

## 'TO LARN POLITIX': KENTUCKY DEMOCRACY IN THE LAST TWO DECADES OF THE 18TH CENTURY

Susanna Delfino  
(Genoa)

From the late 1960's, the idea of early American democracy has been subjected to deep revision by historians whose studies reveal the existence of stark social and economic inequalities within American society dating from the colonial age, and their persistence well beyond the Revolution. Moreover, the concentration of wealth in the hands of a few increased during the Nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup> Other studies, on the settling of the trans-Appalachian territories have indicated how those lands, rather than being the preserve of plain colonists in search of economic independence, were often the theatre of a gigantic land-grab staged by Eastern élites and speculating companies.<sup>2</sup> Finally, all this took place in a context of relentless annihilation of the American Indian populations, such as to render the idea of American democracy doubtful in the light of modern understandings of the term, even with respect to white standards alone.

All these developments have concurred to produce a powerful attack on Turner's thesis and, especially, on its assumption that the "frontier" - a term which is being looked upon with suspicion nowadays - was the most genuine source of American democracy.<sup>3</sup>

However, if democracy has not exactly been a pervasive feature of American society, we can certainly detect signs of a democratic spirit, the source of which is not always related to dominant Anglo-Saxon ethno-cultural groups, oftentimes developing in contraposition to prevailing values. In this regard, the "backcountry", which mainly constituted the late colonial and revolutionary frontier, emerges as a crucial area in tracing back the origins of a democratic idealism which, given the remoteness of those areas from the centers of power, was able to express itself in a more radical and persistent manner. Elsewhere, from the early 1780's, the lower orders of society found it increasingly difficult to forestall the "counter-revolution" set in motion by the ruling classes, and to efficaciously oppose the adoption of a federal constitution which marked the passage to a political regime far more conservative than they would have liked.<sup>4</sup>

While ethnohistorians, cultural anthropologists, environmental historians and -

1. See, for instance, James A. Henretta, "Economic Development and Social Structures in Colonial Boston", *William and Mary Quarterly*, XXII, 1965, pp. 72-92; Raymond A. Muhl, "Poverty in Early America, a Reappraisal: The Case of Eighteenth Century New York City", *New York History*, L, 1969, pp. 5-27; Lee Soltow, *Men and Wealth in the United States, 1850-1870*, New Haven, Ct., 1975.

2. Daniel M. Friedenbergh, *Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Land: The Plunder of Early America*, Buffalo, New York, 1992.

3. On this point, see the works of the New Western Historians, eminently represented by the essays collected in P. N. Limerick, C. A. Milner II, and C. A. Rankin (eds.), *Trails: Toward a New Western History*, Lawrence, Kan., 1991. Also, John Mack Faragher, "The Frontier Trail: Rethinking Turner and Re-imagining the American West", *American Historical Review*, 98, 1993, pp. 106-117.

4. Merrill Jensen, *The New Nation: A History of the United States during the Confederation, 1781-1789*, Boston, Mass., pp. 327-421.

more particularly - the New Western Historians have explored the evolution of the relationship between Indians and whites to shed light on the nature of the cultural interchange between them in the two centuries before American independence, other historians continue to limit investigation of the sources of democratic ideology to white society.<sup>5</sup> Though the latter approach - despite its traditional appearance - endeavors to answer an array of still open questions in that chapter of American history, its practitioners can undoubtedly benefit from the insights offered by less anglo-centric perspectives on the study of colonial North America. This is especially the case for the investigation of the influence of native American and non Anglo-Saxon European cultures in inspiring conceptions of democracy among whites in those backcountry areas which provided the largest contingent of settlers in the trans-Appalachian regions of the Old Southwest.

The meaning of the study of democracy in the formative period of the United States thus lies, above all, in the identification of its sources and contents in the light of the perspectives opened by the new historiographic approaches. In turn, this sort of clarification is central to the definition of the relationship between democracy *tout court* and the Democratic Republicanism that emerged during the 1790's as a reaction to the Federalist administrations.

The case of Kentucky offers a unique opportunity to explore the possibilities of convergence between new directions of research and the more traditional approaches dealing with white society only. In Turner's interpretation, Kentucky enjoyed a relevant position in the celebration of Westward expansion, and its constitution of 1792 was praised as a great achievement of pioneer democracy.<sup>6</sup> In the attempt to identify a regional paradigm to substitute for the now controversial concept of "frontier", the New Western historiography has ended up with excluding Kentucky from its field of investigation. However, this has also been the result of considerations of a historical chronological nature, for the Seven Years War marked the end of the middle ground - as defined by Richard White - while the Revolution sanctioned the unleashing of acquisitive attitudes towards Indian lands on the part of white Americans. The exploration of Kentucky was begun by Daniel Boone only in the 1760's, and the territory almost immediately became the target of acquisitive and speculative interests, that were often enhanced by the perspectives created under the newly acquired independent status of the United States.<sup>7</sup>

However, the conditions and developments characterizing the early social and political history of Kentucky, if not properly an example of democratic attainments, are indicative of where the democratic forces stood, and what they fought for, in the magmatic situation of the first two decades of life of the United States.

"One of the greatest arts in government is to accommodate itself to [the people's] wishes in all matters which will not distract its energy". This idea, expressed by the

5. See Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815*, Cambridge, Mass., 1991; Gregory Nobles, "Breaking into the Backcountry: New Approaches to the Early American Frontier", *William and Mary Quarterly*, XLVI, 1989, pp. 641-670.

6. E. Merton Coulter, "Early Frontier Democracy in the First Kentucky Constitution", *Political Science Quarterly*, 39, 1924, pp. 665-677; John Barnhart, *Valley of Democracy: The Frontier Versus the Plantation in the Ohio Valley, 1775-1818*, Bloomington, Ind., 1953.

7. John Mack Faragher, *Daniel Boone: The Life and Legend of an American Pioneer*, New York, 1992.

"Disinterested Citizen", arch-Federalist George Nicholas, would only partly fit into the typology set by Gordon S. Wood to describe, simultaneously, the old and new conceptions of "doing politics" respectively entertained by Federalists and Antifederalists, and the cleavage separating seaboard realities and cultures from those prevalent in the backcountry.<sup>8</sup>

In fact, although this interpretive framework might easily be applied to transmontane Antifederalists, no eastern Federalist of "aristocratic" breed would ever have subscribed to the concessions to democracy that had coherently followed Nicholas' statement in the framing of the first Kentucky constitution. But, of course, frontier Kentucky was neither tidewater Virginia, nor Eastern Massachusetts, and transmontane Federalists were not mere clones of an original model. From the Piedmont and backcountry regions, where it was firmly entrenched, the politics of interests had spread across the mountains where the social and economic reality was completely different and where, with all respect to William Findley, even the proudest scions of the colonial aristocracy could not refrain from showing the very materialistic implications of their "disinterested" political activity.<sup>9</sup>

As a matter of fact, the peculiarities of Western politics during the 1780's and 1790's can be understood only in the light of the critical mass created by the clash between the expectations fostered by the Declaration of Independence and the revolution about the realization of political democracy through systematic land distribution, and the huge land-grab which dominated the spirit of the age. The intensity of the confrontation among the several forces present in the trans-Appalachian regions (land companies, plain settlers and, later, individual speculators intent on promoting their own private interests as well as those of their parent states) was increased by the centrality of the prize at stake - land - in the system of values of 18th century society, and gave rise to a mixture of idealism and opportunism.

The definition of the boundary between these two motivations has proved arduous to determine for scholars who have sought to outline the most distinctive traits of the new frontier leaders who emerged from the revolutionary convulsion. A good case in point is offered by Arthur Campbell, who was the leading spirit of all Southwestern separatism. Although not alien to land speculation, Campbell entertained political ideas which were certainly closer to the views of the landless settlers to whom he addressed himself, than to those of the greatest part of the new frontier élites. Sharing a conception of property which was widespread throughout the backcountry and frontier regions, he believed that land ought to belong to those who cultivated it. He also thought that laws should be written in a clear language, intelligible to everybody, to avoid the necessity of having lawyers and judges interpret them. The constitution of the state of Frankland of 1784, which was largely inspired by him, embodied these and other highly democratic principles.<sup>10</sup>

8. Quoted in Joan Wells Coward, *Kentucky in the New Republic: The Process of Constitution Making*, Lexington, Ky., 1979, p. 31; Gordon S. Wood, "Interests and Disinterestedness in the Making of the Constitution", in Richard Beeman et al. (eds.), *Beyond Confederation: Origins of the Constitution and American National Character*, Chapel Hill, N. C., 1987, pp. 69-109.

9. Friedenberg, *Life, Liberty, op. cit.*, pp. 190-203. This author documents the close connection between land speculation on the part of the most prominent families of the Virginia aristocracy and the rise of a local political élite in Kentucky.

10. Edward Countryman, "Out of the Bounds of Law": Northern Land Rioters in the Eighteenth Century, in

On account of its strong separatist attitude and, later, Antifederalist stand, the Southwestern frontier has been generically described as the bulwark of democracy in an age of retrenchment toward political conservatism. However, a closer analysis reveals that, after 1785, separatism was no longer a distinctive element of any peculiarly democratic position in frontier politics, nor in the span of a few years was Antifederalism going to be so. This observation prompts a revisitation of an often vaguely defined "frontier democracy" in an attempt at better defining its most qualifying traits and, ultimately, those of the new style of "doing politics" which was emerging in the West and would, within a few decades, become a nation-wide model.<sup>11</sup>

\* \* \* \*

From his 1792 vantage point, George Nicholas could be satisfied with his accomplishment. The constitution he had preponderantly contributed to framing was, in his own words, the best Kentucky could have in the light of its present conditions.<sup>12</sup> His feeling of satisfaction was contrasted, however, by the deep disappointment of the Radical-Democratic forces that had been politically active in the Kentucky country since the early 1780's.

The settlement of Kentucky, which had begun a few years before the war for independence, had represented the quintessential version of the domestic conflicts that had accompanied that war. Soon after the outbreak of hostilities with Great Britain, the Kentucky lands that, along with Tennessee, constituted the only areas of transmontane settlement, provided an example of unique polarization between old colonial patterns of land acquisition and new ones justified by the revolutionary transformation. The overwhelming majority of settlers were landless, and nearly half of them were Germans and Scotch-Irish from the Pennsylvania and North Carolina backcountries who had begun to spill over the mountains after the Regulation crisis of the late 1760's. In their original locations, these people had already developed democratic political ideas, which had ripened during a long confrontation with the coastal political establishment, and had been radicalized by the millennial expectations fostered by evangelical revivalism. Deeply distrustful and suspicious of all ruling classes, they had looked westward with the hope of shaping a new society where the poor would not be oppressed, exploited, or discriminated against by the rich and the powerful. Their political views were fairly articulate, and were based on the tenet that, however modest, land ownership by the highest possible number of individuals constituted a prerequisite for the establishment of political democracy.<sup>13</sup>

Alfred F. Young (ed.), *The American Revolution: Explorations in the History of American Radicalism*, DeKalb, Ill., 1976, pp. 36-69; id., "Consolidating Power in Revolutionary America: The Case of New York, 1775-1783", *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, vi, 1976, pp. 645-677; Alan Taylor, *Liberty Men and Great Proprietors: The Revolutionary Settlement on the Maine Frontier, 1760-1820*, Chapel Hill, 1990; id., "From Fathers to Friends of the People: The Political Transformation of Rural America, 1775-1810", in Loretta Valtz Mannucci (ed.), *People and Power: Rights Citizenship and Violence*, Quaderno 3, Milan Group in Early United States History, Milano, 1992, pp. 55-74; Susanna Delfino, *Terra e felicità: la rivoluzione democratica della frontiera e la nascita degli Stati Uniti*, Milano, 1990, pp. 34-35.

11. Taylor, *Liberty Men*, *op. cit.* pp. 209-232; id., "From Fathers to Friends of the People: Political Personas in the Early Republic", *Journal of the Early Republic*, 11, 1991, pp. 465-491.

12. Coward, *Kentucky*, p. 32.

13. Nobles "Breaking into the Backcountry", pp. 652-653; Thomas L. Purvis, "The Ethnic Descent of

After the military repression of the movement by governor William Tryon, many Regulators migrated to the Holston Valley or to Kentucky where, ironically, they were to confront again some of the men who, a few years earlier, had been the favorite targets of their anger during the North Carolina regulation crisis. In 1775, in fact, Richard Henderson, John Williams, and Thomas Hart became associates in the Transylvania Land Company, and negotiated a treaty with the Cherokee indians by which they acquired almost twenty million acres encompassing the majority of the organized settlements west of the Appalachians.<sup>14</sup>

The sequence of events connected with the presence of the Transylvania Company in Kentucky - with which I have extensively dealt elsewhere<sup>15</sup> - would lead us far astray, but it is significant here to point out that, before the formulation of the Declaration of Independence, which is usually assumed as the theoretical foundation of the settlers' claims to landed property, Kentucky pioneers staunchly refused to comply with the request of the Company that they pay a sum of money to settle the validity of their titles. As I have already suggested, a number of the settlers came from Western North Carolina, and this would seem to confirm the degree of political consciousness acquired by people from an area which was soon to produce the Mecklenburg declaration, often described as the precursor of the Declaration proper of 1776.<sup>16</sup>

Be that as it may, the Declaration of Independence, with its clear implications concerning popular sovereignty, acted as a catalyst on the conflict between the Kentucky squatters and the land companies of colonial origin. But it also served the purposes of Virginia, offering her governing élites an opportunity to settle the issue about who ought to own that vast territory. Since the late colonial period, leading Virginia families, eminently represented by the Washingtons, the Lees, the Carters, and the Masons, had been engaged in the appropriation of Western lands through the creation of land speculation companies. With revolution and statehood, Virginia was confronted with the problem of securing the rich Kentucky lands, which were mostly claimed by companies based in other states (among which, first and foremost, was Transylvania), to her gentry alone. The settlers of Kentucky had formally recognized the authority of Virginia on the eve of the revolution, and now the parent state upheld their argument that the pretensions of the land companies were no longer justifiable in the light of revolutionary principles, while glossing over the important detail that actual settlement might provide a preemptive title to land.<sup>17</sup>

These events coincided with the institution of a land office in the Kentucky country, the appointment of surveyors, and the beginning of a massive engrossment of land on the part of a restricted number of the most prominent Virginia families who, in the

Kentucky's Early Population: A Statistical Interpretation of European and American Sources of Emigration, 1790-1820", *Register of the Kentucky Historical Society*, 80, 1982, pp. 261-263.

14. Delfino, *Terra e felicità*, *op. cit.*, pp. 62-69.

15. *Ibid.*, pp. 55-79.

16. William L. Sanders (ed.), *Colonial Records of North Carolina*, Raleigh, N. C., 1886-1890, pp. 870 ff. *The Declaration of Independence of the Citizens of Mecklenburg County, on the 20th Day of May, 1775*, Published by the Governor, Raleigh, 1831.

17. Friedenbergl, *Life, Liberty, op. cit.*, pp. 188-202; George Washington Ranck, *Boonesborough: Its Founding, Pioneer Struggles, Indian Experiences, Transylvania Days, and Revolutionary Annals*, Louisville, Ky., 1901, pp. 241-242; Delfino, *Terra e felicità*, *op. cit.*, pp. 74-75.

span of a few years, appropriated for themselves 6.5 million acres, roughly corresponding to 25% of the entire surface of Kentucky.<sup>18</sup> The inauguration of the age of individual land speculation also made the fortune of a vast number of surveyors and land agents who acted on behalf of absentee owners. By virtue of their local role and Eastern connections, surveyors like John Floyd, the Breckinridge brothers, and Thomas Marshall (who was a close friend of George Washington's) constituted a nucleus of allegiance to Virginia in a region where a considerable part of the settlers had no particular reason to be loyal, except the hope of acquiring some land. For the time being these individuals, who were amassing enormous estates for themselves and for the gentlemen who had hired them, could even find a ground of common interest with the plain settlers, for, both groups wished to drive back the intruders, i.e., the land companies.<sup>19</sup>

While the settlers might have been aware of the more conservative meaning that no small a part of the Eastern ruling classes attached to the war for independence, they seemed not to have fully appreciated the tremendous potential, in terms of political and economic power, that the western lands represented. This aspect of the problem began to emerge in 1779, when the Virginia Assembly passed a law barring people from other states from entering lands unless they had established good titles prior to 1777. The law was essentially designed to discourage outside speculators, especially from North Carolina, who operated mainly through the agency of Richard Henderson and his associates, but particularly hit the plain settlers, most of whom had arrived after that date. It became pretty clear, by that time, that no extensive land distribution would take place with the consent of Virginia, and that a process of concentration of property was already well under way.<sup>20</sup>

The pattern of land tenure set by Virginia was deeply prejudicial to the future development of Kentucky. Land speculation, allowing for the concentration of vast estates in the hands of a few, thwarted the possibility of the kind of extensive land distribution first envisaged by Jefferson, although his co-authorship of the land law of 1779 makes his continued commitment to this ideal controversial.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, this political choice opened the way to the establishment of slavery as a fundamental feature of the economy of the region. However, at this early stage, the long-term effects of such a policy were barely perceptible.<sup>22</sup>

With such an unfavorable land law, the general discontent of the landless settlers was easily channelled into a vast separatist movement by Ebenezer Brooks - a Presbyterian minister and a close friend of Arthur Campbell's - and George Pomeroy, a Virginian of some means, but apparently landless in Kentucky. The figure of Ebenezer Brooks, eclectic and adventurous, although perhaps more intriguing than that of his life-long friend Campbell, has not received due attention on the part of historians. In fact, Brooks has either been undervalued in his political role in Kentucky during the critical years 1784-86, or dismissed as a superficial, inconstant individual, prone to

18. Friedenberg, *Life, Liberty, op. cit.*, pp. 219-220.

19. Patricia Watlington, *The Partisan Spirit: Kentucky Politics, 1779-1792*, New York, 1972, pp. 35-44.

20. Richard Henderson to Robert Burton, Sept. 12 and 19, 1779, Robert Burton Papers, Southern Historical Collection, Chapel Hill, N. C. (hereafter cited as SHC).

21. Friedenberg, *Life, Liberty, op. cit.*, p. 196.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 220.

give up in turn each of his "many careers" as soon as he met with serious difficulties. As with Campbell, available readings convey the impression that a deeper investigation of the ideas and activities of these separatist leaders may offer a better interpretive key not only to the complex world of land seekers and their ideologies, but also to that of the idealist/opportunist frontier leaders. In 1786, Brooks owned nearly thirteen thousand acres of land in Kentucky. Yet, he left the country and took refuge, once more, with his friend Campbell, apparently to devote himself to an activity that had nothing to do with land.<sup>23</sup>

The essentially popular nature of the first separatist movement can be inferred from the signatures to the petitions (at least four between 1780 and 1782) that the inhabitants of Kentucky addressed either to Congress or to the Virginia Assembly. Signatures always averaged around half of the adult male population; in one case the number seems to have corresponded to as much as two thirds of it, and none of the names of individuals identified with the local élites appeared among those of the petitioners.<sup>24</sup> The nature of the movement was first altered when agents of land companies joined it in a desperate effort to break Virginia's land monopoly. This infusion of highly motivated forces strengthened the separatists to the point of inducing Virginia to create a district court in Kentucky, in order to make her authority felt and have as many land cases settled as possible.<sup>25</sup>

The arrival of judges and attorneys introduced a deep change into Kentucky life, for it marked the beginning of a really local political debate. While entertaining different views about land ownership, the plain settlers had shared with the élite of surveyors/speculators a more general economic vision which was tied to the traditional values of an agrarian society. They were exclusively interested in promoting agriculture and securing good outlets for their produce, especially West and Southward, through the Mississippi. The newcomers, on the other hand, including attorney general Harry Innes and judges Samuel McDowell and Caleb Wallace, differed from the older gentry in some important respects. First of all, they were all educated men whose professional training enabled them to formulate convincing arguments that might appeal to the more inarticulate members of society. Furthermore, as their fortunes were not so strictly connected with land but rather with the exercise of the legal profession, they became the proponents of an economic vision centered upon the diversification of pursuits and the promotion of manufacturing. This idea, which was gaining increasing popularity among South-Eastern upper classes - who did not perceive it as a challenge to traditional social values connected with land and slave property - took on quite peculiar meanings on the frontier, where the advocacy

23. James W. Hagy, "Without a Proper Theatre: The Many Careers of Ebenezer Brooks", *Register of the Kentucky Historical Society*, 80, 1982, pp. 262-277.

24. Ebenezer Brooks to Arthur Campbell, Nov. 9, 1784, Draper Manuscript Collection, microfilm edition (originals in the State Historical Society of Wisconsin); Petition of the Inhabitants of Kentucky to Congress, May 15, 1780, mentioned in Theodore Roosevelt, *The Winning of the West*, New York, 1889-1896, 2 vols., II, pp. 398-399; Petition to Congress, Fall 1781, Draper Coll., 16, CC, 39-40; Petition to Virginia, Spring 1782, in John Donelson to Arthur Campbell, Draper Coll., 9, DD, 34; see also James Rood Robertson, *Petitions of the Early Inhabitants of Kentucky to the General Assembly of Virginia, 1769-1792*, Filson Club Publications, n. 27, Louisville, Ky., 1914. The adult male population ranged between 1,000 and 1,400 during the first half of the 1780's and the signatures to the petitions, correspondingly, between 400 and 700.

25. Richard Henderson to John Williams, Oct. 29, 1778, Howell Collection, SHC.

of manufacturing came to be identified with economic emancipation and, more generally, with independence from the Eastern states. This implication was soon to become a leit-motiv in frontier political rhetoric, and long continued to be so in those areas of the Upper South which had shared a common backcountry/frontier experience in the late Eighteenth century.<sup>26</sup>

However, the two élite groups were equally supposed to be the defenders of Virginia's authority in the Western country. In 1783, this specifically meant having to come to grips with the mounting tide of popular agitation for separate statehood. The separatist thrust reached its peak in late 1783, when Pomeroy began to spread news that Virginia was about to relinquish all her Western claims to Congress, and encouraged the landless settlers to take possession of the sites they would choose, in view of a redistribution of land under a new independent government. Whether the leaders of the movement were in good faith, or artfully tried to create a *de facto* situation in order to advance their scheme, is not altogether clear. However, most of the lands occupied by the settlers were already claimed under Virginia titles, and this forced the officials of the district court to undertake legal action against the instigators of such a "mischief". As a consequence, Pomeroy and one Galloway were prosecuted as "divulgers of false news", since there was no other legally grounded head of accusation.<sup>27</sup>

The land cession of 1783, which implicitly confirmed Virginia's jurisdiction over the Kentucky country, sealed the failure of the strategy adopted by the separatists. Meantime, the General Assembly had also ruled against the pretensions of the land companies, allotting two hundred thousand acres to each of them. This decision, while making Richard Henderson of the Transylvania Company one of the wealthiest landowners of Kentucky, further reduced the possibility of individual, small homesteads. Once left in private hands, land sales would not take place at a uniform and fair price such as would have resulted from a state-directed policy; and it is all too obvious that big landowners/speculators were interested in making the best profit out of the sale of parts of their estates.

One author has convincingly documented a marked tendency on the part of the early settlers, who were ostensibly favored by the 1779 law, to acquire properties far exceeding the acreage conventionally viewed as constituting an average homestead in the rich and productive Kentucky country. This would seem to contradict their blatant adhesion to the so called "homestead ethic".<sup>28</sup>

In this light, the declaration of principles made by the delegates to the first statehood convention, in which they stated that

to grant any Person a larger quantity of Land than he designs Bona Fide to seat himself or his Family on ... is subversive of the Fundamental Principles of a free republican Government

26. Watlington, *Partisan Spirit*, *op. cit.*, p. 53; Delfino, "Antebellum East Tennessee Elites and Industrialization: The Examples of the Iron Industry and Internal Improvements", *East Tennessee Historical Society's Publications*, nos. 57-56, 1984-85, pp. 102-119; id., *Yankees del Sud: sviluppo economico e trasformazioni sociali nel Sud degli Stati Uniti, 1790-1860*, Milano, 1987, prologue.

27. Watlington, *Partisan Spirit*, *op. cit.*, pp. 66-67.

28. Stephen Aron, "Pioneers and Profiteers: Land Speculation and the Homestead Ethic in Frontier Kentucky", *Western Historical Quarterly*, XXIII, 1992, pp. 180-198.

amounted to nothing but sheer rhetoric on the part of land-hungry and angry individuals who could theorize an equal system of land distribution so long as they remained cut off from the possibility of acquiring some, but were ready to change their attitude as soon as they were offered a deal.<sup>29</sup>

The first statehood convention was undoubtedly the most popular in character, for it was orchestrated by Brooks with the never-failing support of Arthur Campbell, in the hope that it might be "an introduction to important events".<sup>30</sup> However, even supposing that the pioneers themselves were prone to break the homestead ethic by acquiring larger estates, this could hardly have modified the overall situation. A property of barely a thousand and a half acres cannot but be seen as a mere trifle compared to the hundreds of thousands, sometimes millions of acres, engrossed by big speculators. Moreover, although the homestead ethic maintained that each individual should be enabled to own a small property for subsistence farming, it did not imply that whoever could afford it should refrain from acquiring more out of consideration for the expectations of those who were still landless. The homestead ethic consisted, most probably, in a homage paid to an unwritten rule of self-moderation that seemed to correspond to the moral qualities assigned to the new American type by Benjamin Franklin in his *Almanack*. On the other hand, the spirit of self-promotion pervaded the ideals widely shared by Americans of every social condition.<sup>31</sup>

The meeting of the second statehood convention, in late May 1785, shows strong analogies with the events simultaneously taking place in the nearby state of Frankland/Franklin. In both places, the span of time between the first and the second convention - the dates of which almost coincided - was marked by a reconsideration on the part of the élites of their own attitude toward separation. In both cases, this was determined by their fear that a popular prevalence might lead to a form of government too democratic to be compatible with the interests of the ruling groups, which were tightly connected with those of their respective parent states.<sup>32</sup> On the other hand, the frontier élites had begun to develop a degree of dissatisfaction and frustration due to the mal-administration of their districts, as well as an awareness that they not only wanted to protect their own properties, but to consolidate their position of local leadership as well. So they started building up the basis of consensus for a "constitutional separation" from their parent states which would not endanger the validity of land titles.<sup>33</sup>

Switching back to Kentucky matters alone, this change of attitude was first proposed by the newer élite, whose economic vision, although close to the Federalist, required autonomy from Virginia, that showed itself reluctant to create the precon-

29. John Mason Brown, *The Political Beginnings of Kentucky*, Filson Club Publications, n. 6, Louisville, Ky., 1889, pp. 63-64; *Journal of the First Convention of Kentucky*, Jan. 4, 1785, in J. R. Pole (ed.), *The Revolution in America, 1754-1788*, London, 1970, pp. 379-382.

30. Brooks to Campbell, Nov. 9, 1784, cit.

31. On Franklin's *Almanack*, see Loretta Valtz Mannucci, *Le radici ideologiche degli Stati Uniti*, Milano, Selene Edizioni, 1992 (repr.).

32. This attitude is suggested, for instance, by Richard Caswell to John Sevier, June 18, Richard Caswell Papers, Southern Historical Collection, Chapel Hill, N.C.; William Blount to John Donelson, May 9, 1784, Tennessee Papers, 1, XX, 72 and William Christian to Arthur Campbell, March 27, 1785, King's Mountain Papers, 1, DD, 43, Draper Manuscript Collection.

33. Delfino, *Terra e felicità*, op. cit., cap. III.

ditions for the kind of growth they envisaged. This autonomistic pencheant, when compared with the commerce and manufacturing oriented economy of the region, may account for the ambiguities which, during the late 1780's, characterized frontier politics that never really fitted into either the Federalist or the Antifederalist model. What gave this élite a substantial popular support, was its stance on the question of the navigation of the Mississippi, which was vital to the agricultural and commercial interests of the region and could thus appeal to many.<sup>34</sup>

The events of 1784-85 taught the popular forces a hard lesson. Their separatist movement had been drained of its Radical-Democratic connotation by the political maneuvering of the newer élite of lawyers and judges whose members, although "modernist" in economics, were rather conservative in their social and political outlook. The latter's pro-separation stand at the 1785 convention had curbed the efforts of the popular wing to gain control of the political situation, and prevented the adoption of a hard-line proposal for unconditional separation, as advocated by Brooks and Campbell. Indeed, most of the political struggles that took place thereafter can be interpreted as a confrontation between the new élite and the old, which opposed separation, but was dragged into the political arena for fear of losing its power. The plain settlers stood in between, and were taken into consideration by the two contending parties only to the extent that appeared useful to their political designs. One good example of this situation is offered by the debate over the Federal constitution.

The members of the Danville Political Club, founded in 1786 by Chief Justice George Muter, were closely identified with the newer élite. Although their conservative ideas made them like the Federal constitution per se, most of them were at that time opposed to the very idea of a federal union, which they deemed irreconcilable with the interests of the West. This concept was expressed by Harry Innes in a letter to Arthur Campbell, who was still working toward the creation of independent states, although under changed conditions.<sup>35</sup> The Club members, however, had to clothe their views in politically sound garb. So they argued that the Federal constitution needed to be amended as far as the protection of individual rights was concerned. Here, their paramount concern was evidently the protection of land and slave property, to attract settlers of some means. This preoccupation, which was central to the Federalist vision of the development of Western lands, was fully shared by George Nicholas, who was perhaps the staunchest supporter of the constitution. Simultaneously, they lent credence to a widespread suspicion that the federal government would abandon the question of the navigation of the Mississippi, a subject which was bound to appeal to most Kentuckians. These arguments were convincing enough, for only three out of the fourteen delegates from the district to the Virginia ratifying convention voted in favor of the constitution.<sup>36</sup>

34. Bennett H. Young, *Constitutions of Kentucky and their History*, Louisville, Ky., 1890, p. 27; Elizabeth A. Perkins, "The Consumer Frontier: Household Consumption in Early Kentucky", *Journal of American History*, 78, 1991, pp. 486-510. In Kentucky, like in Tennessee, there was a marked tendency on the part of the élites to invest in manufacturing, especially ironworks.

35. Harry Innes to Arthur Campbell, Sept. 19, 1788, Draper Coll., 10, DD, 51-52. Campbell's continued commitment to separate statehood is also documented by other correspondence he exchanged with Samuel McDowell, where the possibility of a union between Kentucky and the Cumberland settlements was discussed. Samuel McDowell to Arthur Campbell, Sept. 23, 1787, Draper Coll., 10, DD, 46.

36. Brown, *Political Beginnings*, pp. 107-124; Jonathan Elliot (ed.), *The Debates of the Several State Conventions on the Adoption of the Federal Constitution: Virginia, Philadelphia, 1876*, pp. 235-238.

The political debates that accompanied the several statehood conventions held in Kentucky between 1788 and 1790 illustrate the increasing understanding on the part of the popular elements of the political game of which they were prey. At this point, the old separatist leaders began to think that continued support to their initial cause would only serve the purposes of the élites. Writing in the *Kentucky Gazette* under the pen name of "Cornplanter", Ebenezer Brooks suggested that separation would not bring such a great benefit to the people, in military or in economic terms, and that the new élites would probably be no better than Virginia's, for "the first exertions of the new government would be a heavy tax".<sup>37</sup> Although the élites proclaimed themselves the interpreters of the people's will, they had never shown, in practice, any real concern for it. For instance, at the sixth convention of July 1788, Caleb Wallace had proposed that a constitution be framed and submitted to the population for approval. However, the counter-proposal advanced by the popular delegates that the people's attitude about statehood be first verified by polling militia companies was defeated. The popular delegates were nonetheless able to forestall the scheme to attain a violent separation by introducing a resolution to the effect that, in case of separation, Kentucky would become part of the Union. In this way, they were able to avert the danger of coming under the protection of Spain, following James Wilkinson's plan which, by that time, had become public knowledge. The common people were slowly learning how to "play politics".

None of the élites approved of the system, so warmly favored by the lower classes, of delivering instructions to delegates and representatives. This contrast disclosed the opposing conceptions of political representation, which the former understood as a binding relationship between the electors and their representatives, and the latter interpreted as a mere attribution of powers requiring no further consultation. Innes, for instance, thought that popular opinion was inadequately informed to formulate correct instructions.<sup>38</sup> Nevertheless, recurrence to this method was alternately advocated by both the élite groups to curb the designs of their political foes. It happened a first time when the newer élite of lawyers and judges needed to secure an Antifederalist majority of delegates to send to the Virginia ratifying convention. Again, in the Fall of 1788, the measure was favored by the older élite to avert a violent separation. As we will see, the same strategy will be chosen by George Nicholas and John Breckinridge during the campaign preceding the second constitutional convention of 1799.

The political maneuvering which had accompanied the seventh statehood convention had quite clearly shown that the issue concerning the modality of separation was only a matter of confrontation between two élite groups struggling for power.

In the *Gazette*, "Valerius" began to suggest that all those who wanted separation did so, indistinctly, to procure offices and power for themselves. Reiterating a concept already put forward by "Cornplanter" he argued that, under a new government, neither would taxes be lower, nor would the laws be better. Samuel Taylor, writing as "A Real Friend to the People", warned his fellow countrymen that "the unequal

37. *Kentucky Gazette*, microfilm edition, Sept. 13, 1788.

38. "A Farmer" (Innes), *ibid.*, Oct. 18, 1788.

division of our landed property" was "naturally calculated to promote aristocracy", and hinted at Harry Innes as the most notable example of a crypto-aristocratic spirit.<sup>39</sup>

The logical conclusion of these appeals was that the common people should reject separatism at the eighth convention, scheduled for July, 1789. Here, again, to forestall the schemes of one élite group, the popular delegates were led to accept, unconditionally, the terms for separation proposed by Virginia. However, soon after the convention, a petition signed by well over four hundred people was addressed to the Virginia Assembly, stating that "it was not the will of the good people of the District of Kentucky to be erected into an independent state". About one tenth of these petitioners were small landholders, and a slightly higher proportion was composed of substantial owners; the over-whelming majority were landless.<sup>40</sup>

After 1784, the issue of separate statehood had increasingly lost its original ideological connotation, and become a matter of purely political competition between élite groups. Although members of the contending élite groups proclaimed the belief that all power stems from the people, none of them was ready to give this theoretical declaration institutional form. Basically, they did not trust those whom James Wilkinson had described as "the ignorant orders of society", but were ready to exploit their support whenever the circumstances made it politically relevant. After the burning defeat of 1784, the champions of democracy had increasingly learned how to counteract the political play of the élites, even though this might ironically imply the surrender of their original aspirations to territorial autonomy.

\* \* \* \*

In 1790, the new form of government that Kentucky should have begun to be debated publicly. The members of the Danville Political Club, led by George Nicholas, considered themselves better equipped than anybody else to frame a constitution and, in fact, they had already exchanged opinions on the subject with prominent Eastern politicians like Jefferson and Madison.<sup>41</sup>

The ample space given by the *Gazette* to all the opinions involved in the debate allows us to bring into focus the political views of the several forces confronting each other. It also sheds light on the strength of Radical Democracy in a country where, by that time, well over half of the population was still landless. The ideas entertained by the supporters of democracy on government and political power as sources of corruption and oppression stemmed directly from the Regulators'. With the Frankland democrats, they believed that the moralization of politics could be guaranteed only by introducing forms of popular control over governmental action. But this in turn could only be attained by framing laws in language easily understood even "to the weakest capacity", eliminating the need for attorneys and lawyers who, together

39. *Ibid.*, Nov. 15, 1788, Apr. 25 and May 2, 1789.

40. Watlington, *Partisan Spirit*, *op. cit.*, pp. 185-186. According to this author, 320 of the 429 individuals who made "decipherable" signatures were landless. Moreover, 278 of them had not signed previous petitions, suggesting that they possibly were newcomers. The possible interpretations of these data are manifold. One, for instance, might be that of a progressive enstrangement from political commitment on the part of older settlers, perhaps connected with their acquisition of some land, or, more probably, out of disillusionment generated by failure to obtain it.

41. Brown, *Political Beginnings*, *op. cit.*, pp. 197-200.

with judges, were deemed responsible for countless vexations to the damage of the common people.<sup>42</sup>

Ultimately, however, the moralization of politics rested upon the mechanism of representation. This should not only faithfully reflect the interests of previously neglected social groups, but also give rise to a binding relationship between the representatives and their electors. The organizations through which the democrats meant to control the electoral and political process were the county committees, which were considered true expressions of the "ordinary people" as expressed by the militia companies, from which they sprang.

The county committees originated in the revolutionary period as a means of organizing the citizens under traditional leaders. However, one author finds a difference between the revolutionary committees and the ones emerging in Kentucky during the early 1790's, in that the latter seem to have been more popular in character, being led by men not identified with the local élites. This does not mean that the committees did not include members of the gentry as, in fact, they did for at least two major reasons. The first, more ideological, was connected with the spreading of an antislavery sentiment among Kentuckians of every social class. The second, more opportunistic, was the attempt on the part of the gentry to gain control of committee activities through involvement. The committee of Bourbon county appeared to be the most rampantly democratic, probably owing to the reinforcing effect of the activism in the antislavery campaign of ministers of the gospel, in a county which was to become the center of a religious ferment culminating in the Cane Ridge revival of 1800.<sup>43</sup>

The debate became overheated in 1791, after "A.B.C." made some bold statements to the effect that the framers of the constitution were to have "a common interest with us" (meaning property), and that the question was too delicate to be dealt with by the people at large.<sup>44</sup> By mid-October, the committee of Bourbon county came forward with an "Appeal to the Freemen of the District of Kentucky", a real political manifesto in which it was said that, if the assumption was true that sovereignty belongs to the people, then the mechanic, the farmer, and the common laborer were equally entitled to share the process of constitution-making with the élites. The article went on enumerating the most important points of their plan. There should be but one legislative house; "immoral" people should be excluded from public office; militia officers, as well as civil officials, should be elected by ballot; laws should be framed in a simple manner; all landed property should be adequately and fairly taxed.<sup>45</sup> All these proposals were to be presented and advanced, in the convention, by delegates democratically elected from the bottom up, through a selective, three-stage procedure, springing from the militia companies and requiring, in the end, their approval. The Bourbon county democrats also went so far as to propose that the committees be made a permanent feature of the new form of government, with a veto power on laws passed by the Assembly.

42. *Kentucky Gazette*, Oct. 15, 1791.

43. Donald G. Mathews, *Slavery and Methodism: A Chapter in American Morality, 1780-1845*, Westport, Ct., 1978, pp. 14-15; Eugene P. Link, *Democratic-Republican Societies, 1790-1800*, New York, 1973, chap. four.

44. *Kentucky Gazette*, Oct. 8, 1791.

45. *Kentucky Gazette*, Oct. 15, 1791.

The system of instructing delegates, which was a delicate function attributed to the representatives chosen by the county committees (the same who were to select the candidates to the convention), was charged with being anti-democratic and with "obstructing the free suffrage of the people" by such writers as "A.B.C." and "Felt Firebrand". These attacks were counteracted by the supporters of popular democracy with unequivocal reference to the ideological heritage of the Revolution. One contributor, for instance, compared the present situation of Kentucky to that of all the American states at the beginning of revolution and concluded that, if the county committees were deemed illegal, as their opponents contended, America could be defined as a lawless country, for, during the revolution, no other law existed but that originating from the popular committees.<sup>46</sup>

In reply to the arguments of "A.B.C.", who thought that only great men were entitled to frame the constitution, "Will Wisp" agreed with "H.S.B.M.", another committee spokesman, that "if lawyers should ever again get into the House of Assembly, no doubt but the laws would be intricate and difficult", because this class of people thrived upon the ambiguity of the laws.

A still greater danger was represented by lawyers made politicians, and "Philip Philips" cautioned the common people not to be enthralled by their sophisticated arguments. Pretending to be a semi-illiterate Irishman - a choice indicating the public he wanted to address himself to - he introduced himself as the disenchanting son of the president of a political club back in Ireland. He had never wanted to get involved in politics, which he considered nothing but a cheat. However, he had recently made up his mind to improve himself and "Iarn politix". To this end, he had decided to attend a meeting in Harrodsburg, where he would have the privilege of listening to real politicians debating important issues. The renowned George Nicholas was to be among the speakers, and Mr. Philips had gone to the meeting full of anticipation about the profound truths the orators would disclose to him. However, from what he could gather from their elaborate arguments, those who styled themselves "filosofers", pretending to have "good heds and go'd harts too", did not appear to be "grate friends to the pepel". In fact, although they declared in principle their opposition to lawyers pleading in courts, as well as to the institution of slavery, they justified them both in practice as "necessary evils".<sup>47</sup>

The supporters of popular democracy had quite correctly taken the hint, and had identified their most dangerous enemy. His name was George Nicholas, whose constitutional plan included all the necessary dispositions to guarantee the protection of slavery and landed property. Nicholas aimed at securing the conditions for a qualified immigration by big land and slave owners as a springboard toward regional economic growth, and was afraid that the exclusion of slavery would discourage monied people from settling in Kentucky, thus triggering a mechanism of pervasive impoverishment.<sup>48</sup>

Of course, slavery was a hot issue in 1791 Kentucky, and the question gave rise to a harsh debate which Nicholas could not ignore. Popular opposition to slavery was strong, and the antislavery campaign was reinforced by the presence of Presbyterian,

46. *Ibid.*, Oct. 22, Nov. 12 and 19, 1791.

47. *Ibid.*, Nov. 26, 1791.

48. Coward, *Kentucky, op. cit.*, pp. 26-29.

Methodist, and Baptist ministers of the gospel in the county committees. Here, the close identification between democratic ideals and evangelicalism was quite apparent. Ebenezer Brooks was a Presbyterian minister, just like Samuel Houston, who was reputed to have been the framer of the constitution of the state of Frankland of 1784. Appeals against the peculiar institution sometimes mingled with hints about gender, signifying a more pervasive idea of equality, which the plain people of Kentucky thought had been proclaimed by the Declaration of Independence.<sup>49</sup> Nor could Nicholas avoid taking into due consideration the political-ideological attitude of the "numbers". For this reason, his plan of government included some big concessions to democracy in the appointive system of local and state officials, while curbing, at the same time, the local power of the gentry. This was also attained through the centralization of the judiciary.<sup>50</sup>

Current interpretations ascribe the failure of the democratic, antislavery forces in the constitutional convention to lack of political experience and incompetence in legal and procedural matters. The battle over the article concerning slavery was particularly harsh. The convention included seven ministers of the gospel out of forty-five delegates, and their presence was fundamental in securing presentation of a motion to expunge the article that made slavery legal in the state. Although the motion was defeated by 26 votes to 16, it nonetheless signaled the existence of a wide opposition to human bondage.<sup>51</sup>

On the contrary, the newer élite, headed by Nicholas, was well versed in procedural and constitutional matters, and cunning enough to counter the opposition and secure the approval by a majority of the delegates of a constitution which, after all, included voting by secret ballot, universal free white male suffrage, and direct election of the governor as well as of a number of local officials.

The form of government which emerged from the convention was remarkably similar to the model set by the Federal constitution. However, despite the "necessary" concessions to democracy introduced by Nicholas, it did not embody the most qualifying demands advanced by the county committees: a one-house legislature, the exclusion of "immoral" men from government, and provisions favoring the acquisition of property by the landless. Furthermore, the final document was not submitted to popular ratification.<sup>52</sup>

However, the Federalist élite had attained its most important goals, and the farsighted calculations of George Nicholas' would not fail to bring their fruits. His plan included, in fact, a recommendation to re-examine, and eventually revise the constitution after a number of years. This idea enjoyed the support of no less an authority than James Madison, on the basis of the supposedly still immature stage of development of Kentucky. This provision was also looked favorably upon by the disappointed democratic forces, as it gave hope for the introduction of improvements. But Nicholas knew better. He knew that time would work in his favor. As a matter of fact, the adoption of a dilatory strategy had been the covert, albeit fundamental, feature

49. An article apparently, but not necessarily, written by a woman. *Kentucky Gazette*, Nov. 19, 1791.

50. Young, *Kentucky Constitutions*, *op. cit.*, pp. 35-38.

51. *Kentucky Gazette*, Dec. 3, 1791; Brown, *Political Beginnings*, *op. cit.*, pp. 220-230; *Journal of the First Constitutional Convention of Kentucky*, Lexington, Ky, 1942, introduction.

52. Coulter, "Early Frontier Democracy", *op. cit.*, pp. 676-677; Young, *Kentucky Constitutions*, *op. cit.*

of his long-range political vision. In the span of seven years, slavery would become more firmly entrenched in the economic fabric of the state, medium and large size property holdings would increase, and the democratic and antislavery arguments would lose their momentum. National events worked in his favor too, for after the battle of Fallen Timbers, in 1794, the Ohio country was opened to settlement, attracting a substantial migration of antislavery farmers from Kentucky.<sup>53</sup>

Nor had the Radical Democrats completely grasped the compelling implications of the founding of the federal union on the political plane. In effect, it had sealed the divorce between democratic radicalism of revolutionary origin and official politics, setting the rules for the unfolding of a completely new frame of political discourse. Once the Federal formula prevailed, there was no room left for radically alternative political proposals in a region which was soon to become the fifteenth American state. Quite significantly, the new political opposition styled itself "republican", thus abandoning the issue of popular control over the formative process of political representation, which had been the most qualifying trait of Radical Democracy.

Yet, the numerical consistence of the popular forces (the vast majority of Kentuckians were still landless by 1792), coupled with the intensity of their political activism, had forced the local élites to devise a new political approach to win their consensus. Notwithstanding their largely conservative political views, they shared with the common settlers a fundamental belief in popular sovereignty which, however, they circumscribed to the general principle that government cannot be exercised without the consent of the governed.

In contrast with the traditional view that politics had to be the preserve of "disinterested men", exclusively acting for the common good, the politics of interests affirmed itself in the backcountry and frontier regions. This new style was very distant from the pattern of wholehearted involvement and emotional response shown by the lower orders of society, but was able to channel their vital energies toward issues of common concern, which revolved around the contraposition between the East and the West of the country, while blurring disagreements and conflicts among Westerners themselves.

The formation of a "republican" opposition to the Federalist administration gave rise, in many parts of the country, to the creation of Democratic-Republican societies. In Kentucky, like elsewhere, they saw a wide participation of members of the gentry, who usually held leading roles in such organizations. John Breckinridge, of a prominent Virginia family, soon to be elected chairman of the Lexington Democratic Society, had moved to Kentucky in early 1793 to join his relatives who had already established a fortune in the state. Richard Henderson, the former proprietor of the Transylvania Company, was also among Society members. These men were conservatives at heart. Breckinridge, who owned 25 slaves, considered emancipation as an attack on private property, while Henderson's past record could hardly be described as "Liberal". Apparently, however, they did not find it contradictory to talk about equal rights and equal liberty while, at the same time, pursuing an élitist land policy. What they understood by equality was, in fact, essentially referred to the relative position of the states within the Federal system, or the equilibrium of power

53. Coward, *Kentucky, op. cit.*, pp. 56-86.

among élites. So, they did not have difficulty with denouncing loudly the discriminating attitude held by the Federalist administration toward the West. The imposition of the excise tax and the thorny issue of the navigation of the Mississippi offered good arguments to this effect: despite the sometimes deep ideological contrast between the leaders of the Society and the great bulk of its members, these grievances could muster their unconditional support. As a matter of fact, however, the leaders were mainly engaged at another level of the political debate, which was evolving between the Federalist and the Republican élites, over the theoretical interpretation of the nature of the federal union.<sup>54</sup> The Society of Bourbon county was perhaps the only one deserving the appellation of "democratic". This feature emerged from its membership, the method used for electing officials and delegates, and from the issues debated and brought to public attention. Of the three Democratic Societies of Kentucky, it was the only one to discuss themes concerning local politics, while the others soon became mere tools of Republican propaganda to strengthen the opposition to the Federalist administration. Thus, the fate of the Democratic Societies of Kentucky was decreed, on the one side, by the frightening situation created by the popular reaction to the excise tax and the repression of the Whiskey Rebellion, and, on the other, by the solution of the long-standing question of the navigation of the Mississippi in 1795. By that time, the Lexington Society and its Scott county branch were disbanded, though Bourbon's continued to exist for a while.<sup>55</sup>

Despite apparent stability, the period of time between 1792 and the calling of the second constitutional convention in 1799, was one of deep social and political tension generated by the rise of a plurality of diverging trends in the social, economic, and political life of Kentucky.

While slavery was becoming more firmly rooted in the state, the settlement of the Green river valley by squatters proceeded at a sustained pace. In the face of an ostensible tendency on the part of the government to limit the extension of small property holdings in that area - thus delaying the acquisition of a weight in state politics on the part of the settlers - open political conflict soon resulted. In particular, the Senate was mostly deemed responsible for the attempted sale of a huge tract of land in the Green river region to a company which, although anonymously, included five Kentuckians, among whom were Nicholas and Breckinridge. The Senate was rightly perceived as the bulwark of signeural power, the more so in the light of the fact that its land policy was supported by an increasing number of slaveholders. In 1795 over 85% of the families in the Green river valley were landless, and it is significant that this is the year the General Assembly finally defeated the proposal to sell those lands to the Elisha J. Hall Company, giving the settlers a preemption title, even though the lands went at double the figure per acre the Company had offered to set.<sup>56</sup>

54. Lowell H. Harrison, "John Breckinridge of Kentucky: Planter, Speculator, and Businessman", *Filson Club Historical Quarterly*, XXXIV, 1960, pp. 205-225; Link, *Democratic-Republican Societies*, pp. 13, 78-79; Marco Sioli, "The Whiskey Rebellion as Republican Citizenship", in L. V. Mannucci (ed.), *People and Power, op. cit.*, pp. 39-53; id., "The Democratic-Republican Societies at the End of the Eighteenth Century: The Western Pennsylvania Experience", *Pennsylvania History*, 60, 1993, pp. 288-299.

55. *Kentucky Gazette*, Oct. 12, Nov. 16, 1793; Jul. 12, 1794; Link, *Democratic-Republican Societies, op. cit.*, pp. 186, 204.

56. James A. Ramage, "The Green River Pioneers: Squatters, Soldiers, and Speculators", *Register of the Kentucky Historical Society*, 75, 1977, pp. 179-180.

The second constitutional convention was desired by both the now strengthened class of slaveholders adhering to the principles of Jeffersonian republicanism, and by the popular classes, whose anger and disappointment had constantly increased since 1792. However, as Nicholas had ably anticipated, seven years had produced such a consolidation of economic and social interests in the region as to create a bloc more uniformly motivated to counteract the popular demands. But some fundamental changes had also occurred in national politics, imperilling the frail Federalist construction of the system of government Nicholas had been able to push through in 1792. Now, the "republican" vision dominated the scene, and it would affirm itself in the state constitution.

The campaign leading to the convention showed peculiarities which pointed up the changes within Kentucky as well as the new national political atmosphere. The issue of slavery, now more "political", was central to the debate, a decision made by elite groups, hoping to weaken their adversaries and to distract public attention from embarrassing topics such as political representation and land policy. Thus, attitudes about slavery came to differentiate the popular forces of democracy and their republican allies (including John Bradford, the editor of the *Gazette*, and young Henry Clay) from the group of their opponents, which lumped together former Federalists like Nicholas and Conservative Republicans like Breckinridge.<sup>57</sup> Although differing in their fundamental conceptions about the extent and role of governmental powers, these two men agreed on the necessity of striking a final blow to the threat represented by Democratic ascendancy. To pursue this end, they borrowed from their opponents methods and procedures which were considered "democratic" (choice of delegates by militia companies and county committees, delivery of instructions), combining them with positions that went against the requests of the popular forces. They espoused representation in proportion to population, an independent judiciary, a two-house legislature, protection of property rights, and no emancipation without "due compensation of the owners". The Democrats wanted representation by county, elimination of the Senate, direct election of all public officials and the institutionalization of the system of delivering instructions to delegates, and the exclusion of slavery.

The discussions of the convention were a masterful victory of basically conservative forces in democratic disguise. True, the election of the governor and senators was left to manhood suffrage. However, the very idea of popular democracy was thwarted by denying the people the direct election of militia officers, sheriffs and coroners. Moreover, the "viva voce" system of voting was substituted for the secret ballot, with vast implications as for the expression of a free choice.<sup>58</sup>

The constitution of 1799 reinstated a degree of decentralization and local autonomy which allowed the local oligarchies to recoup the prerogatives of power that Nicholas' plan had wrested from them in 1792. It also tried to reestablish the kind of deferential politics that Antifederalists in general, and frontier radicals in particular, had endeavored to eradicate in their fight over the judiciary, in which both the mechanism of designation and the duration in office of justices was deemed crucial.<sup>59</sup>

57. Coward, *Kentucky, op. cit.*, pp. 88-89.

58. *Ibid.*, *op. cit.*, pp. 115-124.

59. Young, *Constitutions*, pp. 39-42, 45-47; See art. III, sec. 9, and art. IV, sec. 16 in particular.

The campaign of 1799 and the debates of the convention also showed a relative absence of Radical-Democratic voices, except for a sporadic show from the Bourbon county committee, so intensely involved seven years earlier. This change was also the result of the withering of the antislavery thrust that had accompanied the adoption of a more ambiguous position on the subject on the part of the churches, especially the Baptists.<sup>60</sup>

Can we speak of a decline of Democratic Radicalism in Kentucky in the last few years of the 18th century? Or, rather, should we speak of a dislocation of its energies in the midst of the realignment of political forces necessitated by the emergence of Jeffersonian Republicanism as an "institutional" political opposition?

The main character of the latter was the acquisition of a political style more attuned to the post-revolutionary social and economic landscape, aimed at co-opting the forces of revolutionary Radical Democracy, fitting them into a political formula that took for granted the recognition of the principle of popular sovereignty and attempted to "normalize" it. To this end, it invented new ways of mustering wide popular participation, such as the holding of public meetings, banquets and barbecues. In the latter part of the 1790's the same assumption, together with the necessity of establishing a more direct contact with the great mass of potential voters was accepted, on the frontier, by intelligent individuals of Federalist persuasion like George Nicholas as well. Nicholas' adaptability to the Western reality could not, however, contain the tide of the increasing identification between Jeffersonian Republicanism and frontier needs and demands.

In the last analysis, the case of Kentucky exemplifies how the more socially and economically fluid frontier environment provided a congenial setting for the trial of a new pattern of political discourse to which Eastern Federalists adapted themselves only later. It consisted in making ample recourse to widely shared ideological premises drawn from the revolutionary heritage, that soon became stereotypical, in the brand-new framework of the "politics of interests". Increasingly, although slowly, the popular forces understood that they had to learn how to move around in this new chameleontic environment; they came to appreciate the meaning of such words as "rhetoric" and "demagogy". They had perhaps envisaged a kind of permanent revolution, to be fought in the name of ideals, not only to obtain greater social and political equality, but also with a view to procuring some tangible benefits in terms of material well-being and economic security. However, the defeat of 1792 had taught them how difficult it was to match idealism with political success, and, consequently, had pointed to the necessity "to larn politix" to attain their goals.

60. Mathews, *Slavery and Methodism, op. cit.*, pp. 18-29.