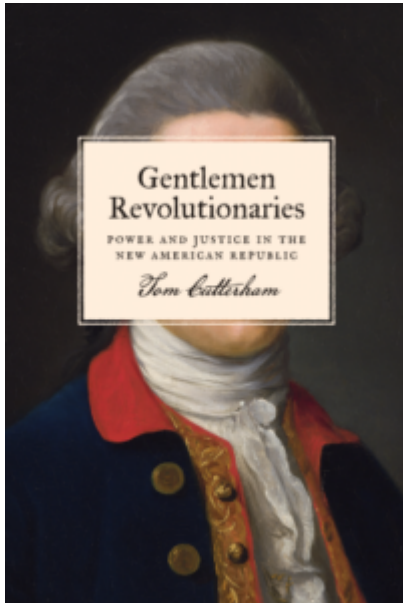


The Pursuit of Status: Elite Formation in the American Revolution



Tom Cutterham, *Gentleman Revolutionaries: Power and Justice in the New American Republic*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017. 208 pp., \$39.95.

The title of Tom Cutterham's book, *Gentleman Revolutionaries*, reflects the core paradox of the American Revolution—why did a group of elite colonial whigs revolt against the British Empire? White British North Americans enjoyed the highest standard of living in the world in the eighteenth century. The revolutionary leaders generally were not drawn from the ranks of the downtrodden with nothing to lose. They had their “lives, fortunes, and sacred honor” at stake, as Cutterham notes in the opening (1). Why would these gentlemen risk all to create a republic, a government that would likely collapse, given the historical tendency of republican governments to fail? Cutterham's approach to this paradox is not to study the ideological, political, economic, or social forces that pushed these gentlemen to revolt in 1776. Rather, he explores the republican order they sought to create after the Revolutionary War had ended. He focuses on the 1780s, a decade neglected by recent historians, myself included, who have tended either to study the resistance and revolution of the 1760s and 1770s or the political partisanship of the 1790s. Cutterham contended that “The American Revolution was led by men who set themselves above the ordinary, common man” (1). Status, not ideology or rights, motivated these revolutionaries. Obsessed with status, revolutionary gentlemen aimed to strengthen their newly acquired political authority by promoting social, cultural, and economic practices and associations that emphasized hierarchy and obedience in the 1780s.

Particularly welcome to historians of the American Revolution is the book's

long overdue reassessment of the Society of the Cincinnati, the controversial association created by Continental Army officers after the Revolutionary War. Chapter one adeptly argues that the officers intended the society to maintain the fraternal bonds that they had formed with each other during the war, while preserving their status as a distinct class of officers, set apart from rank and file soldiers. Cutterham illustrates here and throughout the book how this process of elite formation was two-fold: egalitarianism shaped relationships among the officer corps, but hierarchy and obedience defined the officers' relationships with those below them. By initially allowing the eldest sons of officers to inherit their fathers' status, the Society of the Cincinnati attempted to create a republican hereditary elite. Many contemporaries like Aedanus Burke argued that such a monarchical and aristocratic ethos was incompatible with republican government, but former officers like Alexander Hamilton and Henry Knox believed that the army represented a model for a republican order based on virtue, sacrifice, and hierarchy. Indeed, the Society of the Cincinnati subsequently became an effective military force against popular insurrections, as Cutterham points out in chapter five. That chapter examines the widespread discontent with elite authority that occurred by the late 1780s; in New England, conflicts over debt and paper money even pushed poor farmers to take extra-legal action during Shays' Rebellion. Elites across the nation viewed this unrest as licentiousness and anarchy. The Society of the Cincinnati, led by member Benjamin Lincoln, played a role in suppressing Shays' Rebellion, while other gentlemen like James Madison and Alexander Hamilton turned to political means—the Constitutional Convention—to secure elite interests against the threat of popular revolt.

Another recurring theme of the book is the failure of many elite projects due to the United States' constrained finances during and after the war. For instance, gentlemen like Noah Webster, Joel Barlow, and Benjamin Rush advocated for an ambitious agenda of education reforms and ecclesiastical plans. They sought to use schools, universities, and literary culture to uphold their authority and teach the value of obedience to the common people. Even churches could be used to stabilize the fragile republican order, many like Rush believed, because religion promoted piety and morality among the people. Nonetheless, Cutterham emphasizes how the need to pay war debts thwarted real progress on expanding educational institutions and programs during the 1780s. Other projects of the revolutionary elites were not necessarily failures, but rather remained unfinished and inconclusive. Gentlemen aimed to advance their own "commercial view of justice" based on property and contract rights (79). In chapter three, Cutterham illustrates how elites regarded the courts as a counterbalance to the expanded powers of legislative bodies. Elites especially viewed state assemblies, which were too prone to popular enthusiasm, with suspicion. Instead, gentlemen sought to constrain the powers of democratic legislatures with, in Hamilton's words, "the eternal law of justice and reason" (92). Yet, establishing these universal principles of justice and reason proved difficult in a post-revolutionary society that had experienced years of intense polarization and warfare. For example, Cutterham stresses that in considering the confiscation of Loyalist property, South Carolina elites like John Rutledge

were torn between their desire to protect property rights and the social conflicts and material considerations that pushed the legislature toward revenge and a policy of confiscation. Overall, elites "aimed to limit, as much as they could, legislative interference with contract and property," but the legislatures, subject to democratic pressures from the people whom they represented, were not always able to pursue such an agenda (92).

Not only did revolutionary elites hope to enshrine commercial values in the republic's new justice system, they also sought to develop financial institutions and banks to benefit the commercial classes. Cutterham focuses particularly on the sectional dimensions of this issue, for it was eastern gentlemen like George Washington who wanted "to extend their control into the hinterlands of the west" (122). This control was not just political and ideological, but economic. At a time when a strong national identity did not exist in the United States, elites believed that commerce would unite the regions west of the Appalachian mountains to the East. Banks could help finance western expansion, credit, and land speculation, but proposals for such institutions like the Bank of North America, the project of Robert Morris and Alexander Hamilton, gave rise to intense sectional conflicts. Westerners increasingly banded together in force to resist such efforts.

The greatest contribution of *Gentlemen Revolutionaries* is its emphasis on the dynamism of the conflicts and debates that shaped American society immediately after the Revolutionary War. Those debates concerned fundamental questions about power and authority, as Americans argued about who would rule (not just politically, but socially and economically) in the new republic. Cutterham's book convincingly argues that revolutionary elites attempted to consolidate their power through cultural, financial, and religious institutions and associations, but other Americans, many of them non-elite, ceaselessly fought against this process of elite formation through print culture, extra-legal protests, and armed revolt. This resistance convinced many elites of the need for a stronger Constitution to limit the power of the people over the republic. Cutterham's narrative of the movement toward the Constitutional Convention thus complements recent work by Terry Bouton, Woody Holton, and others, who have emphasized the undemocratic nature of America's constitutional settlement of 1787-88. Cutterham's argument for the elite underpinnings of the Federal Constitution is not new, but his examination of the social and cultural background to the Convention greatly advances and strengthens this particular interpretation.

By the end of the decade, gentlemen revolutionaries had failed to secure their vision of a new republican order through social and cultural means, so they turned to politics. The full significance of this constitutional turn of 1787-88, however, remains unexamined in the book. From Cutterham's discussion, it seems that during the 1780s gentlemen devoted their intellectual and organizational energies to establishing associations and institutions that operated outside of government, but did this emphasis on non-state activities occur at the expense of strengthening the Confederation itself? How was this

focus on the extra-governmental sphere an outgrowth of the revolutionary experience of governance by committee, association, and convention? Did the failure of these social and cultural methods of establishing elite authority push elites toward the Constitutional Convention even more than the perceived weaknesses of the Confederation government? Ultimately, Cutterham's work reveals how state formation became crucial to elite formation by the late 1780s, with gentlemen revolutionaries creating a new framework of government to uphold their status rather than relying on softer forms of social and cultural power. As with their former attempts to expand social and cultural influence, this process was two-fold: it entailed not only building a government to constrain the people's authority, but also elevating gentlemen revolutionaries above the people. Cutterham's thought-provoking work effectively highlights how this process of creating a new republican order centered on the concept of status.

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