analyze the theological issues of the revival than to describe an exhilarating event. Lacking the literary refinements of a classical education, Cole portrayed his experience in the form of a "realistic narrative" framed against a concrete social background.² Although common in setting, the

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¹Michael J. Crawford, ed., "The Spiritual Travels of Nathan Cole," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d Ser., XXXIII (1976), 93. The crowd estimate at Middletown is taken from *George Whitefield's Journals* (Philadelphia, 1960), 479.

²Hans W. Frei distinguishes a "realistic narrative" in the following terms: "Realistic narrative is that kind in which subject and social setting belong together, and characters and external circumstances fitly render each other. . . . [R]ealistic narrative, if it is really seriously undertaken and not merely a pleasurable or hortatory exercise, is a sort in which in style as well as content in the setting forth of didactic material, and in the depiction of characters and action, the sublime or at least serious effect mingles inextricably with the quality of what is casual, random, ordinary, and everyday" (*The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* [New Haven, Conn., 1974], 13-14).

passage is hardly trivial, for it brings to life the impassioned world of the common people and conveys, in their own words, a sense of the irrepressible spontaneity that marked the revivals throughout the colonies. Thunderous noise, clouds of dust, horses in a lather, and unrecognizable shadowy figures dominate a vocabulary that manages to express, as no official account could possibly do, the powerful emotions evoked by the Great Awakening.

With Whitefield's celebrated speaking tours of the colonies there appeared an innovative style of communications that redefined the social context in which public address took place. The sheer size and heterogeneity of the audience exceeded anything in the annals of colonial popular assembly. To organize the mass meetings, both speaker and audience altered the roles and language they customarily adopted in public worship. In the process, a new model of social organization and public address developed—a model which could be applied to a broad range of social, political, and religious contexts.

Contemporary and historical accounts agree that the Awakening was the most momentous intercolonial popular movement before the Revolution. Indeed, the parallel between the popular engagement and "enthusiasm" evidenced alike in the revivals and the rebellion merits close attention. Unfortunately, however, attempts to explain the meaning those two movements had for their participants must confront the fact that the documentary evidence originates overwhelmingly from an elitist "rhetorical world" that excluded the common people from the presumed audience.³ Although the informed writings of the Founding Fathers provide the official revolutionary vocabulary, they do not render in a realistic narrative form the ideological arousal of the common people, who, by the very rhetoric of those documents, were excluded from the message. How were revolutionary sentiments communicated with ideological force to an audience unversed in the rhetorical forms of the literature? And, conversely, how did the active popular self-consciousness manifested in the popular movements energize a republican vocabulary and push it in egalitarian directions the leaders had never intended? The documents are of little help here. More to the point, they actually create the problem of interpretation.

Cole's description of the popular enthusiasm of the revival suggests a different approach to the problem of popular culture and republican ideology. If *what* was communicated is qualified by the restrictive rhetoric through which the ideas were intended to be transmitted, it may help to ask instead *how* communications were conducted and how they changed during the second half of the eighteenth century? There could be no egalitarian culture

³ The term "rhetorical world" is taken from Gordon S. Wood, "The Democratization of Mind in the American Revolution," in *Leadership in the American Revolution*, Library of Congress Symposia (Washington, D.C., 1974), 72.

as we know it today without an ideological predisposition toward the idea that the vulgar masses ought to be reached directly. By examining the changing style of communications in the revivals it is possible to gain insights into the nature of an egalitarian rhetoric through which, and only through which, republican ideas could be conveyed to an unlettered audience.

David Ramsay, a noted participant in and historian of the Revolution, recognized that, to understand the meaning of the Revolution, "forms and habits" must be regarded.⁴ Before a republican vocabulary could communicate radical social meanings, a new rhetoric had to appear in which familiar terms were used to express unfamiliar thoughts. And this, it is argued here, is precisely what happened in the mass assemblies inaugurated by preachers like Whitefield. Despite the differences in intellectual substance between the revivals and the rebellion, those movements exhibited a close rhetorical affinity that infused religious and political ideas with powerful social significance and ideological urgency.

The point of departure for this article is Alan Heimert's study of *Religion and the American Mind*.⁵ Published in 1966, the book had a generally cool reception. Critical essays by Edmund S. Morgan and Sidney E. Mead pointed out conceptual shortcomings in the work but failed to recognize its value in suggesting a method of historical analysis that focuses on the context of communications.⁶ This failure had the unfortunate effect of foreclosing a line of inquiry into the subject of religion and the ideological origins of the Revolution.

Heimert's foreword states his central thesis: religious "Liberalism was profoundly conservative, politically as well as socially, and . . . its leaders, insofar as they did in fact embrace the Revolution, were the most reluctant of rebels. Conversely, 'evangelical' religion, which had as its most notable formal expression the 'Calvinism' of Jonathan Edwards, was not the retrograde philosophy that many historians rejoice to see confounded in America's Age of Reason. Rather Calvinism, and Edwards, provided pre-Revolutionary America with a radical, even democratic, social and political ideology, and evangelical religion embodied, and inspired, a thrust toward American

⁴ David Ramsay, *The History of the American Revolution* (1789), in Edmund S. Morgan, ed., *The American Revolution: Two Centuries of Interpretation* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1965), 8.

⁵ Alan Heimert, *Religion and the American Mind: From the Great Awakening to the Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass., 1966).

⁶ Edmund S. Morgan's review in *WMQ*, 3d Ser., XXIV (1967), 454-459, and Sidney E. Mead, "Through and beyond the Lines," *Journal of Religion*, XLVIII (1968), 274-288. The prominent exception to the negativity of the reviews is William G. McLoughlin's "The American Revolution as a Religious Revival: 'The Millennium in One Country,'" *New England Quarterly*, XL (1967), 99-110.

nationalism."⁷ This assertion diverged dramatically from the conventional wisdom regarding the relations of religion and the Revolution. In demonstrating his thesis Heimert contended, in now notorious words, that it was necessary to read the sources "not between the lines, but, as it were, through and beyond them."⁸ Only by doing this would it be possible to cut through the immediate idiom of political discourse that dominated the official Revolutionary debates and discover the underlying "relationship of ideology and political commitment to modes of persuasion."⁹ In Heimert's view, these "modes of persuasion" were derived from the Evangelical rather than the Liberal tradition.

Against this thesis, and the method upon which it rests, Morgan and Mead launched an impressive assault. The conceptual framework they impose on early America, and their way of reading historical documents, were molded largely by Perry Miller, and it was as an extension of Miller's work that they interpreted Heimert.¹⁰ To them, Heimert's tactic of reading "beyond" the content of the documents to the styles they expressed smacked, in Morgan's word, of "fantasy."¹¹ They contended that the method not only detached the historian from the security of objective reference (that is, the content of the documents) but also ignored social and intellectual connections between revivalism and republicanism that were neither as sharp nor as consistent as Heimert supposed.

Influential as these criticisms have been in stifling consideration of *Religion and the American Mind*, we must ask whether in fact Heimert wrote the book the critics reviewed. If Heimert's study is simply an extension of Miller, then the problems with the book become insurmountable because,

⁷ Heimert, *Religion and the American Mind*, viii.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 11. Heimert's terminology is not meant to imply that one reads beyond the documents by ignoring documentation (as nearly 2,000 footnotes fully attest). Rather, it is the recognition, recently articulated by Gene Wise, that to get at the meaning of verbal statements "one would have to go beyond the documents to the original experience they came out of" (*American Historical Explanations: A Strategy for Grounded Inquiry* [Homewood, Ill., 1973], 73).

⁹ Heimert, *Religion and the American Mind*, vii.

¹⁰ Mead is most explicit here in the opening comments of his review: "Essentially Mr. Heimert's work seems to me to be a 639-page expansion, with massive footnoting of some suggestions imaginatively adumbrated in 1961 by Perry Miller. . . . The voice seems to be that of Jacob, but the hand that tapped the typewriter was that of Esau" ("Through and beyond the Lines," *Jour. of Religion*, XLVIII [1968], 274).

¹¹ Morgan states in his review: "The world he offers us has been constructed by reading beyond the lines of what men said; and what he finds beyond the lines is so far beyond, so wrenched from the context, and so at odds with empirical evidence, that his world, to this reviewer at least, partakes more of fantasy than of history" (*WMQ*, 3d Ser., XXIV [1967], 459).

as the critics demonstrate, there is no clear and consistent link between revivalism and republicanism at the level of ideas. But if the book is viewed in a different context altogether—if Heimert was not seeking to establish direct intellectual links between religious thought and political rebellion—then the entire effort needs to be reevaluated.

Perry Miller's fullest statement on religion and the ideological origins of the Revolution appeared in his essay "From the Covenant to the Revival," published in 1961.¹² Addressing the role of "Calvinistic" Protestantism (a term he applied indiscriminately to Liberals and Evangelicals) in the Revolution, Miller insisted that, with the exception of a few hopelessly optimistic Anglicans, the American people shared a religious tradition articulated in the Reformed vocabulary of "federal" theology.¹³ Under the influence of this austere covenantal tradition the colonists could never be moved by self-congratulatory appeals to natural rights and enlightened self-interest. Rather, the dynamic for revolution issued from a deep sense of moral corruption and degradation that found a target in English oppression but, more important, spoke to the sins of colonial society itself. For generations of colonists schooled in the language of covenant, judgment, and collective accountability, the jeremiad functioned as the "form of discourse" capable of driving them to a moral revolution. Considered as an intellectual movement, the Revolution represented a spiritual purge administered to a corrupt established order in the interest of restoring a pure order that would both free the colonists from a decadent oppressor and cleanse their own society. The Revolution was inspired by this highly unstable compound of pious contrition and political rebellion, moral reformation and patriotic resistance.

Miller's essay came to exert an enormous influence on assessments of the role of religion in the Revolution.¹⁴ Yet nowhere did it reflect a recognition of the social dislocations and divisions which we now know proliferated in eighteenth-century America.¹⁵ Miller's framework fails to show how Ameri-

¹² In James Ward Smith and A. Leland Jamison, eds., *The Shaping of American Religion* (Princeton, N.J., 1961), 322-368.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 325.

¹⁴ See, in particular, Edmund S. Morgan, "The Puritan Ethic and the American Revolution," *WMQ*, 3d Ser., XXIV (1967), 3-43, and Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass., 1967), 7, 32, 140, 193, 250. It is instructive to note exactly where Miller's "From the Covenant to the Revival" fits in Heimert's work. In *Religion and the American Mind* the essay is cited only three times, and never expanded on. Even more revealing, in his introductory essay to the volume of Great Awakening documents jointly edited with Miller (*The Great Awakening: Documents Illustrating the Crisis and Its Consequences* [Indianapolis, 1967]), Heimert includes Miller in every historiographical citation, but not one of those citations is to "From the Covenant to the Revival."

¹⁵ See Kenneth A. Lockridge, "Social Change and the Meaning of the American Revolution," *Journal of Social History*, VI (1973), 403-439, and Jack P. Greene,

cans sharing the "Puritan Ethic" could have been so sharply divided over the issue of independence or why, among the patriots, such confusion and contradiction raged over the question of what the Revolution was all about.¹⁶ Finally, it is impossible in Miller's terms to account for receptivity to rebellion on the part of a populace of limited literacy.¹⁷ To focus solely on the ideas set forth in surviving documents as the source of ideological change is to confuse a deep cultural transformation with its subsequent manifestation in a self-conscious, theoretical vocabulary.

In opposition to Miller, Heimert describes two clearly separate and distinctive revolutionary styles in eighteenth-century America, each originating in opposing "rhetorical strategies" that crystallized after the mass revivals.¹⁸ On the one hand, there was the rebellion itself—the movement for independence from England, which Heimert concedes may well have proceeded from Liberal assumptions. On the other hand, there emerged with the rebellion an egalitarian impulse that pointed toward the creation of a society fundamentally incompatible with traditional conceptions of order, hierarchy, and deference.¹⁹

"The Social Origins of the American Revolution: An Evaluation and Interpretation," *Political Science Quarterly*, LXXXVIII (1973), 1-22.

¹⁶ See John R. Howe, Jr., "Republican Thought and the Political Violence of the 1790s," *American Quarterly*, XIX (1967), 147-165.

¹⁷ Drawing upon a sampling of colonial will signatures, Kenneth A. Lockridge concludes that "the literacy of that American generation which took the colonies into the Revolution was less than perfect. It seems probable that one-quarter of the generation born around 1730 . . . was totally illiterate. Including New England in the total would not much alter the level of enduring illiteracy since two-thirds of the population lived outside of New England" (*Literacy in Colonial New England: An Enquiry into the Social Context of Literacy in the Early Modern West* [New York, 1974], 87).

¹⁸ I use the term "mass revival" here intentionally to distinguish multi-community meetings addressed by itinerating preachers, who were often uneducated and of low social origins, from local revivals conducted by a settled pastor. Heimert's concentration on Jonathan Edwards and the established New England ministry tends, I believe, to work at cross-interests to his point concerning the stylistic innovation of the revivals. Historians would do better to concentrate on Whitefield and the awakening he inspired through his public addresses to unprecedented thousands of auditors. The fundamental problem raised by the revivals was not Edwards's treatises but the itinerants' practices.

¹⁹ Heimert, *Religion and the American Mind*, 14, 532. To avoid terminological confusion I will use the term "rebellion" to refer to independence from England and "revolution" to describe the radical internal impulse to reorder American society in an egalitarian direction. Similarly, the classical (deferential) theory of republicanism richly described in Gordon S. Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1969), 3-124, and J. G. A. Pocock, "The Classical Theory of Deference," *American Historical Review*, LXXXI (1976), 516-523, must be distinguished from the more radical egalitarian "republicanism" that ultimately

Approaching the problem of popular receptivity and concentrating on the verbal forms through which ideas were presented, Heimert locates the sources of this animating egalitarianism in the Great Awakening but concludes that it can be understood only by reading beyond the religious content of evangelical ideas to the new forms of public address established in the revivals. At some point prior to the popular reception of a revolutionary vocabulary, a new rhetoric must appear in which familiar terms can be used to mean something different—and this change in the *form*, as distinguished from the *content*, of communications marks the moment of a fundamental transformation of popular consciousness. Any revolution in world-view requires a new rhetoric. The most conspicuous and revolutionary product of the revivals was not to be found in doctrine, in the creation of new ecclesiastical or academic institutions, or even in resistance to the tyranny of established religion or monarchy. Evangelicalism's enduring legacy was a new rhetoric, a new mode of persuasion that would redefine the norms of social order. In Heimert's words, "quite apart from the question of Revolution, the contrasts between Liberal and Calvinist social thought were possibly of less ultimate significance than the remarkable differences between their oratorical strategies and rhetorical practices."²⁰

Heimert's recognition of the revolutionary potentialities of the revivals suggests a closer look at evangelical oratory, particularly in relation to the forms of public worship that prevailed before the revivals. Despite differences in style and substance between Puritanism and southern Anglicanism, all churchmen believed traditionally with Samuel Willard that God did "Ordain Orders of Superiority and Inferiority among men."²¹ This hierarchical world-view presupposed a society of face-to-face personal relationships in which people identified themselves with reference to those around them and acted according to their rank in the community. Forms of attire, the "seating" of public meetings, and patterns of speech were among the more conspicuous indications of a pervasive social stratification that separated the

came to mean, in Wood's terms, "nothing less than a reordering of eighteenth-century society and politics as they had known and despised them . . ." (*Creation of the American Republic*, 48).

²⁰ Heimert, *Religion and the American Mind*, 18.

²¹ Perry Miller and Thomas H. Johnson, eds., *The Puritans* (New York, 1938), 251. For a discussion of the inherited social ethic which the revivals challenged see especially William G. McLoughlin, *Isaac Backus and the American Pietistic Tradition* (Boston, 1967), 1-22; Rhys Isaac, "Religion and Authority: Problems of the Anglican Establishment in Virginia in the Era of the Great Awakening and the Parsons' Cause," *WMQ*, 3d Ser., XXX (1973), 3-36; and Isaac, "Evangelical Revolt: The Nature of the Baptists' Challenge to the Traditional Order in Virginia, 1765 to 1775," *ibid.*, XXXI (1974), 345-368.

leaders from the rank and file. As Stephen Foster observes, "mutuality, subordination, and public service constituted a kind of sacred trinity of all respectable societies, Puritan or otherwise."²²

The social institutions of colonial America were designed to sustain this prevailing perception of proper social organization. In this traditional social ethic, itinerancy was inconceivable because, in Increase Mather's words, "to say that a Wandering Levite who has no flock is a Pastor, is as good sense as to say, that he that has no children is a Father."²³ What made a pastor was not simply the preaching of the Word but also a direct, authoritarian identification with a specific flock. To ignore the personal and deferential relationships of a minister with his congregation would be to threaten the organic, hierarchical principles upon which both family and social order rested.

That ministers be "settled" was no idle proposition but rather an insistence carrying with it responsibility for the whole social order. An institution as critically important as the church could deny the forms of social hierarchy only at the peril of undermining the entire organization of social authority. In terms of communications this meant that speaker and audience were steadily reminded of their *personal* place in the community; in no context were they strangers to one another, for no public gatherings took place outside of traditional associations based upon personal acquaintance and social rank.²⁴

Within this world of public address Liberals and Evangelicals alike realized that something dramatically different was appearing in the revivalists' preaching performances. The problem raised by the revivals was not their message of the new birth. Indeed, it was the familiar message of regeneration that lulled leaders into an early acceptance and even endorsement of the revivals. The problem, it soon became clear, was the revolutionary setting in which the good news was proclaimed. The secret of Whitefield's success and that of other evangelists (no less than of Patrick Henry in the 1770s) was not simply a booming voice or a charismatic presence. It was a new style: a rhetoric of persuasion that was strange to the American ear. The revivalists sought to transcend both the rational manner of polite Liberal preaching and the plain style of orthodox preaching in order

²² Stephen Foster, *Their Solitary Way: The Puritan Social Ethic in the First Century of Settlement in New England* (New Haven, Conn., 1971), 18.

²³ Quoted in Cedric B. Cowing, *The Great Awakening and the American Revolution: Colonial Thought in the Eighteenth Century* (Chicago, 1971), 23.

²⁴ On the cultural implications of a face-to-face traditional society see Rhys Isaac, "Dramatizing the Ideology of Revolution: Popular Mobilization in Virginia, 1774 to 1776," *WMQ*, 3d Ser., XXXIII (1976), 364-367. I am indebted to Professor Isaac for sharing his article with me prior to its publication and for clarifying many of the points raised in this essay.

to speak directly to the people-at-large.²⁵ Repudiating both the conventions of the jeremiad and the ecclesiastical formalities, they assaulted the old preaching style no less devastatingly than they attacked the doctrines of covenant theology. Their technique of mass address to a voluntary audience forced a dialogue between speaker and hearer that disregarded social position and local setting.

Immensely significant were the separation of the revivalists from local ministerial rule and their unfamiliarity with the audience. Until then, preachers, like political leaders, had to know whom they were addressing. Because the very act of public speaking signified social authority, they were expected to communicate through the existing institutional forms. When public speakers in positions of authority communicated outside of the customary forms, they set themselves, by that act itself, in opposition to the established social order. The eighteenth-century leaders' obsession with demagoguery and "enthusiasm" can only be understood in the context of a deferential world-view in which public speakers who were not attached to the local hierarchy created alternative settings that represented a threat to social stability. The frenzy raised by the itinerants was not born of madness but was derived from the self-initiated associations of the people meeting outside of regularly constituted religious or political meetings and, in so doing, creating new models of organization and authority. As the Harvard faculty clearly recognized in their censure of Whitefield, the "natural effect" of his preaching was that "the People have been thence ready to despise their own Ministers."²⁶

In gathering their large and unfamiliar audiences the revivalists utilized the only form of address that could be sure to impress all hearers: the spoken word proclaimed extemporaneously in everyday language. As historians immersed in printed documents, we scarcely recognize the dominance of speech and oratory in aural cultures—an orality that, by definition, never survives in the written record. Alphabetic writing and print emerged, after all, as an *imitation* of spoken words, and so they have remained ever since. Recognition of the powerful social and psychological imperatives of direct oral address has led Walter Ong to observe that "writing commits the words to space. But to do so, it makes words less real, pretends they are something they are not: quiescent marks."²⁷ Print and typographic culture create highly

²⁵ Although Puritan rhetoric rejected the ornamental tropes and "witty" figures common to classical (Ciceronian) rhetoric, the New England plain style remained a literate rhetoric born in the schools and designed to instruct a reading public. The plain style was not intended to persuade essentially illiterate audiences unused to the logic of rational discourse. See Walter J. Ong, *Ramus: Method, and the Decay of Dialogue* (Cambridge, Mass., 1958), 212-213.

²⁶ Heimert and Miller, eds., *Great Awakening*, 352.

²⁷ Walter J. Ong, *Why Talk? A Conversation about Language* (San Francisco, 1973), 17.

visual, sequential, and analytic patterns of thought which aural cultures, attuned to easily remembered forms of speech, cannot readily comprehend.²⁸ Unlike print, which is essentially passive, reflective, and learned, sound is active, immediate, and spontaneously compelling in its demand for a response. Speech remains in the deepest sense an event or psychological encounter rather than an inert record—an event that is neither detached from personal presence nor analyzed, but is intrinsically engaged and calculated to persuade. Print cannot match the persuasive power of the spoken word whose potential audience includes everyone who can understand the language. It is no wonder that literate elites have feared persuasive orators from Plato condemning the sophists to Charles Chauncy damning the demagogues of the revival. Once orators are allowed the opportunity to address the people, there is, in Chauncy's words, "no knowing how high it [their influence] may rise, nor what it may end in."²⁹

To portray the word as event, as a vital indwelling principle, the revivalists employed what Miller termed a "rhetoric of sensation"³⁰—a new rhetoric that, through its recognition of the singular power of the spoken word delivered to a mass audience, differed fundamentally from the Old Light or rational preaching which was written out like a lecture and was more concerned, in the revivalists' words, with "ornament" than with the "affections." The animadversions of Liberals against what they called the revivalists' "mighty noise," which not only stimulated enthusiasm but also challenged the social order, were certainly justified from their perspective.³¹ Ong makes the important point that "script, and particularly the alphabet, provides a heightened experience of order. The world of thought is itself a beautifully intricate world, and the world of words is likewise impressively, if mysteriously, organized. . . . To attack the printed word would be to attack the symbol of order."³²

Looking to the New Testament as their model, the revivalist rediscovered

²⁸ On the relationship of literacy and analytical thought see Jack Goody and Ian Watt, "The Consequences of Literacy," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, V (1963), 304-345, and Jack Goody, "Evolution and communication: the domestication of the savage mind," *British Journal of Sociology*, XXIV (1973), 1-12.

²⁹ Heimert and Miller, eds., *Great Awakening*, 256.

³⁰ Perry Miller, *Errand into the Wilderness* (Cambridge, Mass., 1956), 167-183. Heimert brilliantly develops this theme in his chapter on "The Danger of an Unconverted Ministry," which he singles out as the "principal hinge" of his study (*Religion and the American Mind*, 159-236).

³¹ John Caldwell, *The Nature, Folly, and Evil of rash and uncharitable Judging. A Sermon Preached at the French Meeting-House in Boston . . .* (1742), in Richard L. Bushman, ed., *The Great Awakening: Documents on the Revival of Religion, 1740-1745* (New York, 1969), 159.

³² Walter J. Ong, *The Presence of the Word: Some Prolegomena for Cultural and Religious History* (New Haven, Conn., 1967), 136.

the effectiveness of extemporaneous address in their struggle against the Standing Order. Recent analyses of New Testament rhetoric demonstrate the prevailing orality of the gospel. Amos Wilder, for example, notes that "Jesus never wrote a word. . . . In secular terms we could say that Jesus spoke as the birds sing, oblivious of any concern for transcription. Less romantically we can say that Jesus' use of the spoken word alone has its own theological significance."³³ Throughout the gospels the Word is the oral word, and the Good News is uttered through ordinary speech. In his classic study of the Western literary tradition Eric Auerbach pointed out that "in the last analysis the differences in style between the writers of antiquity and early Christianity are conditioned by the fact that they were composed from a different point of view and for different people."³⁴

Returning not only to the social doctrine of the gospel but to its rhetoric as well, the evangelists excited the people to action by "calling them out" and exhorting them to experimental Christianity. Radical attacks on an "unconverted ministry" that acted more like "Letter-learned . . . Pharisees" than preachers of the Word take on additional meaning in the social context of eighteenth-century established religion.³⁵ The danger that the Liberals sensed in the revivals was rhetorical as well as doctrinal. The Anglican commissary Alexander Garden correctly, and sarcastically, identified this threat: "*What went you out, my Brethren, to see, or rather to bear? Any new Gospel, or message from Heaven? Why, no? but the old one explained and taught in a new and better Manner.*"³⁶ Pointing to the spirit of this new manner, one opponent of the revivals observed that "it abhors Reason, and is always for putting out her Eyes; but loves to reign Tyrant over the Passions, which it manages by Sounds and Nonsense."³⁷ The identification of sight with reason, and of sound with the passions, is here obvious and comes very near to the center of the raging controversy surrounding the itinerants. At stake was nothing less than the rules and conventions governing public address and social authority.

The revivalists' repudiation of polite style and their preference for extemporaneous mass address cut to the very core of colonial culture by attacking the habit of deference to the written word and to the gentlemen

³³ Amos N. Wilder, *Early Christian Rhetoric: The Language of the Gospel* (Cambridge, Mass., 1971), 13.

³⁴ Eric Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton, N.J., 1953), 46.

³⁵ Gilbert Tennent, *The Danger of an Unconverted Ministry, Considered in a Sermon on Mark VI. 34* (1741), in Heimert and Miller, eds., *Great Awakening*, 73.

³⁶ Alexander Garden, *Regeneration, and the Testimony of the Spirit. Being the Substance of Two Sermons*. . . (1740), *ibid.*, 58.

³⁷ *A true and genuine Account of a WANDERING SPIRIT, raised of late*. . . , *ibid.*, 149.

who mastered it. Evangelical rhetoric performed a dual function: it proclaimed the power of the spoken word directly to every individual who would hear, and it confirmed a shift in authority by organizing voluntary popular meetings and justifying them in the religious vocabulary of the day. Partly through doctrine, but even more through the rhetorical strategy necessitated by that doctrine, the popular style of the revivals challenged the assumption of hierarchy and pointed to a substitute basis for authority and order in an open voluntary system.

The popular rhetoric of the evangelists contrasted sharply with the much more formal modes of address preferred by upholders of established authority. Nowhere were the social divisions of American society more clearly reflected than in the leaders' utilization of a printed form of discourse that separated the literati from the common people. Throughout the eighteenth century, public communications were not only increasingly printed but were tuned to a genteel European literary style governed by canons of correct usage. As George Philip Krapp observed in his seminal history of the English language, "pronunciation, grammar and spelling were not then tests of respectability [in the seventeenth century] . . . in the degree to which they have since become. What seems now like illiterate speech, the speech of persons who do not reflect how they speak, was then merely the normal speech of the community."³⁸ With no printed dictionaries to provide authority for correct spelling and usage, seventeenth-century vernacular literature exhibited a high degree of variability. As the spread of printing in the eighteenth century gave increased importance to writing, however, there emerged a concomitant movement toward standardization of spelling and usage. Following the appearance of Samuel Johnson's dictionary in 1755, language came to be thought of as written rather than spoken, and educated elites on both sides of the ocean adopted a written style intended to communicate with their literate peers.³⁹ Linguistic divisions between the well-bred and the vulgar became increasingly clear to both sectors of the colonial society. One revealing example of a distinctive lower-class style is a radical essay, *The Key of Liberty*, written (though never accepted for publication) in 1797 by James Manning, an untutored Massachusetts farmer who "neaver had the advantage of six months schooling in my life." In organization, spelling, and grammar the essay stands in stark contrast to the

³⁸ George Philip Krapp, *The English Language in America*, I (New York, 1925), ix.

³⁹ See, for example, H. L. Mencken, *The American Language: An Inquiry into the Development of English in the United States*, 4th ed. (New York, 1936), 380, and James Root Hulbert, *Dictionaries: British and American*, rev. ed. (London, 1968), 10.

polished style of the whig patriots. It was, as Manning recognized, "not in the language and stile of the Larned for I am not able."⁴⁰

Linguistic uniformity conspired with classical education to establish a learned discourse that effectively separated the literate elite from the common folk. Hugh Blair, whose handbook, *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*, came to epitomize the style for aspiring gentlemen, averred that the educated class "is now so much accustomed to a correct and ornamental style, that no writer can, with safety, neglect the study of it."⁴¹ To encourage such a style Blair pointed to the patrician cultures of classical Greece and Rome, and urged his fellow literati "to render ourselves well acquainted with the style of the best authors. This is requisite, both in order to form a just taste in style, and to supply us with a full stock of words on every subject."⁴² The classical heritage provided a vocabulary and mode of discourse which leaders had to learn if they were to communicate through the proper forms.⁴³

Classical learning inculcated a set of social and cultural attitudes about the nature of speaker and audience that went far beyond the content of literature. A formal, analytical style conveyed social as well as literary prerogatives. For centuries, masters of print and the written word enjoyed social power and prestige partly because the people were awed by a sequential form of communications they could not understand. The eighteenth-century rise in learned treatises, tightly argued pamphlets, and belletristic writing reflected an effort, in Mather Byles's words, to "cultivate *polite* Writing, and form and embellish the Style of our ingenious Countrymen.—"⁴⁴ But Byles's "ingenious Countrymen" did not include the common folk.

⁴⁰ Samuel Eliot Morison, ed., "William Manning's *The Key of Liberty*," *WMQ*, 3d Ser., XIII (1956), 202-254.

⁴¹ Hugh Blair, *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*, I (Philadelphia, 1862), 215. Blair's lectures and essays were gathered together for publication in 1783.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 214.

⁴³ Walter Ong observes in "Latin and the Social Fabric," that "using Latin was like playing a game whose rules could never be changed. . . . Latin was not merely one subject among many or even among several . . . Latin effected the transit from ignorance to tribal or communal wisdom. . . . Youngsters were given to understand that the treasures of all understanding were stored in the ancient tongues" (*The Barbarian Within* [New York, 1962], 206, 215). For descriptions of the classical grounding of colonial thought and education see Richard M. Gummere, *The American Colonial Mind and the Classical Tradition* (Cambridge, Mass., 1963); Robert Middlekauff, "A Persistent Tradition: The Classical Curriculum in Eighteenth-Century New England," *WMQ*, 3d Ser., XVIII (1961), 54-67; Meyer Reinhold, ed., *The Classic Pages: Classical Reading of Eighteenth-Century Americans* (University Park, Pa., 1975); and Wood, *Creation of the American Republic*, 48-53.

⁴⁴ Miller and Johnson, eds., *The Puritans*, 689. For a description of the increasingly high incidence of colonial borrowing from polite British culture see T. H. Breen, *The Character of the Good Ruler: A Study of Puritan Political Ideas in New*

The eighteenth-century shift in the direction of print and polite style was reflected in the growing appeal of rational religion among the educated elite. Cotton Mather typified this shift as early as 1726 in his *Manuductio ad Ministerium*, which, as Miller recognized, "in its catholicity of taste and urbanity suggests the spirit of current periodical essays rather than the utilitarian aim of a preaching manual."⁴⁵ Followers of deism, which carried the Liberal print-centered rationalism to an extreme, tended, in Ong's words, "to think of God himself as no longer a communicator, one who speaks to man, but as a Great Architect . . . , a manipulator of objects in visual-tactile space."⁴⁶ Treating communications as written rather than spoken, and locking words in printed space, rational Protestantism was incapable of penetrating the soul of an aural society; its ideas set forth in printed sermons and treatises could never inform a popular mentality attuned to the spoken word.

Attached to the elitist typographic culture were social imperatives. As long as social identities depended on a traditional social order for context and location within a finely graded hierarchy, communications had to be transacted through an elitist rhetoric. Power became so closely tied to print that advanced literacy and a classical education were virtually prerequisite to authority, and a college education guaranteed rapid advance in the social hierarchy.⁴⁷ By 1776 there were nearly three thousand college graduates in the colonies who, through the remarkable improvements in post and press, were able to communicate with one another on a scale and with a frequency unimaginable in the seventeenth century.⁴⁸ The cosmopolitan "better sort" formed a close-knit community that provided both authors and audience for

England, 1630-1730 (New Haven, Conn., 1970), 203-239, and Jack P. Greene, "Search for Identity: An Interpretation of the Meaning of Selected Patterns of Social Response in Eighteenth-Century America," *Jour. Soc. Hist.*, III (1970), 189-200.

⁴⁵ Miller and Johnson, eds., *The Puritans*, 669. See also Johnson's discussion of Puritan rhetoric, *ibid.*, 64-79.

⁴⁶ Ong, *Presence of the Word*, 73. The same print-centered ("visual") mode of perception is apparent in the Lockean epistemology that underlay Liberal assumptions in both religious and political contexts. See Ernest Tuveson, "Locke and the 'Dissolution of the Ego,'" *Modern Philology*, LII (1955), 164-165.

⁴⁷ On the social meaning and political significance of a classical education in the colonies see James Axtell, *The School upon a Hill: Education and Society in Colonial New England* (New Haven, Conn., 1974), 201-244; James J. Walsh, *Education of the Founding Fathers of the Republic: Scholasticism in the Colonial Colleges . . .* (New York, 1935); and Robert M. Zernsky, "Power, Influence, and Status: Leadership Patterns in the Massachusetts Assembly, 1740-1755," *WMQ*, 3d Ser., XXVI (1969), 511-512.

⁴⁸ Axtell, *School upon a Hill*, 213. For classic descriptions of the expanding networks of communications in 18th-century America see Frank Luther Mott, *American Journalism: A History of Newspapers in the United States Through 250 Years, 1690-1940* (New York, 1941), 3-110, and Wesley Everett Rich, *The History of the United States Post Office to the Year 1829* (Cambridge, Mass., 1924), 3-67.

the wave of printed literature that began to surge in the late eighteenth century. Pamphlets written by educated gentlemen, primarily lawyers, merchants, ministers, and planters, were addressed to their peers.⁴⁹ The common people were not included in the audience, but it was assumed that they would continue to defer to the leaders. There was no recognition that the pamphleteers' impassioned celebration of republicanism would require a new rhetoric of communications reflecting a profound shift in the nature of social authority—a rhetoric, in brief, that threatened to undermine the exclusive world in which the pamphlets were originally conceived.

With the coming of independence the American leadership could congratulate itself on the creation of a unique republican world-view through their publications. At the same time, however, these leaders could neither anticipate nor appreciate an egalitarian rhetoric that would soon compel them to relinquish their traditional claims to power and authority in the new republic. As a model of society, the neoclassical world of the colonial gentlemen was essentially stable; their exclusion of the common people meant that their writings could not reflect a changing self-consciousness initiated from below. The very outlook that created a learned and articulate "Republic of Letters" served, at the same time, to limit the writers' historical consciousness. Quite simply, the people were neither heard nor understood in their own terms.

The creation of an egalitarian rhetoric owed nothing to the classical heritage. If we are to understand the cultural significance of the Revolution, we must move beyond the rhetorical world of informed publications to the social world of popular assembly. We must *listen* as the "inarticulate" would have listened and determine to what extent religious and political meetings had a common rhetorical denominator that reached a revolutionary crescendo in the movement for independence.⁵⁰ For Philip Davidson, whose

⁴⁹ Gordon S. Wood observes that "even more indicative of the limited elitist conception of the audience was the extraordinary reliance on personal correspondence for the circulation of ideas. It is often difficult to distinguish between the private correspondence and the public writings of the Revolutionaries, so much alike are they" ("Democratization of Mind," *Leadership in the American Revolution*, 67-72).

⁵⁰ That the revivals did, in fact, continue to grow is most clearly reflected in the rapid growth of the dissenter movements in the colonies. Thomas Jefferson, for example, observed that by the time of the Revolution "two-thirds of the people [of Virginia] had become dissenters" (*Notes on the State of Virginia*, ed. William Peden [Chapel Hill, N.C., 1955], 158). More generally, Isaac Backus noted that, by 1795, the number of Separate Baptist preachers had grown to 1,125 (*A History of New England with Particular Reference to the Baptists*, ed. David Weston, 2d ed. [Newton, Mass., 1871], 401).

work continues to stand as the best general description of communications in the Revolutionary period, there was an unmistakably oral orientation to patriot "propaganda."⁵¹ Throughout the colonies there existed a broad range of dramatic and oral communications in which, in William Eddis's words, "the busy voice of preparation echoes through every settlement."⁵² The mobilization of the people was accomplished through extra-institutional mass meetings which, Merrill Jensen recognizes, were "of even greater long-range importance than mob action."⁵³

The Founding Fathers were reluctant, for obvious reasons, to dwell on the oral dynamic unleashed in the course of rebellion; the same cannot be said of the loyalist opposition. Jonathan Sewall recognized both the evangelical and oral connections with republicanism: "there is an Enthusiasm in politics, like that which religious notions inspire, that drives Men on with an unusual Impetuosity, that baffles and confounds all Calculation grounded upon rational principles. Liberty, among Englishmen, is a Word, whose very Sound carries a fascinating charm."⁵⁴ Loyalist literature is replete with complaints that American towns were increasingly "filled with mock orations and songs, which for composition and sentiment would disgrace the most stupid and abandoned . . ."⁵⁵

Whigs and loyalists used against one another the same arguments from constitution, law, and natural rights, but the charge of demagogic orality was

⁵¹ Philip Davidson, *Propaganda and the American Revolution, 1763-1783* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1941). Despite his penetrating description of Revolutionary communications, Davidson failed to recognize that the sort of mass society in which a manipulative propaganda could flourish did not exist in pre-Revolutionary America. What made the pamphlets significant was not the writers' intent to hoodwink the people but rather their exclusion of the people from the presumed audience. Both the term and the practice of mass propaganda originated after the Revolution. See David Hackett Fischer, *The Revolution of American Conservatism: The Federalist Party in the Era of Jeffersonian Democracy* (New York, 1965), 144-149.

⁵² William Eddis, *Letters from America*, ed. Aubrey C. Land (Cambridge, Mass., 1969), 100.

⁵³ Merrill Jensen, "The American People and the American Revolution," *Journal of American History*, LVII (1970), 15. For suggestive descriptions of how these "mass meetings" aroused "popular enthusiasm" for independence see Davidson, *Propaganda and the American Revolution*, 173-208; Isaac, "Dramatizing the Ideology of Revolution," *WMQ*, 3d Ser., XXXIII (1976), 357-385; and Robert Middlekauff, "The Ritualization of the American Revolution," in Stanley Coben and Lorman Ratner, eds., *The Development of an American Culture* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1970), 31-43.

⁵⁴ "A Letter from Jonathan Sewall to General Frederick Haldimand," May 30, 1775, in Jack P. Greene, ed., *Colonies to Nation, 1763-1789: A Documentary History of the American Revolution* (New York, 1975), 267.

⁵⁵ Margaret Wheeler Willard, ed., *Letters on the American Revolution* (New York, 1925), 81. See also Ramsay, *History of the American Revolution*, 16-17.

a one-way criticism. The loyalist opposition never mustered a counterattack until after 1773; and when it finally appeared, it was almost exclusively printed. Like earlier Liberal rhetoric, that of the loyalists disdained the "wild uproars" of the whigs which culminated in nothing less than a "Yell of Rebellion," and concentrated instead on pen and press.⁵⁶ In Davidson's words, "the Tory appeal was a written appeal; the dearth of oral, dramatic, and pictorial suggestions is striking."⁵⁷

Insofar as the whig gentlemen favored traditional modes of public address, they failed to plumb the depths of a popular revolutionary spirit that was oral and egalitarian rather than printed and elitist. Bernard Bailyn, who has examined the ideological origins of the Revolution more deeply than any other scholar, relies almost exclusively on printed sources as a sufficient explanation for the development of a Revolutionary mentality. It was "the opposition press, as much as any single influence," Bailyn argues, "that shaped the political awareness of eighteenth-century Americans."⁵⁸ Although this is true for the informed populace, the link between print culture and the people, between pamphlets and popular ideology, is assumed, not demonstrated. Despite the rhetorical incompatibility of a popular culture and tightly reasoned pamphlets, the existence of a distinctive popular ideology is denied.⁵⁹ But as Patrick Henry pointed out, "the middle and lower ranks of people have not those illumined ideas which the well-born are so happily

⁵⁶ Daniel Leonard, "To the Inhabitants of the Province of the Massachusetts-Bay." (1775), in Leslie F. S. Upton, ed., *Revolutionary Versus Loyalist: The First American Civil War, 1774-1784* (Waltham, Mass., 1968), 39.

⁵⁷ Davidson, *Propaganda and the American Revolution*, 298, 301.

⁵⁸ Bernard Bailyn, *The Origins of American Politics* (New York, 1967), 38-39. Bailyn attributes many of the ideas presented in the "opposition press" to the English "real whig" tradition. This is of some importance because, like the American whigs, the English libertarian persuasion was almost exclusively print-centered. As Caroline Robbins observes, "the Real whigs, the liberals, seem to have been associated in certain areas and institutions around a few persuasive men. They were related by a bewildering series of marriages. . . . They relied on conversation, on letters among themselves or occasionally in the public press, on the dissemination of the printed word. . . . [T]hey followed a hit-and-miss method, consistent only in their determined faith in the printed tracts and treatises continually produced by them" (*The Eighteenth-Century Commonwealthman: Studies in the Transmission, Development and Circumstance of English Liberal Thought from the Restoration of Charles II until the War with the Thirteen Colonies* [Cambridge, Mass., 1959], 381, 382, 383).

⁵⁹ Bernard Bailyn argues that "the outbreak of the Revolution was not the result of social discontent. . . . Nor was there a transformation of mob behavior or of the lives of the 'inarticulate' in the pre-Revolutionary years that accounts for the disruption of Anglo-American politics" ("The Central Themes of the American Revolution: An Interpretation," in Stephen G. Kurtz and James H. Hutson, eds., *Essays on the American Revolution* [Chapel Hill, N.C., 1973], 12).

possessed of—they cannot so readily perceive latent objects.”⁶⁰ Henry’s refusal to enter into “the labyrinths of syllogistic [Latin] argumentative deductions” in his public address may well account for the power of his oratory, which more than one commentator has likened to that of the revivalists in style and impact.⁶¹

The problem with Bailyn’s analysis is not that it is wrong in the way it portrays ideology; indeed, it represents a brilliant plea for the late eighteenth century as an “age of ideology.” The problem is pamphlets: although central to the rebellion and to the articulation of classical republican theory in the colonies, they are not sufficient to explain the process of an egalitarian cultural transformation. Bailyn concentrates on the pamphlets and the “real whig” country ideology as the formative sources of the rebellion. Having set the ideological background for rebellion, he describes some of the manifestations of the “transforming radicalism” unleashed by the Revolution.⁶² But the instances of transforming radicalism which Bailyn isolates are described far more effectively than they are explained in terms of their cultural sources. Pamphlets could never represent the primary source of radical republicanism, any more than the revivals could have issued from printed sermons or the loyalist critique of the rebellion organize itself through oral popular appeals.

Recognizing the failure of pamphlets to capture the growing revolutionary sentiment in America, a writer for the *Pennsylvania Packet* argued in 1776 that “our cause will never appear to advantage in a pamphlet. . . . When you write a pamphlet you are expected to say the best, if not all that can be said on the subject, and if it contains [only] a few weighty arguments the author is despised and the subject suffers.”⁶³ The writer was referring, of course, to pamphlets generally. Not every pamphlet was limited by the rhetorical constraints of a classical style. What made Thomas Paine’s *Common Sense* so unlike the prevailing pamphlet literature of the day was its scorn for the best literary canons and its repudiation of the language and

⁶⁰ William Wirt Henry, ed., *Patrick Henry: Life, Correspondence and Speeches*, III (New York, 1891), 462.

⁶¹ Heimert, *Religion and the American Mind*, 232, 233; Rhys Isaac, “Preachers and Patriots: Popular Culture and the Revolution in Virginia,” in Alfred F. Young, ed., *The American Revolution: Explorations in the History of American Radicalism* (DeKalb, Ill., 1976), 152-154.

⁶² Bailyn states that “the radicalism the Americans conveyed to the world in 1776 was a transformed as well as a transforming force. . . . Institutions were brought into question and condemned that appeared to have little if any direct bearing on the immediate issues of the Anglo-American struggle” (*Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*, 161, 232).

⁶³ Quoted in Thomas R. Adams, *American Independence, the Growth of an Idea: A Bibliographic Study of the American Political Pamphlets Printed Between 1764 and 1776* . . . (Providence, R.I., 1965), xiv-xv.

forms of classical discourse. Coming from a lower-class Quaker background, Paine lacked the formal Latin education common to other pamphleteers; in its place he managed to establish a new style that anticipated the wave of nineteenth-century literature intended for the people generally.⁶⁴

Another major atypical pamphlet to appear in the colonies before independence was *An Oration on the Beauties of Liberty*, published in 1773 by the Baptist minister and linen-draper John Allen. Like Paine, Allen was a recent arrival from England at the time *An Oration* was printed, and, like *Common Sense*, the tract enjoyed immense popularity in the colonies.⁶⁵ In style it bears repeated resemblances to the "enraged" language which scholars have found throughout *Common Sense*.⁶⁶ Also, as in *Common Sense*, the references and quotations are not drawn, as in the other pamphlets, from classical republicanism or British constitutional theory, but rather from the Bible. There is not one page of *An Oration* that does not supply biblical precedent or injunction for the assault on privilege and tyranny. Ahab, the golden calf, Zedekiah, Cain, Abel, and Rehoboam constituted a familiar vocabulary that was "opened up" and explained repeatedly in colonial sermons. To liken a ruler to Ahab or a social order to Babylon was to call for a revolution.

Perhaps the most important aspect of *An Oration* is that it was obviously meant to be heard as well as read.⁶⁷ Its full impact can be felt only when one *listens* to the rhetoric. Addressing the common people, Allen repeatedly relied on a coarse prose, rather than on logical syllogisms or authorities from a printed past. Reminding the people that rulers and ministers were "servants" who must "hear" a free and "affectionate" people, Allen demanded, "Has not the voice of your father's blood cry'd yet loud enough in your ears, in your hearts? . . . Have you not heard the voice of blood in your own streets . . . ?"⁶⁸ In striking contrast to virtually all the other pamphleteers, but like Paine later, Allen aimed his rhetoric beyond the literate elite to the rank and file.

If action proceeds from a cultural perception of public events in terms of symbolic forms, then analyses of the mobilization of ideas into ideology and

⁶⁴ This point is effectively developed in Eric Foner, *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America* (New York, 1976), xv-xvi, 80-87.

⁶⁵ *An Oration Upon the Beauties of Union* (Boston, 1773) was exceeded in separate editions by only two pamphlets including the "runaway best seller" *Common Sense*. For tabulations see Adams, *American Independence*, xi-xii.

⁶⁶ See, for example, Bernard Bailyn, "Common Sense," in *Fundamental Testaments of the American Revolution*, Library of Congress Symposia (Washington, D.C., 1973), 7-22.

⁶⁷ John M. Bumsted and Charles E. Clark, "New England's Tom Paine: John Allen and the Spirit of Liberty," *WMQ*, 3d Ser., XXI (1964), 570.

⁶⁸ Allen, *An Oration on the Beauties of Liberty*, 19, 27.

action must recognize, at least in part, the cultural preconditions for receptivity, particularly on the popular level. A discontinuous ("revolutionary") cultural change could, by definition, never emerge from a continuing intellectual tradition; there must be a break somewhere. Where are the sources of such a radical ideology to be discovered?

Without denying the influence of typographic culture on the leaders of the rebellion and in the formation of the new governments, it might be helpful to think of republicanism in a pluralistic context as absorbing both traditional and egalitarian perceptions of social order. The theoretical work of J. G. A. Pocock builds upon an understanding of the unavoidable "multivalency" of language that derives from the different experiences of speakers and hearers.⁶⁹ Recognizing the truism that words do not necessarily mean what either the speaker or the historian believe they mean, Pocock does not examine language and ideas as fixed entities, but rather insists that language and communications not be separated from the circumstances and comprehension of their individual users. When "conceptual and social worlds" are placed in conjunction, no singular "constellation of ideas" or "climate of opinion" appears to have embodied an identical meaning for all social ranks.⁷⁰ To get at the popular meaning of republican ideology requires moving beyond the verbal content of the documents themselves to the social world in which they were transmitted.

Pocock's insights, placed in the context of the American Revolution, reveal that not one but two ideological explosions propelled the colonies into a new nation. Both leaders and followers were possessed of an extraordinarily powerful ideology that at points converged on common antagonists and a common vocabulary, and at other points diverged dramatically. No ideology that is pieced together solely from the literate world of print can fully comprehend the radical dynamic of the Revolution. It is incapable of accounting for the enormously creative power of *vox populi* to organize a social order bound together in voluntary associations based on discussion and public address. Resisting John Adams and others who located the Revolution's *raison d'être* among the classical world view of the elite, Benjamin Rush issued the following advice to historians: "I hope with the history of this folly, some historian will convey to future generations, that many of the most active and useful characters in accomplishing this revolution, were strangers to the formalities of a Latin and Greek education."⁷¹

⁶⁹ See, especially, J. G. A. Pocock, *Politics, Language and Time: Essays on Political Thought and History* (New York, 1971), 3-41.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁷¹ Quoted in Meyer Reinhold, "Opponents of Classical Learning in America during the Revolutionary Period," American Philosophical Society, *Proceedings*, CXII (1968), 230.

The social conditions that allowed for the popular upsurge in the revivals and rebellion did not permit unstructured public address to degenerate into "anarchy" and mass rebellion, as the Standing Order had always feared. Perhaps the enduring legacy of the Revolution lay in its demonstration that distinctive ideologies *could* work in concert. The typographic ideology of the real whig tradition was, as Bailyn and others demonstrate, an "inner accelerator" of a transforming radicalism, but only in the sense that the aroused elite were compelled by the logic of their argument for rebellion to create, in law and politics, an egalitarian vocabulary, and, in communications, the secular equivalents of the revival in voluntary political parties and free presses.⁷² Beneath that impulse, however, we must also recognize typographic ideology and the rebellion as accelerating a movement *already in progress*, a movement that originated among the lower rather than the upper strata of colonial society, and that, combined with profound social strains which increased throughout the eighteenth century, opened the way for the "enchanted sound" of mass public address.⁷³

While the whig justification of the rebellion pointed to an "invisible government" of ministers, cliques, and venal officials, another conspiracy, recognized as early as 1773 by the loyalist Boucher, was equally "invisible" and far more powerful. Attacking the foundations of traditional social order, this conspiracy derived its "invisibility" from its essentially extemporaneous nature. In Boucher's words: "as though there were some irrefutable charm in all extemporaneous speaking, however rude, the orators of our committees and sub-committees, like those in higher spheres, *prevail with their tongues*. To public speakers alone is the government of our country now completely committed. . . . An empire is thus completely established within an empire; and a new system of government of great power erected, even before the old one is formally abolished."⁷⁴ An empire premised on talk, wholly lacking in the formal coercive structure that kings, churches, aristocracies, standing armies, and mercantile controls provided, did indeed represent a revolutionary departure in the principles of government and social order. Voluntaryism, the very linchpin of social, religious, and political organization in the new republic, was perhaps the clearest manifestation of this revolutionary system

⁷² Bailyn, *Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*, 95.

⁷³ Garden, *Regeneration, and the Testimony of the Spirit*, in Heimert and Miller, eds., *Great Awakening*, 47.

⁷⁴ Jonathan Boucher, *A View of the Causes and Consequences of the American Revolution in Thirteen Discourses* . . . (New York, 1967 [orig. publ. London, 1797]), 320, 321. See David Ammerman's discussion of "government by committee," in *In the Common Cause: American Response to the Coercive Acts of 1774* (Charlottesville, Va., 1974), 103-124, and Wood, *Creation of the American Republic*, 319-328.

of authority.⁷⁵ Of course, public address did not replace print, nor was the populace hostile to print and literacy *per se*, but only to a print culture that was elitist and hierarchical. Still, it is no accident that early republicanism represented the "Golden Age of Oratory," because mass address was, for a time, the most effective means of reaching the new audience and utilizing the egalitarian style seized upon by republican orators and revivalists as the creative force within the popular ideology.⁷⁶

The rhetorical transformation in the revivals signified an emerging popular culture asserting itself against a paternalistic social ethic. In the course of the Revolution, the social order prefigured in evangelical assemblies was suffused with secular and political meanings articulated in the worldview of republicanism. This new order, in Michael Kammen's description, was not so much a "seamless web" as an "unstable pluralism" defying reduction to any one ideology or social system.⁷⁷ The rhetorical division resulting from the revivals played a major role in generating subsequent tensions and conflicts in American society. These tensions, moreover, reflected not so much opposing ideas with conflicting literary traditions as entirely different social outlooks and attitudes toward social authority, all deriving legitimacy from the individualism implicit in a mass democratic society. Evangelical attacks on a settled and educated ministry may have expressed a pristine "anti-intellectualism" in the colonies,⁷⁸ but it was an anti-intellectualism that was positive and creative—indeed, revolutionary. Without it there would have been no creation of an egalitarian American republic.

The oral explosion and egalitarian style evidenced in the revivals were

⁷⁵ On the frontier the essentially oral, voluntary association was most clearly manifested in the revivals which, as Donald G. Matthews suggests, represented a critical "organizing process" in the new nation. See Matthews, "The Second Great Awakening as an Organizing Process, 1780-1830," *Am. Qtly.*, XI (1969), 23-43. Similarly, Leonard L. Richards points out how, in the voluntary reform efforts of the "evangelical crusade," evangelical abolitionists effectively utilized the "revolution in communications and the creation of mass media" to bypass traditional social channels and organize voluntary associations within "impersonal, large-scale organizations" ("*Gentlemen of Property and Standing*": *Anti-Abolition Mobs in Jacksonian America* [New York, 1970], 167).

⁷⁶ Wood points this out in *Creation of the American Republic*, 621-622, and "Democratization of Mind," in *Leadership in the American Revolution*, 78-82. Perhaps not sufficiently emphasized in studies of early American literature is the abrupt decline in public significance of pamphlets, letters, treatises, and printed sermons after the Revolution.

⁷⁷ Michael Kammen, *People of Paradox: An Inquiry Concerning the Origins of American Civilization* (New York, 1972), 89-96. The social ramifications of this cultural pluralism are treated in Robert H. Wiebe, *The Segmented Society: An Introduction to the Meaning of America* (New York, 1975).

⁷⁸ Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (New York, 1962), 55-141.

not limited to religion, nor was the articulation of a radical ideology the conscious objective of itinerant evangelists. The primary concern of the revivals was the saving of souls, and the rhetorical innovations that lent force to the movement were not fully perceived or verbalized for what they could come to represent: a revolutionary shift in world-view. As a movement initiated from below, the social experience of the revivals existed in fact before the emergence of a literate rationale. This does not mean that the experience proceeded from irrational impulses but, rather, that the terms necessary for rational comprehension and formal legitimation had to be invented. What opponents of the revivals termed a "spirit of superstition" was, for Jonathan Edwards, a new "sense" that could not easily be rendered into the existing forms of speech: "Some Things that they are sensible of are altogether new to them, their Ideas and inward Sensations are new, and what they therefore knew not how to accommodate Language to, or to find Words to express."⁷⁹ Edwards's concern was to fit the new social experience of the revivals to its proper spiritual vocabulary, while acknowledging that no language could fully express the essence of religious faith.

What Edwards and other churchmen failed to recognize was that the "spirit of liberty" manifest in the revivals would not be contained in religious categories. In the movement for independence both leaders and followers adopted a political vocabulary that expressed the egalitarian impulse in the secular language of republicanism. This vocabulary was largely provided, as Bailyn and Caroline Robbins demonstrate, through the Commonwealth tradition. But the ethos and ideological fervor of republicanism did not derive so much from the injection of Commonwealth vocabulary into colonial pamphlets as from the translation of the evangelical experience into a secular theoretical vocabulary that more adequately embodied, for some, the revolutionary thrust first widely experienced in the revivals. Words that were abstracted from their restrictive, deferential context came to mean something else. In Tocqueville's observation, Americans had a penchant for abstract words because only by using a vocabulary lacking specificity could they communicate radical ideas that destroyed a conventional style. "An abstract word," Tocqueville noted, "is like a box with a false bottom; you may put in it what ideas you please and take them out again unobserved."⁸⁰ The "country" publicists did not provide the textbook of revolution, so much as a lexicon of revolution, the meaning of which could be grasped only within a persuasion that celebrated the sovereignty of the new political audience.

⁷⁹ Jonathan Edwards, *The Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God* . . . (1741), in Bushman, ed., *Great Awakening*, 123. On Edwards's use of language see Harold P. Simonson, *Jonathan Edwards: Theologian of the Heart* (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1974), 91-118.

⁸⁰ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, eds. J. P. Mayer and Max Lerner (New York, 1966), 482. See also Robert E. Shalhope, "Toward a Republican Synthesis: The Emergence of an Understanding of Republicanism in American Historiography," *WMQ*, XXIX (1972), 72-73.