Pulling Together and Drawing Apart: A Comment*

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In March 1767, while acting as a selectman and overseer of the poor for the town of Braintree, John Adams had an experience that I think is instructive for our consideration of the issues with which the two papers are concerned: the changing bonds among Anglo-Americans in the Revolutionary generation. One Saturday that month, Adams paid a visit to Robert Peacock and his "poor distressed Family." The Peacocks were living in abject misery. The family of six — husband, wife, and four children — inhabited a single room, which served them for "Kitchen, Cellar, dining Room, Parlour, and Bedchamber." There were just two beds, in one of which Peacock lay ill, with a little child in his arms. Peacock said he had been confined there for seven weeks "without going out of it farther than the Fire." In the second bed were three other children. Only Peacock's wife was up, standing by the fire — what little there was: "a few Chips," Adams recorded, "not larger than my Hand. The Chamber excessive cold and dirty."

This encounter with suffering naturally evoked Adams's sympathies. "These are the Conveniences and ornaments of a Life of Poverty," he lamented. "These the Comforts of the Poor. This is Want. This is Poverty!" Even so, Adams had a job to do. He was there to inquire whether the town of Braintree was legally obliged to do anything to help the unfortunate Peacocks. He found the answer was no. Peacock and three of the children had previously been legal inhabitants of Boston, and it was to that town the family would have to turn for relief. In eighteenth-century Massachusetts, a community took care only of its own; if you didn't belong — as the Peacocks did not in Braintree — you had no claim to support, no matter how desperately you were in need. And so Adams hastened to Boston, where he told the selectmen that something really ought to be done for the poor Peacocks, only not by the town of Braintree. Whether anything was done, we do not know. The family disappears from Adams's diary.[1]

But Adams himself thought he received something positive from the experience: a feeling of satisfaction at his own sympathies for the poor. "When I was in that Chamber of Distress," he wrote, "I felt the Meltings of Commisera-

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tion. This Office of Overseer of the Poor leads a Man into scenes of Distress, and is a continual Exercise of the benevolent Principles in his Mind. His Compassion is constantly excited, and his Benevolence encreased." The ultimate beneficiary of all his efforts was Adams himself. In the finest humanitarian spirit of the eighteenth century, Adams discovered that doing good was its own reward. A benevolent man could not only improve himself by helping others, but also relish the feeling of "Self-approving joy." In the case of the Peacocks, neither Adams nor the town of Braintree had to spend a penny to reap the benefits of benevolence. Charity began, and ended, at home.[2]

I tell the story of John Adams's experience as overseer of the poor in such detail because it brings together themes that the preceding papers unfortunately keep apart. We know that in the years that John Adams was carrying on his duties in Braintree, he was also developing much the same view of British policies that Edmund Quincy came to hold: that is, that British officials were engaged in a corrupt conspiracy to rob Americans of their precious heritage of freedom. As Robert Sparks implies in his discussion of Quincy, these Massachusetts Whigs lost their capacity to imagine British policy-makers as Englishmen like themselves, with legitimate interests and ideas to pursue; instead, the Ministry in London and its American supporters were conjured up as an abstract engine of despotism, an embodiment of inhuman, monstrous greed. At the same time, Adams, Quincy, and their fellow Massachusetts Whigs vigorously asserted their ties with colonists elsewhere, their powerful sense that they were all embarked in a common cause. As Peter Virgadamo tells us, that feeling was reciprocated; everywhere, from mid-century on, people were prepared to make the problems of suffering Boston their own by contributing to the relief of that city's inhabitants in periods of severe distress. In effect, Americans forged an abstract identity among themselves, even as they cast the British beyond the pale.

Then again, as Adams's experience as an overseer suggests, the rising identity among Americans that Virgadamo emphasizes was greatly limited in everyday life. For New Englanders in towns like Boston and Braintree were also cutting ties with some of their fellow citizens: with that wandering army of the poor that like the Peacock family, tramped from town to town in search of jobs and a settled place. Adams, for one, may have felt sympathy for the Peacocks, but there was nothing he could do officially and nothing he did privately to help them out. Social divisions were sharpening in Massachusetts, setting people apart from one another in a process of which Adams was acutely aware and that he hoped at least personally to overcome, if only in his mind. And many people preferred never to see the poor at all.

What do these three themes — the intensifying alienation from Britain, the surging American nationalism, the widening distance among Americans themselves — have to do with one another? To what degree are the internal social changes within cities like Boston associated with the coming of the Revolution? It is the fundamental weakness of these papers that they not only do not help us to answer these questions. They fail even to ask them. In so do-

ing, they resolutely neglect to face up to the expanding body of evidence that the origins of the Revolutionary movement lay deep within a crisis of colonial society.

Consider the missed possibilities in Sparks's study of Edmund Quincy. There is a marvelous irony in Quincy's perception that British officials were intent upon living off the hard-won treasure of Americans, intent upon exploiting the colonies as ruthlessly and as systematically as the English were oppressing India and Ireland. It was Quincy, after all, who had amassed a fortune at mid-century by capturing a Spanish treasure ship and retiring with the handsome proceeds to an easy, gentleman's life in Boston. Before that, in his prime years as a merchant, Quincy was evidently in a hurry to strike it rich. Not content with the comfortable status he had inherited, he was ready to exploit financial opportunities where he found them, even if that meant trying to push an old man and several drunken sons off their land or it involved successfully skirting the edges of the law by buying up provincial bills paid to Massachusetts soldiers and exchanging them at a profit in London. Quincy was, quite simply, unscrupulous in the pursuit of wealth, as disposed to manipulate other peoples' lives and fortunes for his own advantage as any of the "Ministerial Robbers" he later condemned. And he didn't shrink from advertising his success. When his privateering ship, the *Bethel,* sailed into harbor in 1749 with its freight of Spanish gold, Quincy had an armed guard ostentatiously convoy 161 treasure chests through the streets of Boston to his home — a spectacle that as the historian Gary Nash emphasizes, must surely have exacerbated resentments against the rich in a city that had suffered greatly from the wars against the French. It was not until Quincy suffered business reverses himself and went bankrupt that he appears to have taken a new view of the drive for riches. "Money is the root of all evil," Quincy piously reminded his creditors. It was a lesson he knew all too well.[3]

If Sparks neglects the tantalizing connections between Quincy's dubious financial past and his suspicions of British "robbers," Virgadamo fails to relate the acquisitive activities of the Boston elite to the problems of the city's poor. For Virgadamo, the growth of private charity marked the expression of a "humanitarian spirit" that helped to forge a national identity among Americans. This theme is an important one: the transcendence of parochial loyalties among the colonists. Eighteenth-century Americans ordinarily led intensely particularistic lives, bounded by limits of locality and structured around ties of religion and kinship. As in John Adams's Braintree and in the Scots Charitable Society of Boston, people normally associated with and took care of their own. Hence, it is significant that colonists outside Boston were willing to assist the much-beleaguered inhabitants of that city in the series of disasters that befell them from the cold winter of 1740 to the port closing of 1774. But do these instances of intercolonial charity support Virgadamo's argument that humanitarianism nurtured the construction of an American consciousness? I doubt it. Surely, many future Loyalists contributed to the relief of suffering Bostonians during the smallpox epidemic of 1752 and after the great fire of 1760. In doing so, they may have been identifying with fellow

Christians in need or reaching out to fellow subjects of the British Empire. That act of charity, nevertheless, did not prevent them from choosing the British side in the Revolutionary crisis, from cutting themselves off from other Americans and perhaps even fighting them in a bitter civil war. The spirit of '76 was far more than the culmination of a long-developing "United Way."

The trouble with Virgadamo's approach is that he considers the spread of humanitarianism as an isolated theme, with no connection to the history of social relations in the colonial cities and particularly, to changing attitudes towards the poor. Far from enjoying the new spirit of benevolence that Virgadamo celebrates, the inhabitants of pre-Revolutionary Boston were, in fact, deeply riven among themselves, torn apart by harsh political conflict and heightening class divisions. In a trend towards "Anglicization" that recent historians have been investigating, wealthy Bostonians aped aristocratic English models by pulling back from communal obligations and withdrawing into exclusive, fashionable circles of their own. Arrogantly, upper-class figures scorned the mob and set out to weaken popular participation in politics. But the move towards exclusion backfired. Political leaders like James Otis launched attacks on those who "grind the faces of the poor without remorse, eat the bread of oppression without fear, and wax fat upon the spoils of the People." Even as humanitarian outsiders were linking themselves to the fate of poor Bostonians, the city formed a "house divided against itself," and against many outsiders, too.

Caught up in a protracted economic depression, Boston was unable to furnish either work or public relief for the many transients who still came streaming in. City officials responded by stifling their social sympathies: newcomers were regularly warned out. If such strangers fell into need while in Boston, they would get no help from the town. But Boston was no more hard-hearted than the surrounding countryside. All over Massachusetts, townspeople were taking up the welcome mats, fastening shut the gates of charity, and restricting benevolence to those who had a legal right to support. Parochialism was thus intensifying in Massachusetts, even as Virgadamo detects a "nascent nationalism" in the colonies as a whole.[4]

Even within Boston, there was a new distance between the donors of charity and the recipients. Virgadamo overlooks the fact that the spirit of humanitarianism gave rise to new forms of charity: the construction of almshouses, workhouses, hospitals, and other formal institutions that set the poor and deviant off from the wider community. This marked a dramatic departure from past colonial practice. Once the needy received out-relief in their own homes and were boarded with other householders, at public expense. Now, in imitation of new English examples, the poor were increasingly confined in segregated establishments, where they were put to work picking oakum or spinning flax in order to pay for their own support. To be sure, the separation of the poor was only partially achieved. Far more paupers remained beyond the almshouse walls than were ever forced within. One reason was that the overseers of the poor were reluctant to humiliate decent people in

distress by consigning them to the poor house. This was not yet the Jacksonian age of the asylum. Even so, the direction of social policy is clear: the differentiation of the poor from the community would grow ever more formal over the years.[5]

In this changing context, then, the development of abstract bonds of ideology among Americans — Virgadamo's rising spirit of patriotism — accompanied the emergence of more impersonal and more contentious relationships among the people of the separate colonies themselves. The process of social change had disrupted the old familiar world of localism and deference, and things would never be the same. Indeed, the Revolution would deepen the immersion of Americans in a wider, more cosmopolitan world. Exiled to the countryside in the crisis of 1775, Edmund Quincy declared himself to be a "Citizen of the World" — albeit a small one: "Sometime at Lancaster," he added, "and other times at Boston." Ironically, the Revolutionary movement in Massachusetts even overcame the stingy parochialism that had previously set one town against another in the flight from responsibility for the poor. In 1775, as Patriots were flooding out of occupied Boston, neighboring communities agreed, at the Provincial Congress's request, to take in and assist specific numbers of the city's poor — no more warning them out. But this open hand to the needy soon ended. By the 1780s, the towns were back to battling in the courts, rather than pay for aid to unfortunate families like the Peacocks of Boston and Braintree. And by the Jacksonian age, the characteristic approach to the poor would be a completion of the humanitarian innovations of the mid-eighteenth century: walling the poor and deviant off from the rest of the community, under the charge of specialized professionals, who would try to remodel them into respectable souls. The Boston physician Walter Channing called this the spirit of exclusiveness, the withdrawal on the part of the comfortable from the "ever recognized relationships of brotherhood." Exclusiveness "is not much disposed to go to the lower places in society. If it attempts to aid pauperism, it does so by delegation. It knows too little of the detail of every day want and misery, to feel that it can directly minister to its relief."[6]

No longer did middle-class Americans seek out those satisfactions of benevolent sentiments on which John Adams prided himself. The long-run heritage of the Revolution was that Americans saw themselves linked together as citizens of a great national republic — but no longer as fellow human beings bound together by a concrete human lot.

NOTES

1. L.H. Butterfield *et al.*, eds., *Diary and Autobiography of John Adams* (4 vols.; Cambridge, 1961), I, p. 332; Douglas Lamar Jones, "The Strolling Poor: Transiency in Eighteenth-Century Massachusetts," *Journal of Social History,* 8 (Spring, 1975), pp. 32-39.

2. David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture (Ithaca, 1966), p. 333-64 (quote on p. 356).*

3. Gary B. Nash, *The Urban Crucible: Social Change, Political Consciousness, and the Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, 1979), p. 227.

4. Nash, *Urban Crucible, passim* (quote on p. 297); Robert A. Gross, *The Minutemen and Their World* (New York, 1976), pp. 68-108.

5. Nash, *Urban Crucible,* pp. 125-27, 184-90; David Owen, *English Philanthropy 1660-1960* (Cambridge, 1964), pp. 36-68.

6. David J. Rothman, *The Discovery of the Asylum: Social Order and Disorder in the New Republic* (Boston, 1971), pp. 155-205 (quote on p. 174).