

BOOK REVIEWS

FROM IDEA TO FREEDOM

From Idea to Freedom — The Revolutionary Aspect of American Statehood (ISBN 978-86-84149-45-1) by Gordana Bekčić Pješčić was published by Most Art, Zemun, in 2011. The book contains 192 pages, including numerous quotes and pictures — reprints of paintings, documents, photographs and maps. The book is arranged in ten sections beginning with the American Declaration of Independence, seven chapters, the Constitution of the United States of America and the Chronology of Events.

The first chapter under the title “The New Land,” offers the readership a historical background of the American Revolutionary War, the main topic of the book. The author presents us the story about the discovery of the American continent, the British settlement of the new territories, the Thirteen Colonies, and the biographies of seven Founding Fathers that played the most important role in the revolution and statehood building. “The discovery of America was a historical mistake,”¹ a rather controversial and intriguing sentence, is the opening statement of the first chapter that makes the reader immediately highly interested in the content of the book. In this chapter, the author rightfully claims that “the contemporary civilization would not have been the same in any aspect, had the War of Independence had a different outcome.”² The author also emphasizes that the creation of the United States of America was a revolutionary phenomenon in the times when it took place, as much as it is nowadays. According to the author, the certain elements of the American statehood were shaped much prior to the War for Independence, and these elements are explained, explored and interpreted in the following chapters. The importance of this historical event and its influence on the rest of the world is so big that the general lack of knowledge about the creation of the United States of America it is quite unusual, claims the author.

In the second chapter, “From Vassals to Free Men,” the author elaborates on the thirteen years prior to the beginning of the American War of Independence which represented the period during which the opinions, positions and ideas pertaining to the major political issues were consolidated. According to the

¹ Gordana Bekčić Pješčić, *Od ideje do slobode*, Most Art, Zemun, 2011, p. 11.

² *Ibid*, p. 17.

author, the natural, social, economic and political conditions in the colonial America were so different from the ones which existed in the British Monarchy that they represented a unique experience and laid ground for the big changes that took place prior to and during the War of Independence. The main four differences that laid the ground for the creation of a republic in the American soil were the absence of the immediate king's rule, hereditary aristocracy, strict division of classes, and the centralized bureaucratic apparatus. The author argues that the revolution happened in the people's minds before the battles and bloodshed, and offers the readership a learned journey through events, discussions and argumentation that led to the revolution and founding of the American republic.

The author dwells on the deep economic reasons for the conflict with the British Monarchy in the fourth chapter entitled "The Forged Liberty". The taxes imposed on the colonists by the British Crown were the main reason for the uprising against the Monarchy. The colonial period in America was the time of the first industrial revolution which set the foundations for today's global economic and trade influence, as claimed by the author. The author refers to Adam Smith's book "An Inquiry into the Nature and Cause of the Wealth of Nations" in order to explain the theory of economic liberalism which has had the most fruitful application in the United States of America since the colonial times. The individual freedom represents the most important precondition for the economic liberalism enabling people to create business associations and make profit. The theory of economic liberalism also implies the complete absence of the political influence on the economy which directly creates conditions for the growth of the national wealth. In the spirit of economic liberalism, the business culture and entrepreneurship were highly developed in the colonial America much before the revolution took place. The author claims that the economic interests of the people in the Thirteen Colonies represented the basis for the economic liberalism which, since those times, has acted as a major driving force of the United States of America and its global economic advance through 20th century until present days. This chapter reviews the tax laws imposed on the Colonies by the British Monarchy, including The Molasses Act, The Quartering Act, The Stamp Act, and The Tea Act which finally led to the "Boston Tea Party" and the revolution that followed.

"A City Upon a Hill," the third chapter, represents an in-depth analysis of the importance of religion in both the colonial America and the United States of America. The author notes that the religious practice shaped the American political culture to such a degree that the United States of America might not even exist today if it were not for various faiths and beliefs, especially the Puritan Protestantism. "The foundations of American political culture are based upon religious principles, primarily the Puritan ones. However, the vigor and

strength of these principles were not in their canonical value, but in the fact that the main theological principles spilled over into the everyday life.”³ And strangely enough, although religion is usually considered a retrograde force by the prevailing secular stream of thought, in the case of the United States of America, it has played a particularly progressive role in the creation and evolution of the country, as argued by the author. Except for the puritans who originally inhabited Massachusetts, the author also elaborates on other religious groups that participated in the American experiment — Quakers from Pennsylvania, Anglicans from Virginia, The Great Awakening movement, and Catholics from Maryland.

The fourth chapter entitled “The Builders” offers a completely new aspect of looking at the American Revolutionary War. The role of Freemasons and their basic principles of personal, political, economic, religious and social liberty in the founding of the United States of America are topics rarely researched and studied by scientists, even in America. In this chapter, the readership can find out that the majority of Founding Fathers were also members of the Freemasons, among them George Washington, Samuel Adams, Benjamin Franklin, James Monroe, and Alexander Hamilton. The author skillfully and convincingly dispels the widespread prejudices about a secret, powerful society that pulls the strings of the world. “Freemasonry is not a secret society, but a discreet society with its secrets.”⁴ The author explains that a Freemason is a man searching for the truth about himself and the world that surrounds him. By presenting a short history of the Freemasonry, the structure of the Freemasons’ society, and their basic principles, values and ideas, the author offers a background for the analyses of the role of Freemasons in the American Revolutionary War. The author also argues that the Freemasons’ principles, values and ideas, such as the personal liberty, the respect for the moral laws, and the respect for the faith of the other, were shared by the settlers of the Thirteen Colonies. The Freemasonry represented a form of civic education that had already been accepted and practiced before the American Revolution, and that represented the main difference between the American and European Freemasonry, according to the author. In the pre-revolutionary period, the Freemasonry was the sole American inter-colonial organization which served as a communication channel for the like-minded people across the Colonies. During the Revolutionary period, claims the author, the Freemasonry also served as a uniting force within the American Continental Army, which had been quite disorganized and divided. The symbols and principles of the Freemasonry continued to play an important role in the life of the United States

³ Gordana Bekčić Pješčić, *Od ideje do slobode*, Most Art, Zemun, 2011, p. 87.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

of America to the present days, as noted by the author. This chapter also contains a short text about the Freemasonry in Serbia and the part it played in the Serbian constitutional history, a fact little known to the broader public in Serbia.

In the fifth chapter, "The Structure of Freedom," the author elaborates on the theoretical and philosophical foundations of the American political thought, and in that respect on the influence of John Locke, Baron de Montesquieu and Thomas Hobbes' work and theories. The Declaration of Independence, as pointed out by the author, testifies that "all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness,"⁵ and it fully reflects Locke's theory of natural law. The separation of powers and the "trias politica" principle, as formulated by Baron de Montesquieu, were applied by John Adams and James Madison in shaping the institutional establishment of the American republic. Alexander Hamilton, influenced by Thomas Hobbes' thoughts about the social and political order, was a crucial figure in writing the Constitution of the United States of America and in establishing the First Bank of the United States. By explaining and analyzing the theoretical background of the American political thought, the author skillfully pictures the institutional structure of the United States of America, as established by the Founding Fathers more than two centuries ago, and the continuous success in functioning of the American democracy since those times.

The last chapter of the book, "The New Order," summarizes the previous chapters and presents concluding thoughts of the author about the contemporary position of the United States of America in the international arena. All through the previous five chapters the author successfully demonstrated the dialectical contradictions the United States of America were based upon, as well as the present status and role of this country in the globalized world. These contradictions include the American exceptionalism rooted in the ideas about the "empire of liberty" which retained slavery for a long time after gaining independence from the British Monarchy, the powerful religious aspect which allowed an ultimate religious tolerance, and the federal structure of the country that at the same time presents itself as a national country. "The creation of the United States of America is an event that divides the history into the one before and the one after. The American Revolution is an incident that leaped out of the time algorithm breaking off the historical continuum."⁶ In this chapter, the author also reviews the current international standing of the United States of

⁵ "The Declaration of Independence", Internet: 25.02.2012, <http://www.ushistory.org/declaration/document/>.

⁶ Gordana Bekčić Pješčić, *Od ideje do slobode*, Most Art, Zemun, 2011, p. 147.

America on the global, regional and bilateral levels which brings us to the opposed and contradictory attitudes toward America by the rest of the world.

From Idea to Freedom was originally the author's magisterial thesis defended in April 2011 at the Faculty of Political Science, University of Belgrade. The book offers findings and an in-depth analyses of the creation of the United States of America exploring the roots and origins of core values and ideas America was born from. Gordana Bekčić Pješčić rightfully claims that the United States of America, as a key player in the international arena today, is a country special and different from other countries in many aspects, and that the comprehension of the American history and its origins is essential to everybody who deals with today's only global superpower.

The book represents a well-researched and deftly executed study of the events and decisions that led to the American Revolutionary War of Independence, and the ideological and legal framework the United States of America were created within. The author propagates the overarching theme that the American Revolution, represents a "black swan" among world revolutions — although "every revolution is a historical precedent."⁷ According to the author, the legacy of the American Revolution — the United States of America, is a global political, social and cultural model in today's world. And indeed, the United States of America is a country created on the idea of freedom, a country created according to the needs of a man as an individual, and not according to the needs of a ruler.

In addition to the main theme of the book, the author explores a number of very interesting and somewhat intriguing subthemes, such as the findings that the American continent was not settled by the people from the margins of the British society, as claimed by many critics. The author devoted a whole chapter to the role that the Freemasons played in the American Revolution and their influence on the creation and the development of the American democracy. Exploring and studying the topic of Freemasonry is a rare enterprise and a rather controversial one, and Gordana Bekčić Pješčić deserves an acclaim for taking up this bold feat.

The book is very well written and highly readable, and it is appropriate for both those who are well acquainted with the American history in general and the American Revolution in particular, and for those with little prior knowledge of the historical, political, economic and societal aspects of the creation of the United States of America. Thus, the book can be read as a scientific paper, a textbook or a novel depending of the previous knowledge and personal interest of the reader. The paper and print are of high quality which enables the reader

⁷ Gordana Bekčić Pješčić, *Od ideje do slobode*, Most Art, Zemun, 2011, p. 32.

to fully enjoy pictures and reprints of paintings, original documents and maps. Quotes and short texts offering additional explanations about particular events, documents, and personalities support the main theme and the author's view of the subject. The final section of the book, the Chronology of Events, printed on a folded throwout paper makes it possible to have an easy overview of the historical period covered by the book.

Taking into consideration the current position of the United States of America in the world politics and international relations, and the widespread negative attitudes towards the world's only superpower, especially in Serbia, it is not easy to write a book that expresses a moderate opinion about America. The author skillfully presents, interprets and analyses enough evidence and examples to make the readership contemplate about the United States of America without being emotionally engaged despite the controversy this country creates.

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