

THE SPIRIT OF REFORM (1820-1840)

Cours HD

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Introduction

Many American devoted their lives to the crusade against slavery. But one of the most active and courageous abolitionist was Abby Kelley (born in 1811 in Massachusetts, educated at Quaker [Society of Friends] boarding school in Rhode Island). She joined the Female Anti-Slavery Society and like thousands of women in the North, she was a deeply committed abolitionist. In 1838, she started giving speeches about slavery. Her first public speech in Philadelphia ended with the building being burnt down to the ground since the population had heard that abolitionists favoured « amalgamation » -i.e. sexual relations between blacks and whites. For twenty years, she travelled throughout the North, speaking in churches, public halls, and antislavery homes on « the holy cause of human rights. » Her career shows the interconnections of the era's various reform movements. In addition to abolition, she was active in pacifist organisations -which opposed the use of force, including war, to settle disputes. She wrote that « In striving to strike [the slave's] irons off, [women] found most surely that we were manacled ourselves. » Abby Kelly was not the first American woman to speak in public, but she covered more miles and gave more speeches than any other female orator. She forthrightly (= franchement) challenged the era's assumption that woman's « place » was in the home. Lucy Stone, another women's rights advocate, said Kelley « earned for us all the right of free speech. »

1. THE BIRTH OF REFORM

Abolitionism was one of the many efforts to improve American Society. In the 1830s, while Alexis de Tocqueville was visiting the US, he noted that, in the absence of a powerful national government, America's political and social activities were organised through voluntary (= *bénévole*) associations- churches, brotherly orders, political clubs and so on. The reform ethos was born from and was part of this proliferation of voluntary groups which aimed to reorganize society on the basis of cooperation rather than competitive individualism.

Nearly all groups worked to convert public opinion to their cause. They sent out speakers, petitions and published pamphlets- like Abby Kelley. Reform was also an international crusade : peace, temperance, women's rights and antislavery advocates regularly travelled from one side of the Atlantic to another to promote the cause.

Several tactics were adopted to bring about social change :

- . some relied on « moral suasion » (= persuasion morale) to convert people to their cause.
- . some sought to use the power of government to force sinners to change their ways.
- . some reformers withdrew from larger society and established their own cooperative settlements. They hoped to change American society by creating « heavens on earth. »

1) Utopian communities

About one hundred reform communities were established in the decades before the Civil War. Historians call them « utopian » after Thomas More's 16th century novel *Utopia*, an outline of a perfect society. Most arose from religious conviction but others from the desire to counteract social and economic changes resulting from the market revolution. They were hoping to restore social harmony and to narrow the widening gap between the rich and the poor. Through them the words « socialism » and « communism » entered the language of politics.

Most utopian communities sought to find alternatives to conventional gender relations and marriage patterns. All insisted that the abolition of private property must be accompanied by the end of men owning the property of their spouses.

2) The Shakers

They believed God had a dual personality, both male and female which implied that both sexes were spiritually equal. « virgin purity » was one pillar of their faith. There was no traditional family life : men and women lived separately in dormitory-like structures. They adopted children in orphanages (=orphelinats) to increase their numbers rather than

doing it naturally. They engaged in frenzied (= endiablé) dancing and rejected individual accumulation of private property. They were economically successful and their beautifully crafted furniture is still admired today.

3) The Mormons

The members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, or Mormons, travelled to modern-day Utah, hoped to create a Kingdom of God on earth. The movement was founded by Joseph Smith in the 1820s. It claimed ancient Hebrews had emigrated to the New World and become the ancestors of the American Indians. Mormons refused to separate Church and State, and practised polygamy which was at odds with Christian teaching and 19th century morality. But movement started in New York but moved west to settle in Illinois. Five years later, Smith was arrested and murdered in jail. The movement then moved to Utah near the Great Salt Lake.

4) Oneida and Brook Farm

Oneida was founded in 1848, in upstate New York by John Humphrey Noyes. He took the revivalist message that man could achieve moral perfection to an atypical extreme. He preached that his followers and himself had become so perfect that they had reached sinlessness, a complete « purity of heart. » His small community developed in Vermont. Contrary to Shaker celibacy, he taught that the members of his community formed a single « holy family of equals », and the community became famous for its « complex marriage » in which any man could propose sexual relations to any woman who could accept or reject the offer which was then registered in a public record book. He was against « exclusive affection » which, to him, destroyed the harmony of the community. He was indicted (= inculpé) for adultery by local officials and in 1848, he moved his community to Oneida, where it survived until 1881. But Oneida was an extremely dictatorial environment. Members observed each other's attitude and publicly criticized those who did not respect Noyes's rules. By the 1860s, a committee was determining who could have children, this led to an early example of « eugenics ».

In 1841, New England transcendentalists* established Brook Farm near Boston. The movement aimed to show that manual and intellectual labour could coexist. Their model was the French social reformer, Charles Fourier, who envisioned communal living and working arrangements while retaining private property. Leisure time was devoted to music, dancing, dramatic reading, and intellectual discussions. It was like a miniature university which attracted mostly writers, teachers, and ministers. The novelist Nathaniel Hawthorne who was a member for a while criticized it in his novel, *The Blithedale Romance*, and the movement disbanded after a few years of existence.

*Transcendentalism = 1. an idealistic philosophical and social movement which developed in New England around 1836 in reaction to rationalism. Influenced by romanticism, Platonism, and Kantian philosophy, it taught that divinity pervades all nature and humanity, and its members held progressive views on feminism and communal living. Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau were central figures.

2. a system developed by Immanuel Kant, based on the idea that, in order to understand the nature of reality, one must first examine and analyse the reasoning process which governs the nature of experience. (The Oxford Dictionary)

5) The Owenites, Utopia and Modern Times

→ Robert Owen, a British factory owner who was horrified by the degradation of workers in the early days of industrialisation in Britain created a model factory village at New Lanark, Scotland, which combined strict rules of work discipline with comfortable housing and free public education. Owen promoted communitarianism as a peaceful means of ensuring that workers received the full value of their labor. In 1824, he purchased the Harmony community in Indiana and established New Harmony where he aimed to create a « new moral world.» To him, individuals could be transformed by changing the conditions in which they lived. Children ought to be removed at an early age from the care of their parents to be educated where they would be taught to subordinate individual ambition to the common good. He also defended women's rights (access to education and the right to divorce). New Harmony survived for only a few years but deeply influenced the labour movement, educational reformers, and women's rights advocates. His vision matched the American belief that a community of equals could be created in the New World.

→ Utopia, Ohio and Modern Times, New York, were founded by Josiah Warren, an early American anarchist. Both were unregulated settlements. Warren wanted to address the cause of labor unrest and women's inequality. He created shops where goods were exchanged according to the amount of work that had gone into producing them, thus preventing middlemen like bankers and merchants from sharing in the hard-earned income of farmers,

labourers and manufacturers. Marriage was a purely voluntary arrangement since no laws regulated personal behaviour : Warren took American individualism to its logical extreme. To him, freedom meant « allowing each individual to be absolute despot or sovereign. »

6) Religious revivalism and reform

Most Americans regarded property ownership as key to economic independence - and therefore to freedom- and marriage as the basis of the social order. Far more typical of the reform impulse were movements that aimed at liberating men and women from slavery and war, but also from illiteracy, drinking and a tendency towards criminality -all forms of internal servitude.

Many of these reform movements came from the religious revivalism of the second Great Awakening. According to revivalist preachers, God had created man as a « free moral agent » therefore sinners could not only reform themselves but could also remake the world. The revivals popularized the outlook (= perspective) known as « perfectionism », which saw both individuals and society at large as capable of indefinite improvement. That's why a good deal of the era's reform movements had a vision of society freed from sin. Under the impact of the revivals (= les réveils) older reform efforts moved in a new, radical direction. Temperance was transformed into a crusade to eliminate drinking entirely. Criticism of war became outright (= pur et simple) pacifism. And critics of slavery now demanded immediate and total abolition rather than gradual emancipation.

7) The temperance movement

For people of the North's emerging middle-class culture, reform became a badge (= insigne) of respectability, a sign that individuals had taken control of their own lives, and had become morally accountable human beings. The American Temperance Society (founded in 1826) directed its efforts to redeeming occasional drinkers, not habitual drunkards (= invrognes). By 1840, alcohol consumption per person had fallen to less than half the level of a decade earlier. The temperance crusade and other reform movements aroused (=susciter) considerable hostility since occasional drinkers -those who enjoyed a drink of alcohol once in a while- did not see themselves as immoral.

8) Criticism of reform

Many Americans saw the reform impulse as an attack on their own freedom. Drinking was common during festive celebrations and events like militia gatherings. Taverns were popular meeting places for working men in early 19th century towns and cities, but also places of political discussions, organisational meetings, and popular recreations. Among those hostile to the reform impulse were American Catholics whose numbers had grown because of Irish and German immigration. Catholics did not have the same understanding of freedom as Protestant reformers. They considered sin as an unavoidable burden of individuals and society and regarded the perfectionist idea that evil could be banished from the world as an insult to genuine religion. SO they bitterly opposed what they believed were reformers' efforts to impose their own version of Protestant morality on their fellow citizens. To Reformers, man was a free moral agent while Catholics put less emphasis on the individual and more on the importance of communities centered on family and church. John Hughes, the Archbishop of New York at the time declared : « Man by his nature, [is] a being of society. »

9) What Freedom was to Reformers

Reformers needed to reconcile their desire to create a moral order with their quest to enhance personal freedom. Their vision of freedom was both liberating and controlling. On the one hand, Reformers insisted that their aim was to make sure Americans could enjoy true liberty. On the other hand, they insisted only self-discipline could bring self-fulfillment. To them, the free individual was the person who internalised the practice of self-control. To some extent, they thought American society suffered from an excess of liberty (the « natural liberty » verging on anarchy and mentioned by John Winthrop in the early days of Puritan Massachusetts as opposed to the « Christian liberty » which was that of the morally upright citizen.

Many religious groups in the East worried that people who had settled in the West and immigrants who came from abroad lacked self-control, and led lives of sin, like drinking, violation of the Sabbath, and lacked Protestant devotion. They formed the American Tract Society, the American Bible society, and others that inundated eastern cities and the western frontier with copies of the gospel and pamphlets-(more than 500 million pages were printed at the time - to promote religious virtue.

10) Asylums

There was a proliferation of new institutions as Reformers hoped the latter could reshape human beings into free and morally upright people. Many institutions were built in the 1830s and 1840s : jails for criminals, poorhouses for destitutes, asylums for the insane and orphanages for children without families ; all shared the same ideal of « perfectionism » (= to eliminate incurable social ills). To do this, they thought that placing people in an environment where their character could be transformed was necessary. But jails ended up being overcrowded and rehabilitating inmates became less important than keeping them away from the rest of society. Reformers originally believed that through these institutions those who were admitted in could be released to become productive and self-disciplined citizens.

11) The common school

It was a tax-supported state school system open to all children. At that time, a majority of children had no access to learning at all. The annual reports of Horace Mann, a Massachusetts lawyer and the era's leading educational reformer, mixed conservatism and radicalism, liberation and social control, and were widely read in America. He envisioned universal public education as a means to restore equality by bringing together in one single type of schooling experience the children of all classes. This, he thought, would enable the poorer children to climb the social ladder. He hoped it would serve the industry and be an alternative to moving west to get a farm. The early labor movement shared the same view and encouraged the development of such schools. He also believed it was good for social stability since to him parents did not always instill the proper discipline in their children. It also helped to prepare students for work in the new industrial economy. By 1860, every northern state had adopted tax-supported school systems for its children. These schools enabled many women to become teachers and have a career. In the South, planters did not follow through as they feared the rebellion of literate blacks, and did not want to pay for the education of poor white children. As a result, the South lagged far behind in public education. During that period (1820 to 1840) the North and South increasingly grew apart.

2. ABOLITIONISM