

Daniel Webster and the Making of Modern Liberty in the Atlantic World

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Imagining Liberty in the Atlantic World

In the years between 1815 and 1830, concepts of modern liberty developed in the Atlantic world in a political context shaped by transnational ideals and alliances. Three sets of events from 1815 provide the parameters for my discussion of the conceptual development of liberty during this period: the Battle of New Orleans and the Treaty of Ghent, which concluded to the War of 1812; the defeat of Napoleon at Waterloo and the creation of the Holy Alliance; and the arrival of Ferdinand VII's forces of reconquest in Spanish America. These military, legal, and political events provide a framework for understanding the circulation of revolutionary ideas and the media of their circulation in the Americas and the wider Atlantic world during these years. When the meaning of liberty was articulated and contested in a web of relations between the United States and other revolutionary states, including France, Haiti, Spanish America, and Greece.

As the crisis over slavery and the Union elevated national concerns after 1830, Atlanticism became less prominent in United States politics. The intensifying nationalization of politics after 1830 reoriented core political concepts, binding the meaning of liberty more firmly to the problems of civil and human rights

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raised by the enslavement of people of African descent and the challenges of federalism that the secessionist movement brought to the fore. The adequacy of the United States Constitution as a vehicle that could fulfill aspirations for liberty and sustain a viable state was contested after 1830 in a way that it had not been in the previous decade and a half. Prior to 1830 proponents of the United States Constitution were on the offensive internationally, offering it as a model for republics throughout the Atlantic world. After 1830 those same proponents were more often on the defensive, seeking to shore up its authority within the very nation that it instituted. The shift, brought about by the dialectical emergence of Garrisonian abolitionism and intensifying Southern secessionism, can be traced in a landmark speech that Daniel Webster gave in 1830. In debate on the Senate floor, Webster responded to South Carolina Senator Robert Hayne's federalist view of the Union as a compact of sovereign states, offering instead a national model of the Union as an embodiment of liberty. Webster's stirring formulation in this speech became his motto for the remainder of his career: 'Liberty and union, now and forever, one and inseparable.'¹ Twenty years later, in his gorgeously Unionist Seventh of March speech, Webster supported the Compromise Measures of 1850, including the poisonous Fugitive Slave Law, thereby turning long-time admirers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson into harsh critics. Rather than joining liberty and union, Emerson felt, Webster had sacrificed liberty to union.

Webster continues to be known principally as the aesthetician of the Union. Prior to 1830, however, Webster focused more on the other half of the 'Liberty and Union' slogan, and he did so in a manner that tied United States history firmly to its Atlantic context. In five major orations delivered between December 1820 and August 1826, Webster addressed Atlantic world revolutionary history, and in the process shaped concepts of modern liberty.

1. 'Second Reply on Foot's Resolution,' in *The Works of Daniel Webster*, ed. Edward Everett (Boston: C. C. Little and J. Brown, 1851), 6 vols. 3: 270-342; quotation on p. 342.

These speeches elevated Webster to international celebrity as a man of letters and champion of liberty. His speeches were attended by political luminaries, reprinted on three continents, and read in politically influential circles. Running through all five of these speeches is a conception of modern liberty based on an Anglo-American tradition that focused on the circulation of knowledge, the broad distribution of property, the absence of established religion coupled with the moral authority of Christian values, and strong institutions to support the types of social order that Webster believed were integral to true liberty. In these speeches he also developed a historical narrative of national origins and a core set of phrases and images that provided an aesthetic and affective base for commitment to the nation as the best and safest guarantor of liberty. Like Edmund Burke, whom he cited in his speeches and with whom he was constantly compared, Webster believed such affective and aesthetic grounds to be a more effective means of uniting and energizing a state than the rational assent model favored by social contract theorists such as John Locke.

Three of those speeches were commemorative addresses monumentalizing successive moments in United States history that were for Webster the sources of a modern concept of liberty. They included the Plymouth oration (1820), a celebration of New England's 'core values' and institutions, attended by the old revolutionary and former president John Adams, who had been an early proponent of this view of New England; the Bunker Hill Monument oration (1825), which was attended by another luminary of the American Revolution, the Marquis de Lafayette, whose continued role in Atlantic world politics helped Webster transform the dedication of a monument on a local battlefield into a world-historical event; and the eulogy on Presidents Adams and Thomas Jefferson (1826), when in the presence of Adams's son, President John Quincy Adams, Webster surveyed the contributions of the two late presidents to national and international politics. In these speeches Webster sought to transform

the thriving New England tradition of commemorative address into a genre that signified beyond the region or the nation, and he succeeded well. Let me cite one prominent example. Lafayette, who had a continued presence in French politics as a reformer and a liberal during the 1820s, informed Webster that the Bunker Hill address 'has been translated in French and other languages, to the very great profit of European readers.'²

Webster's commemorative speeches triangulate between region, nation, and the revolutionary Atlantic world, with the nation as the central object of definition. Webster's Atlanticism emerges more sharply as a discrete concern in the two major deliberative orations that he performed in the House of Representatives. Webster's internationally famous speech in favor of the Greek revolutionaries (1824) and his celebrated oration in support of Simón Bolívar's Congress of Panama (1826) define a modern form of liberty rooted in Enlightenment universalism, produced by the circulation of knowledge, and embodied in tradition. Webster was already a recognized lawyer and former representative from New Hampshire when he was elected to Congress from Massachusetts, and he chose the Greek rebellion as the focus of his maiden speech in order to make a statement about the ideological role that the United States should play in the emerging world order. Six years later he supported Bolívar's Panama Congress over the objections of Andrew Jackson and Southern leaders who feared Spanish American interest in Cuba and the spread of the antislavery thought that Bolívar had absorbed from the Haitian Revolution and made a centerpiece of his theories of post-independence nationalism. Webster felt it was imperative to support 'the spirit of liberty on this side of the Atlantic.'³ These two Congressional speeches relate Webster's emerging national vision to an understanding of the international

2. Fletcher Webster, ed., *The Private Correspondence of Daniel Webster*, 2 vols. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1857), 1:400.

3. 'The Panama Mission,' in *Works of Daniel Webster*, 3:178-217; quotation on p. 202.

community that profoundly shaped his thinking about the United States as a model for and arbiter of liberty. On the floor of the United States House of Representatives Webster transformed revolution and counter-revolution in the Atlantic world into a grand drama of modern liberty.

Let me briefly sketch the Atlantic-world stage that Webster played upon. In the United States, the second defeat of Britain secured political independence and ushered in a period often called 'the Era of Good Feelings,' when an absence of significant oppositional politics produced something approaching a one-party state. Thomas Jefferson's strategic weakening of the executive branch of the government during his presidency contributed to a political system in which Congress bore substantial power. The 'great triumvirate' of John Calhoun, Henry Clay, and Daniel Webster emerged into roles of national influence, each strongly representing one of the three major regions of the country (Calhoun the South; Clay the West; Webster the North).⁴ The political roles of the great triumvirate were enhanced by their reputations as talented and distinctive orators. During these years congressional deliberations played a defining role in national governance, and the eloquence of these representatives was central to the civic culture of their era. Their major orations drew large crowds, were printed in the newspapers, as separates, and in anthologies, and circulated via personal correspondence. The growth of media networks—performance venues, the press, the postal service and the roads, canals, and later railroads that serviced it—was at the top of a national political agenda dominated in these years by what were known as 'internal improvements,' development projects that took priority for Webster and many of his colleagues over national expansion.

Abolition had not yet emerged as the defining movement within antislavery. In 1820 the Missouri Compromise temporarily settled

4. Merrill D. Peterson, *The Great Triumvirate: Webster, Clay, and Calhoun* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

the question of slavery in new territories, and for the next decade antislavery efforts had an Atlantic world focus, driven by the African colonization movement and efforts to ban the slave trade. Founded in 1817, the American Colonization Society sought a solution to the problem of African slavery that led in 1822 to the foundation of Monrovia (later renamed Liberia) as a destination for the resettlement of former slaves. Led by Great Britain, international antislavery efforts also focused on the abolition of the slave trade. Only after 1830 did antislavery efforts in the United States increasingly focus on the specific national dimensions of slavery.

The anti-colonial and republican movements in the Caribbean and Latin America also focused attention on Atlantic world politics. Revolutionary struggles for Spanish American independence extended from 1808 until 1826. During these years 'the Liberator' Simón Bolívar helped lead anti-colonial resistance movements in the northern part of the continent; experimented with federalist and republican forms of government in Gran Colombia, the state that encompassed substantial portions of Venezuela, Panama, Ecuador, and Colombia; and organized an inter-American congress in Panama.⁵ Bolívar complained of European and North American indifference to his people's struggles. 'America stands together because it is abandoned by all other nations,' he complained in his 'Jamaica Letter' of 1815, characteristically referring to Spanish America as 'America.' It would have made more sense, he felt, if 'Europe herself, as a matter of common sense policy, should have prepared and executed the project of American independence.'⁶

When Europe did become involved, however, it was not on the side of 'America.' The Holy Alliance of European monarchies was ostensibly created to promote the expressly Christian values of justice, love, and peace in Europe, but its emphasis quickly became

5. John Lynch, *Simón Bolívar: A Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).

6. 'Reply of a South American to a Gentleman of this Island' ['Jamaica Letter'], *Selected Writings of Bolívar*, comp. by Vicente Lecuna, ed. Harold A. Bierck, Jr., trans. Lewis Bertrand, 2 vols. (New York: The Colonial Press, 1951), 1: 103-22; quotations on p. 121 and p. 107.

Wm. Fenner
1809

SPAIN.

AN
ACCOUNT

OF THE

PUBLIC FESTIVAL

GIVEN BY

THE CITIZENS OF BOSTON,

AT THE EXCHANGE COFFEE HOUSE,

JANUARY 24, 1809,

IN HONOR OF

SPANISH VALOUR & PATRIOTISM.

WITH THE

REGULAR AND VOLUNTEER TOASTS,

AND ALL THE

ORIGINAL SONGS AND ODES

SUNG ON THE OCCASION.

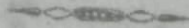
IN WHICH IS ALSO INTRODUCED

A BRIEF SKETCH OF SPAIN,

GEOGRAPHICAL, HISTORICAL AND POLITICAL.

.....
SPAIN is not a dead but sleeping Lion.
.....

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1809

Spain. An Account of the Public Festival Given by the Citizens of Boston, at the Exchange Coffee House, January 24, 1809, in Honor of Spanish Valour & Patriotism. With the Regular and Volunteer toasts, and All the Original Songs and Odes Sung on the Occasion (Boston: Russell and Cutler, [1809]).

the protection of sovereign power and the prevention of revolution. In his speeches from these years, Webster repeatedly focused on the threat that the alliance posed to the spread of liberty. He noted with alarm that alliance powers promulgated the doctrine of Laibach, also known as the Troppau Protocol, which called for the suppression of revolutionary movements in Europe.⁷ The protocol was brought to bear on the resistance movement in Greece, which in 1821 flared into full-scale war for independence from the Ottoman Empire and became an international cause célèbre. The Alliance intermittently threatened to intervene in Latin America as well, and Webster warned that the Allied Powers viewed even the United States itself as 'in a state of rebellion or of anarchy.'⁸

During these years the United States and Great Britain were frequent allies on behalf of Atlantic world republican independence movements and against the counterrevolutionary power of the Alliance. In 1822 President James Monroe recognized five of the new Spanish American republican governments, and Britain warned that it would do the same if independence was challenged. The next year threats that France and Spain, backed by the Holy Alliance, were attempting to retake South America led Monroe to declare hemispheric solidarity in his State of the Union address, articulating what later became known as the Monroe Doctrine. Bolívar testified to the significance of the Anglo-American alliance when in 1826 he proposed an 'Americas' league to the representatives at the Congress of Panama. Bolívar suggested Britain as the head and protector of the newly independent states and the United States as a partner, albeit a dangerously close and powerful partner which he wanted to keep on the

7. The Troppau Protocol (1820) asserts that 'States, which have undergone a change of government due to revolution, the result of which threaten other states, ipso facto cease to be members of the European Alliance, and remain excluded from it until their situation gives guarantees for legal order and stability. . . . If, owing to such alterations, immediate danger threatens other states the powers bind themselves, by peaceful means, or if need be by arms, to bring back the guilty State into the bosom of the Great Alliance.' Carlton J. Hayes, *A Political and Cultural History of Northern Europe*, 2 vols. (1916; New York: Macmillan Co., 1932) I: 733

8. 'The Revolution in Greece,' in *Works of Daniel Webster*, 3: 60-93; quotation on p.71.

periphery of his projected economic and military league to prevent its swallowing its southern neighbors. It was this series of events that led Webster in his House speech to assert that Monroe's declaration was met by 'the free people of the United States' with 'one universal feeling of the gratified love of liberty.'⁹

Making Modern Liberty

What did Webster mean by liberty? And what specifically is *modern* liberty? Contemporary philosophers recognize two traditions of political thought that correspond to different meanings for the term. In 1958 Isaiah Berlin famously defined positive and negative variants of modern liberty. 'Negative liberty' is delimited by the answer to the question, 'What is the area within which the subject—a person or group of persons—is or should be left to do or be what he is able to do or be, without interference by other persons?' This is a Cold War version of the classical liberal definition of liberty principally identified with Anglo-American political philosophy as articulated by John Locke and John Stuart Mill, and further refined by John Rawls and Berlin himself. It is distinguished from a form of liberty associated with Rousseau and Jacobinism and linked, in Berlin's thought, to the totalitarian and fascist movements of the twentieth century. This 'positive liberty' is defined by the answer to the question 'What, or who, is the source of control or interference that can determine someone to do, or be, this rather than that?'¹⁰ A common shorthand for distinguishing positive and negative liberty shared by many political philosophers is to trace negative liberty to the Glorious Revolution and the American Revolution and positive liberty to the French Revolution. This distinction can be boiled down, too simply and yet influentially, to Locke versus Rousseau, or to property and civil protections on the one hand, and the general will and human rights as a basis for state intervention on the other.

9. 'Panama Mission,' in *Works of Daniel Webster*, 3: 203-3.

10. Isaiah Berlin, *Liberty*, ed. Henry Hardy (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 169.

The idea that there is a distinctly 'modern' concept of liberty emerges in the writings of a contemporary of Webster's, the Swiss liberal Benjamin Constant, who in his 1816 essay 'The Liberty of the Ancients Compared with that of Moderns' recast the negative Lockean and positive Rousseauian definitions of liberty in developmental historical terms.¹¹ The terms 'negative' and 'positive' liberty suggest a conceptual mapping of differences; 'Anglo-American' and 'French' liberty suggest a national explanation of differences; 'Lockean' and 'Rousseauian' liberty suggest lines of philosophical development initiated by major thinkers. By designating many of the same concepts as a sequence, or a historical development, rather than as parallel conceptual tracks, Constant suggested that progress necessitates the embrace of 'modern' liberty. He argued that two features of modern political life distinguish ancient from modern liberty: these are representative government and commerce. Ancient liberty was participatory and political in nature; modern liberty consists of the protection of individual liberties and the growth of private pleasures through commerce, a system necessitated by the growth of large republics and made possible by the development of representative systems. Constant insisted that 'we can no longer enjoy the liberty of the ancients, which consisted in an active and constant participation in collective power. Our freedom must consist of peaceful and private independence.'¹² The French Revolution went awry, Constant argues, because Rousseau and his followers tried to imitate the ancients. 'Social power injured individual independence,' he concludes.¹³

Webster shared Constant's aversion for the French Revolution, but he differed from Constant both in his specific objections and in his historical teleology. Whereas the liberal Constant described the flaws of the French Revolution as an excess

11. Benjamin Constant, 'The Liberty Of The Ancients Compared With That Of The Moderns' in *Political Writings*, trans and ed. Biancamaria Fontana (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 309-28.

12. Constant, 'Liberty of the Ancients Compared with that of the Moderns,' 316.

13. Constant, 'Liberty of the Ancients Compared with that of the Moderns,' 320.

of social power at the expense of personal freedom, Webster described the contrast between the American and French Revolutions as a difference between 'guarded, regular, and safe' development and the 'unfortunate but natural' outcome of 'an irregular and violent impulse.'¹⁴ Here he echoed Edmund Burke's conclusion in his 1775 speech on conciliation with America that the Americans had 'the advantages of order, in the midst of a struggle for liberty.'¹⁵ The conciliation speech was an important precursor text to Webster's Plymouth oration. Crucially, where Burke presented the American Revolution as an extension of the British constitution, Webster claimed that the American colonies did much more than simply reproduce the values and institutions of the mother country. In ancient Greece, Webster observed, colonies merely mimicked the 'parent city,' leading to 'those mutual dissensions and conflicts which proved so fatal.'¹⁶ The settlers of British North America sought not just to replicate the metropolis. Rather they aspired 'to erect systems of more perfect civil liberty, or to enjoy a higher degree of religious freedom.'¹⁷ In an 'age of progressive knowledge and improvement,' the settlement of North American colonies not only 'enlarge[d] the natural boundaries of the habitable world' and 'extend[ed] commerce and increase[d] wealth among the human race.' It also produced 'moral effects,' and affected 'the state of human knowledge, the general tone of human sentiments, and the prospects of human happiness.' In short, the European discovery and settlement of the Americas gave 'civilized man' 'a new range for his thoughts, new objects for curiosity, and new excitements to knowledge and improvement.'¹⁸ It is this progressive

14. 'The Bunker Hill Monument,' in *Works of Daniel Webster*, 1: 57-78; quotation on p. 72.

15. Edmund Burke, *On Empire, Liberty, and Reform: Speeches and Letters*, ed. David Bromwich (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 88.

16. 'First Settlement of New England,' in *Works of Daniel Webster*, 1: 1-54; quotation on 16.

17. 'First Settlement of New England,' in *Works of Daniel Webster* 1:17.

18. 'First Settlement of New England,' in *Works of Daniel Webster* 1:17.

quality that elevated modern over ancient colonization and explains for Webster the advances of modern over ancient liberty.

Webster's signature rhetorical gesture was to set out theoretical opposites in order to resolve them in the institutions of the American state. In his speeches tradition is set against revolution—except in the United States, where revolution originated from traditional institutions and therefore is readily absorbed into them. Reason is opposed to feeling, but not when political reason calls forth appropriate feelings of sympathy and identity with people resisting oppression. Performance is distinct from print, unless the oration is printed and circulated via personal correspondence to influential members of the audience, such as John Adams and the Marquis de Lafayette, who are themselves prominently featured in the printed text. The institutions of knowledge mediate the opposing terms and relate them to the overall development of the United States as well as to the communications networks of the Atlantic world.

At Bunker Hill, Webster described the expansion of knowledge and the growth of an Atlantic world:

Knowledge has, in our time, triumphed . . . over distance, over difference of languages, over diversity of habits, over prejudice, and over bigotry. . . . The whole world is becoming a field for intellect to act in. Energy of mind, genius, power, wheresoever it exists, may speak out in any tongue, and the *world* will hear it. . . . There is a vast commerce of ideas; there are marts and exchanges for intellectual discoveries. . . . Mind is the great lever of all things . . . and the diffusion of knowledge . . . has rendered innumerable minds, variously gifted by nature, competent to be competitors or fellow-workers on the theatre of intellectual operations.¹⁹

Central among the intellectual advances that Webster cited was the development of political thought, which fed directly into advances in 'human liberty and human happiness.'²⁰

19. 'The Bunker Hill Monument,' in *Works of Daniel Webster* 1:71.

20. 'The Bunker Hill Monument,' in *Works of Daniel Webster* 1:72.

Liberty was a sentiment as well as a product of knowledge for Webster, who observed to Lafayette that 'A great chord of sentiment and feeling runs through two continents, and vibrates over both.'²¹ As Burke's American heir, Webster brought the full repertoire of affective rhetorical techniques to bear in the service of a tradition of revolutionary enlightenment. Feeling, he insisted, is a force of historical change. His goal in his commemorative speeches was to give 'right direction to sentiments, and open proper springs of feeling in the heart.'²² 'Let us feel deeply how much of what we are and of what we possess we owe to this liberty, and to these institutions of government,' he urged in his speech on Adams and Jefferson. Feeling must sustain the institutions of liberty: 'If we cherish the virtues and the principles of our fathers, Heaven will assist us to carry on the work of human liberty and happiness.'²³ In his speech on the Greek Revolution, Webster observed that words could produce feelings that would change history. Moral causes had replaced military power. Public opinion triumphed over brute force. Webster urged his Congressional colleagues to provide 'a manifestation of our sympathy with a long oppressed and now struggling people,' arguing that 'the Greeks address the civilized world with a pathos not easy to be resisted.'²⁴

In Webster's view, as knowledge circulates and as feelings of sympathy for oppressed peoples grow, liberty spreads. Webster's claims resemble key features of Jürgen Habermas's description of 'publicity' as a facilitator of modern concepts of freedom. The similarities between Webster and Habermas are particularly apparent in Webster's celebration of Greek reading societies and other modes of knowledge production and circulation that fuelled their revolutionary resistance to the Ottoman Empire. He praised the

21. 'The Bunker Hill Monument,' in *Works of Daniel Webster* 1:71.

22. 'The Bunker Hill Monument,' in *Works of Daniel Webster*, 1:62.

23. 'Adams and Jefferson,' in *Works of Daniel Webster*, 1:147.

24. 'The Revolution in Greece,' in *Works of Daniel Webster*, 3: 92.

Greek leaders for their ability to build institutions of knowledge such as schools, colleges, libraries, and the press and located the origin of the Greek resistance movement in an 'improved state of knowledge' and the growth of literature.²⁵

Greece mirrored the United States' revolutionary experience, Webster claimed, but Spanish America was different. 'They are but pupils in the school of popular liberty,' he observed of the sister republics to the south, attributing their slow progress to differences of 'race' and political and religious experience.²⁶ Yet, Webster insisted, the United States had been a primary influence in their reform efforts. 'They have looked steadily, in every adversity, to the *great Northern light*,' he claimed.²⁷ Here Webster clearly overstated his case. Bolívar, for one, was openly skeptical of the United States as a political model for Latin American republics. 'As long as our countrymen do not acquire the abilities and political virtues that distinguish our brothers of the north,' he wrote, 'wholly popular systems, far from working to our advantage, will, I greatly fear, bring about our downfall.'²⁸ Great Britain was his favored constitutional model, with its hereditary senate as a guarantor of liberty against the dangers of popular demagoguery.

Webster's description of the new knowledge produced in the North American colonies stood in sharp contrast to Bolívar's expressions of frustration at the limited knowledge he was able to produce about Spanish America. The 'facts about America and her development' were 'shrouded in mystery,' he wrote in his 'Jamaica Letter.' 'Who is capable of compiling statistics of a land like this?'²⁹ Bolívar was unable to give a satisfying answer to a correspondent's questions because he 'lack[ed] documents and books' and because he had only 'limited knowledge of a land so vast, so varied, and so little known as the new world.'³⁰ Bolívar

25. 'The Revolution in Greece,' in *Works of Daniel Webster*, 3:79, 85.

26. 'The Panama Mission,' in *Works of Daniel Webster*, 3:215.

27. 'The Panama Mission,' in *Works of Daniel Webster*, 3:217.

28. *Selected Writings*, 1: 115.

29. 'Jamaica Letter,' 109.

30. 'Jamaica Letter,' 103.

warned the delegates to the Second National Congress of Venezuela in Angostura that, 'subject to the threefold yoke of ignorance, tyranny, and vice, the American people have been unable to acquire knowledge, power, or [civic] virtue.'³¹

On the matter of civic order, Bolívar sided with Rousseau, who urged the controlling force of society and the popular will over the individualism and liberalism that Constant advocated. In his Jamaica Letter, Bolívar expressed skepticism over the capacity of Spanish Americans for full liberty, asking, 'Is it conceivable that a newly emancipated people can soar to the heights of liberty and, unlike Icarus, neither have its wings melt nor fall into an abyss?'³² Four years later, advising the legislators at Angostura about the new constitution that they were about to form, he warned that 'absolute liberty invariably lapses into absolute power' and advocated forms of 'popular education' that would include newly created institutions modeled on the Athenian Aeropagus and the Roman censors and domestic tribunals.³³ These ancient institutions were designed to enforce moral order, which Bolívar felt was critical in a state where the people had been denied the opportunities for self-governance enjoyed in the British colonies of North America. Like Rousseau, he wished to import ancient institutions of social order to sustain the republic and enforce virtue.

For Webster, as for Bolívar, modern liberty required subjects prepared to exercise it. The New England free school served much the same function as the Aeropagus and the tribunals, though it had the virtue in Webster's eyes of being an inherited local institution and thereby a traditional form of authority—and not one imported from the past. In the Plymouth address, Webster described the free school in terms that Michel Foucault would have found refreshingly frank: 'We regard [education] as a wise and liberal system of police, by which property, and life, and the peace of society are secured. . . . We hope for a security beyond

31. 'Jamaica Letter,' 176.

32. 'Jamaica Letter,' 115.

33. 'Jamaica Letter,' 192.

the law, and above the law,' he continued, 'in the prevalence of an enlightened and well-principled moral sentiment.'³⁴ The free school was an American export that Webster urged upon his international audience. In contrast to Bolívar's lack of information about Spanish America in the Jamaica Letter, Webster was able to offer comparative statistics on literacy rates in England (one child in fifteen could read and write), Wales (one child in twenty), France (one child in thirty-five), and New England, where literacy, the fruit of institutions established by Massachusetts Bay colony law in 1647, was close to universal. Webster linked the Christian faith of the Puritans closely with both literacy and citizenship, observing that 'whatever makes men good Christians, makes them good citizens.'³⁵ The institutions of literacy and Christianity characterized modern liberty for Webster and distinguished the Puritans from the 'barbarians' who inhabited the continent before them.

Along with education, Christianity, and the circulation of knowledge, property was the fourth support of modern liberty for Webster. He contrasted the feudal model of property that still encumbered Europe with the broad distribution of property in America where, he claimed, the Puritans who landed at Plymouth encountered a Lockean new world in which 'the whole soil was unreclaimed from barbarism.'³⁶ Native Americans served Webster principally as a foil, representing for him the condition of peoples without the institutions of modern liberty, and have consequently been displaced. For Bolívar, in contrast, indigenous Americans and non-white creoles marked the central challenge of the new Spanish American republics. While Bolívar did seek ways to redistribute land and wealth, he presented that project as a component of the larger effort to create a broadly based social equality, built on laws and institutions that could mediate between the strongly discriminated racial groups that characterized postcolonial society. Few differences are more marked than these in the political thought of

34. *Works of Daniel Webster*, 1: 41-2.

35. *Works of Daniel Webster*, 1:44.

36. *Works of Daniel Webster*, 1:35.

the two men. The racial hierarchies that were a consistent preoccupation of Bolívar's were all but ignored by Webster. Suppressing the persistent indigenous presence, and restricting his references to an African American presence to his discussion of the slave trade, Webster portrayed an 'America' that was New England writ large.

Nowhere in these speeches did Webster look abroad and find an example that the United States could profit from, in the manner of Robert Dahl in his recent book *How Democratic Is the American Constitution?*³⁷ In his subsequent career, Webster was an important figure in the formation of international law, but the nearest he came to an embrace of some non-United States-based political form here was his support for Bolívar's Congress of Panama. It is worth remembering that this was a controversial project that was greeted with hostility by Webster's Southern colleagues in Congress because they feared Bolívar's example on the issue of race and slavery.

Webster presented a world that had many alternatives to New England institutions of modern liberty—but none of which was good. He summed up his celebration of New England as a crucible of modern liberty with a warning:

We are bound to maintain public liberty, and, by the example of our own systems, to convince the world that order and law, religion and morality, the rights of conscience, the rights of persons, and the rights of property, may all be preserved and secured, in the most perfect manner, by a government entirely elective. If we fail in this, our disaster will be signal, and will furnish an argument, stronger than has yet been found, in support of those opinions which maintain that government can rest safely on nothing but power and coercion.³⁸

Webster feared the political and military threats to the Americas that were posed by the counterrevolutionary forces of the Holy

37. Robert A. Dahl, *How Democratic is the American Constitution?* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002).

38. 'First Settlement of New England,' 1: 44–45.

Alliance. He feared the forces of social disorder that in his view had destroyed the French Revolution and threatened to cripple the new Spanish American states. He also feared the moral threat posed by the persistence of the African slave trade, and he offered an impassioned plea for New England to be 'purified' from it. As in John Winthrop's day, and in our own, Webster saw the city upon a hill being threatened by forces both external and internal.

Webster's fears for the United States experiment seem idle at best and egregiously jingoistic at worst—and, applied to the world as it is now, they surely are. But a moment's thought suggests the obvious fact that Webster had real cause to worry. The looming conflicts about slavery and the federal system would require a civil war to resolve. I sometimes describe Webster as being like Shakespeare, because both writers are full of clichés. My point is that he told an influential story in which modern liberty was a product of United States institutions. This story has achieved such wide circulation that it is easy to lose sight of its historical moment, but that moment is crucial to its significance. A national narrative such as Webster's can block the emergence of new forms of liberty. Seen in the Atlantic world context of his own time, however, Webster can still offer perspectives on our world today.

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