

George Bancroft's Transcendental View of American History under the Influence of Puritan Tradition

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Abstract:

This paper, by analyzing George Bancroft's high reverence of the puritan tradition embodied in his historical works, his perception of American Revolution and political democracy and even his incorporation of German idealism, proposes that Bancroft should be viewed as the leading voice in the early nineteenth century to define America's historical mission and meaning. His distinct transcendental view of history is helpful for us to get a better understanding of the democratic tradition of the U.S..

Keywords: George Bancroft, transcendental, puritan tradition, nineteenth century

1. Historical background of George Bancroft's transcendental view of American history

In the early decades of the nineteenth century, largely in an attempt to establish a historical basis of the development of a national consensus, political and cultural spokespersons frequently envisioned the Puritans as mythic fathers of the American nation. In the 1820s, there were waves of religious excitements throughout the U.S and later these religious excitements developed into the greatest nationwide revival of emotion-laden Christian evangelicalism in American history. Indeed, by the time of the civil war, evangelical Christianity had actually become the religion, if not of America, at least of most Americans. As a matter of fact, the American enlightenment had accomplished very little in weakening the hold on American culture of generations of piety nurtured by puritan tradition, and evangelical Protestantism was still fundamentally a religious movement. For a clearer understanding of the substance of the political and democratic thought, one need to turn to the antebellum period's political intellectuals. George Bancroft, Jacksonian Democrat, career diplomat, and the author of the 10-volume *History of the United States*, was among one of them.¹ In this paper, I shall mainly focus on Bancroft's transcendental view of American history which fully incorporated the puritan traditions. And in the light of that, we can get a better understanding of his idea of American democracy.

2. Probing into the rising use of Puritanism in the early 19th century

Before elaborating on Bancroft's transcendental view of American history, we need to know the reason why Puritanism was on the rise which had developed into a national term as an ideology explaining the tradition, background and basis of the United States at the early stage of the 19th century. Jan C. Dawson, a Professor of History at Southwestern University, argues that the rising use of Puritanism was largely in response to the French Revolution. A general comparison between the United States and France had developed in the early 19th century, and U.S. historians and political theorists sought to refute a dominant assertion by the French that republicanism was only compatible with infidelity. "Infidelity" and "political liberalization" indeed were terms that could become tantamount to threats for many American political thinkers. They saw the horrors of the French Revolution as an indication that the American social and cultural tradition had projected the United States toward the most fully-realized model of civilization and moral progress.² In terms of the bloody side of war as it developed through the American Revolution, one may well imagine that for many Americans of the new Republic, France suggested just a near mirror image, but it was devoid of a truly moral or religious purpose. The United States must always guard against backsliding into such kind of model. But the specific combination of republicanism and Christianity in terms of a "fundamental characteristic of faith" became a national issue with the publication of George Bancroft's highly popular *History of the United States* (1834).³

¹ David A. Hollinger and Charles Capper, *The American Intellectual Tradition : a sourcebook* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998) , pp191-192.

² Jan C. Dawson, *The Unusable Past: America's Puritan Tradition, 1830 to 1930* (Chico, California: Scholar's Press, 1984), p25.

³ *Ibid.*, pp25-26.

3. George Bancroft's high reverence of the puritan tradition embodied in his historical project

George Bancroft published his highly influential *History of the United States* (vol. 1 1834), amid the renewed historical interest in the Puritan forebears and the desire to foster a nationalistic revival. Bancroft utilized a form of biblical symbol describing historical figures and events as foreshadowing of future events.⁴ In the actions of characters like John Winthrop, John Endicott, and John Cotton, he envisioned prophetic "types" containing the seeds of what would later become the American Revolution. In framing the Puritans as typological forebears of America's destined greatness, Bancroft's history depicted early colonial leaders like John Endicott as epic figures who personified courage, faith, vision, and moral strength:

Endicott -- who, "ever since the Lord in mercy had revealed himself unto him," had maintained the straightest judgment against the outward form of God's worship, as prescribed by English statutes; a man of dauntless courage, and that cheerfulness which accompanies courage, benevolent, though austere; firm, though choleric; of a rugged nature, which his stern principles of non-conformity had not served to mellow -- was selected as a "fit instrument to begin this wilderness work".⁵

Such kind of descriptions, portraying a man to whom "the Lord in mercy had revealed himself" and who "was selected as a 'fit instrument'" by God, illustrate New England reverence for leaders like Endicott.

An essential feature of Bancroft's historical project was the association of faith and republicanism as central tenets of the Puritans and as compatible and necessary ingredients of national political life in America. For Bancroft, the republic owed a profound debt to the Puritans as the oldest tradition and as providing the philosophical seed linking religious and political reform.⁶ The fruit of the Puritan seed, according to Bancroft, included such American fundamental thinking as popular sovereignty, or rule by the people, and liberty of conscience:

[The] church existed independent of its pastor, who owed his office to its free choice; the will of the majority was its law; and each one of the brethren possessed equal rights with the elders. The right, exercised by each congregation, of electing its own ministers was in itself a moral revolution; religion was now with the people, not over the people. Puritanism exalted the laity. . . .

Puritanism constituted not the Christian clergy, but the Christian people, the interpreter of the divine will. The voice of the majority was the voice of God; and the issue of Puritanism was popular sovereignty. . . . Puritanism was a life-giving spirit. . . . The people did not attempt to convert others, but to protect themselves; they never punished opinion as such; they never attempted to torture or terrify men into orthodoxy.⁷

Thanks to Puritanism, Bancroft thought, "religion" was no longer "over the people," the "voice of the majority" was holy and sacrosanct, and dissent was "never punished." Bancroft focused on individual rights and the high value of "free choice". Bancroft moves toward a fuller separation of church and state, insofar as moral authority rests much more prominently with the individual and with the joint population rather than with the religious establishment. The people as a whole constituted the "voice of the majority"; further, the citizenry provided "the voice of God". Bancroft's view emphasizes a more democratic and privileged prize of the so-called the "inferior people".

Again, Bancroft accepted that the Puritans were central to contemporary American ideals. Puritanism was the primary historical agent responsible for initiating the movement toward the millennial fulfillment of these lofty ideals. By framing the Puritans in such liberalized terms, Bancroft and other spokespersons fostered a transcendental view of American history in which the new nation sought to realize a universal law of the spirit. This law of the spirit, according to Bancroft, was most powerfully depicted in the opening paragraphs of *The Declaration of Independence* and was a direct result of the Puritan legacy of New England, working ultimately through the agency of Providence.⁸

⁴ Michael Davitt Bell, *Hawthorne and the Historical Romance of New England* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1971), pp8-14.

⁵ George Bancroft., *The History of the United States. Vol. 1. 1834.* (Boston: Little Brown, 1856). pp340-341.

⁶ Bush Jr., Harold K. *Re-inventing the Puritan Fathers: George Bancroft, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and the Birth of Endicott's Ghost*, Bush, Harold K. ATQ; Kingston, R.I. Vol. 9, Issue. 2, Jun 1, 1995, p131.

⁷ George Bancroft., *The History of the United States. Vol. 1. 1834.* (Boston: Little Brown, 1856). pp371-372

⁸ Bush Jr., Harold K. *Re-inventing the Puritan Fathers: George Bancroft, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and the Birth of Endicott's Ghost*, Bush, Harold K. ATQ; Kingston, R.I. Vol. 9, Issue. 2, Jun 1, 1995, p131.

4. George Bancroft's perception of American Revolution and political democracy with the guidance of the puritan tradition

According to Bancroft, as Dawson writes, the American tradition was filtered through the experience that had become the defining perspective of American identity--the Revolution. He said: "The Revolution of 1776, so far as it was affected by religion, was a Presbyterian measure. It was the natural outgrowth of the principles which the Presbyterianism of the Old World planted in her sons, the English Puritans, the Scotch Covenanters, the French Huguenots, the Dutch Calvinists, and the Presbyterians of Ulster." He calls Calvin "the father of America," and adds: "He who will not honor the memory and respect the influence of Calvin knows but little of the origin of American liberty."⁹ As Michael Kammen, a specialist in American history and culture, points out, that the stories of patriots and soldiers made what had been the object of the struggle the set of basic political principles and the definitive American traits to be read historically. This was as well the period in which "civil religion" began to flourish in the form of July 4th celebrations, while the document around which they centered, took on the role of "sacred relic".¹⁰

Bancroft, seeing the Puritans through the patriots and liberty through Providence, could then reach the conclusion that "the issue of Puritanism was popular sovereignty".¹¹ Bancroft's move was to locate in historical terms "the faith that linked republicanism and Christianity". In so doing, he offered his account of the principles which "bound the seventeenth to the nineteenth century: the equation of social and political stability with the fulfillment of universal law; the participation of the common man is that fulfillment; and the unity of Humanity as an expression of God's love".¹² Bancroft saw American democracy as God's special gift to the universe. His historical study of the United States, Bancroft said, aimed "to follow the steps by which a favoring Providence, calling our institutions into being, has conducted the nation to its present happiness and glory".¹³ Bancroft elevated the "common man", the prerequisite of democracy, and places him in relation to Puritanism as a standard of well-intentioned self-improvement, for which, Bancroft suggested, the Puritans stood. Democracy itself then becomes bound with Puritanism in a kind of organic moral whole. While the individual then remains prey to the fallibility and inconsistencies that have plagued the human race throughout history, the fact of the progress of the whole race itself is undeniable. As Bancroft develops the argument in "The Office of the People in Art, Government, and Religion", he transforms the almost mechanistic and calculative perspective one encounters in Federalist #10, where Madison proposes republic over "pure democracy," and large over small republic, as a means of "curing the mischief of faction".¹⁴ For Bancroft, popular government is seen as charged with the "moral force" of Puritanism, so that "Truth...emerges from the contradictions of personal opinions...." and the conclusion is reached, that "the decrees of the universal conscience are the nearest approach to the presence of God in the soul of man".¹⁵ In this way, with a democracy seen to have been born out of the Puritan tradition, the tradition is in turn made a national presence, and the nation takes on for some the aspect of (to use Dawson's phrase) a "consensus of consciences".

5. German idealism incorporated in George Bancroft's thinking for the formation of his transcendental view of American history

At the same time George Bancroft also brought German idealism into the mixture. Revising the developmental trajectory of G. W. F. Hegel, who held that the Prussian monarchy was history's goal, Bancroft set American republicanism, or democracy, in its place. This adjustment was, in a way, a fair "fit", given

⁹ Posted by Jonathon Van Maren, posted on July 6th, 2020. <https://thebridgehead.ca/2020/07/06/the-american-revolution-was-a-presbyterian-revolt/>, accessed on December 20th, 2020.

¹⁰ Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture*. (New York: A. Knopf, 1991). P68.

¹¹ Quoted by Jan C. Dawson, *The Unusable Past: America's Puritan Tradition, 1830 to 1930* (Chico, California: Scholar's Press, 1984). P27.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ James Madison, 'The Federalist, "Number 10" and "Number 51" 1787-88', Edited by Professor Sun Youzhong, *American Intellectual History Center for American Studies, BFSU*, p43.

¹⁵ George Bancroft "The Office of the People in Art, Government, and Religion," Edited by Professor Sun Youzhong, *American Intellectual History, Center for American Studies, BFSU* p67.

German idealism's origins in German priests' Protestantism.¹⁶ Bancroft admired and popularized in the United States German idealist philosophy.

As a young man he had studied in Göttingen, Berlin, and Heidelberg. While in Germany, he became intimately familiar with the historical speculation of G.W.F. Hegel. His own work incorporated several unmistakable Hegelian themes: that history showed the progressive unfolding of the divine personality; that this process was reflected in the advance of human liberty; and that liberty had developed most fully in the Protestant Germanic world. For Bancroft, unlike Hegel, however, this progress toward liberty reached its culmination on American soil.¹⁷ Bancroft presents the American people as the ultimate bearers of divinely ordained liberty and makes this point explicit at the end of his *History of the Formation of the Constitution of the United States* (1882): "A new people had arisen without kings or princes or nobles. They were more sincerely religious, better educated, and of nobler minds and of purer morals than the men of any former republic. By calm meditation and friendly councils they had prepared a constitution which, in the union of freedom with strength and order, excelled every one known before."¹⁸

Paul Gottfried, a conservative historian of political thought, comments: "One does not have to strain to find here a Jacobin imagination hidden behind Hegelian language. A consolidated American national government, a powerful executive representing the popular will, and a global civilizing mission are the visionary expectations that one can read into Bancroft's patriotic scholarship."¹⁹

6. Conclusion

In short, as Jan Dawson has claimed, Bancroft should be viewed as the leading voice in the early nineteenth-century contest to define America's historical mission and meaning, primarily by reframing Puritanism as the quintessential seed for all things good and bright in America.²⁰ Bancroft was representative of his generation's search for an American historical identity that would both confirm and inspire the faith that linked republicanism and Christianity. His distinct transcendental view of history is helpful for us to get a better understanding of the democratic tradition of the U.S.

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¹⁶ Joseph R. Stromberg, *The Dark Night of the American Soul*, <https://www.lewrockwell.com/2003/04/joseph-r-stromberg/the-dark-night-of-the-american-soul/> accessed on December 20th, 2021.

¹⁷ Paul Gottfried, "Liberalism vs. Democracy," *Journal of Libertarian Studies*, 12, 2 (Fall 1996), pp. 243-245.

¹⁸ Joseph R. Stromberg, *The Dark Night of the American Soul*, <https://www.lewrockwell.com/2003/04/joseph-r-stromberg/the-dark-night-of-the-american-soul/> accessed on December 20th, 2021.

¹⁹ Paul Gottfried, "Liberalism vs. Democracy," *Journal of Libertarian Studies*, vol. 12, No. 2 (Fall 1996).

²⁰ Jan C. Dawson, *The Unusable Past: America's Puritan Tradition, 1830 to 1930* (Chico, California: Scholar's Press, 1984). P136