

The Americans: The Colonial Experience *

Ch. 1: How Orthodoxy Made the Puritans Practical

Never was a people more sure that it was on the right track. “That which is our greatest comfort, and meanes of defence above all others,” Francis Higginson wrote in the earliest days, in *New-Englands Plantation*, “is, that we have here the true Religion and holy Ordinances of Almightye God taught amongst us . . . thus we doubt not but God will be with us, and if God be with us, who can be against us?”

But their orthodoxy had a peculiar character. Compared with Americans of the 18th or the 19th century, the Puritans surely were theology-minded. The doctrines of the Fall of Man, of Sin, of Salvation, Predestination, Election, and Conversion were their meat and drink. Yet what really distinguished them in their day was that they were less interested in theology itself, than in the application of theology to everyday life, and especially to society. From the 17th-century point of view their interest in theology was practical. They were less concerned with perfecting their formulation of the Truth than with making their society in America embody the Truth they already knew. Puritan New England was a noble experiment in applied theology.

The Puritans in the Wilderness—away from Old World centers of learning, far from great university libraries, threatened daily by the thousand and one hardships and perils of a savage America—were poorly situated for elaborating a theology and disputing its fine points. For such an enterprise John Calvin in Switzerland or William Ames in Holland was much better located. But for testing a theology, for seeing whether Zion could be rebuilt if men abandoned the false foundations of the centuries since Jesus—for this New England offered a rare opportunity.

So it was that although the Puritans in the New World made the Calvinist theology their point of departure, they made it precisely that and nothing else. From it they departed at once into the practical life. Down to the middle of the 18th century, there was hardly an important work of speculative theology produced in New England.

It was not that the writing of books was impossible in the New World. Rather, it was that theological speculation was not what interested the new Americans. Instead, there came from the New England presses and from the pens of New England authors who sent their works to England an abundance of sermons, textual commentaries, collections of “providences,” statutes, and remarkable works of history. With the possible exception of Roger Williams,

who was out of the stream of New England orthodoxy anyway, Massachusetts Bay did not produce a major figure in theology until the days of Jonathan Edwards in the mid-18th century. And by then Puritanism was all but dead.

During the great days of New England Puritanism there was not a single important dispute which was primarily theological. There were, to be sure, crises over who should rule New England, whether John Winthrop or Thomas Dudley or Harry Vane should be governor, whether the power or representation of different classes in the community should be changed, whether the Child Petition should be accepted, whether penalties for crime should be fixed by statute, whether the assistants should have a veto, whether outlying towns should have more representatives in the General Court. Even the disputes with Anne Hutchinson and Roger Williams primarily concerned the qualifications, power, and prestige of the rulers. If, indeed, the Puritans were theology-minded, what they argued about was institutions.

One gets the same impression in looking for evidences of political speculation, for philosophical inquiry into the nature of community and the function of government. Nothing in Puritanism itself was uncongenial to such speculation; Puritans in England at the time were discussing the fine points of their theory: What was the true nature of liberty? When should a true Puritan resist a corrupt civil government? When should diversity be tolerated? And we need not look only to giants like John Milton. The debates among the officers in Cromwell’s Puritan Army between 1647 and 1649 reveal how different their intellectual atmosphere was from that of New England. They were not professional intellectuals, but soldiers and men of action; yet even they stopped to argue the theory of revolution and the philosophy of sovereignty.

In England, of course, “Puritanism” was much more complex than it was in Massachusetts Bay Colony. It included representatives of a wide range of doctrines, from presbyterians, independents, and separatists, through levelers and millenarians. Which of these was at the center of English Puritanism was itself a matter of dispute. Within the English Puritan ranks, therefore, there was much lively debate. It was not only criticism from fellow-Puritans that Cromwell and his men had to face. They well knew that any community they built in England would have to find some place for the dozens of sects—from Quakers through Papists—who had made England their home. English Puritan literature in the 17th century sparkled with polemics.

Seventeenth-century America had none of the speculative vigor of English Puritanism. For Massachusetts Bay possessed an orthodoxy. During the classic age of the first generation, at least, it was a community of self-selected conformists. In 1637 the General Court passed an order prohibiting anyone from settling within the colony without first having his orthodoxy approved by the magistrates. Perhaps never again, until the McCarran Act, were our immigrants required to be so aseptic. John Winthrop was bold and clear in defense of the order. Here was a community formed by free consent of its

* Boorstin, Daniel J. *The Americans: The Colonial Experience*. New York: Vintage Books, 1958.

members. Why should they not exclude dangerous men, or men with dangerous thoughts? What right had supporters of a subversive Mr. Wheelwright to claim entrance to the colony? “If we conceive and finde by sadd experience that his opinions are such, as by his own profession cannot stand with externall peace, may we not provide for our peace, by keeping off such as would strengthen him and infect others with such dangerous tenets?”

In the eyes of Puritans this was the peculiar opportunity of New England. Why not for once see what true orthodoxy could accomplish? Why not in one unspoiled corner of the world declare a truce on doubts, on theological bickering? Here at last men could devote their full energy to *applying* Christianity—not to clarifying doctrine but to building Zion. Nathaniel Ward was speaking for Puritan New England when, in his *Simple Cobler of Aggawam* (1647) he declared, “I dare take upon me, to be the Herauld of New-England so farre, as to proclaime to the world, in the name of our Colony, that all Familists, Antinomians, Anabaptists, and other Enthusiasts, shall have free Liberty to keep away from us, and such as will come to be gone as fast as they can, the sooner the better.”

The Puritans in New England were surprisingly successful for some years at keeping their community orthodox. In doing so, they also made it sterile of speculative thought. Their principal theological treatises were works by William Ames (who never saw New England) and John Norton’s *Orthodox Evangelist*, a rudimentary summary of the works of English divines. In England the presbyterians and independents and levelers within Puritanism were daring each other to extend and clarify their doctrines; but we see little of this in America.

A dissension which in England would have created a new sect within Puritanism, simply produced another colony in New England. The boundless physical space, the surrounding wilderness deprived the New England ministry of the need to develop within its own theology that spaciousness, that room for variation, which came to characterize Puritanism in England. When Anne Hutchinson and her followers caused trouble by their heterodox views and unauthorized evening meetings, she was tried and “excommunicated.” The result, as described by Winthrop, was that in March 1638, “she . . . went by land to Providence, and so to the island in the Naragansett Bay, which her husband and the rest of that sect had purchased of the Indians, and prepared with all speed to remove unto.” The dissidence of Roger Williams—the only movement within Massachusetts Bay in the 17th century which promised a solid enrichment of theory—led to his banishment in October, 1635. It was only after Williams’ return to England and his developing friendship with John Milton that he wrote his controversial books.

In New England the critics, doubters, and dissenters were expelled from the community; in England the Puritans had to find ways of living with them. It was in England, therefore, that a modern theory of toleration began to

develop. Milton and his less famous and less reflective contemporaries were willing to debate, as if it were an open question, “whether the magistrate have, or ought to have, any compulsive and restrictive power in matters of religion.” Such was the current of European liberal thought in which Roger Williams found himself. But Williams was banished from Massachusetts Bay Colony and became a by-word of heterodoxy and rebellion. He died in poverty, an outcast from that colony. If his little Providence eventually prospered, it was never to be more than a satellite of the powerful orthodox mother-colony.

What actually distinguished that mother-colony in the great age of New England Puritanism was its refusal, for reasons of its own, to develop a theory of toleration. In mid-17th century England we note a growing fear that attempts to suppress error would inevitably suppress truth, a fear that magistrates’ power over religion might give them tyranny over conscience. “I know there is but one truth,” wrote the author of one of the many English pamphlets on liberty of conscience in 1645, “But this truth cannot be so easily brought forth without this liberty; and a general restraint, though intended but for errors, yet through the unskilfulness of men, may fall upon the truth. And better many errors of some kind suffered than one useful truth be obstructed or destroyed.” In contrast, the impregnable view of New England Puritanism was expressed in the words of John Cotton:

The Apostle directeth, Tit. 3.10 and giveth the Reason, that in fundamentall and principall points of Doctrine or Worship, the Word of God in such things is so cleare, that hee cannot but bee convinced in Conscience of the dangerous Errour of his way, after once or twice Admonition, wisely and faithfully dispensed. And then if any one persist, it is not out of Conscience, but against his Conscience, as the Apostle saith, vers. 11. He is subverted and sinneth, being condemned of Himselfe, that is, of his owne Conscience. So that if such a Man after such Admonition shall still persist in the Errour of his way, and be therefore punished; He is not persecuted for Cause of Conscience, but for sinning against his Owne Conscience.

The leaders of Massachusetts Bay Colony enjoyed the luxury, no longer feasible in 17th century England, of a pure and simple orthodoxy.

The failure of New England Puritans to develop a theory of toleration, or even freely to examine the question, was not in all ways a weakness. It made their literature less rich and gave much of their writing a quaint and crabbed sound, but for a time at least, it was a source of strength. Theirs was not a philosophic enterprise; they were, first and foremost, community-builders. The energies which their English contemporaries gave to sharpening the distinctions between “compulsive” and “restrictive” powers in religion, between “matters essential” and “matters indifferent” and to a host of other questions which have never ceased to bother reflective students of political theory, the American Puritans were giving to marking off the boundaries of their new towns, to

enforcing their criminal laws, and to fighting the Indian menace. Their very orthodoxy strengthened their practical bent.

American Puritans were hardly more distracted from their practical tasks by theology and metaphysics than we are today. They transcended theological preoccupation precisely because they had no doubts and allowed no dissent. Had they spent as much of their energy in debating with each other as did their English contemporaries, they might have lacked the singlemindedness needed to overcome the dark, unpredictable perils of a wilderness. They might have merited praise as precursors of modern liberalism, but they might never have helped found a nation.

Ch. 24: A Philosophy of the Unexpected

By the early 17th century, Europe had accumulated a rich but cumbersome cultural baggage. Systems of thought, established institutions, professional traditions, dogmatically-defined bodies of knowledge regarded as all that was worth knowing—these cluttered the landscape of England and of Europe. The bare earth was almost nowhere visible.

Systems always breed more systems; when new liberating movements arose in England and on the continent during the 17th and 18th centuries, they took the familiar European form of anti-systems. Thus, “the Enlightenment,” which claimed to free men from superstition and from the dogma of old authority and petrified thought, itself acquired much of the rigidity and authoritarianism of what it set out to combat. The European Enlightenment was in fact little more than the confinement of the mind in a prison of 17th- and 18th-century design. The new “rationalism”—which Europeans boasted was their new freedom—was the old human dogmatic servitude. What Carl Becker described as “The Heavenly City of the 18th-Century Philosophers” was a mirage of freedom. The best European minds of that age labored to build the new- model walls in which they were to be confined. Liberation could not be conceived in any other way in Europe.

Life in America was to give new meaning to the very idea of liberation. For Americans, cultural novelty and intellectual freedom were not to mean merely the exchange of one set of idols for another; they meant removal into the open air.

The most fertile novelty of the New World was not its climate, its plants, its animals, or its minerals, but its new concept of knowledge. The wealth of the new-found land could enable men to live well by Old World standards, but the realization that knowledge itself might be different from what men had before believed—this opened up realms never before dreamed of. Men in the New World found unsuspected possibilities in life everywhere. No American invention has influenced the world so powerfully as the concept of

knowledge which sprang from the American experience. To understand that discovery we must look to the earliest colonial days.

When has a culture owed so little to its few “great” minds or its few hereditarily fortunate men and women? One of the contrasts between the culture of Europe and that of the United States is that the older culture traditionally depended on the monumental accomplishments of the few, while the newer culture—diffused, elusive, process-oriented—depended more on the novel, accreting ways of the many.

In most past societies—certainly in the aristocratic societies of western Europe—rulers and priests had been the “explaining” classes. They were the acknowledged possessors of the ways of knowing, the secret keys to the ancestral treasurehouse of mystery and of knowledge. The Protestant Reformation, with its dogma of the universal priesthood of all believers, did, of course, discourage reverence toward a special class of “knowers,” but there soon arose a “protestant” priesthood (in the Geneva of Calvin or the London of Archbishop Laud) which, in its turn, denied freedom of discovery to the laity or to heretics. The common people could show their good sense only by acting according to ways approved by their “betters.”

American life quickly proved uncongenial to any special class of “knowers.” Men here were more interested in the elaboration of experience than in the elaboration of “truth”; the novelties of a New World led them to suspect that elaborate verification might itself mislead. As William James explained at the close of the 19th century, technically completed verifications are seldom needed in experience. In America, he said, “the possession of truth, so far from being ... an end in itself, is only a preliminary means toward other vital satisfactions.” Sometimes consciously, sometimes through the force of circumstance, Americans listened to the dictates of “self-evidence.” Before long this appeal to self-evidence became a distinctive popular epistemology—a substitute for philosophy or a philosophy for non-academic thinkers.

The more encumbered a society is with ancient culture and institutions, the more likely is its most profound and well-organized thought to diverge from its way of acting. One of the ways in which American experience liberated the New World was by freeing men from the notion that every grand institution needed a grand foundation of systematic thought: that successful government had to be supported by profound political theory, that moving religion had to be supported by subtle theology—in a word, that the best living had to have behind it the most sophisticated thinking. This mood was to explain the superficially contradictory strains of the practical and the traditional in the American mind—the openness to novel ways that worked and the readiness to accept ancient and traditional laws—for both common sense and common law were time-proven and unreflective ways of settling problems.

In America what seemed to be needed was not so much a new variant of European “schools” of philosophy as a philosophy of the unexpected. Too

much of the best-elaborated thinking of the European mind added up to proof that America and its novelties were impossible. A less aristocratic and more mobile New World required a way of interpreting experience that would be ready for the outlandish and would be equally available to everyone everywhere.

“Common sense” was, of course, an old and thoroughly respectable notion in western European civilization. Some Scottish thinkers in the 18th century—they were not without their influence in America and one actually had become the favorite philosopher of George III—elaborated a special “philosophy” of common sense. In America, however, the more influential appeal to self-evidence did not take any such academic form; it was a philosophy which had no philosophers. It had to be so, for it was a way of thinking pervaded by doubt that the professional thinker could think better than others.

The appeal to self-evidence did not displace more academic and more dogmatic modes of thinking among all Americans, but American life nourished it until it became a prevailing mode. It was not the system of a few great American Thinkers, but the mood of Americans thinking. It rested on two sentiments. The first was a belief that the reasons men give for their actions are much less important than the actions themselves, that it is better to act well for wrong or unknown reasons than to treasure a systematized “truth” with ambiguous conclusions, that deep reflection does not necessarily produce the most effective action. The second was a belief that the novelties of experience must be freely admitted into men’s thought. Why strain the New World through the philosophical sieves of the Old? If philosophy denied the innuendoes of experience, the philosophy—not the experience—must be rejected. Therefore, a man’s mind was wholesome not when it possessed the most refined implements for dissecting and ordering all knowledge, but when it was most sensitive to the unpredicted whisperings of environment. It was less important that the mind be elegantly furnished than that it be open and unencumbered.

Ch. 25: The Appeal to Self-Evidence

“We hold these truths to be self-evident,” the second sentence of the Declaration of Independence proclaims. In deriving the essential social truths from their “self-evidence”—rather than from their being “sacred & undeniable” as the original draft had read—the Declaration was building on distinctly American ground.

The roots of the appeal to self-evidence were described by the Rev. Hugh Jones as early as 1724 in his character of the Virginians:

Thus they have good natural Notions, and will soon learn Arts and Sciences; but are generally diverted by Business or Inclination from profound Study, and prying into the Depth of Things; being ripe for Management of their

Affairs, before they have laid so good a Foundation of Learning, and had such Instructions, and acquired such Accomplishments, as might be instilled into such good natural Capacities. Nevertheless thro’ their quick Apprehension, they have a Sufficiency of Knowledge, and Fluency of Tongue, tho’ their Learning for the most Part be but superficial.

They are more inclinable to read Men by Business and Conversation, than to dive into Books, and are for the most Part only desirous of learning what is absolutely necessary, in the shortest and best Method.

The matured statement of this point of view is found in Franklin and Jefferson, the most eloquent spokesmen of an American and anti- aristocratic way of thinking about thinking. On more than one occasion Franklin refused to engage in learned controversy. “Disputes,” he retorted to European critics of his ideas on electricity, “are apt to sour one’s temper, and disturb one’s quiet.” If his observations were correct, he said, they would readily be confirmed by other men’s experience; if not, they ought to be rejected. He expressed the gist of his belief in self-evidence to an English correspondent in his 1786 report on American progress in government. “We are, I think, in the right Road of Improvement, for we are making Experiments. I do not oppose all that seem wrong, for the Multitude are more effectually set right by Experience, than kept from going wrong by Reasoning with them.” This is much the same as Jefferson’s notion (in his draft preamble to the Virginia Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom) “that the opinions and belief of men depend not on their own will, but follow involuntarily the evidence proposed to their minds.”

The founders of European liberal thought declared that in any public battle between truth and error, truth would eventually prevail. Theirs was only another declaration of faith in philosophers, in the magical ability of enlightened and profound minds to grasp the truths of contending systems, in the philosophers’ capacity to devise systems corresponding to the actual shapes and laws of nature. Theirs was simply another aristocratic faith, but now the aristocracy were philosophers and scientists. Progress was identified with what Sir Francis Bacon called “The Advancement of Learning”: the talented and privileged few played the leading role. The classic French statement, the Marquis de Condorcet’s *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind* (1795), made the deepest philosophers—Descartes, Newton, and Leibnitz—the heroes in the battle to liberate the human mind. Their improved metaphysics had enabled men to break out of the political and religious prisons built by centuries of kings and priests. This was the work of “men of genius, the eternal benefactors of the human race.”

Such an explanation was alien to America. Even John Adams, who thought human mequality was the wellspring of history, was outraged. “What a pity,” Adams exclaimed in irony, “that this man of genius cannot be king and priest for the whole human race!” And Adams added in 1811:

The philosophers of France were too rash and hasty. They were as artful as selfish and as hypocritical as the priests and politicians of Babylon, Persia, Egypt, India, Greece, Rome, Turkey, Germany, Wales, Scotland, Ireland, France, Spain, Italy or England. They understood not what they were about. They miscalculated their forces and resources: and were consequently overwhelmed in destruction with all their theories. The precipitation and temerity of philosophers has, I fear, retarded the progress of improvement and amelioration in the condition of mankind for at least an hundred years.

The public mind was improving in knowledge and the public heart in humanity, equity, and benevolence; the fragments of feudality, the inquisition, the rack, the cruelty of punishments, Negro slavery were giving way, etc. But the philosophers must arrive at perfection per saltum. Ten times more furious than Jack in the Tale of a Tub, they rent and tore the whole garment to pieces and left not one whole thread in it. They have been compelled to resort to Napoleon, and Gibbon himself became an advocate for the Inquisition. What an amiable and glorious Equality, Fraternity, and Liberty they have now established in Europe!

Adams' distrust of the ruthless demands of genius and his preference for the slower, more sober advances of the public mind expressed a deep current in American feeling: the difference between Washington and Napoleon; between Roosevelt, Truman, and Eisenhower on the one hand and garret-spawned European illuminati like Lenin, Mussolini, and Hitler.

In America what would liberate men was not the opportunity to combat ancient and erroneous philosophic systems by modern ones, but the opportunity to bring all philosophy into the skeptical and earthy arena of daily life. No philosophy would be too sacred for such a test. Americans saw less value in the full-dress intellectual tournaments of learned academies, in the passionate arguments of artists and prophets on the Left Banks of the world, than in the free competition of the marketplace. Such competition was hardly yet known to Europe, and it might never be known there in its crude American form. When Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes wrote in 1919 that "the best test of truth is the power of the thought to get itself accepted in the competition of the market," he was not appealing from the individual philosopher to the guild of philosophers. Rather he was appealing from professional thinkers to the bulk of Americans.

In the 18th century, if not earlier, American experience had already begun to give this flavor to our thinking. "If what is thus published be good," Franklin wrote in the *Pennsylvania Gazette* on July 24, 1740 defending the freedom of printers, "Mankind has the Benefit of it: If it be bad ... the more 'tis made publick, the more its Weakness is expos'd and the greater Disgrace falls upon the author, whoever he be." So too, Jefferson in urging freedom of speech, press, and religion, argued less from the desirability that every mind be

enlightened by modern philosophers than from the desirability of allowing each mind its free and direct response to its unique experience. "Your own reason is the only oracle given you by heaven," advised Jefferson "and you are answerable, not for the rightness, but uprightness of the decision." The basic American questions were to be settled in the arena of experience rather than of controversy or of learning. The straight short path by which Americans arrived at their conclusions can be illustrated by their idea of progress.

By the 18th century many European thinkers had arrived at the idea of progress by devious and painful intellectual paths. There was the speculative philosophical path explored by Francis Bacon and Descartes; there was the speculative historical path explored by Fontenelle, Condorcet, and Gibbon. Some thinkers argued from the essential character of man or the laws of nature; others extended their historical vision back to the Romans, to Socrates, or even to primitive tribes. Some dissected man, society, and the universe to find the elements of inevitable progress; others took their bearings from distant points in time to trace their lines to the present and into the future.

All these were the reflections of learned men. In England progress seemed the slow and undramatic product of a long relatively peaceful past. In France progress seemed a hope which could be fully justified only by the future. But in America one needed to be neither historian nor prophet: progress seemed confirmed by daily experience.

From the beginning, people in provincial America noted that in the New World progress was self-evident. "Let them produce any colonie or commonwealth in the world," we have heard the magistrates of Massachusetts Bay reply to the Child petitioners (1646), "where more hath beene done in 16 yeares." When, about a century later, Burnaby visited Philadelphia, he exclaimed that where only eighty years before had been a "wild and uncultivated desert, inhabited by nothing but ravenous beasts, and a savage people," there was now a flourishing city. "Can the mind have a greater pleasure than in contemplating the rise and progress of cities and kingdoms? Than in perceiving a rich and opulent state arising out of a small settlement or colony? This pleasure everyone must feel who considers Pennsylvania." American history could be summarized in the phrase which appeared on more than one title page: "The Progressive Improvements ... of the British Settlements in North America."

The American situation made it natural to identify progress with growth and expansion. The very survival and vitality of the American colonies was itself a proof of progress. Franklin drew his conclusions about progress in America from what anybody could notice: a growing population in the continental American emptiness. There could be no greater mistake, Franklin explained in his *Observations concerning the Increase of Mankind, Peopling of Countries, etc.* (1755), than to generalize about the growth of population from the experience of the Old World: "nor will Tables form'd on Observations made on full-settled old Countries, as Europe, suit new Countries, as America." It would

be futile to try to restrict American manufactures or to seek to confine the American population. "For People increase in Proportion to the Number of Marriages, and that is greater in Proportion to the Ease and Convenience of supporting a Family. When families can be easily supported, more Persons marry, and earlier in Life." Plentiful land and the ease of getting on in America would induce people to marry early and to have more children: here the population would surely double every twenty years. "But notwithstanding this Increase, so vast is the Territory of North America, that it will require many Ages to settle it fully; and, till it is fully settled, Labour will never be cheap here, where no Man continues long a Labourer for others, but gets a Plantation of his own, no Man continues long a Journeyman to a Trade, but goes among those new Settlers, and sets up for himself, &c. Hence Labour is no cheaper now in Pennsylvania, than it was 30 Years ago, tho' so many Thousand labouring People have been imported." While the high cost of labor here would prevent the colonies from competing with the mother country in manufactures, their increasing population would yearly enlarge the American market for British goods.

There is, in short, no Bound to the prolific Nature of Plants or Animals, but what is made by their crowding and interfering with each other's means of Subsistence. . . . Thus there are suppos'd to be now upwards of One Million English Souls in North-America, (tho' 'tis thought scarce 80,000 have been brought over Sea,) and yet perhaps there is not one the fewer in Britain, but rather many more, on Account of the Employment the Colonies afford to Manufacturers at Home. This Million doubling, suppose but once in 25 Years, will, in another Century, be more than the People of England, and the greatest Number of Englishmen will be on this Side of the Water. What an Accession of Power to the British Empire by Sea as well as Land! What Increase of Trade and Navigation! What Numbers of Ships and Seamen!

Franklin saw that already American facts were destroying European theories. For example, the theory of "mercantilism" by which England and her rivals justified their contest for empire had been shaped by the facts of a crowded Europe. Behind mercantilism lay the assumption that the wealth of the world was a pie and that a bigger slice for one country meant a smaller slice for all the others. In the ever-expanding New World, all this seemed doctrinaire. Why should America follow the pattern of Europe? Why should an increase of people here menace the wealth of England? On the contrary, as Franklin observed, to enlarge the American colonies would decrease the probable competition from American manufactures while increasing the market for English products.

Manufactures are founded in poverty. It is the multitude of poor without land in a country, and who must work for others at low wages or

starve, that enables undertakers to carry on a manufacture, and afford it cheap enough to prevent the importation of the same kind from abroad, and to bear the expence of its own exportation.

But no man who can have a piece of land of his own, sufficient by his labour to subsist his family in plenty, is poor enough to be a manufacturer, and work for a master. Hence while there is land enough in America for our people, there can never be manufactures to any amount or value. It is a striking observation of a very able pen, that the natural livelihood of the thin inhabitants of a forest country is hunting; that of a greater number, pasturage; that of a middling population, agriculture; and that of the greatest, manufactures; which last must subsist the bulk of the people in a full country, or they must be subsisted by charity, or perish. The extended population, therefore, that is most advantageous to Great Britain, will be best effected, because only effectually secured by the possession of Canada.

In his *Interest of Great Britain considered with regard to her Colonies and the acquisitions of Canada and Guadaloupe* (with the collaboration of Richard Jackson, 1760), Franklin applied this reasoning to British policy in North America after her victory over the French. The question then being debated in pamphlets and on the floor of Parliament was whether the British should drive the French from North America by annexing Canada or should instead take the sugar island of Guadaloupe. Orthodox mercantilists argued that the frigid, unsettled wilderness of Canada, adding a long boundary to be protected while yielding only a scanty fur-trade, would become a heavy burden on Mother-England; and that to remove the French from North America would dangerously increase the independence of the Americans. But Franklin saw the question differently; according to him, growth, expansion, and multiplication were the law of American life. All ancient analogies between the human body and the body politic were faulty because there were actually no natural limits on the growth of a body politic. The American market, by consuming English manufactures, would provide more employment for English labor, and would eventually increase tenfold the population of the mother-island. The influence of Franklin's pamphlet is hard to measure, especially since a number of powerful Englishmen (including the great Pitt himself) already shared his views, but the British did acquire Canada and not Guadaloupe by the Peace of Paris in 1763, and so they removed the French menace from the continental American colonies.

This way of thinking had actually provided fresh American arguments for expansion of the Empire. It also expressed a novel and naive approach to the idea of progress itself. The 18th-century expansion of the American colonies might not have carried so forceful a lesson had not Franklin and others prepared Americans in a way of naivete, in a readiness to argue from what seemed self-evident.

The same could be said for other American ideas of the provincial age which at first sight looked like the conclusions of the European “Enlightenment” philosophers. After a second look these American doctrines often prove to be “self-evident” conclusions from the facts of American life. For example, the versatile interests of a French *philosophe* expressed his belief in the sovereign unity of reason and his encyclopedic interests affirmed a theoretic “rationalism.” But the versatility of a Virginia planter owed more to the actual diversity of his responsibilities—for the government, crops, medicine, religion, and everything else in his little plantation world. Again, while in France the essential equality of mankind had to be laboriously demonstrated by research and speculation (for example in Rousseau’s “Essay on the Origin of Inequality”), in America the idea of equality had a self-evident meaning all its own. Of course, American facts would also limit American ideals; where the “facts of life” in America seemed to deny equality (as in the case of the Negro or the Indian), many good Americans felt strong doubts.

From the beginning, Americans formed a habit of accepting for the most part only those ideas which seemed already to have proved themselves in experience. They used things as they were as a measure of how things ought to be; in America the “is” became the yardstick of the “ought.” Was not the New World a living denial of the old sharp distinction between the world as it was and the world as it might be or ought to be?