

FROM CITIZENS TO SUBJECTS: THE FORMALIZATION OF AUTHORITY IN POST-REVOLUTIONARY MASSACHUSETTS

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As the single moment in the wake of independence when the Revolution threatened to dissolve into civil war, Shays's Rebellion inescapably challenges celebrations of America's rise from colony to nation. During 1786-87, hundreds of farmers in the backcountry adopted the same method of protest – closing courts, mobbing officials, drilling Minutemen – that had been used a decade before to overturn royal government in Massachusetts. Appropriating the symbols of the Revolution, ostentatiously decorating their hats with sprigs of hemlock, the emblem of the Continental soldier, they presented their crusade as a new fight for independence, this time against a Patriot élite more oppressive than the Crown officials it had displaced.

Indeed, there were charges that the new rulers of Massachusetts had purposely roused the people to rebellion against Britain by misrepresentations and outright lies, in order to propel themselves into power and reap the rich, corrupt fruits of office. The new republican élite, it was said, exploited its position to live off the labors of common folk, imposing huge taxes, collecting debts without mercy, exacting payment of both in scarce coin, no matter how many farms and shops were foreclosed and how many blameless men were driven to debtors' jail. No relief seemed possible through the normal channels of government; protesters charged that under a constitution biased towards the rich, the privileged few controlled the courts, the Senate, and the governorship, maintaining a stranglehold on plans for reform. Popular rebellion was thus imperative to save liberty and preserve the Revolution. But unlike the beleaguered representatives of the King, the Patriot lords of Massachusetts hung on, ultimately resorting to repression to maintain their rule. To secure that victory, they joined with élites elsewhere to steal power from the people in towns and states and lodge it in the new, central government under their command. In the embittered perspective of defeated Shaysites, the Constitution was a legal cloak for the dominion of the Patriot ruling class.

This scenario of conflict and conspiracy, of a people manipulated and betrayed, was sure to cause trouble for historians. Ever since 1776, our identity as a nation has been defined, quite literally, by the myth of the Revolution as a spontaneous rising of the people, free and united, against British oppression. Originating in Whig propaganda, this idealization of the American cause was

elaborated, during and after the war, into a full-dress, historical interpretation. Since the winners wrote the histories, these works relegated dissenters from «the glorious cause» to the margins of American life. Loyalists – those British-Americans who had tried in vain to reconcile competing loyalties to king and country – were vilified as traitors, who had betrayed America's liberties in exchange for privilege and power. Already banished from their native land, the Loyalists were dispatched into literary exile, their reputations as honorable sons of Massachusetts or Maryland confiscated as surely as their lands. As with Tories, so with Shaysites. They, too, were placed beyond the American pale, either passed over in silence or dismissed as pawns in the hands of selfish schemers, embittered Loyalists, and British spies, all aiming to amass wealth and power for themselves. The rank and file of Shays's army, admitted the Friends of Government, were «well-meaning» folk, but too many, desperate to escape the bills for luxuries they had bought on credit in better days, had been seduced into rebellion by «artful, designing men». Far from defending the Revolution, the misguided insurgents were putting republicanism and independence at risk. Common losers in a protracted, political struggle spanning more than two decades (1765-88), Loyalists and Shaysites were thus remade into the first un-Americans, insiders-turned-outsiders, who had never really belonged. In an assertion of ideological hegemony, the triumphant Patriots constructed, then proscribed, their adversaries as co-conspirators, a sinister league of the extreme Right and Left. To the victors went the spoils of defining the national consensus¹.

Let us call the two schools of thought on Shays's Rebellion the Hemlocks and White Hats, denoted by the symbols they placed in their hats as badges of identity. Between them, for nearly two hundred years, they have dominated the discourse on the crisis of 1786-87. Indeed, in the historiography of the Revolutionary era, the Massachusetts insurrection has come to be a litmus test of political belief. During the nineteenth century, Nationalist historians applauded the Fathers of the Constitution for rescuing the republic from the anarchy portended by Shays. By contrast, in the twentieth century, scholars on the Left have seen in the Massachusetts protests the true, democratic spirit of the common folk: a signal moment in our history when ordinary people rose up in arms against the forces of capitalism and élitism that rule the nation and betray its promise. They cherish that memory as a harbinger of popular radicalism, sure to rise again.

These competing versions of Shays's Rebellion are locked into a debate, whose terms were set by the opposing parties two hundred years ago. And though they present mutually exclusive interpretations of the same events,

¹ Bernard Bailyn, *The Ordeal of Thomas Hutchinson* (Cambridge, Mass., 1974), 383-408; Michael Zuckerman, «Fiction and Fission: Twentieth-Century Writing on the Founding Fathers», in *Religion, Ideology, and Nationalism in Europe and America: Essays Presented in Honor of Yehoshua Arieli* (Jerusalem, 1986), 227-42; James H. Hutson, «Country, Court and Constitution: Antifederalism and the Historians», *Williams and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd series, XXXVIII (1981): 337-38.

they embody a single structure of thought. Theirs is the conspiracy theory of politics, so popular among Anglo-Americans of the Revolutionary era. Hemlock history merely turns the perspective of the White Hats upside down. In each school, a little body of ambitious, selfish men – in the one case, demagogues from below; in the other, merchants and magistrates from above – plans to seize power and exploit the people for personal gain. The conspirators are, invariably, *outsiders* to the society they assail: to established gentlemen, Shays was a social upstart, stirring from the depths to bid for power; to the backcountry, eastern merchants represented an intrusive, alien world. Whatever their origin, the invaders endanger a way of life that is otherwise sound.

Today, it might seem easy to jettison the conspiracy theories of the past. But the eighteenth-century paradigm of politics has imprinted a set of hidden assumptions upon our approaches to Shays's Rebellion. As Gordon Wood has shown, the disposition to detect secret plots behind the outward show of events was once the hallmark of an Enlightened mind. In the age of Samuel Adams and Daniel Shays, the mysterious movements of history – the rise and fall of kings, the advance and decay of civilizations – were no longer attributed to the hidden hand of God or the grip of fate. Instead, the course of events reflected human agency; society was the product of the intentions of men. Such purposes were, invariably, conscious and rational: deliberate calculations, based on known interests and ideals, in service of planned ends. In its own time, this new perspective emancipated thought, enabling men and women to cut through venerable traditions and superstitions and to assert their own reason and will. But its legacy to the twentieth century has been a narrow, rationalist view of political and social action. Writing within this framework, historians have at times been obsessed with the schemes and plots of the little cabals accused of fomenting Shays's Rebellion. Even when they reject such narrow explanations, scholars retain the assumption that the contending parties chose up sides, according to rational calculations of socio-economic interests. Our understanding of culture and society is bent into this frame. David Szatmary's foray into Shays's Rebellion promised to open up a new perspective on the distinctive cultures – competitive capitalists, on one side; communal farmers, on the other – at odds in the contest; but in the end, he only tightened the interpretative strait-jacket. For to Szatmary, not only did the insurgents of the backcountry have a better cause; they also enjoyed a morally superior way of life².

The biases in our treatment of the insurrection run deeper still. Joint

² Gordon S. Wood, «Conspiracy and the Paranoid Style: Causality and Deceit in the Eighteenth Century», *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd series, XXXIX (1982): 401-42; Hutson, «Country, Court and Constitution», 356-68; Forrest McDonald, *E Pluribus Unum: The Formation of the American Republic 1776-1790* (Boston, 1965), 145-54; Sidney Kaplan, «Veteran Officers and Politics in Massachusetts, 1783-1787», *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd series, 9 (1952): 29-57; Robert A. East, «The Massachusetts Conservatives in the Critical Period», in Richard B. Morris, ed., *The Era of the American Revolution: Studies Inscribed to Evarts Boutell Greene* (New York, 1939), 375-84; David P. Szatmary, *Shays' Rebellion: The Making of an Agrarian Insurrection* (Amherst, Mass., 1980).

heirs to an eighteenth-century frame of mind, White Hats and Hemlocks have been, in their different ways, loyal sons of the American Revolution. To the defenders of government, James Bowdoin and Samuel Adams aimed only to preserve the fruits of independence – liberty and republicanism – against a hostile world. The champions of the insurgents prove no less fervent in their embrace of the Revolution, but they have relocated the true spirit of 1776 in the sturdy yeomen of the backcountry. So, Progressive historians were eager to expose the lukewarm patriotism of the merchant class, but they skipped right over the half-hearted enthusiasm among many farmers in the west. Nobody has bothered to explore the diverse meanings of the Revolution to all parties in the dispute, to set the conflicts of the era in the long perspective of Massachusetts history, or, more radically, to probe the many ties, personal, political, and cultural, that bound insurgents, neutrals, and Friends of Government alike to a more traditional, pre-Revolutionary world.

In the last few years, we have begun to break free of the partisan myths of Shays's Rebellion. The work of John Brooke, Stephen Marini, Gregory Nobles, and Alan Taylor has allowed us to glimpse a countryside in upheaval, fracturing into distinct classes and cultures – orthodox yeomanry, cosmopolitan gentry, pietistic dissenters – whose values and beliefs came into collision during the crisis of the 1780s. Each group was pulled in contrary directions by the pressures of the time, as mediated through longstanding conflicts and commitments. Socio-economic interest alone did not drive political choice; the institutional setting – the presence of gentlemen, the authority of ministers, the multiplicity of sects – was key to decisions for or against the rebellion. And in expressing opposition to public policies on both economic and political matters – taxes, money, debts, courts, lawyers, the Constitution – many rural inhabitants affirmed values of earlier vintage than the republicanism of 1776. Slow to move into the Revolutionary cause, quick to resent the constant demands for men and money to run the war, the insurgents of western Massachusetts spoke in conflicting voices: they demanded a government closer, more responsive to the people, and they stridently proclaimed their own republican virtue. But as Alan Taylor has argued, they clung to «the protection covenant» of the displaced, old regime. Reared in a society of ranks and orders, expecting to be loyal subjects of benevolent patriarchs, they asked mainly to be left alone by a distant metropolis. No activist citizenry for them! But such hopes for rural insulation from the wider world – from the claims of the marketplace and the demands of the state – were already nostalgia. The relentless forces of change, accelerated by Revolution and war, had shattered the «peaceable kingdoms» of the backcountry from within. Fluidity, not fixity, shaped rural lives³.

³ John L. Brooke, «A Deacon's Orthodoxy: Religion, Class and the Moral Economy of Shays's Rebellion»; Stephen A. Marini, «The Religious World of Daniel Shays»; Gregory H. Nobles, «Shays's Neighbors: The Context of Rebellion in Pelham, Massachusetts»; and Alan Taylor, «Regulators and White Indians: Forms of Agrarian Resistance in Post-Revolutionary New England»; all in Robert A. Gross, ed., *In Debt to Shays: The Bicentennial of an Agrarian*

A similar recognition of contradiction and change has yet to alter our understanding of merchants and magistrates, indeed, all the Friends of Government, during the crisis of 1786-87. Sympathetic students of the backcountry continue to view the rulers in the capital from the perspective of the periphery: at best, they appear shadowy figures, looming over the rural landscape, with the power to make or break families and farms; at worst, rigid, insensitive capitalists, indifferent to the ravages they wreak through single-minded concentration on the letter of the law and on the bottom line. But the few friendly accounts we have of the «commercial-cosmopolitan» leaders of the state are little better. In these works, James Bowdoin and company toil conscientiously, high-minded public servants, committed to law, liberty, and government by consent: unswerving republicans in a modern, political world. By either reckoning, the result is the same: the eastern élite runs the levers of state and the course of trade with conviction and confidence. True, in the international credit crisis of the mid-1780s, the lords of commerce scrambled to collect bills, but they always knew what they were about. Rational and purposive, the merchants and magistrates emerge in history as a unified, governing class.

Just the opposite, I want to argue, was the case. The diverse groups in government, trade, and the professions, who dominated public policy in the 1780s, experienced the dislocations of the era as forcefully, as traumatically as did their desperate adversaries in the countryside. It was not out of strength, but rather uncertainty and insecurity that they confronted the crisis in 1786-87. And the very brittleness of that situation hardened attitudes, just at the moment that flexibility and compromise were most in demand. The contending parties did not encounter one another, of course, on an equal field; within the structures of economic and political power of post-Revolutionary Massachusetts, commercial interests held most of the advantages, while backcountry people operated from the margins. Still, if merchants and farmers inhabited opposing social worlds, as Szatmary has suggested, a common

Rebellion (forthcoming). See all Gregory H. Nobles, *Divisions throughout the Whole: Politics and Society in Hampshire County, Massachusetts, 1740-1775*, (New York, 1983).

⁴ For hostile views of the merchant class, a wide range of writers can be cited from the 1920s to the 1980s. A sampling would include: A.M. Simons, *Social Forces in American History* (rpt., New York, 1925; orig. pub., New York, 1911), 88-99; James Truslow Adams, *New England in the Republic 1776-1850* (Boston, 1926), 129-66; Charles A. Beard and Mary R. Beard, *The Rise of American Civilization* (2 vols.; rpt New York, 1930; orig. pub., New York: 1927), I: 297-309, 544, 665, 759, 772, 798, II: 711; Vernon Louis Parrington, *Main Currents in American Thought. Volume One. 1620-1800: The Colonial Mind* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1927), 271-82; East, «The Massachusetts Conservatives in the Critical Period», 349-91; Millard Hansen, «The Significance of Shays' Rebellion», *South Atlantic Quarterly*, XXXIX (July, 1940): 305-317; Arthur E. Morgan, «An Early American Social Revolt», *Survey Graphic: Magazine of Social Interpretation*, XXIX (December 1940): 618-19; Szatmary, *Shays' Rebellion*, 18-55. For defenses of the merchants and magistrates, the earliest version is George Richards Minot, *The HISTORY of the INSURRECTIONS in Massachusetts. In the Year Seventeen Hundred and Eighty Six. And the REBELLION Consequent Thereon* (Second Ed., Boston, 1810; orig. pub., Boston, 1788). For an updating of Minot, see William Pencak, «Samuel Adams and Shays's Rebellion», *New England Quarterly*, LXII (March, 1989): 63-74, and two essays in the forthcoming anthology on Shays's Rebellion, *In Debt to Shays*: Pencak, «The Fine Theoretic Government of Massachusetts is Prostrated to the Earth», and Richard Buel, Jr., «The Creditor Interest in Massachusetts Politics, 1780-1786».

process of Revolutionary change, and not just an extended chain of debt from London to Boston to western Massachusetts, brought the two sides to their rendezvous at Springfield armory and Petersham common. In this perspective, the metropolitan elite loses stature as the aggressive agent of advancing capitalism in the countryside. What it fails in symbolic force, however, it regains in historical authenticity. Instead of stepping forth fully formed onto the eighteenth-century stage, the elite was a bourgeois class in the making, struggling to be born, in the face of internal disunity, external challenge, and its own affiliations to an older order of thought and action.

There is hardly time here to lay out the full support for this case, which has been built upon existing secondary sources and *not* my own original research. But consider, for a start, the very composition of the metropolitan elite. This was no traditional governing class, long entrenched in state house and counting house. The Revolution had dramatically altered the upper orders. As James Kirby Martin has shown, the top offices in the province were emptied by the break with Britain; seventy per cent of the principal placeholders were cast out, to be replaced by ambitious, younger men from the second rank of the social order. The currents of change swept through the chambers of commerce with equivalent force. Nearly half of Boston's merchant community, by the best estimate, went into bitter exile as Loyalists or quietly slipped into neutral eclipse at home. The emigres included the princes of trade – Ervings, Hallowells, Hutchinsons – but also a great many others, who specialized in the dry goods business, importing directly from England, or in government contracts. Taking their place at the helm of trade were the militant smugglers, the dealers in illegal West Indian sugar and Dutch tea, who had spearheaded the campaign against imperial restrictions, and the managers of the coastal trade, whose American focus promoted independence of the British connection.

But this ascendancy was short-lived. Between the disruptions of war and the disappointments of peace, the ranks of commerce were reshuffled again. A host of newcomers arrived from the outports of the North Shore; they were joined by men suddenly grown rich by privateering. By one estimate, in 1783, only one out of every seven merchants had been active since before the war. At decade's end, the trading community of Boston was a little more stable; twenty per cent of the merchants listed in the 1789 *Directory* had been in business since 1780. With such volatility on the 'change, such fluctuations in fortunes, the post-war merchants of Boston formed a diffuse assemblage of venturers, not a close-knit company of thieves. «When you come», James Bowdoin wrote from Boston in 1783, «you will scarcely see any other than new faces... the change which in that respect has happened within the few years since the revolution is as remarkable as the revolution itself»⁵.

⁵ James Kirby Martin, *Men in Rebellion: Higher Governmental Leaders and the Coming of the American Revolution* (New York, 1973), 44, 48-49, 109, 155, 184-185; John W. Tyler, *Smugglers & Patriots: Boston Merchants and the Advent of the American Revolution* (Boston, 1986), 17-23; 241-51; Van Beck All, *Politics Without Parties: Massachusetts, 1780-1791* (Pittsburgh, 1972), 27; Forrest McDonald and Ellen Shapiro McDonald, *Requiem: Variations on Eighteenth-Century*

It was not just that the commercial and political élite consisted chiefly of new men; the situation they faced was equally unprecedented. Having sought release from imperial controls, the merchants of Boston now enjoyed the dubious benefits of free trade within a mercantilist world. Their dilemmas were both short- and long-term. The immediate problem involved the vast purchase of British goods, once American ports were reopened for Anglo-American trade. Cautious businessmen warned that huge imports from England, advanced on liberal credits, would soon glut the market, while draining the country of cash. Their predictions were soon realized in the trans-Atlantic commercial crisis that set in the next year. That slump only deepened the depression and worsened the losses that the American economy had suffered in the previous decade. John J. McCusker and Russell Menard estimate that real income fell by 46 per cent over the period 1774 to 1790 – a precipitous decline in personal well-being on the scale of the Great Depression of the 1930s. Bad as things were, they were surely at their worst in the mid-1780s, when the fiscal decisions were made that prompted Shays's Rebellion. And how to recover from the crisis? Though New England vessels were soon scouring the globe and opening trade with China, ports in England and the British West Indies were closed, soon followed by the French sugar islands; the Mediterranean trade became prey to Algerine pirates; the fisheries and whaling industry had been devastated by war. No longer could merchants follow well-established routes of trade and profit, as in the prosperous years of the late empire. Their income was now as uncertain as the return of their ships to port⁶.

In this unfamiliar setting, the Eastern commercial interest moved to consolidate control over the state. Thanks to the new Constitution of 1780, the populous, port towns had gained enhanced political power in the General Court, and they soon exercised that influence to establish the fiscal program – funding the state debt at par, with interest paid in gold, through heavy taxes on polls and estates – that provoked the insurrection. Yet, this power was newly won. Through most of the war, the merchants had been forced to live with market regulations and price controls, imposed by popular committees and angry crowds. Such restraints on trade by fellow Bostonians were no more welcome than the rules of the British empire. But they became inevitable, so long as paper money continued to circulate, depreciating in value and pushing prices out of sight. As Barbara Clark Smith has demonstrated, the merchants got rid of outside meddling in business and asserted their autonomy only by

Themes (Lawrence, Kansas, 1988), 77-78; Robert A. East, *Business Enterprise in the American Revolutionary Era* (New York, 1938), 214.

⁶ James A. Henretta, «The War for Independence and American Economic Development», in Ronald Hoffman, John J. McCusker, Russell R. Menard, and Peter J. Albert, eds., *The Economy of Early America: The Revolutionary Period, 1763-1790* (Charlottesville, Va., 1988), 445-87); John J. McCusker and Russell R. Menard, *The Economy of British America 1607-1789: Needs and Opportunities for Study* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1985) 361-72; Margaret E. Martin, *Merchants and Trade of the Connecticut River valley 1750-1820*, in *Smith College Studies in History*, XXIV (October, 1938-July, 1939) (Northampton, 1939), 40-42.

putting the Commonwealth back on the gold and silver standard. The victory achieved, the commercial interests spent the rest of the decade, coping with the riots and challenges their political economy had wrought. Continuous control over public policy was hard work⁷.

Facing unrest in the countryside, the merchants and magistrates encountered other challenges, from without and within. Before the war, British factors, agents of export houses in the mother country, set up business in Boston, competing with native merchants for customers and unsettling established networks of trade. Now, they were back, offering liberal credits and low prices in a deliberate strategy to break into the retail market. At home, the power of the mercantile élite was contested in new ways. We incline to think of the county courts as collection agencies for the privileged. But in the 1780s, for the only time in the judicial history of Massachusetts, the lower orders aggressively pursued their betters at law. In Plymouth County, common men were taking the upper classes to court, almost as often as they themselves were sued. Then again, they had good reason to doubt the solvency of «great men». A good number of merchants had overextended themselves in the consumer binge after the war, and others in the élite were apparently living beyond their means. The young lawyer Royall Tyler, to take one example, was on the verge of ruin just before he signed up as aide-de-camp to General Lincoln in the army to suppress the rebellion. To impress John Adams and win the hand of his daughter Nabby in marriage, Tyler had bought an expensive estate in Braintree, where he tried out gentleman-farming, even building a windmill on the place. The entire venture failed; by 1786, Tyler had been jilted, his law practice was faltering, and he was £ 200 in debt for the farm. Such grandiose schemes were not uncommon.

It is striking how many Patriot leaders moved into the mansions of the very rulers they had displaced. For a while in the 1780s, James and Mercy Otis Warren, the fervent foes of Thomas Hutchinson, occupied the «beautiful Seat» in Milton that the former governor had been obliged to flee. «It has not always happened in like manner», the Warrens were assured by the Virginian Arthur Lee, «that the forfeited Seats of the wicked, have been filled with men of virtue. But in this corrupt world, it is sufficient that we have some examples of it for our consolation». That may not have been solace enough for many in the upper ranks. By 1785, as the new Governor of the Commonwealth, James Bowdoin was urging his fellow citizens to resume their frugal habits and swear off conspicuous expense. Taking up his call, in a replay of the nonimportation movement of the 1760s, privileged women were ostentatiously taking public vows to dress «in the plainest manner; and encourage industry, frugality, and

⁷ Stephen Patterson, *Political Parties in Revolutionary Massachusetts* (Madison, Wis., 1973), 164-96; Hall, *Politics without Parties*, 94-130; Jackson Turner Main, *Political Parties before the Constitution* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1973), 83-119; Joseph A. Ernst, «Shays's Rebellion in Long Perspective: The Merchants and the "Money Question"», in Gross, ed., *In Debt to Shays*; Barbara Clark Smith, «The Politics of Price Control in Revolutionary Massachusetts, 1774-1780» (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1983).

neatness». An upper-class movement for self-reform thus began, even as the élite struggled to keep the countryside under control⁸.

In these unsettling circumstances, then, the top leaders of politics and trade confronted popular demands for paper money, tender laws, and suspension of the courts. Their answer was adamant resistance to efforts to adjust the law to the necessities of the moment. The merchants and magistrates insisted upon the strict sanctity of the written word, on contracts and constitutions. Pleas for informal accomodation were met by rigid adherence to formal authority and law. This unswerving attachment to legal rules and sworn pledges reflected, in part, the imperatives of the commercial world. Trading over long distances with strangers, in situations of great risk, merchants put a premium on the orderly fulfillment of bargains. At the same time, in dealings with neighbors, they had to put up with a different ethos of exchange, where money seldom passed hands, customers irregularly settled accounts, and «time» was not yet a commodity, on which interest was charged. Negotiating between the two realms of trade and exchange must have produced strains on many occasions, but in the crisis of the 1780s, the tension was acute. Many in the élite abandoned the balancing act and demanded that people pay taxes and debts on time. Far from yielding to the popular outcry, the élite pressed on with its fiscal program, which was the stiffest in the new republic. In the 1780s, the Commonwealth was already «Taxachusetts»⁹.

In politics, too, the leaders of Massachusetts beat back all efforts to alter the rules of the game. Having obtained a conservative constitution in 1780, only at great pains and with a little juggling of the votes from the towns, the élite refused to consider any amendments at all until the legally appointed time, which was no earlier than 1795. Nor were informal alternatives, such as county conventions, any better. Over and over, spokesmen for government denounced the revival of popular conventions to protest the actions of the General Court. Such gatherings, Chief Justice William Cushing instructed the Grand Jury of Middlesex County, «are not known to the constitution», under which all legitimate channels of political action are prescribed:

The setting up smaller bodies of men in the form and semblance of representative bodies, to act and resolve upon public matters and measures, has a dangerous

⁸ William E. Nelson, *Dispute and Conflict Resolution in Plymouth County, Massachusetts, 1775-1825* (Chapel Hill, 1981), 79-83; Tyler, *Smugglers & Patriots*, 110, 194-95, 248-50; Stephen E. Patterson, «The Federalist Reaction to Shays's Rebellion», and Robert A. Gross, «The Confidence Man and the Preacher: The Cultural Politics of Shays's Rebellion», both in Gross, ed., *In Debt to Shays*; East, *Business Enterprise*, 224-25; Arthur Lee to James Warren, *Warren-Adams Letters* (Boston, 1917-25), II: 171; Pauline Maier, *The Old Revolutionaries: Political Lives in the Age of Samuel Adams* (New York, 1980), 91-92; Hall, *Politics without Parties*, 123-24; Mary Beth Norton, *Liberty's Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750-1800* (Boston 1980), 157-63, 244-45.

⁹ For an elaborate justification of the policies of the Bowdoin administration, see Massachusetts General Court, *Address from the General Court to the People of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, November 14, 1786*, in *Acts and Resolves of the General Court 1785-86*, 142-64; Christopher Clark, «Household and Capital in Rural Massachusetts: The Connecticut Valley, 1800-1860», ch. 2 (forthcoming).

tendency to draw away men's minds from their duty and obedience to that constitutional authority, to which they have engaged by the solemn compact of government and to which all citizens, civil and military, have additionally bound themselves by solemn oath to submit and to bear true faith and allegiance.

No matter that such conventions enabled people in the backcountry to overcome the obstacles that normally limited their effectiveness at the capital and to forge new alliances among like-minded towns. In a republic, as Thomas Paine had said, «THE LAW IS KING», and whatever the disadvantages, everyone in Massachusetts would have to honor its sovereign terms¹⁰.

By this logic, I have been moving to an argument that places the Massachusetts élite in the front ranks of republicanism. Other scholars may stress the high-mindedness, the faithfulness to principle in this version of the Revolutionary faith. But the republicanism of the dominant class had a coercive underside, owing to its abstract allegiance to law. However unfair the terms of the game, everybody must play by the rules. If poor, backcountry towns failed to send representatives to the legislature, they had forfeited the right to complain about its acts. As part of the construction of the republican subject, citizenship was carefully circumscribed within the political marketplace of the state. The same requirements governed participation in the economic marketplace of trade. As Thomas Haskell has suggested, a fundamental condition for the modern capitalist order was the rise of a new moral sensibility, which demanded that people conscientiously keep the promises they make. In these terms, by its resistance to informal adjustments in economics or law during the crisis of the 1780s, the Massachusetts élite was enforcing upon society at large the consciousness of an emergent bourgeoisie¹¹.

But I pull back from this argument almost as soon as it is asserted. For the leaders in politics and trade did not rush boldly into their brave new world. Many clung to ideas of subjects and rulers, ranks and orders, as surely as did their counterparts in the backcountry. Never enthusiastic about the Revolutionary ideal of active citizenship for adult white males, the élite revealed traditional biases in its interpretation of Shays's Rebellion. Recall the obsession of state leaders with the «artful and designing» men, who were said to be spreading «many notorious horrid falsehoods» in order «to impose upon the ignorant and throw people into a flame...». Well-meaning, but unruly, ordinary people could easily flare into violence, if they drifted outside control by the élite. In this hierarchical world-view, autonomy and initiative among common

¹⁰ «Charge of the Chief Justice [William Cushing] to the Grand-Jury of the county of Middlesex», *Hampshire Gazette*, 29 November 1786; J.R. Pole, *Political Representation in England & the Origins of the American Republic* (Berkeley, 1966), 226-44; Stephen E. Patterson, «The Roots of Massachusetts Federalism: Conservative Politics and Political Culture before 1787», in Ronald Hoffman and Peter J. Albert, eds., *Sovereign States in an Age of Uncertainty* (Charlottesville, Va., 1981), 31-61; Szatmary, *Shays' Rebellion*, 70-76; Thomas Paine, «Common Sense» (1776), in Merrill Jensen, ed., *Tracts of the American Revolution 1763-1776* (Indianapolis, 1967), 434.

¹¹ Thomas L. Haskell, «Capitalism and the Origins of the Humanitarian Sensibility, Parts I and II», *American Historical Review*, 90 (April, 1985): 339-61, and 90 (June, 1985): 547-66.

folk were suspect; only through guidance by their «betters» could they judge correctly about affairs of state. Operating on these assumptions, the General Court distinguished carefully between leaders and followers in its punishment of the rebels. Even then, in the Disqualifying Act of 1787, it barred the rank and file insurgents from holding public office, teaching school, or keeping a tavern for five years. The channels of communication in the countryside were to remain in safe hands. Similarly, the élite prescribed a ritual of deference and submission, by which the convicted rebels solicited and received pardons. In a typical statement, Pelham's Henry McCulloch pled for his life on the ground that he had been no officer in the rebel army. If he had stood out from the crowd, that was only because of his vanity: astride his «good horse», he indulged «a foolish Fondness to be thought active and alert» and enjoyed the admiration of his peers. Besides, added his mother in a supporting document, young Henry – a man in his thirties – had been tempted into rebellion by bad company and too much drink. Without a «father to Counsel him and a mother that did not know how», the boy had been misled by Pelham's own élite, Captain Shays and company, whom «he has been taught to believe, and obey, as officers of the Town».

McCulloch earned his reprieve, but only after a solemn march to the gallows, with noose around his neck. By that dramatic method, the magistrates of Massachusetts meant to demonstrate both the might and the mercy of the state¹².

By such conservative practices, then, the advance-guard of republicanism and capitalism tempered its modern vision and turned citizens into subjects of a well-ordered, sovereign state. By occasional acts of voting, and with displays of deference to the élite, the common folk would consent to the rules under which they lived. And by abiding by those rules, with no exceptions allowed, they would uphold the regime. Stripped to essentials in the crisis of the 1780s, republican citizenship had only one requirement: obedience to law. That was no different from the claims on subjects in the old regimes of Europe.

But let me end with two qualifications to this case. First of all, the so-called «élite» of Massachusetts, in both trade and state, has remained incredibly vague though this presentation. Was there a single élite? I doubt it. Only close study of the major political actors and groups in the 1780s can establish the relation between the large-scale pressures and processes I have delineated – the insecurities and uncertainties of the time, the challenges from without and within – and the perceptions and policies of officeholders in the face of

¹² «Charge of the Chief Justice [William Cushing] to the Grand-Jury of the county of Middlesex», *Hampshire Gazette*, 29 November 1786; *Address of General Court*; C.O. Parmenter, *History of Pelham, Mass., From 1748 to 1898, Including the Early History of Prescott* (Amherst, Mass., 1898), 384-390; Gregory H. Nobles, «The Politics of Patriarchy in Shays's Rebellion», *Families and Children: The Dublin Seminar for New England Folklife Annual Proceedings 1985* (Boston, 1987), 37-47; Marion Starkey, *A Little Rebellion* (New York, 1955), 204-15; Louis Paul Mazur, «The Culture of Executions and the Conflict over Capital Punishment in America, 1776-1860» (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 1985), 41-46.

widespread unrest. Secondly, it is certain that Massachusetts did not polarize completely into two parties – Friends of Government and rebels – in 1786-87. Many people in the backcountry kept their protests within established channels; others went on to join county conventions; and fewer still, I suspect, took up arms against the state. In turn, not all merchants demanded rigid adherence to the forms of law. In trading centers of the Connecticut Valley, merchants were readily accepting «country pay» in exchange for store goods at the peak of the crisis. Contrary to myth, they did not insist on hard cash alone. Nor did they invariably exploit their economic power. During the hard times of the 1780s, John Miller, a small farmer of Northampton «reduced to misfortune», borrowed «a considerable sum, and more than I owed everybody else» from the lawyer, gentleman, and delegate to the Philadelphia Convention of 1787, Caleb Strong. Never did Strong press for payment, Miller recalled in a public tribute; «he... told me to pay him as fast as I could conveniently, and no faster». Possessing substantial resources, Strong sustained ties to his neighbors, in a paternalist relation that held over the years. A comparable concern for community appears in other places as well – in the earnest efforts of many people to mediate the conflict and avoid a resort to arms, and in the readiness of others, who condemned the insurgency, to back pleas for pardon from the likes of Henry McCulloch. Evidently, authority had not decayed everywhere in Massachusetts, nor had all the ties between gentlemen and common folk withered away. Within the framework of the triumphant, new order, customary arrangements of politics and exchange still mediated the everyday business of life¹³.

More broadly, once the insurgency was routed and the élite had regained morale, the disputing parties pulled back from their stark confrontation. After the «revolution of 1787», when voters en masse turned out the General Court that had, through inflexibility, brought on the crisis, the legislature made some of the accommodations of law to necessity for which the backcountry had pled. The formalization of authority and law in 1786-87 may have been a harbinger of a capitalist future. But it had to contend with the persisting habits and values of hierarchy and community in a still half-traditional world.

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¹³ See advertisements of Shepard and Fowle in the *Hampshire Gazette* during fall, 1786; Clark, «Households and Capital», ch. 2.