

# THE WHISKEY REBELLION AS REPUBLICAN CITIZENSHIP

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The Whiskey Rebellion is a particularly apt subject for an examination of republican citizenship as it took shape in the last third of the eighteenth century among ordinary Americans especially as regards mass violence and relations with the Establishment. The most immediate violence in this case was directed against the collectors of the Whiskey Excise Tax imposed by the Federal Government, who were stripped, tarred and feathered and left naked in the woods: unpleasant, though not fatal. Next, members of the communities in the West of Pennsylvania who had submitted to the law were made targets for a numerous variety of «rough games», thus establishing a climate of fear and «terror» which was certainly not comparable with that reigning in Revolutionary France, though it had some significant aspects in common with it, including a sort of grim humor.

More generally, this specific violence participates in the general violence of frontier life which emerges in the settlers' relations with the Indians; in the conflicts with creditors and speculators; in the bitter struggle between the frontier yeomen and the (very often absent) large landowners, like «patriot father» George Clymer, the superintendent of the Whiskey Tax collection, or, even more, George Washington, struggling to organize his land at Miller's Run through intermediaries and in constant conflict with the frontier and its inhabitants. And, underlying all this, there was the situational violence inherent in geographic and physical factors affecting the lives of the frontier farmers - the winter snow which cut off communications, the mud invading the roads which turned into rivers in the spring season - but which did not spare «civilized» Philadelphia, convulsed by the yellow fever epidemic raging in the city during the summer and fall of 1793<sup>1</sup>.

Fascinating and interesting aspects in the panorama of American history, but ones which have usually been allowed to overshadow examination of the political expectations of the lower classes who took an active part in the public

<sup>1</sup> For a new vision of the American frontier, not as a story of progress and cultural transformation «but as a tale of continuing tragedy», see Gregory H. Nobles, «Breaking into the Backcountry: New Approaches to the Early American Frontier, 1750-1800», *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d Ser., XLVI, 1989, pp. 641-670.

meetings which organized resistance and signed at the bottom of the numerous petitions. In the second half of the eighteenth century, the official American social and political scene was only slightly influenced by their actions or by proposals put forward by the subordinate classes, in their attempts to change the relationships of power. The lower classes used an oral and gestural language to express their hardships, their grudges, their resentments and hopes; and their protests and counterproposals were seldom translated into written documents except for the petitions and the reports put out by the various assemblies and permanent committees which enjoyed great popular participation.

The conceptual formulations and the policies of these groups found their way into such documents, deriving from the various meetings and gatherings held to create solidarity around a cause, to single out an enemy, to forcefully react against abuses of power; and they were expressed in a synthesis representing an image of American radicalism throughout the second half of the eighteenth century.

A tuning fork vibrates if a certain musical note is played: but does the vibration originate from inside or from outside? The effect of vibration is the combination of both elements, the musical note played is the external cause, but the tuning fork reacts according to its internal nature, and reverberates to the sound of a note which has a particular frequency. In the same way, the movements of the people reacted to external changes – as, for example, the tax on whiskey production – but above all they reacted according to an internal, autonomous process of formation, which had brought about an ideological unity among the farmers of the West, and a cultural movement with an intrinsic capacity to react. This endogenous capacity was here opposed to the institutional violence of the new Federal Government, and advanced not only physical reaction *tout court*, but also new social initiatives and political demands. The inhabitants of the central region of the United States to the west of the Allegheny Mountains, in particular, made up the *tiers-état* of the Union, and, like the Parisian *sans culottes*, opposed their equalitarian values to the traditional manifestations of social authority.

Social behaviour patterns, often overtly coarse, developed by these frontier peoples were the expression of new theoretic positions; they put forward innovations in daily and political life, in the attempt to occupy space which had previously been dominated by élites, and they asked for direct representation both in the State government and within every local community, to legitimize their citizen status in every respect.

Any researcher engaging the problematics raised by the Whiskey Rebellion must take into account the work carried out by Thomas Slaughter, *The Whiskey Rebellion: Frontier Epilogue to the American Revolution*<sup>2</sup>. Despite the criticism of Richard Buel that this book «does not seem to contribute very

<sup>2</sup> Thomas P. Slaughter, *The Whiskey Rebellion: Frontier Epilogue to the American Revolution*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1987.

much to a sense of the past», Slaughter's book widens the horizons of «localism» within which the rebellion of 1794 had always been confined, and makes an in-depth analysis of frontier life, also underscoring its importance in the history of the revolutionary period, giving it a foremost place not so much for its caricatural/sociological aspect, as for its historical/political one<sup>3</sup>.

The analysis of the political proposals of the frontier communities and their leaders thus offers new perspectives to historians. The observations of Alan Taylor, contained in his more articulated review of Slaughter's work, «Frontier Ferment», are certainly more varied and profound than those advanced by Buel and highlight the characteristics of his book much more clearly<sup>4</sup>. For example, the importance of political continuity with the previous experience of rebellion in the period before the Revolution, already pointed out in the writings of Barbara Karsky, and the duration of the backcountry radical revolutionary spirit where those involved acted for the principles which they considered to have given rise to the War of Independence<sup>5</sup>. Separatist struggle and even international intrigues thus are the context of the Whiskey Rebellion, not the limited setting of *opera buffa* acted out by a few drunkards who refused to submit to Federal laws for fear of going without their favourite drink, which *a posteriori* opportunism was to describe.

The «whiskey» label proved a way to minimize the social and political struggle of the farmers, and few people stopped to consider seriously the importance of the «product» of the social experience of the American farmers, concealed behind such a simple label, so easy to pinpoint, but which at the same time was futile and banal. «Strong liquor» had, on the other hand, always been a characteristic element of popular life, making the potential level of associative capacity of the popular protest against any tax on alcohol levied by any Government very high.

In 1736 the Gin Law proposed in England by the Prime Minister, Robert Walpole, was blocked by popular protest and could not be applied. In this case the unrest was only a threat, and took place in the form of a fictitious funeral to honour the corpse of «Mother Gin», but this was enough to convince Walpole that the military police would have been unreliable in enforcing the Gin Law<sup>6</sup>. The American situation at the end of the century was not so different, and whiskey was interpreted as an essential instrument of the farming economy: an easily exchangeable commodity which could be substituted for money. In fact, in 1778 the farmers in York County, Pennsylvania, sold their grain to make whiskey rather than support the American troops engaged in the war of Independence<sup>7</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> For Richard Buel's review see *The American Historical Review*, XCII, 1987, p. 1273.

<sup>4</sup> Alan Taylor, «Frontier Ferment», *Review in American History*, XXV, 1987, p. 591.

<sup>5</sup> Barbara Karsky, «Agrarian Radicalism in the Late Revolutionary Period», in Erich Angerman, ed., *New Wine in Old Skins*, Stuttgart, 1976.

<sup>6</sup> For this example see George Rudé, «Mother Gin and the London Riots of 1736», *The Guildhall Miscellany*, X, 1959.

<sup>7</sup> James Lemon, *The Best Poor Man's Country*, Norton, New York, 1972, p. 225.

Whiskey also influenced political decisions: in 1738 the election of Colonel Edmund Scarborough in the County of Accomack, Virginia, was protested against because the candidate had offered «strong liquor» to the voters on election day; one man in particular had said, «Give me a glass, and I'll go and vote for Col. Scarborough». The election of Edmund Scarborough had been duly confirmed by the Provincial Assembly because he had done nothing unusual<sup>8</sup>. The caricature of the elections in the backcountry regions in the '90s, that we find in the satirical works of Hugh Henry Brackenridge - who took part in, and «told the story» of the Whiskey Rebellion - is also illustrative, when he describes an electoral contest between an honest deacon and an ignorant Scotch-Irishman in the frontier counties of Pennsylvania:

When they looked on the one, they felt an inclination to promote him. But when again on the other hand, they saw two kegs which they knew to be replenished with a very cheering liquor, they seemed to be inclined in favour of the other. But appetite prevailed, and they gave their vote in favour of the man with the two kegs<sup>9</sup>.

Despite the caricature, it is possible to distinguish the figure of the «true democrat» in these descriptions, to which, in addition to such visible characteristics as colourful language, rough manners and an irreverent attitude, could be added an abundant consumption of whiskey. It is also interesting to note that whiskey began to feature in the social description of individuals precisely in this period and that only «in the 19th century do we see the birth of alcoholism and the appearance of the solitary drinker»<sup>10</sup>.

This traditional style of life contrasted strongly with the arrogance of the new federalism which, on the contrary, preferred the élitist image of the former colonial regime. The trade agreements with overseas cities enabled American gentlemen to indulge in the wines favoured by the English aristocracy: port, madeira, claret and canary. Through their rituals and the consumption of precious wine of quality, these gentlemen tacitly submitted ordinary people to the scrutiny and approval of their social group; the act of drinking, in this case, was therefore not an act of release, but an act of social definition, of belonging to a virtuous élite<sup>11</sup>.

The consumption of home-made whiskey, on the other hand, encouraged the loss of institutional control over the morality of citizens and helped to form the ideal type of «democrat», against whom Federalists moved by elaborating complex rules in the attempt to harness the spontaneity of ordinary

<sup>8</sup> Rhys Isaac, *Transformation of Virginia, 1740-1790*, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 1982, p. 112.

<sup>9</sup> Hugh Henry Brackenridge, *Modern Chivalry*, Hafner Publishing Company, New York, 1968, p. 85. This hugely successful book was first published in 1792.

<sup>10</sup> Philippe Aries and Ggeorge Duby, *La vita privata: l'Ottocento*, Laterza, Roma, 1988, p. 461.

<sup>11</sup> Peter Thompson, «The Friendly Glass: Drink and Gentility in Colonial Philadelphia», *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, CXIII, 1989. On the culture of drinking in the United States see W.J. Rorabaugh, *The Alcoholic Republic: An American Tradition*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1979.

man, which became identified with a wild, dangerous attitude, capable of overturning the social order. The whiskey tax therefore became also an element in the defence of the nascent, revised social order.

The Excise Tax on Distilled Liquors, which came into effect in 1791, immediately raised the protest of the frontier settlers. For these people, whiskey was an essential commodity in their survival economy, and had actually taken on the value of money in their exchanges with the East Coast, due to the scarcity of hard cash. The refusal to submit to the tax on spirit production thus became the unifying factor in the 1794 rebellion in Western Pennsylvania, but above all it constituted the meeting point for all the «radical» popular protest in the West against the Federal Government, guilty, in their eyes, of exclusively serving a merchant-aristocratic élite, rather than national interests.

The ethos of the frontier farmers was thus characterized as a counter-culture, a movement of opinions and ideas which pushed popular groups towards a more autonomous, tolerant style of living than the colonial system previously, and the Federal system afterwards, wished to impose. The radical movements which had influenced the outcome of the American Revolution had not exhausted their activity, but continued their criticism against Government policies. Or rather, as Alan Taylor states:

Revolution ended neither with the last British troop ship sailing home nor with ratification of the Federal Constitution, but persisted in the backcountry where Americans contended, often violently, over the same issues of taxation, representation, and republican autonomy that had sparked Independence<sup>12</sup>.

The French Revolution also contributed to encourage the struggle, enriching it with ideological content spread throughout the population by means of the Democratic Republican Societies which, as in Western Europe, brought the French message «door to door». The action of the Democratic Republican Societies, which were set up in the wake of the enthusiasm for the French Revolutionary events, became a basis of the struggle of the subordinate classes to enforce their political demands. More than forty Societies were set up in the whole of the United States, from Maine to Georgia, with the principal aims of meeting the demands for greater political participation and acting as institutional intermediaries between the Government and the people.

Coordinated by Correspondence Committees similar to those set up during the revolution, the main activity of these societies was to organize public discussion and to elaborate resolutions and circulars containing their criticisms of the policies of Federal administration. They bitterly contested the «secret» sitting of Congress, begging the legislators and judges to abandon the use of the «dark, intricate, antiquated formalities» and of their «obsolete phraseology», which only lawyers could understand<sup>13</sup>. «It must be

<sup>12</sup> Alan Taylor, «Frontier Ferment», p. 591.

<sup>13</sup> Philip Foner, *The Democratic Republican Societies, 1790-1800*, Greenwood Press, Westport, 1976, p. 10.

the mechanics and farmers, or the poorer class of the people (as they are generally called) that must support the freedom of America» affirmed the *Newark Gazette*, on March 18, 1794. Freedom was once again in danger and the attack came this time from the policies of the Federal administration which strove to favour the traders, the bankers and the speculators, «the rich and the well born»<sup>14</sup>.

The opposition and hatred of the Federalists for the Democratic Republican Societies was justified by the political dangerousness of the subordinate classes. But the intervention of these social classes, as Pauline Maier has confirmed as far as the pre-Revolutionary period is concerned, was characterized by extra-institutional rather than anti-institutional action, in that it aimed at the achievement of the principle of direct representation at a moment when Government laws and policies were moving toward different political objectives<sup>15</sup>. Like the rebels of the colonial period, the defenders of freedom were protecting the interests of their communities in a moment when the established authorities were failing in their duty. The tax on whiskey production, put forward by Alexander Hamilton in 1791, triggered off popular discontent and added to the problems left unsolved by the Federal Government. In the same way that the concern over the price of bread had acted as a catalyst for the unity and pugnacity of the Parisian *sans-culottes*, the tax on whiskey, which was an indispensable commodity for the autonomous economy of the frontier farmers, as well as for their daily life, acted as a fulcrum for popular protest which, however, also included numerous other problems.

Taken as a whole, the Whiskey Rebellion highlighted the existence of a common background for all the American rural protest movements in the second half of the eighteenth century, and was characterized by complaints about the gap between poverty and wealth, seen as inappropriate to a Republic of freemen and the defence of the interests and the social role of the small-holding communities. The American rural rebellion, in fact, was not instigated by social outcasts, by criminals, tramps or «traitors». The inhabitants of the American countryside involved in the popular revolts of this period were almost all yeomen, with a home and income. The inexistence of the food riot in the American agricultural areas is proof of this. The popular rebellion was not concerned with the threshold of basic survival – the markets, mills and granaries were not attacked – but was directed against the Government representatives, against their opulence, their wealthy homes, their properties, not to take possession of them but to bring their owners back to criteria of equality seen as republican<sup>16</sup>.

<sup>14</sup> *Newark Gazette*, May 19, 1794.

<sup>15</sup> Cfr. Pauline Maier, *From Resistance to Revolution. Colonial Radicals and the Development of American Opposition to Britain, 1765-1776*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1972, p. 5.

<sup>16</sup> For an analysis of different kinds of crowds and types of collective violence in eighteenth century North America, especially concerning the liminal status of the people on the frontier, see Thomas P. Slaughter, «Crowds in Eighteenth Century America: Reflections and New Directions», *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, CXV, 1991.

My paper is concerned with this point: the particular analysis of the subordinate classes and their leaders, to further distinguish the «faces in the crowd», the people who took an active part in the Whiskey Rebellion and who had a decisive influence on the events. In this context it is difficult to distinguish between the activists of a «violent» protest and those of a «non violent» protest<sup>17</sup>. It is more relevant to note that, as in every popular American rebellion in the second half of eighteenth century, organized violence was the final manifestation of lower class political protest which was structured in a series of fixed phases.

First the population mobilized through committees; then a meeting was held to draw up a petition containing remonstrances and proposals to be presented to the local Assembly. The third phase made use of «personal» violence as a political weapon: the Government representatives were threatened and frightened, in order to force them to leave their positions, and the violence reached its height in the burning of their houses – the symbol of their belonging to the neighbourhood – as in the case of John Neville, the tax collector in the four Western Counties in Pennsylvania. A fourth and final phase, which took place if the previous actions had not achieved their hoped – for outcomes and the Government had not revised its policy, was the calling up of a militia ready to march towards a definite, public goal: individual or «personal» coercion gave way to public action aimed at imposing policy change by force. Such violence, once it was organized, did not strike blindly, but was directed against those individuals directly responsible for Government policies and the symbols of government power.

The rebels claimed to be carrying out a form of «natural justice»; it was rough and ready, but seldom led to murder. In most cases, indeed, the state of unrest remained in the second phase with a written protest, a petition. This instrument, although it is used at all levels of American society, as Ruth Bogin affirms, «gives us the voice of the people who seldom if ever proclaimed their social goals and political opinions in other written forms»<sup>18</sup>. A comparison of these documents essentially gives us a valuable, unique opportunity to penetrate the theoretical world of the people of that time. Their analysis enables us to discover the requests of the population, to distinguish the acceleration principle which sparked off popular protest and led to the public meeting phase, to the drawing up of petitions, and even to more violent phases and collective armed mobilization.

There was, therefore, already a tendency to form a movement in the speeches given during the public meetings and in the questions raised in the petitions, where, behind the «humble» tone of simple subjects, the signatories concealed their aspirations for equality and their need to place themselves

<sup>17</sup> For another viewpoint see Thomas P. Slaughter, *Whiskey Rebellion*, p. 114, where it is affirmed that violent and non-violent protests were not inter-connected.

<sup>18</sup> Ruth Bogin, «Petitioning and the New Moral Economy of Post Revolutionary America», *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., XLV, 1988, p. 382.

on an equal level with the Establishment, thus strongly affirming the «sovereignty of the people».

Even the acts of violence which occurred when the weapons of verbal criticism and personal pressures had failed, and recourse was made to spontaneously called-up militia, were only the external expressions of the deeper request of the yeomen for political affirmation of their social role, which they saw as a fundamental priority. These actions were, in fact, the «performance» of a «political theatre», enacted by their spontaneous associationism, directed by the Democratic Republican Societies, and by the social religiousness which prevailed the millenarianism of the frontier preachers and popular leaders such as Hermon Husband, a «regulator» in North Carolina and subsequently «Whiskey Rebel» in Pennsylvania, and the Reverend John Corbley.

The basic concept was the importance of the role of the settled communities, where the «sovereignty of the people» was a fundamental active right; and the background setting to this community could certainly not be identified as a «temple», but a solid house, built by the members of the communities themselves<sup>19</sup>. It was a large house, metaphorically able to contain all the committees and the public meetings which put forward their view of sovereignty and direct representation, not through an independentist, or even less, an anarchic spirit, as the Federalist press wrote at the time, but through the «legal channels» inherited from the experience of «regulators» in the Carolinas and «consacrated» by participation in the establishment of republican institutions though the Revolution.

The 7,000 Whiskey Rebels who marched on Pittsburgh in the summer of 1794 were a clear example of a spontaneous organization. They constituted a public procession, political theatre representing the power of the sovereign people physically; capable of imposing their own political decisions, though they imposed, in fact, only a «performance» in the imaginary halls of government «out-of-doors», where the normal roles were turned upside down: the governors became part of the audience, while the leading actors were the self-constituted parading body who enacted the part of the «republic/state» over against the «state/republic»<sup>20</sup>. This «march on Pittsburgh», this embodied citizenry, described by the respectable élites as a dangerous «wild beast», never grew out of control and confined itself to filing through the streets of the town in an orderly manner, expressing a clear message of power, yet at the same time demonstrating the capacity of the republican people for self-organization and self-control. But above all it was an explicit, visible, demand to take part in institutional policy making. No attempt was made to «occupy» the city or to «make war»; the citizenry embodied, an army called up by itself,

<sup>19</sup> William Findley at the Pennsylvania ratifying Convention, see Loretta Valtz Mannucci, «People and Power: the Federal Processions of 1787 and 1788», paper presented at the symposium «Ideology and Resistance. Reconstruction of American Culture and its Reception at Home and Abroad», Haifa, 1990.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4. Especially where the author shows the differences between the «republic/state» and the «state/republic».

«showed itself» and then returned home, disembodied once more, to await the events.

Representational democracy had become so familiar to the inhabitants of the West that, filled with enthusiasm for the ideals of the French Revolution, they called one another «citizens»: a symbolic gesture which was intended to make men forget private interest and be more aware of collective ones. Taken as a whole, the Whiskey Rebellion constituted an essential point in the process of defining the awareness, as far as the subordinate classes were concerned, of having a natural right to share a natural citizenship, at the moment when the ambiguity of the Founding Fathers was growing, in their concern to create a solid vision of the public weal as situated in the functioning of the institutions where they themselves, their interests and their judgement were in the central position. It also supplied the opportunity for the lower classes to demonstrate their own ability to form associations and their desire to obtain direct representation in the Republican institutions, by taking part in them as fully entitled citizens.

The Whiskey Rebels certainly did not as yet constitute a party, and they did not form a «class»; what united the rebels was above all the need to create a democratic republic with egalitarian aspirations not, of course, to abolish property rights - which most of them already enjoyed - but to limit the abuse of power of the great absentee landowners who monopolized the best land, and the prestige of the coastal élites who often determined political decision making. The Western Pennsylvania crowd thus developed its own organization and expressed itself through its own leaders, clearly affirming concepts such as the inalienability of the «rights of the man», the «sovereignty of the people» and «freedom of the individual», on a parallel with the political message of Thomas Paine. «We are free men, not slaves» the American farmers stated in their petitions, and they were ready to realize these freedoms by fighting the tyranny of any government, whether it were English or Federal, and by moving away from their past deference and inferiority.

The War of Independence had, after all, not been a crucial turning point between two distinct periods in the history of United States: the war against the English, though fought on the territory, had passed in some sense «over the heads» of the frontier yeomen, who now came up against the old revolutionary leaders, this time no longer in the guise of «Founding Fathers», but in the less honourable role of land speculators and monopolizers of public offices.

An example was George Clymer, a «revolutionary» from Philadelphia, who had signed the Declaration of Independence and was a member of the Constitutional Convention, and one of Hamilton's right hand men as superintendent of the Whiskey Tax<sup>21</sup>. Clymer's farsical journey to the frontier zones of

<sup>21</sup> For George Clymer's ambiguous figure in American history see Jerry Grundfest, *George Clymer: Philadelphia Revolutionary, 1739-1813*, Ayers Co. Pubs., New York, 1982, and for his anti-popular activity during the revolutionary period see Steven Rosswurm, *Arms, Country and Class*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, 1987, pp. 169-170.

Western Pennsylvania in 1792 to obtain information on the activity of the rebels and the spread of public meetings, which took place, as William Findley – the Antifederalist congressman from Western Pennsylvania – reports in his chronicle of the Whiskey Rebellion, «with the rapidity of a post rider, accompanied by a military guard through the most peaceable part of the country», was only one aspect of the role Clymer took on within the Federal institutions in the service of the interest of the companies speculating in Western lands<sup>22</sup>. The lands Clymer owned west of the Allegheny Mountains were sold for a high profit when the Whiskey Rebels had been overcome and the price of land rose sky high, and his speculating activity continued after that in Kentucky.

Also typical was the frenzied activity of George Washington, this time in the less worthy role of land speculator, concerned with his own private interests and his involvement in frontier problems. He was aware of the laws forbidding the concentration of the best land in a few hands, but his interest in buying up the frontier lands cheaply was almost rapacious. From his purchase of the concession rights to the territory offered to soldiers by the Governor of Colonial Virginia as a reward for enlisting, from 1754 to 1769, when he was the head of the militia in that colony, to his purchase of land through his agent William Crawford from 1767 to 1782 when the latter was killed by the Indians, Washington's land ownings continued to increase<sup>23</sup>.

But the frontier lands were not simple investments to administrate: rent collecting was not easy, especially for non-resident landlords. The tenants were formulating strong demands to obtain the direct ownership of the lands. The settlers opposed the great absentee land owners and speculators, although they saw «as an encouraging sign those residents who also gained vast property, when they promoted local interests»<sup>24</sup>. This was the post-war background to the journey of the Revolutionary hero to the Western Pennsylvania lands in the summer of 1784, and the conflict with the Scottish tenant farmers of his land at Miller's Run. Speculators were certainly not popular with the settlers, and for them George Washington was merely an absentee landowner who grew rich on the best lands thanks to their hard work.

Rural communities were the backbone of pre-industrial America and their members were the foremost participants in social action. The Scotch-Irish component of the frontier dwellers was certainly not willing to submit quietly to the bullying behaviour of the public administrators or the land speculators. Resolute and honest, the Scotch-Irish farmers were hospitable with their friends, but felt no ties of loyalty toward those they considered enemies whatever their position or fame: they were ready to take revenge for any

<sup>22</sup> William Findley, *History of the Insurrection in the Four Western Counties of Pennsylvania in the Year MDCCXCIV*, S. Harrison Smith, Philadelphia, 1796, p. 70.

<sup>23</sup> Relationships between the first President and the frontier lands have been investigated by numerous scholars but only Thomas P. Slaughter explains the connection between Washington's public actions and his private interest. See Thomas P. Slaughter, *The Whiskey Rebellion*, pp. 75-89.

<sup>24</sup> Susanna Delfino, *Terra e felicità*, F. Angeli, Milano, 1990, p. 35.

slight and to oppose anything that savoured of injustice or falseness. These tendencies were strengthened, as – especially after 1790 – communities acquired a high percentage of political refugees from Ireland who continued to be active in American politics<sup>25</sup>.

But nothing could be done against the national hero and the Scottish settlers' claims on Miller's Run were set aside by a verdict of the Pennsylvania Supreme Court favorable to Washington. Furthermore, these conflictual relations with the West did not change even when Washington became President of the United States in 1789; his property and lands continued to grow at frontier settlers' expense, as did the intertwining of personal and private interests which had characterized his pre-presidential years<sup>26</sup>.

These are aspects of history which have usually been forgotten by the more than 3,000 writers who have praised the first President of the United States; they have been more interested in the creation of myths than in the reconstruction of the past, which even today raises a general outcry and the charge of treachery on the part of historians like Buel. Moreover, if on the one hand American historiography has continued in its acritical admiration for the national leaders of the Revolution, on the other hand it has tried to deny the importance of the role of those local political leaders who grew up in the shadow of the frontier protest movements.

Albert Gallatin, for example, once he had become Secretary of the Treasury under Jefferson's presidency, saw his past life among the Whiskey Rebels ignored, despite the fact that his political proposals and writings had played an important part within the Western Pennsylvania uprising. His action among the Whiskey Rebels had led to the second Pittsburgh conference in August 1792, where he was present as Secretary and contributed to the adoption of a highly radical resolution, defined by Hugh Henry Brackenridge as «the last step before using force»<sup>27</sup>.

This resolution was to all intents and purposes a declaration of war against the tax collectors and all those members of the community who would have helped them, and it stated:

That whereas some men may be found amongst us, so far lost to every sense of virtue, and feelings for the distresses of their country, as to accept the office of collector of the duty. Resolved, therefore, that in future we will consider such person as unworthy to our friendship, have no intercourse of dealings with them, withdraw from them every assistance, withhold all the comforts of life which depend upon those duties that as men and fellow citizens we owe to each other, and upon all occasions treat

<sup>25</sup> For the Scotch-Irish behaviour see Willard F. Dunaway, *The Scotch Irish of Colonial Pennsylvania*, Genealogical Publishing Co., Baltimore, 1979. See also Maldwyn A. Jones, «Ulster Emigration, 1783-1815», in E.E. Green, ed., *Essays in Scotch Irish History*, Routledge and Kegan, London, 1969, p. 49.

<sup>26</sup> See especially the chapter «George Washington and the Western Country» in Thomas P. Slaughter, *The Whiskey Rebellion*, pp. 75-89.

<sup>27</sup> Hugh Henry Brackenridge, *Incidents of the Insurrection in the Western Parts of Pennsylvania, in the Year 1794*, John McCulloch, Philadelphia, 1795, III, p. 24.

them with that contempt that they deserve; and that it be, and it hereby most earnestly recommend to the people at large, to follow the same line of conduct toward them<sup>28</sup>.

A lack of civic virtue and inattention to the real problems of the community was enough to forfeit the status of citizen. Being a citizen did not therefore mean being born in a particular place, but more concretely taking part in the social life and the political decisions of the community to which one belonged. Those who did not adhere would have to say goodbye to the «comforts of life» which, as men and as citizens, the farmers reserved for members of the community. It should be noted, however, that it is «contempt» – ostracism – and not violence that is invoked.

Although Gallatin was in 1795 to consider this resolution as the only «political sin» he had committed, the resolution represented the reply of a community united against a situation of institutional arrogance, and the farmers' reaction was a battle for freedom and democracy against a repressive law and against those members of the community who detached themselves from social responsibility, thus losing their right to be considered citizens in every respect<sup>29</sup>.

In the same way, other popular leaders like William Findley and Hugh Henry Brackenridge, political representatives and the first «historians» of the Whiskey Rebellion, certainly failed to receive the attention they deserved in the American historical panorama for their role in the insurrection, and above all as the formulators of well defined political views. Findley arrived in America in 1763 at the age of 23 and began to work as a weaver. He succeeded in purchasing property in Westmoreland County, Pennsylvania, and took part in the War of Independence as a captain in the Continental Army. At the end of the war, he entered politics, despite his lack of experience and, under the new national Constitution which he had opposed, was elected to Congress where, thanks to his practical common sense and his skill in representing the interests of the farmers who had elected him, he remained from 1791 to 1817. He openly criticized the Constitution in the House, always defended the rights and freedoms due the social and economic status of the frontier farmers, and spoke out against their hardships, which he himself had personally experienced<sup>30</sup>.

Findley had also been personally committed against the tax on liquor production right from the first meetings at Redstone Old Fort and Pittsburgh in the summer of 1791, and had searched for legal, peaceful means to direct the dissent. As delegate of the inhabitants of Westmoreland County at the

<sup>28</sup> *Pennsylvania Archives*, 2s Ser., IV, p. 29. The Pittsburgh Conference of August 21-22, 1792, was the last in a series of public meetings of the inhabitants of the Western Counties of Pennsylvania. A first assembly had taken place at Brownsville Old Town on July 27, 1791. On September 7, the delegates of the four Counties had met for the first time at Pittsburgh, and the meeting was carried over to the second Pittsburgh conference in August of the following year.

<sup>29</sup> Albert Gallatin, *The Speech of Albert Gallatin, a Representative from the County of Fayette*, W.W. Woodward, Philadelphia, 1795, p. 7.

<sup>30</sup> William Findley, «Autobiographical Letter», *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, V, 1881, pp. 440-450.

Pittsburgh meeting of August 21-22, 1792, he had compared the opposition to the Whiskey Tax by the Western Pennsylvanians to the rebellion against the Stamp Act and to the Boston Tea Party, but had always condemned, as «intemperate and impolitic», all those who advocated a violent protest<sup>31</sup>. He denounced the Federal Government for having violated «the liberty to express opinions». The delegates meeting at Pittsburgh were not acting against «the Law» but were expressing the will of the people, Findley stated, and it was the will of the people which dictated community laws, and certainly not a far-off, authoritarian government which was trying to impose a law whose validity no one, among those touched by it, recognized<sup>32</sup>.

Findley spoke to the settlers in their own language, but even he found it difficult to defend the cause of non-violence. It was not easy to convince people that a law they considered unjust and oppressive was at the same time constitutional. It was the great solidarity around simple words like «unjust and oppressive» which, taking on specific form in a traditional forum of republican/democratic institutions like the public assembly, gave strong impetus to the farmers' actions and to their representatives. A series of dates for further meetings were arranged, but the main task they set themselves was to draw up and make known a circular letter and a general address to the neighbouring Countries in Pennsylvania, Virginia and Kentucky, appealing for their support in a common cause<sup>33</sup>.

If these proposals referred to the circular letter sent out to the legislative assemblies of the other colonies in February 1768 by Samuel Adams, in the name of the Massachusetts House of Representatives, to denounce the English taxes as a violation of the principle, no taxation without representation, the figure of Hermon Husband was a direct witness of the historical connection between the Whiskey Rebellion and the previous movement of the Regulators during the colonial period, especially in the message contained in his lay preaching. Many things had changed since the time of the Regulators, but they were not changes which touched the goals inspiring Husband. Throughout his political career he remained consistent in his millenarian position, searching for a total transformation of social relations.

In these years of revolution and transformation of the state, Husband had drawn an important conclusion from his experiences of frontier life: the inhabitants of the territories west of the Allegheny Mountains were physically and spiritually before the gates of an ideal society, a «New Jerusalem». But the way to this new life was barred by numerous enemies. During the colonial period the adversaries of «ordinary people» and of their liberties had been the civil servants, the lawyers, the Scottish traders, or any group of people connected with certain companies, professions whose interest clashed with the

<sup>31</sup> William Findley, *History of the Insurrection*, p. 45.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54.

<sup>33</sup> «Resolution of the Meeting Held at Redstone Old Fort» quoted in Hugh Henry Brackenridge, *Incidents*, III, p. 16.

interest of public welfare»<sup>34</sup>. In the period of the Whiskey Rebellion, however, the list of enemies had changed significantly: from being the officials of a power which could at least in part have been considered alien, they were now «our» professional politicians. Husband's list thus included both «ambitious politicians» and «scribes and lawyers» who monopolized the best lands, political power and the economic opportunities of the region. These were the adversaries of the hardworking farmers; and to their number could be added the «tax gatherers, bums, tythe men, excise men, custom house officers» and all those who prospered at the expense of the productive members of the community, like slave owners and the wealthier landowners who, in Husband's opinion, only knew «the art of robbing and living on the labour of the other men»<sup>35</sup>.

During the Pennsylvania debates on the adoption of the federal Constitution, Husband had already expressed his own criticism, arguing that the document was a step backwards compared to the promises of the Revolutionary period and pointing out the evolution of some leaders, who from revolutionaries had become tyrants. Husband's political proposal – the New Government of Liberty – demanded instead direct representation and the local autonomy of the single communities, property taxes, and the guarantee that even candidates who were not wealthy could be elected to government office, as well as the structural safeguarding of freedom by the population through popular mechanisms for the amendment of laws they considered imperfect<sup>36</sup>.

These political proposals underlined the importance of the charismatic leaders who set up a direct link with the people who elected them and who independently pushed them forward in the social struggle. «Ordinary people» shared Husband's visions and dreamed of – and strove to bring about – the «new world» that he described. It was to be a world where survival economy and the small distilleries serving the community would not be penalized. Perhaps the language of these leaders was difficult for the ruling élites to understand, but it was perfectly clear to the frontier settlers who shared an idea of the Republic based on an extreme form of direct participation specifically modelled around the needs of the members of the community. It was a Republic able to represent a society where «rules are more respected than private initiative, community and family values more than individualism and universal access to land more than commercial development»<sup>37</sup>.

That was also the political viewpoint of David Bradford, the Major General of the militia which gathered at Braddock's Field on August 1, 1794, to march on Pittsburgh – to which they referred emblematically as «the city of Sodom» – at the height of the popular movement, when 7,000 farmers united in

<sup>34</sup> Roger Ekirch, «A New Government of Liberty: Hermon Husband's Vision of Backcountry North Carolina, 1755», *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., XXXIV, 1977, p. 633.

<sup>35</sup> Hermon Husband, *Fourteen Sermons on the Characters of Jacob's Fourteen Sons*, Philadelphia, 1789, pp. 19-23.

<sup>36</sup> Roger Ekirch, «A New Government of Liberty», p. 633.

<sup>37</sup> Hermon Husband, *Fourteen Sermons*, p. 74.

defence of their communities. His radical role in previous assemblies had brought him to lead the armed revolt and take the rank of commander in the ritual procession towards Sodom. Bradford, in fact, rode «a superb horse in splendid trapping» and was wearing «full martial uniform, with plumes floating in the air». He seemed to be George Washington's *alter ego* in the hearts of the Western Pennsylvania<sup>38</sup>.

It is true that personages like Husband, Findley or Bradford did not have the carisma and the ability for political analysis of such revolutionary leaders as Robespierre or Samuel Adams, but they were just as important in that they voiced the demands of the frontier yeomen. It is therefore relevant to emphasize the political proposals put forward by these representatives «created by the crowd» and, in the petitions and reports voted in the assemblies, to try to capture the political ideas which were expressed in the popular votes and which succesfully elected men, such as Findley, who were so close to the experience of the farmers and in open contrast with Federal positions, as well as distinct from Jeffersonian attitudes. These expressions of public will should not be dismissed as merely «provincialism», but were a more complete reflection of the needs of the subordinate rural classes and of the traditional «regulating» procedures as these had been clarified and transformed by the revolutionary experience and the founding of the republic.

This agrarian radicalism attests to a growing political awareness on the part of the farmers, in a moment when social relations were changing rapidly and «the desire for new definitions of the body politic» was being affirmed<sup>39</sup>. The common denominator of the popular rebellions of the late 18th century therefore does not lie only in the specific demands of individuals for the solution of clearly defined problems, but above all in the most fundamental and general socio-political demands linked to the principle of the administration of power.

The Democratic Republican Societies, the popular leaders like Gallatin, Husband, Findley and Bradford, to say nothing of the political proposals of the subordinate classes, have not been given much consideration in a historiography which has concentrated on Federalist decision-making processes, Jeffersonian democracy and the heritage of the «heroes» of the Revolution. We should take care to prevent having only the «great men» survive from the past; their roles of «Founding Fathers» and «military commanders» are a very partial record. We should particularly try to prevent protagonists and facts recorded in the memoirs of a few people, but forgotten by the history books, from disappearing forever. This is a hard lesson to set out, unfortunately, but also a new challenge to throw light on whole stretches of the past.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Leland D. Baldwin, *Whiskey Rebels. The Story of a Frontier Uprising*, University of Pittsburgh Press, Pittsburgh, 1967, pp. 148-149.

<sup>39</sup> Barbara Karsky, «Agrarian Radicalism», p. 88.