nation that would be “among,” not independent from, other nations of the world.

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Culture and Liberty in the Age of the American Revolution. By Michal Jan Rozbicki. (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011. Pp. xii, 290. $35.00 cloth; $35.00 e-book.)

Scholars of the American Revolution, Michal Jan Rozbicki argues in Culture and Liberty in the Age of the American Revolution, have failed to understand its “core concept” (p. 1) because they view liberty philosophically and theoretically rather than historically and culturally. Rozbicki seeks to change this mindset in an ambitious, if not wholly satisfying, book that is part historiographical critique, part history of the Revolution, and part theoretical essay on the interpretation of culture.

Rozbicki contends that the modern view of liberty as “a uniform, self-evident, and unproblematic concept of equal freedom” (p. 18) has distorted nearly all interpretations of the Revolution. The founders are often portrayed either as heroic pioneers of our ideals or as hypocrites who failed to follow them. Rozbicki rejects both perspectives as inadequate. Liberty, he suggests, is ultimately defined not by equality but by distinction; not by universality but by “specific immunities and entitlements” (p. 11) held by particular people. Such exclusive liberties, he says, were central to politics and culture in early-modern Britain (and its American colonies), where the ruling classes were ultimately defined less by their wealth or titles than by their liberties. Even into the eighteenth century, Rozbicki shows, they did not find it difficult to imagine enslaving the idle poor. The mainland American colonial elites who emerged by the 1730s modeled themselves on the British gentry—so successfully so that they monopolized “the production of political reality and its symbolic representations” (p. 58) in America.

The cramped and tightly controlled view of liberty changed dramatically during the American Revolution. Although American elites began their revolt to preserve their power rather than to remake their society, they soon began celebrating an “inclusive” (p. 79) liberty
available to all, finding it a helpful means of resisting imperial de-
mands, legitimizing a republican polity, and unifying Americans across
the former colonies. In the process, Revolutionary leaders created
what Rozbicki calls a \textquotedblleft radical script\textquotedblright{}—a \textquotedblleft remarkable conceptual pack-
age\textquotedblright{} (p. 81) that celebrated a new order that defined equality as an
integral part of liberty and the people as the ultimate sovereign.

After pushing this new view, Rozbicki writes, Revolutionary leaders
found themselves forced to conform to its dictates, not only in their
personal lives but also in the public sphere. Outsiders and critics
in the 1780s and 1790s were able to assert standing by appealing to
the ideals of liberty, and insurgents in Shays\textquoteright;s Rebellion used the new
\textquotedblleft vocabulary of rights and freedom\textquotedblright{} (p. 164) to back up their demands.
Politicians similarly (and more successfully) portrayed their opponents
as betrayers of liberty who were driven by passion rather than refined
reason. Yet even though elites were obliged to grant claims based on
this inclusive idea, Rozbicki argues, they did not fully accept it: to
preserve their own superiority over what they still termed \textquotedblleft the mob,\textquotedblright{}
American leaders redefined themselves as a natural aristocracy or an
aristocracy of merit.

Rozbicki\textquoteright;s emphasis on the importance of the Revolution perhaps
leads him to focus too tightly on these years. A broader account of
earlier conceptions of liberty might have allowed him to examine the
widespread contemporary belief that Britons as a whole possessed
significant liberties—a more inclusive vision that helped American
colonists justify their own share in these privileges not only in the Rev-
olution but throughout the eighteenth century. Rozbicki\textquoteright;s attempt to
highlight late eighteenth-century changes also leads him to exaggerate
the control of colonial elites over their political culture and therefore
give too little attention to scholarly discussions about the role of
slaves and others outside the elite classes in shaping their worlds. The
work furthermore ends without considering how definitions of liberty
changed in the years after 1800, an exploration that might have
clarified his argument\textquoteright;s larger implications. Still, Rozbicki astutely
critiques attempts to glorify or condemn the founders for articulating
or repudiating our values. The case he makes for the importance of
inequality in Revolutionary America deserves to be widely considered.

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