The missing revolution: The totalitarian democracy in light of 1776

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Abstract

During much of his prolific career, the late historian Jacob Talmon was preoccupied with revolutionary movements, and was especially unsettled by, and attracted to, the force displayed by the French and Russian Revolutions. The young United States’ long and bloody war against the British Empire, followed by the creation of a republican novus ordo seclorum, supposedly fitted Talmon’s revolutionary model and narrative. Hence, it is hard to account for the complete absence of the American Revolution from Talmon’s extensive and celebrated trilogy.

This paper examines how Talmon understood revolutions and how the major historiographical schools interpreting the American Revolution could not accommodate, for different reasons, Talmon’s paradigm of the nature and essence of revolutions. The paper further demonstrates how not only the failings of different historical interpretive schemes convinced Talmon to ignore the American Revolution. Rather, since the American Revolution could be conceived either as Lockean or Machiavellian, but in any event not as Rousseauian, Talmon overlooked its Atlantic nature; he chose to focus solely on messianic Europe. The paper will thus analyze the meaning and consequence of the fact that Talmon left the examination of the pursuit of happiness to Americanists, and chose to leave 1776 out of his corpus. Indeed, a missing revolution.

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In Silver Blaze Sherlock Holmes identified the killer by remarking that “the dog did not bark,” thus concluding that the dog knew the villain. Here, I would like to discuss another “dog” that did not bark, or rather the absence of the American Revolution in Jacob Talmon’s historical corpus.

Talmon was a historian of revolutions. Modern revolutions, especially the Jacobin and Bolshevik coups and those movements’ rise to total political power, startled him. Indeed, revolutionary dynamics and its world-shattering potential captivated his intellectual curiosity. Surprisingly, in spite of Talmon’s interest in revolutions, the first modern revolution, the one that tore the First British Empire apart and created the United States of America, was completely absent from his writings. In order to come to terms with this striking absence this essay will first examine the unique concept of the Talmonian revolution, with the way in which that eminent historian defined and made sense of that modern concept, and then proceed to
demonstrate why the leading interpretations of the American Revolution could not dwell, each for its own reasons, together with Talmon’s revolutionary paradigm. In other words, we shall trace a missing revolution.¹

I

The absence of the American Revolution from Talmon’s corpus was not the only puzzle in that eminent historians’ writing. Indeed, antonyms and paradoxes pervade his canon. Although it was Talmon’s Judaism that constructed his worldview, he dedicated his career to the research of the history of European revolutions. While writing a history of ideas, he constantly probed into the essence of material reality, and though he declared himself to be a liberal struggling against determinist doctrinarians, he believed in the existence of ineluctable historical laws. A few years ago I analyzed and demonstrated how some of these paradoxes could be conciliated.² Here, however, I will concentrate on a different puzzle: the absence of the revolution of 1776 from Talmon’s intellectual horizon.

As an East European immigrant to Israel who became one of the country’s foremost historians, Jacob Talmon embodies in many ways the story of Israel’s academic founding fathers. Ranked within the school of the great historians of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem such as Michael Richard Kovner, Joshua Prawer, Yehoshua Arieli and Alexander Fuks, Talmon’s scholarship, especially The Totalitarian Democracy, made a significant impact on European historiography. Talmon won world acclaim for his contribution to the understanding of “Totalitarian Democracy” and “Political Messianism,” the modern phenomena of massively popular and ideological dictatorships, for which he coined these widely acknowledged terms. The twentieth anniversary of his death in 2000 was thus duly commemorated in Israel by conferences, newspaper and academic articles, and the publication of an anthology. On the 25th anniversary his memory was honored with a conference in the Israeli Academy of Sciences from which the publications in this issue stem. A few months before his death in 1980 Talmon completed the final chapter of his panoramic trilogy.³ The intellectual context in which Talmon wrote his trilogy, a landmark inquiry into the history of modern European ideas that spanned more than three decades, is clear: By the second half of the twentieth century liberal writers, many of them Jewish, such as Isaa Berlin, Hannah Arendt, Karl Popper and Harold Laski, were fiercely attacking the ideological origins of totalitarianism and the contemporary totalitarian regimes. Talmon took part in this enterprise by contributing his novel concepts and conceptualizations to the feisty liberal discourse. In his attempt to explain the demonic rise and power of modern coercive political systems Talmon provided a sweeping “grand history,” emphasizing the psychological, philosophical, sociological, and humanistic aspects of the epoch that commenced with the French Revolution. He attempted to design an overall scheme that would make sense of modern history’s excesses, and hopefully help the West avoid the errors that created modern tyrannies. Indeed, Talmon believed that he could expose the fallacies of totalitarian democracies by demonstrating the working of the vicious cycle that turned messianic utopias into despotic dictatorships. In order to do that, Talmon had to come to terms with the dynamic of what he understood as the major historical phenomena of modernity, the political revolution.

One cannot separate Talmon’s understanding of the nature of revolutions from his secular–liberal dispositions, which self-consciously followed the tradition of Constant, Tocqueville and Mill. Subsequently, his beliefs regarding social organization should be seen as an integral part of his methodology and his choice of historical themes. Talmon was a conscientious fighter for individual freedom, which he understood as minimizing the yoke of government while maintaining the social order. He complemented such libertarian beliefs with a scholarly methodology with which he carried out historical research empirically, by “the method of trial and error.”⁴ Indeed, his description of liberalism as “areligious,” and its “freedom from both the burden of sin on the one hand, and the craving for salvation on the other,” sheds light on his own political

¹Another similar “missing revolution” in Talmon’s writing is the Haitian Revolution. However, to trace the different set of reasons for Talmon’s avoidance of that Atlantic history will not fall under the scope of this inquiry.
⁴The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy, p. 255.
Talmon believed that only regimes that did not acquire unnecessary powers could avoid tyranny in the long run, a belief that made him lean toward social and political pragmatism: Talmon preferred ad hoc solutions in which governments played the mere role of a night-keeper. He was thus extremely suspicious of any attempt to achieve all-encompassing solutions. 

Talmon’s view of totalitarianism, which he believed opposed “both the diversity that goes with a multiplicity of social groups, and the diversity resulting from human spontaneity and empiricism,” thrust him into a life-long confrontation with doctrines that preached the concentration of all aspects of life under the firm guidance of revolutionary governments. Accordingly, he took the fact that “liberty is safer in countries where politics are not considered all important and where there are numerous levels of non-political private and collective activity, etc. than in countries where politics take everything in their stride” as an axiom. Although he recognized the faults of representational, liberal democracies, Talmon’s moderate and pluralistic temperance led him to believe that such arrangements consisted of the lesser of evils. Any system that set revolutionary goals and was implemented by a revolutionary dictatorship, he argued, would construct a regime of coercion, as in Robespierre’s France and Lenin’s and Stalin’s Russia. Revolutionary history thus led Talmon to believe that “messianic ideology cannot materialize without compulsion, and compulsion has no limits.” In such strained situations, according to Talmon, in which ideologies strove toward absolutes, ideologues would treat any manifestation of diversity as heretical and act harshly to suppress perceived heresies. Talmon thus praised the “organic, slow, half conscious growth” of institutions in the Anglo-Saxon style, and vehemently opposed revolutionary coups that strove to set up governing systems at a single stroke.

Talmon may have tolerated, or could at least understand, the French revolutionaries who were still inexperienced in the intricacies of democracy when they annulled liberties, apparently not understanding that active political debating in a parliamentary regime was not a sign of paralysis but rather a normal and healthy political practice. But the succeeding generations of revolutionaries should have learned the horrific lessons of the Jacobite dictatorship. Writing during the Cold War, he was anxious to prove that freedom was a value much more important than equality. Although many nineteenth-century doctrines found a moral fault in private property, the abolition of which “was to most messianic schools the condition, indeed realization, of that just and harmonious scheme of things, Talmon justified property in the name of the individual’s autonomy.

Total systems such as Lenin’s, which “reduce all complex human and social relationships to no more than the consequences of the system of private property,” did not leave enough room for individuality and heterodoxy, and thus endangered the most basic of freedoms, of speech and thought.

The modern era that commenced with the French revolution created “the encounter between a Messianic political creed and the masses,” a phenomenon Talmon labeled Political Messianism. Political messianics, as Talmon used to quote the French mathematician Henri Poincaré, “thirst before everything for certitude, do not really love truth.” The striving for absolute truth depended on unshakable belief in its existence, both in mathematics as well as in politics, and thus made enthusiasts deform reality as well as their attitudes towards those who did not think and feel the way they did. Messianic fanatics, which the French and Russian revolutions provided by the thousands, ignored the fact that dogmatic doctrines were necessarily acted out by flawed human agents and therefore would by definition be realized imperfectly. Since such dogmatic doctrines focused on collectivities and obviously lacked sensitivity to individuals, they were natural allies of tyranny, just as empiricism and skepticism were counterparts of liberty. Uncompromising doctrines further lead political groups toward ends they did not initially seek, as in the example of the Jacobins and the Terror, making the revolutionary condition constant. While he was writing about the French Revolution, obviously alarmed by
the Jacobins’ experiment in constructing a monolithic society according to a utopian scheme in a swift and violent act, Talmon voiced his criticism of the totalitarian Soviet Union. The current and immanent danger was the communist bloc that stood as an ideological adversary to liberalism and the west.

Notwithstanding Talmon’s vehement objection to political messianism, and his anxiety related to the Enlightenment-age origins and shared assumptions that liberalism and political messianism shared, he was attracted by the dynamic energy that messianic doctrines released. A crucial divide, however, between messianism and non-messianic paradigms was that where messianic visions pervaded “no debate is possible.” 14 Talmon pointed out that only a tolerant frame of discussion could contain a variety of political opinions. Messianism and the belief in absolutes turned any opposing belief into criminal dissention. His own political beliefs, diametrically opposed to those of political messianism, brought Talmon to confront the ideas of tyranny and oppression, and the revolutionary action that sustained them, throughout his prolific career.

II

In The Origins of the Totalitarian Democracy, Talmon asserted that the publication of the pamphlet What is the Third Estate? By the abbe Sieyes proclaimed the first manifestation of an “absolutist approach … [and] the first exponent of what we propose to call the Revolutionary attitude.” 15 Since then contemporaries have felt, Talmon believed, that they were experiencing a continuous revolution, and thus he set the idea of “revolution” as a key concept in his scholarship. European revolutionaries would not be satisfied with merely founding a democracy, since “as true revolutionaries” they wished to bring about a total socio-political change. They would not let such change occur by mere chance, or, as Talmon cynically put it, by the mere whims of the electorate. Hence, Talmon concluded that even when European radical revolutionaries aimed at realizing an ideal democracy, their democratic perfectionism did not originate from pluralism, but rather from that heartfelt wish that assumed that when the people are completely sovereign the unified and harmonious general-will emerges spontaneously.

According to Talmon, then, the hope to topple an existing order and subsequently to establish a utopian arrangement characterized and fueled the modern revolutionary stance. Hence, revolutions strive to upset the world’s order and to instill an alternative and uniform construction. If before the Age of Reason revolutionaries settled for abolishing authoritative regimes, Enlightenment-era dissenters attempted to create the world anew. Thus, according to Talmon, only revolutions occurring after the late-eighteenth century were idealist in the sense that they acted and attempted to construct society according to a preconceived idea. Indeed, Europe witnessed such revolutions that went a step further than merely resisting old regimes by founding alternative governments. Yet Talmon, as I suggested earlier, identified the first manifestation of this modern state of affairs in the France of 1789. He never referred to the affair that took place across the Atlantic in 1776.

Prima facie, the American Revolution fitted Talmon’s paradigm: The rebelling colonies overthrew the British monarchy in North America and fought a bloody eight-year war and subsequently founded a novel political arrangement, a Federal Constitution, which governed the United States of America. The American Founding Fathers surely believed that by constructing a republican-federal government they had created the world anew and thus ruptured the flow of universal history; the annals of the world could be divided, for all that they cared, into the era before and after their, American, revolution. Such beliefs echoed not only in contemporary rhetoric but significantly in the meaningful symbols and emblems with which Americans chose to ornament their newly devised republican sphere: the American Great Seal, for instance, bore the motto novus ordo seclorum, a new order of the ages, a maxim that signified the utopian tension within which the young American republic was created.

Indeed, twentieth-century historians did not ignore the resemblance, similarities and connections between the revolutions in America and France. One of the most important historical treatises of mid-twentieth century, The Age of Democratic Revolutions by Robert R. Palmer, underscored the connections between the history and politics of Europe and America, and described the American and French Revolutions as two

14 Unity and Particularity, p. 216.
15 The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy, p. 72.
intertwined events, which inaugurated the commencement of an era of Atlantic Revolutions. Other historians, both French and American, such as Patrice Higonnet of Harvard University, and Talmon’s colleague and close friend Yehoshua Arieli of the Hebrew University, demonstrated and analyzed the complex ways in which the American revolutionary precedent influenced the French experiment in revolution and in which the French Revolution echoed the American. Such analysis brought to the fore the many similarities between the American and French republicanism. However, as opposed to such historians, Talmon ignored the revolutionaries on the western shores of the Atlantic, which, one must not forget, toppled a European monarchy and founded a republic thirteen years before the revolutionaries in France. Hence, we shall attempt to understand in the remainder of this essay the absence of the American Revolution’s from Talmon’s corpus. We shall see how the different historiographical schools which interpreted the American Revolution during the past century, from the progressives at the beginning of the twentieth century to the neo-Whig historians during its final decades and the “Atlantic” historians at the beginning of the twenty-first century, did not interpret or propose revolutionary paradigms that could conform to Talmon’s powerful if exclusive interpretation.

Throughout most of the nineteenth century mainstream historiography of the United States concluded that the Revolution and the creation of the American republic consisted of a salutary step on the way to realizing perfect freedom in America. Indeed, Victorian Americans tended to believe unquestioningly that, in the spirit of the Declaration of Independence, self-evident liberal truths were realized in their country. During the years that the American democracy sprawled westwards relentlessly and slavery was abolished they felt they need neither explain nor justify those truths. Indeed, America seemed to many practitioners of this line of historical interpretation as a superior moral experiment in freedom. This was indeed a “Whig interpretation of American history,” that understood the revolutionary past as a fight of good against evil, of freedom aspiring Americans against the tyrannical British Empire. The American Whig historians, first and foremost George Bancroft, who understood the forces of freedom that the Revolution released as world-liberating, teleological and unequivocally benign, could not avoid large-scale de-contextualization and misrepresentation of ideas and the ways in which they affected historical processes. Indeed, Whig historians told the history of America in “the simple rhythms and repeated choruses of a popular ballad.”

This valorizing historiography, which was the backdrop to a new generation of historians that emerged in the dawning of the twentieth century, was deeply influenced by the Progressive Movement. Progressivism, fueled by an ideology of social justice, attempted to repair the ailments of American society that were compounded by the early twentieth-century by the dire consequences of rapid industrial growth. Unsurprisingly, historians who were influenced by progressive ideas described American society as torn by class-based tensions and economic interests; their tone was unequivocally Marxist. Such an interpretation dramatically diverged from the Whig narrative that characterized nineteenth-century historiography, which emphasized liberty as the primary motivator and engine of American history and portrayed American history in terms of progress (as opposed to progressivism). Yet, as Americans came to terms with the suffering and the trampling of the rights of native Indians when American interests decidedly expanded the nation’s continental sphere to global influence, and industrialization created a proletarian class for the first time, America’s assurance regarding the nature of the freedom that the Revolution and Constitution promised was badly shaken. Within this context Progressive historians argued that the American Revolution should not be understood as patriotic response of a cohesive society to imperial tyranny, if only because of the simple fact that late eighteenth-century American society was not so. Indeed, the Progressive historians argued that one must understand the Revolution through the severe class-rivalries that characterized American society. American history was thus written during the Progressive Era as a dramatic narrative that pitched “the people” against “the aristocracy,” a conflict in which the revered Founding Fathers were not seen anymore as

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19Hofstadter. The Progressive Historians.
motivated by revolutionary altruism. Rather, the leaders of the revolutionary generation once depicted as “an assembly of demigods,” were now understood as a group of nefarious power and money hungry politicians.20

Thus, we should not be surprised that the Progressive historians, who ruled the American historiographical landscape well into the twentieth century, saw the American Revolution as reflecting class warfare in the likeness of the French Revolution; in fact, although it occurred thirteen years later, they interpreted the American Revolution in light of that continental revolution. Thus, the Progressives represented the American Revolution as the rise of deprived and privilege-less masses who strove for equality and democratization, just as they understood the French Revolution. In America, however, the Progressive historians, led by Charles Beard in his epoch-making Economic Interpretation of the American Constitution, argued that democratization was halted by the establishment of the Federal Constitution in 1787.21 Hence, instead of seeing the Constitution as a colossal feat, as their predecessors had done, they perceived it as the workings of a cabal that seized the people’s powers and invested those powers in a small yet powerful economic oligarchy.

The paradigm of French Revolution proved, however, a bond too loose to tie Progressive interpretations with Talmon: If the Progressive historians considered humans as economic entities who based their behavior according to predicted profits and incentives, Talmon held an ideal view of history, of temporal processes as powered by ideas. Talmon’s intellectual inclination was indeed anti-Marxist. Marxist materialistic views understood ideas as epiphenomenal, as reflections of deeper social powers, or rather as abstractions that were meant to cover and obscure “real,” selfish motivations. Thus, for instance, the American Constitution seemed to a whole generation of progressive historians as an economic document, destructive to the good of most Americans, and produced by a small profit-motivated group, a far-cry from the idealist Whigs who saw the Constitution as a distillation of republican wisdom. The American Revolution indeed appeared, in Carl Becker’s immortal words, not as a battle for home rule, but rather a struggle for “who shall rule at home.”22 It was, in other words, a power struggle between American social classes. Such materialistic-driven revolutionaries, not motivated by utopian visions but rather scrambling in a political power-grab, could not sit under the same roof with Talmonian revolutionary radicals.

After World War II a new generation of researchers, Talmon’s contemporaries, rewrote the history of the Revolution. These new historians, who provided an alternative to the Progressive interpretation of American history that would dominate the historiography of the mid-twentieth century, argued that the political and social changes that coincided with the American Revolution were less dramatic than the Progressives claimed. As historian Jack Greene observed, those historians demonstrated that “there was no wholesale turnover in political leadership, immediate repudiation of the ideals of upper-class leadership, or fundamental distribution of socioeconomic power during the era of the Revolution.”23 But this generation of historians who began writing in the late 1940s, who were veterans of the Depression and the Second World War, believed that they should not only disprove their predecessors’ presumptions and conclusions, but also that they should find the roots of what they saw as America’s exceptionalism. The critical progressive analysis would not suffice for such a challenge. These historians, who would be collectively known as the “consensus historians,” shared with Talmon much more than the progressives did. Both Talmon’s scholarship and the American consensus school were reactions to the Cold War; while Talmon wished to uproot the ideological foundations of totalitarianism, consensus historians wanted to underscore what they saw as the simple and pragmatic charm of American liberty as opposed to the atrocities of the repressive regimes of the twentieth century. Hence, in striking opposition to the progressives who clustered around interpretations of class and economic tensions, the consensus historians identified a blessed social, political, and economic middle-ground as the characteristic feature in American history. Thus, Louis Hartz, a prominent consensus scholar, could argue in his landmark book The Liberal Tradition in America, coincidentally published simultaneously with The Totalitarian Democracy, that America always consisted of a liberal community that was created without the burden of

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21Charles A. Beard. Economic Interpretation of the American Constitution, 1912.


“a feudal past.” America, according to Hartz, was “born equal.” Without feudalism to retard American liberalism, John Locke’s liberal ideas seemed to dominate the American political discourse. Hartz and the consensus historians believed that American political thought, based on ideas of rule by consent and natural rights (including the right to the protection of property), was Lockian from its inception. Indeed, Lockian premises were so universal in America that they seemed to have been shared by all parties of the major American conflicts. The conflicts were thus only virtual struggles, reflecting the two sides of the same Lockian coin. The progressives, according to this consensual interpretation (a consensus, we now understand, around John Locke’s ideas), were badly mistaken when they emphasized tensions in their interpretation of American history. America, argued Hartz and his colleagues, operated under an umbrella of widely shared Lockian assumptions.

The meaning of this consensual situation was, however, that Americans lacked the ideological motivation and even the need to develop the social vision of European radicalism. The American Revolution, according to Hartz, was a mere colonial rebellion, a conservative and legalistic affair. Thus, for example, the discourse of natural rights during the Revolution was employed by both the Patriots and Loyalists. Should a revolution in which the vocabulary, beliefs and assumptions were shared by all parties be seen as radical, Hartz and the rest of his generation asked? The consensus historians further pointed at what they saw as the minimal violence and the insignificant redistribution of wealth and political power that the Revolution brought about. Consensus historians concluded now that the American revolutionary urban mobs who fired the imagination of the Progressive historians played marginal roles in the revolutionary drama. Even more importantly, political struggles were not seen anymore as clashes between social classes but rather as conflicts between groups competing with each other within a framework well defined by a broad consensual liberal ideology.

Once more, however, Talmon could not feel comfortable with a stance such as the consensus historians’, which underscored Americans’ pragmatic wisdom and their uneasiness with a complex philosophy of life. Although both the consensual historians and Talmon reacted from their different perspectives to the horrors of twentieth-century totalitarian regimes, Talmon’s American contemporaries strove to represent the United States as an ideology-less country, or as Daniel Boorstein put it, as a graveyard for European Utopias. Hence, consensus historians perceived the American Revolution as a conservative event, an attempt to maintain and preserve ancient British rights and American property, which had at its center legalistic and constitutional questions. Although the consensus historians operated, like Talmon, in the intellectual and cultural space that the Cold War carved, they interpreted the American Revolution as a liberal episode, fundamentally a-totalitarian. The American Revolution, according to the consensus historians, did not only lack the violent fervor that Talmon found in European revolutions, but was also short of ideology; Hartz and his cohorts saw America as pragmatically adopting Lockian ideas for the sake of convenience and its lack of metaphysics. While Talmon underscored the horrors of totalitarian ideologies, the consensus historians chose to emphasize the uniqueness of American history, which was manifest through its lack of conflict. The American Revolution as seen through consensual lenses, namely as ideology and conflict-free, could not be reconciled with Talmon’s historical constructions.

A series of essays and monographs that were published starting in the late 1960s shook the primacy of liberal doctrines in the interpretation of the creation of the American republic. The first signal was an essay by Edmund Morgan that identified the ideological strands in the American Revolution that would soon be incorporated under the title “republicanism”: the fear of English corruption and luxury, and the anxiety that Americans would not be able to hold to their civic virtues for long and thus lose their republic. This seminal essay that depicted the founders of the United States as paranoid and anxious, a loaded accusation in post-McCarthy America, fractured the harmonious structure of the liberalistic and individualistic historiography of the consensus school. Now, historians had to confront a Revolution that could no longer be seen as Lockian,

25. As opposed to such views, recent accounts of the American War of Independence emphasize its brutality, especially in the south, and view it as a civil war. See, for example, Ray Raphael. A People’s History of the American Revolution: How Common People Shaped the Fight for Independence. (Perennial: New York, 2002).
rational, and pragmatic. Rather, they faced a cluster of insecurities and seeming irrationalities. After years of virtual agreement among scholars as to the nature of the American Revolution, students of early America began to doubt whether Locke was indeed the central pillar of American ideology. A new paradigm took liberalism’s place, and once it crystallized during the 1970s it became known as the “republican synthesis” in American history.28

The historians who participated in constructing the republican synthesis were labeled “neo-Whigs,” because like the nineteenth-century Whig historians they too believed that ideas in general, and particularly republican ideology, had a central role in the history of the American Revolution. Once more then we may discern concrete similarities between a school of American history and Talmon’s attitude toward the history of revolutions. The neo-Whigs, like Talmon and unlike the progressives and the consensus historians, placed ideas in the center of the historical process. Unlike the progressives that understood ideas as abstractions covering “real” economic interests, the neo-Whigs were acutely sensitive to language, rhetoric, and political thought and culture. Indeed, Talmon’s view, of “the importance of ideas as historic agents” would have fitted them easily.29 The neo-Whigs did not see the American Revolution as a Lockian-consensual event, but rather as a revolution that was motivated by civic-humanistic and republican ideas. According to the neo-Whig historians, American revolutionaries did not pursue their natural rights but rather wished to realize themselves as citizens realizing their civic-personality through participation in republican politics. Hence, they interpreted the American patriots not as individualistic hedonists but rather as communal altruists. In his magisterial tome The Machiavellian Moment John Pocock revealed the genealogy of the American republican tradition, and tied it to the opposition discourse in eighteenth-century England, to the Italian communes of the Renaissance, and with the Greco-Roman world of farmer–soldier citizens in the world of the city-states.30 As opposed to the Lockian conception of the consensus historians that perceived American revolutionaries as if their discursive mode was rights-centered, the neo-Whigs interpreted the American Revolution as driven by a discourse of civil duties. Americans were not liberals pursuing their material happiness, but rather acted out Roman-like roles as their only way to manifest their virtuous revolutionary personality.

Even though the neo-Whigs depicted the Revolution in terms of intellectual radicalism and revolutionary language, they too, like the consensus historians, understood the consequences of the American Revolution in conservative terms. The neo-Whigs agreed, for example, that the Revolution preserved and even reinforced the grip of American elites, which contemporaries tended to understand as a “natural aristocracy,” a merit-based social system corresponding with civic virtue, not inheritance. Thus, the revolution’s radicalism was, according to the neo-Whigs, a matter more of the vigor of the ideas it contained and less of the social change which it propelled. With such perceptions that interpreted the American Revolution as radical in thought but not in deed, in ideas but not in consequences, Talmon’s ideas could not, once more, be reconciled. A revolution should have been, according to Talmon, we remember, a general, stirring, world-shaking event, not limited and ordered activity. If a Talmonian revolution was a forward-looking, modern event, the American Revolution, as seen by the neo-Whig historians, was backward facing, “the last act of the civic Renaissance.”31

Arguably even current historiographical interpretations of the American Revolution that dominate the twenty-first century’s intellectual landscape would not have convinced Talmon to add the Revolution of 1776 to his revolutionary corpus. Hence, a contemporary view that perceives itself as “Atlantic” describes the First British Empire, the New World Empire of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, as a structure defined by a poor, decentralized English state, lacking decision, control, and enforcing abilities.32 The weakness of that empire, Atlantic historians argue, created the need to legitimize orders and instructions that originated in the

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29 The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy, p. 79.
32 For a statement on the nature of Atlantic history, see David Armitage and Michael J. Braddick. The British Atlantic World, 1500–1800. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).
British metropole by the consent of the colonial peripheries. Indeed, the fact that Britain did not have the means to impose its directions molded the relationship between the metropole and the peripheries as an association based upon negotiations between the imperial center and its colonial peripheries. According to Atlantic historians, the wide (and inadvertent) autonomy of the colonial Anglo-American societies together with the enormous size of the American continent and the unprecedented portion of the White population that owned farming land (which increased the participants in the political process to unprecedented numbers), made the British colonies in America the most radical of societies in the West. The large number of landowners and the virtually unlimited quantity of that most-valuable resource, the unheard of economic opportunities that were opened to (White) immigrants, the virtual lack of poverty and of poor, the social mobility, the equality in the face of the law, all these created societies with a European shell but with a distinct American content.

Shedding the burden of the British Crown, Americans needed not, according to such interpretations, to experience a radical and violent revolution, as France would shortly afterwards experience, since these societies were inherently radical; indeed, they may be seen as republican already under the formal auspices of the British Crown. Once the Revolution was over, the ruling elites preserved their pre-revolutionary power and status, and the thirteen republican governments that succeeded the colonial charters brought to mind in many ways the polities they had replaced, minus the Monarch. Thus, this interpretation argues, not only did continuity characterize the structure of political power before and after the Revolution, but it were also the respective republican states, not the Federal government, that helped stabilize social relations, preserve order and the rule of law, and most importantly, defend private property rights. Thus, the American Revolution, as opposed to the French Revolution, did not generate drastic social change, nor did it create a unified nation state as effective power and sovereignty remained in the respective states, not in Washington, DC, for many decades after the founding of the Federal Constitution in 1788. The new republican regimes in the separate independent states did not encourage significant social change, Atlantic historians assume, because the pursuit after personal gain remained the central cultural imperative in America. After the Revolution, as before it, American societies were characterized by social permissiveness and relative equality (among Euro-Americans), while private property remained the chief criterion for determining social class. Hence, one can identify the origins of the American Democracy that would emerge during the nineteenth-century decades before the Revolution. Indeed, these Atlanticists believe, the American Revolution merely brought long-term processes to fruition. In other words, the changes that coincided with the American Revolution were likely to occur anyway. Once more we encounter a non-revolutionary revolution, one that would not fit Talmon’s revolutionary mold.

We have traced the historiography of the American Revolution in the past century in order to make sense of its absence from Jacob Talmon’s corpus. Beyond, however, the difficulty in reconciling the different historiographical approaches toward the American Revolution with Talmon’s view of the nature of revolutions lie two deeper obstacles. First, a pessimistic strain in Talmon’s thought ran against the successes of the American Revolution. Talmon believed that infuriated, revolutionary “masses” were prone to make irrational political decisions, and thus fall in the snare of totalitarian solutions. Describing Europeans caught in revolutionary situations as if “predetermined fate vanquishes” their deeds, Talmon perceived revolutions not only as events in political history but also as processes that turned human agents into marionettes, as if forced to act out predestined and destructive roles. This modus operandi emphasized the potential destructive powers of ideologies and led Talmon to conclude that rigid belief systems easily justified and encouraged “cruel and sadistic measures,” much more than “motivat[ing] people to act rightfully.” Political Messianism, which according to Talmon has characterized Western history since the late-eighteenth century, held out “terrible possibilities of mass tyranny” by uniting millions in a belief in obtainable social perfection. Hence, attempts to establish a heavenly kingdom on earth ended up in the establishment of totalitarian regimes.

35Myth of the Nation, p. 171.
36Unity and Particularity, p. 315.
37The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy, p. 170.
Since Talmon believed that all-encompassing solutions appealed to human psychology much more than measured steps, he was inevitably a latent pessimist. Such a position made the American Revolution’s apparent successes hard to make sense of: The American patriots not only achieved home-rule in a relatively orderly fashion, but they also established a coherent alternative government through debate and reason. Indeed, the American Revolution never experienced the bloody French excesses of the Terror and the Vendée, while it created the nation that had become by the time that Talmon was condemning totalitarianism the vanguard in the battle against political messianism.

Talmon’s pessimism may have indeed challenged his professed liberalism (a stance which is usually correlated with belief in human progress and rational agency). It may have also partially explained his self-distancing from the American Revolution. Even more problematic for incorporating the American Revolution in his writing, however, was Talmon’s analysis of the revolutionary dynamic, which embodied “the unmistakable surging march of history.” 38

In comparing the French and the Russian revolutions, Talmon found an unfathomable and inescapable law which causes revolutionary salvationist schemes to evolve into regimes of terror, and the promise of a perfect direct democracy to assume in practice the form of totalitarian dictatorship. 39

He was further puzzled as to why utopias “always turn from a vision of release into a snare and a yoke?” 40 Every revolutionary movement that wished to bring about a natural and harmonious state of affairs, a utopia, he argued, apparently necessarily deteriorated. Ideological revolutions, Talmon concluded, coercively imposed abstract ideas on imperfect people, and must transform into tyranny. The French and Russian revolutions constantly on his mind, Talmon thus perceived a historical law that turns totalitarian democracies into authoritarian regimes.

This is the curse on salvation creeds: to be born out of the noblest impulse of man, and to degenerate into the weapons of tyranny. An exclusive creed cannot admit opposition. It is bound to feel itself surrounded by innumerable enemies. Its believers can never settle down to a normal existence. 41

The degeneration of totalitarian democracies, the decline of utopias into terrifying realities, was born, according to Talmon, out of the urge to enforce absolute solutions upon all too human societies.

Such views of revolutions were hardly compatible with the American Revolution, which, as we have seen, was perceived by most historians as relatively orderly and lacked the orgiastic bloodbaths of its European counterparts. Although, as we have seen, Progressive historians, as well as their “neo-Progressive” successors, repeatedly interpreted the American Revolution as a “social movement” that bred radical social ideas and action, what seems striking about that revolution are the continuities between pre-revolutionary and post-revolutionary America. 42 Hence, Talmonian images of masses of revolutionaries, “acting spontaneously like an elemental force,” and destinies of entire nations shaped “by way of, it seems, inescapably recurrent patterns” cannot be easily reconciled with the American Revolution. 43 Indeed, if anything, the United States, by concluding its revolutionary chapter with the violence-free ratification of the Federal Constitution, defied the historical patterns that Talmon identified. American revolutionaries seem to have dodged what Talmon deemed “the immense potency of history.” 44

We may conclude then that it was not merely a question of historical interpretation and historiographical trends that swayed Talmon to ignore the American Revolution. Rather, it may have been the fact that he understood that New World revolution as anything but messianic. No scholarly position has advised

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38 Myth of the Nation, p. 536.
39 Myth of the Nation, p. 535.
40 Political Messianism, p. 16.
41 The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy, p. 253.
42 See, for example, J. Franklin Jameson. The American Revolution as a Social Movement. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1926); The most consistent Neo-Progressive historian over the past decades of the American Revolution has been Gary Nash, most recently in The Unknown American Revolution: The Unruly Birth of Democracy and the Struggle to Create American. (New York: Viking, 2005).
43 Political Messianism, p. 408; Myth of the Nation, p. 171.
44 Myth of the Nation, p. 171.
otherwise in the past two centuries. Since the American Revolution was a Lockian, or rather a Machiavellian, event, definitely not a Rousseauian Revolution, Talmon chose to ignore the Atlantic character of modern revolutions that R.R. Palmer has magisterially described. Talmon concentrated on Messianic Europe and left the pursuit of American happiness for others. The Revolution of 1776 remained, at least in Talmon’s writing, a missing revolution.

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