

From Rebellion to Equality: The Rhetoric of Creedal Nationalism in Early American Abolitionist Movements

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ABSTRACT

Thomas Jefferson's Declaration of Independence contains Enlightenment-Era language of the right to rebel against a government violating natural rights. The most famous sentence of the resolution contains the phrase, "All men are created equal." The phrase morphed over time away from its original meaning as a self-evident assertion that God did not create Kings to rule. The document's language slowly turned into sacred language, embodying an American Creed concerning civic equality from which national identity could be defined. This study presents research that continues to refine the history of "Creedal Nationalism" in the United States by examining its construction in the public rhetoric of the abolitionist movements from the 1820s to the 1840s. Since identity and nationalist ideology are constructed through the cultural power of narrative, the development of the rhetoric and changing interpretations of language surrounding the idea of the American Creed has shaped American Political Development. These ideas remain central to the political conflicts in the United States today.

Introduction

A traditional ethno-cultural nationalism existed in the English colonies of the future United States for as long as there had been colonies. William Bradford, in his journal *Of Plymouth Plantation*, began bemoaning the threat to the racial and religious purity of his nation in the 1620s. In 1782, John Hector Crevecoeur published a collection of essays entitled *Letters from an American Farmer*, in which the third essay was entitled "What is an American?" This is precisely the question that nationalism as an ideology exists to answer. As a French immigrant, Crevecoeur portrayed America as an ethnic melting pot but wrote in an ironic style about the falsehood of a classless American society and the horrors of slavery (Crevecoeur 2009). American nationalists of his time had multiple overlapping sources of identity and a sense of community around which to coalesce a nationalist ideology. Competing local and national identities were built on the foundations of English imperial ideology, warfare against Native American nations along frontiers, colonial-era identity, and all the dynamics of post-colonial politics mixed in with constant immigration and the racial politics of slavery.

A competing American nationalist ideology began to coalesce around a new narrative of American identity after the War of 1812. In the patriotic fervor following the war, re-printings of the opening phrases of Thomas Jefferson's Declaration of Independence proliferated on various merchandise.¹ Celebrations of July 4th had for decades served an important public political function, but the textual content of the Jefferson Declaration had been far less of note. Over the following years, labor movements, women's rights movements, and the abolitionist movement seized on the rhetoric in the Declaration as a central argument for their cause. The 18th century Enlightenment language of popular sovereignty and natural rights was repurposed to lay claim to an American version of nationalism which centered around a rhetoric of equality, what Lincoln eventually popularized across many speeches as the American Creed of "All Men are Created Equal" with inalienable rights. The narratives of identity that emerged in the public discourse constituted a Creedal Nationalism, a nationalist ideology conceiving the American nation as a community dedicated from its founding as open to allowing anyone into the public sphere as citizens. Only half a century after the start of the Revolution, an ideological struggle between competing nationalisms emerged as mythical history was constructed over the meaning of the Revolution and what it meant to be an American. This study presents research into the history of Creedal Nationalism in the United States by examining its public sphere construction in the rhetoric of the abolitionist movements from the 1820s to the 1840s.

¹Hereafter referred to as the Jefferson Declaration.

Nations and the Ideology of Nationalism

As the ideology of liberalism grew in popularity in 18th-century Europe and America, the notion of a country (as opposed to an empire or kingdom owned by a noble family) composed of “citizens” became embedded in both political discourse and mass identity. If the political legitimacy of government does not derive from divine sources, it derives from the will of the citizens. The ideology of liberalism begs the question, who should be the citizens, and what countries should exist that will belong to those citizens? Who should be in, and who should be out? Where should the borders be drawn to contain the citizens properly? Nationalism as an ideology provided an answer to that question, namely that the citizens of a country should consist of a nation, a group of people that exist distinctly (for some reason) from other groups of people. Nationalism asserted that each nation has the right to self-determination through having its own country. This function of nationalism as an ideology has continued through the formation of modern states in the 18th century, rebellion within multi-national empires in the 19th century, rebellion and state formation in the post-colonial world of the 20th century, and regional demands for independence in the 21st century. It also has always been used by traditional ethno-cultural nationalists to object to the presence within a country of people dissimilar to themselves, often manifesting as objections to immigration by people outside of the characteristics of what the nationalist believes to be their nation or ideologies supportive of excluding groups of residents of a country from the full rights of citizenship based on their lacking the proper ethno-cultural characteristics of the country’s nation.

No matter how the political culture of a society defines the word “nation,” the ideology of nationalism views the nation as the people with a right to self-determination, the right of citizenship, and the right to have a government dedicated to its benefit. Benedict Anderson’s idea-based conception of the nation as an imagined political community, inherently limited and sovereign, is certainly where I, as a constructivist, begin looking for the origins, character, and influence of nationalist ideology (Anderson 1991). Anderson describes nationalism as being born out of cultural systems at the time of the decline of religious explanations for the legitimacy of political structures. Anderson tells a story of the decline of sacred language and the rise of secular language, unifying and bounding a new imagined community through its state administrative language and the capitalist-driven mass printing of vernacular books, newspapers being the longest form of book. For Anderson, administrative units created meaning in the post-colonial creole communities, driven into public consciousness through the work of capitalist newspapermen. For nationalism as a source of political legitimacy for the new United States, Anderson’s origin story remains quite sound. As a source of political identity and its political use within public space, it is too late as an origin and fails to describe the public dynamics of the early Republic.

Waldstreicher (1997) argues nationalism is more than an ideology connected to the transmission of an idea of the nation, but rather is constructed through public acts in the content of public patriotism and discourse. Nationalism is created by the content and participation found in patriotic celebrations, festivities, parades, and public discourse in wide-ranging forms as toasts at dinner parties to the articles found in newspapers. Symbols and narratives shape the national identity, as does who is allowed to participate and who is not. As Homi Bhabha (Bhabha 1990, 2) argues, building on Anderson in *Nation and Narration*, the nation is a system of cultural signifiers that emerges from the narrative of its writings, “nation as a form of narrative – textual strategies, metaphoric displacements, sub-texts, and figurative stratagems.” The nation is constructed through the continuous accumulation of public actions within the classical conception of Jurgen Habermas’ (Habermas 1989) public sphere, political culture constructed within civil society rather than through political institutions. Nationalism in the early United States was not a uniting consensus around a new source of political legitimacy, but rather a set of activities over which competing groups were empowered to struggle for the identity of what it meant to be an American, regardless of the group’s access to the power of political institutions.

A New Way to Conceptualize the Competing Types of American Nationalist Ideology

This study supports the introduction of Creedal Nationalist discourse within the public sphere as seen in the language and arguments of the abolitionist movement beginning in the 1820s. It is part of a research project into the origins and importance of Creedal Nationalism in American political development, focusing on labor, women’s rights, and the abolitionist movements. It is a structural project designed to build out the multi-disciplinary discourse concerning Habermas’ public sphere. The political landscape I seek to describe and explain is not the state’s policy-making or the home’s private life but the discourses of civil society. The goal is a travel guide to the dreams of Benedict Anderson’s imagined communities during the myth-building years of the early United States as expressed in the public sphere. The causal power of language and symbols is assumed to be a constructivist view of the formation of ideology rather than just the influence of ideology acting through the transmission source of political culture acting on elections and legislation. *The language of nationalism does not create a national identity, but the language it creates the nation.* The role of civil society in forming an ideological narrative and the political identity that derives from it has a causal influence over defining citizenship and the function of the political sphere.

My ideological category of Creedal Nationalism is distinct from not only ethno-cultural nationalism but also the traditional category of civic nationalism in American political science. Within the American political development literature of the 20th

century, it has been common to assert “civic nationalism” as an alternative ideological category of nationalism present in America (Kohn 1944; Hofstadter 1948, Plamenatz 1973, 23-36; Gellner 1981, 753-776). Civic nationalism defined the nation as a group of people who believe in universal principles of the rule of law, political equality for all citizens, and democratic processes that support popular sovereignty. Proponents deride the historical myths inevitably contained in ethno-cultural nationalism in favor of universal truths of popular sovereignty. I join the chorus of critics in recent years questioning the usefulness of the category (Xenos 1996, 213-231; Yack 1996, 193-22; Keitner 1999, 341-351; Kaufmann 2000, 133-155; Kuzio 2002, 20-39; Spencer 2014, 666-673; Tamir 2019, 419-434; Larin 2020, 127-141). I assert the theoretical framework for civic nationalism was and remains ontologically indistinguishable from liberalism as an ideology. As a theoretical framework, it tells me nothing about the transmission of ideas and narrative discourse that construct the identities of citizens who do or do not properly belong within a nation.

On the Origins of American Creedal Nationalism

While I find the alternative theoretical formulation of *civic nationalism* conceptually empty, the two competing versions of nationalism in the United States in the early 19th century can still be found in competition in the 21st. The central hypothesis of my research project is that Creedal Nationalism developed as an ideology through public discourse by groups intending to broaden the claim to full membership of American society. The development of Creedal Nationalism in the public discourse grew as a narrative of myth-building concerning the increasingly sacred document produced by the Second Continental Congress during the war against Britain. All nationalism engages in myth building, an imagined current community tied to a historical past. Creedal Nationalism built an American nation that was born in narrative, using mythical and sacred language to lay claim to the purpose of the Revolution. It reinterprets the Jefferson Declaration’s language from simply expressing the natural rights of self-governance that form the basis of the document’s straightforward Enlightenment social contract claims. Creedal nationalism was expressed in public discourse, laying claim to the Jefferson Declaration as the superstructure of the United States and the foundational principles of what it means to be an American. Used by the Creedal Nationalists of the abolition movement, the language of the Creed becomes an argument, in and of itself, for the abolition of slavery, the right to civil equality under the law, opposition to the Colonization movement, the meaning of the Constitution, and the right of any person to be considered a member of the American nation.

This is very different from what the language of the Jefferson Declaration meant when it was written. The violent political cauldron of the early American republic had many contesting political ideologies, foreign policies, conceptions of federalism, battles over slavery, and competing identities. Various versions of Enlightenment liberalism prevailed over most of the conflicts, a rejection of the Divine Right of Kings in preference to the rule of law and citizenship as the foundation of a self-governing society. This is the language of natural rights found in Jefferson’s Declaration and many of the other declarations of independence from the time and the various state constitutions and surrounding documents. The opening language of liberal ideology was so common that John Adams’ supporters accused Jefferson of plagiarism. Jefferson responded that he had not been asked to write something original and that all uniformly and commonly held the ideas expressed. It was the language of contemporary philosophers such as Francis Hutchinson with doses of good old John Locke. Nobody, least of all Thomas Jefferson, would have suggested that the language in any way referred to racial equality or civic equality for all. It was a declaration of popular sovereignty, the right to rebel against a tyrant who damaged the natural rights of a society’s social contract. It explicitly referenced the equality of men in a state of nature before forming a governed society. It was simply a document that was legally required to secure gunpowder and alliances from continental Europe well after the British Crown had declared total war against the colonies, treating them as a foreign combatant rather than mere rebels.

But racial and civic equality was precisely what the abolitionist movement in the early 1820s began to claim the words found in the document meant. Rhetoric became the basis of national identity, reconfigured from its original ideological meaning into a new conception of the nature of the American nation. The language became a part of what historian Pauline Maier described as the American Scripture, becoming the sacred language for Creedal Nationalists, particularly from the 1820s, as a founding principle of the country that guaranteed the equality of all people at the heart of the American polity. Maier even describes eulogies for Thomas Jefferson (and John Adams) in 1826 that verged on Christlike rising to God or, at the very least, sainthood as individuals who had bestowed sacred principles (Maier 1997, 189-192). For abolitionists, this included the inherent human equality in all things.

Some of the opponents of abolition in the early years of the country and opponents of Creedal Nationalism from the 1820s argued that equality in all its forms and meanings could only be claimed by those who were members of the society. If you were not a proper participant in the public sphere from the point of view of those making the argument, you were not entitled to this natural equality. This argument appears in the reasoning of those who fought over the Virginia Declaration of Rights content as risking a statement of the inherent rights of enslaved people. It supported continued inequality in political rights based on class despite a variety of these statements inside state constitutions. It appeared in the 1820s in arguments against the right of workers to form labor unions. It was naturally part of excluding women, allowing John Adams, for example, not to see

them in the public sphere and, therefore, not remember them when it became time to parcel out equality. Many others, such as Stephen Douglas during the Lincoln-Douglas debates, pointed out that the Jefferson Declaration did not mean what the Creedal nationalists said it did.

As Creedal Nationalism spread in the 1820s, the abolitionist movements quickly brought into the public sphere the arguments the ideology provided. The contrast to earlier arguments is stark. This study cannot do even the smallest justice to the history of abolitionist discourse. I will allow a few broad generalizations. For most of the 18th century, abolitionist narratives centered on slave resistance, from rebellion to legal suits and scatterings of religious arguments based on Christian scripture. The horrors of slavery acted in concert with Golden Rule-style objections of Quaker abolitionists, who also paired abolitionist arguments with a more general condemnation of the selfish pursuit of wealth and violence.

While many Enlightenment philosophers pontificated racist ideas of the superiority of the European race, slave rebellions, and slave legal actions seized on Enlightenment concepts of liberty and self-determination, the intelligentsia of Europe and America primarily debated which of the dominant racist theories were true. Even absurdly racist propositions by philosophers such as David Hume in his essay “Of Natural Characters” were paired with accepting the natural right of self-governance for what they saw as the inferior races (Immerwahr 1992, 481-482). Defenders of slavery regularly quoted Hume. However, even Thomas Jefferson subscribed to the idea of Francis Hutcheson that all men have the right of self-governance in the state of nature because God did not make Kings with greater moral virtue. Although Jefferson believed his slaves to be physically and mentally genetically inferior in every possible way to himself, he believed they were equally capable of the moral virtue that formed the foundation of the right to self-governance. These arguments were not about equal rights in a functioning society but mostly centered on the right to freedom when entering a non-slave country or city and debate over the slave trade, which became a cross-Atlantic dialogue as the 18th century evolved.

Pre-War of 1812 Abolitionist Narratives

As the Revolutionary period approached, breaking out of simply Quaker abolitionist-style arguments was Anthony Benezet’s lengthy pamphlet *A Short Account of that part of Africa Inhabited by Negroes* in 1762. The pamphlet did use the same Quaker arguments attacking the pursuit of wealth based on the suffering of others (and the “Duty of Love to our Fellow Creatures”). Still, it combined it with an assault on the racist conceptions of African societies that supported pro-slavery ideologies (Benezet 1762, 5). He quotes traders and merchant factors, describing advanced civilizations, and makes pointed notes of a people with courts of justice, complex economies, and local governments that have no more right to sell people as a commodity than the slave traders have to buy them. He constructs a narrative to reverse the racist viewpoint and describes Europeans as barbarians descending on a civilized Africa. He finishes by quoting Enlightenment philosophers Francis Hutchinson and James Foster on the natural right to liberty.

Benezet’s 1771 pamphlet *Some Historical Account of Guinea* was perhaps even more influential (Sinha 2016, 21-24). The bulk of the text is descriptive of the life and societies in West Africa and a history of the European slave trade, including a section describing the arguments of Bartolome de las Casas. Although an assimilationist who ran a school for black children, Benezet argued forcefully against the barbarism of the slave trade, which should end immediately, and for the emancipation of all slaves over a period that would be equitable for their owners. He admitted to the danger of the slaves being unleashed into society without proper time to gain in virtue (Benezet 1771, 138). He suggested upon emancipation, slaves be wards of the state in the same way as the homeless poor and their children are given education. Then, each family could be given a plot of land at the “uncultivated” edges of the most southern and western parts of the colonies (Ibid, 140).

Benezet’s writings influenced his own community in Philadelphia and the anti-slavery community in England (Sinha 2016, 22). The abolitionist dialogue was decidedly trans-Atlantic. J. Philmore’s slightly earlier anti-slavery book published in London in 1760, *Two Dialogues on the Man-Trade*, was a straight-forward assertion of the unity of the human species, the equality of man in the state of nature, and the cruelties and crimes inherent to slavery as un-Christian. Typical of the cross-Atlantic anti-slave trade arguments, the book argued from the presence of reason in the hearts of all men, regardless of race. Like cases in New England, existing law was being used to fight against slavery in the courts. Runaway slaves initiated cases in England and France that led to anti-slavery decisions. Granville Sharp was another prominent English abolitionist who won a decisive case in England and whose pamphlets were widely published in the American colonies in the 1760s and 1770s. The arguments relied on interpretations of the law and warnings of divine vengeance for those who violated the teachings of the Gospels.

Abolitionists, from William Dillwyn to John Wesley (Wesley 1775), drew on Benezet and argued similarly throughout the post-revolutionary period. Up to the end of the War of 1812, references to the language of the Jefferson Declaration were relatively scarce in public discourse, outside of reprinting without commentary in some newspapers around every 4th of July, a date which continued to grow as a general patriotic celebration. For example, within the database of the Library of Congress and the Internet Archive’s digitized newspapers from 1777 to 1815, only a few references to the phrases of the Jefferson Declaration are used as the basis of an argument. They are not made regarding abolition or slavery in general. The arguments referencing the Creed use the words in their original meaning. For example, in 1805, US Congressman James Elliot

(1805) wrote a series of letters laying out his political philosophies and support for the Jefferson administration. However, technically, a Federalist, printed in the *Berkeley and Jefferson Intelligencier*, quoted the Jefferson Declaration as part of his argument that the US political system was properly constituted and should not become more of a European-style aristocracy or more democratic. Also in 1805, an anonymous essay writer to the *National Intelligencer and Washington Advertiser* labeled himself as “an old Whig” and quoted the Jefferson Declaration Creed, claiming they are the basis of all the laws of the country, referring to them as what should be the Creed of the United States. He asserted that as a foundational principle, the country should endeavor to protect them and never have a King or hereditary Senate (An Old Whig 1805). A final example is from a letter essay from US Senator Michael Leib (General Leib 1811) printed in 1811, which referred to the Jeffersonian Declaration language as a “political catechism . . . of republican faith.” He used it not as an assertion of equality but of the right of a people to remove a government that does not serve its interests as part of an argument that US Senators should serve in a delegate style responsive to their constituents.

Creedal Nationalism in Public Abolitionist Narratives

Beginning in the 1820s, the abolitionist movement joined the early labor movements in laying claim to the increasingly sacred language of the American Creed. As the language became interpreted as meaning the inherent right to civil equality and citizenship for all men, the phrases in the Jefferson Declaration concerning liberty in the state of nature and the right to rebel upon the violation of the social contract morphed into an argument that all men are entitled to membership of the nation creating that social contract.

These arguments entered the public sphere in newspapers before dedicated abolitionist newspapers began widely circulating. For example, newspapers in the 1820s in Illinois were battling each other over slavery in the new state. In 1823, George Churchill, one of the editors of the *Edwardsville Spectator* and a member of the Illinois General Assembly, published a letter of his own in the newspaper speaking out against the people plotting with the support of Missouri for the Illinois Constitution of 1818 to be changed by convention to allow slavery formally. The *Spectator*’s publisher was decidedly anti-slavery but cannot be described as an abolitionist newspaper (Harris 1903, 28-32). Illinois’ admittance to the United States as a state required its constitution to nominally ban slavery. However, slavery was common in the territory; most white people were pro-slavery, and de facto slavery continued.² Amongst numerous other arguments, Churchill straightforwardly asserts that people who believe in the Jefferson Declaration principles know slavery is inherently wrong (Churchill 1823). The same newspaper in September printed a speech from a 4th of July celebration by the Reverend Isaac Newton Piggott that asserted the Jefferson Declaration was incompatible with slavery. Reverend Piggott (1823), arguing against Illinois changing its Constitution and including some fear-mongering about the danger of living around slaves, proclaimed in a convoluted argument that the Jefferson Declaration guaranteed all men equality and that slavery damaged not only the rightful equality of the enslaved but even the equality of white men in slave states.

Many examples of the re-purposing of the Creed appear in *The Spectator* as the state fought over the issue of slavery. In 1824, an essay with no by-line arguing against the slave trade was published on April 27. It argued that the American nation was a blessed people, enjoying prosperity, abundance, and equal treatment in civil rights under the laws of good government. The essay goes on to assert the Creed in the Jefferson Declaration is the strongest possible argument against slavery, so strong it counters any conceivable argument for slavery. The writer concludes from this the inherent wickedness of excluding people from the American nation based on the color of their skin (Anonymous 1824).

In just a few short years, the philosophical, legal, and national identity meaning of the Creedal text within the Jefferson Declaration was debated while the primary author was still alive. The writer of a letter to Maine’s *Portland Gazette* in 1820 with the by-line of Philo Justicia (Son of Justice) comments that the people of the country are debating whether the Jefferson Declaration “means what it says, where it declares ‘all men are created equal’ . . . [but] others declare, that this means those only who are created with white skins and sleek hair (Philo Justicia 1820).” The author is attacking one of Maine’s representatives to the US House who supported slavery being extended to Missouri because the Federal government did not have the authority to restrict it. The Son of Justice claims that the Jefferson Declaration empowers the US government to ban slavery wherever it wants. At the same time, a bill was introduced in the New York legislature in 1820, which stated that since the Jefferson Declaration’s Creed was incorporated into the New York Constitution of 1777 and, therefore, that the NY Constitution was incompatible with slavery, all slaves would be immediately emancipated. “Pro-Colonization” organizations were formed to promote free blacks or all, referencing the Creed as a basis of the country that guaranteed equality of rights for all men as citizens, which was seen as unworkable and therefore necessitated their physical removal.

A shift in the ideological foundations of the anti-slavery arguments is quite noticeable within the newspapers dedicated to the abolitionist movement. As the 1820s progressed, there was a noticeable increase in the number of newspapers in print and the use of Creedal Nationalism within dedicated abolitionist publications. Arguably, the first such dedicated newspaper was

²Called indentured servants and with restrictions on new slaves being brought to the state.

published as a lengthy monthly paper by Benjamin Lundy in 1820, an abolitionist Quaker who moved the publication location numerous times over its nineteen-year lifespan. Although technically a newspaper, the early printings self-described as more of a monthly magazine “containing original essays and selections on the subject of African slavery,” as it said on its front page, which had more the appearance of a book front cover with only the title, Lundy’s name as editor, the location of printing, the volume, and a quotation from the Jefferson Declaration of the Creed (Lundy 1821a, 1). Once the paper eventually moved to a more typical front page, it kept the Declaration quote below the banner name and publisher.

In the first issue of 1821, having moved to Tennessee from Ohio and increased the print run of the paper, Lundy had by page four declared that the Declaration’s Creed was the “basis of our most excellent form of government” and that all the “fellow creatures, without distinction” of the country, deserve to live within it with the “blessings” of their equal rights (Lundy 1821b, 4). The examples from the *Genius* are too numerous to detail, but another example of the Declaration’s Creed being used as a proclamation of the inherent right of all members of the American nation to equality in civil rights comes from an 1827 re-printing by Lundy of an old speech by Daniel Bryan, a member of the state Senate of Virginia speaking against the extension of slavery into new states. The speech, as printed in an article entitled “Virginia Patriotism,” refers to the Jefferson Declaration as the “political creed” that they “as Americans” must follow. Daniel Bryan (Bryan 1827, 1) then asserts that the rights contained within the Declaration’s Creed can only be taken away from an individual “for the punishment of crimes of which they are convicted.” Senator Bryan then asserts that “human beings as absolute property” is inherently inconsistent with any political laws that could be created in a country whose sacred principles were those of the Declaration’s Creed.

The explicit sacredness of the language of the Declaration and the national identity myth-making grew more common after the seemingly divine coincidence of the deaths of John Adams and Thomas Jefferson on July 4, 1826. The need to explain why the Jefferson Declaration’s Creed was an argument against slavery decreased, the sacredness of the language used increased, and the framing of an American nation inclusive of all people within the country became more explicit. One of the most famous abolitionist newspapers, William Lloyd Garrison’s *The Liberator*, began its first issue in 1831 with an essay by Garrison in which the entire argument quotes the Jefferson Declaration as the basis to assert the necessity for the immediate enfranchisement of all slaves. Then he apologized for ever suggesting gradual abolition.

Freedom’s Journal was the first African-American published abolitionist newspaper, founded in 1827 primarily by John Wilk and others in New York City, with Samuel Cornish and John Russwurm as editors. By 1829, Samuel Cornish had split from the paper due to his opposition to Colonization as an answer to slavery. Cornish briefly published his abolitionist newspaper, *The Rights of All*, which, in its opposition to removing the enslaved from the American nation, was quite explicit in its expressions of Creedal Nationalism. For example, Cornish plucked from the pages of the *Greensborough Patriot* (the “paper of record” for Greensboro, NC from 1826-1922) on July 4, 1829, an essay written by its publisher William Swaim entitled “Declaration of Independence.” Cornish (Cornish 1829, 6) introduces the piece by mentioning where it came from and that “Our friend Swaim must have felt a little of the fire of 76 – the same that animated that immortal *Jefferson*, when he hurled his political anathemas against the demon of Slavery, on that day.” Swaim’s (Swaim 1829, 3) essay begins:

Fifty-three years ago this day, the most illustrious body of Statesmen that ever assembled under Heaven declared to a listening world . . . [independence]. This declaration . . . was based upon the broad principle “That all men are *created equal* and endowed by their Creator with the right of pursuing *life, liberty, and happiness*.” Who, after reading these ever-lasting truths, and seeing them hung up in gilded frames throughout the United States – after witnessing the joyous enthusiasm that burns in the American heart, and hearing them repeated – [after all the people who fought for them] - we say who, after all this mass of concurrent testimony, staring him full in the face, would believe, for a moment, that a Slave would be permitted to breathe in this “LAND OF THE FREE, AND THE HOME OF THE BRAVE?”

The essay concludes by warning his neighbors of North Carolina that continued slavery will cause the United States to cease to exist like Rome before it and ends with the appeal that “we are unworthy the character of Americans, and a disgrace to the ancestors from whom we have descended if our “Boasted Patriotism” is to be terminated with our temporal existence!!” Swaim had joined the Manumission Society of North Carolina and studied printing under Benjamin Lundy in Baltimore at *The Genius of Universal Emancipation*, eventually becoming the assistant editor of the abolition newspaper before returning home and running his general interest newspaper in 1829.

Other abolitionists in the late 1820s appealed directly to the slave population. One of the most dramatic and widely read was David Walker’s 1829 pamphlet *Appeal, in Four Articles: to the Colored Citizens of the World, But in Particular, and Very Expressly, to Those of The United States of America*. David Walker was a leading free black abolitionist in Boston. The pamphlet was distributed heavily to the South and so effective and explicit in its call for rebellion that the state of Georgia and other southern states passed a law against the possession or distribution of the pamphlet in the state, with several states requiring the death penalty (Crockett 2001, 305-318). The rhetoric in his argument produces a narrative separating the “Americans” as a white nation, which had done more evil to his race than to other people in history. Walker bookends his pamphlet by referring

to the works of Thomas Jefferson. By page three, he is attacking at length the explicit racism in *Notes on the State of Virginia*. He ends his pamphlet with the Jefferson Declaration, pointing out the contradiction between slavery and the Creed. He quotes more of the Jefferson Declaration than most in the abolitionist movement and uses the extended language to issue a warning: “Now, Americans! I ask you candidly, was your sufferings under Great Britain, one-hundredth part, as cruel and tyrannical as you have rendered ours under you? Some of you, no doubt, believe that we will never throw off your murderous government and ‘provide new guards for our future security (Walker 1830, 86).”

Despite constantly constructing a narrative separating the American nation from the non-white people of the country, he explicitly references and quotes John Cornish’s *Rights of All* newspaper and its arguments against colonization (Ibid, 76). He references the Jefferson Declaration by pointing out that Americans claim that the country’s inhabitants enjoy equal rights (Ibid, 82). Other than the religious messages that God will not forever abide slavery, Walker’s (Ibid, 79-80) central argument is that Americans should either abolish slavery and make black men equal citizens, or his people will do the same by force and God is on their side:

Remember, Americans, that we must and shall be free and enlightened as you are. Will you wait until we shall, under God, obtain our liberty by the crushing arm of power? Will it not be dreadful for you? I speak Americans for your good. We must and shall be free, I say, despite you. You may do your best to keep us in wretchedness and misery, to enrich you and your children, but God will deliver us from under you. And wo, wo, will be to you if we have to obtain our freedom by fighting. Throw away your fears and prejudices then, and enlighten us and treat us like men, and we will like you more than we do now hate you, and tell us now no more about colonization, for America is as much our country as it is yours. – Treat us like men; there is no danger, but we will all live in peace and happiness together. For we are not like you, hard-hearted, unmerciful, and unforgiving. What a happy country this will be if the whites will listen. . . . And there is no doubt in my mind but that the whole of the past will be sunk into oblivion, and we, under God, will become a united and happy people.

The impact of the pamphlet was enormous, both as a critique within the slave states and as a Creedal Nationalist critique of the internal divisions within the abolitionist movement, particularly attacking the Colonization movement. Walker (Ibid, 62) asserts, “This country is as much ours as it is the whites; whether they will admit it now or not, they will see and believe it by and by.” The *Appeal* also drew on history and logic to attack racism and the American nation’s treatment of people with dark skin, regardless of free or slave status. The narrative is constructed as the title implies, as a direct appeal to black people of the United States, free or slave, that they should not wait for white people with power to change their status regarding being equal members of the American nation.

Throughout the 1830s, Creedal Nationalism continued to grow in its attacks on the Colonization movement, which sought to end slavery but separate the ex-slaves from the American nation. For example, in 1839, *The Voice of Freedom*, an abolitionist newspaper in Vermont, published David Camp’s speech to the Orleans County branch of the Anti-Slavery Society on January 18, 1839. David Camp was the Vermont Lieutenant Governor and the manager of the Anti-Slavery Society in Swanton, VT. The speech opposed colonization and supported immediate abolition. He presented within the lengthy speech arguments for why the principles of the Anti-Slavery Society should “commend themselves” to statesmen, patriots, and Christians. The argument designed to be amenable to the statesman was that a country could be made greater by increasing its number of intelligent citizens that could help develop its resources, which abolition would achieve. His commending the Society’s principles “To the Patriot,” he argued:

Would the patriot, the lover of his country, render that country worthy of his love? He would seek not only to make her beautiful, majestic, and glorious but also innocent, amiable, and virtuous. He would establish just and equal laws, banish oppression, fraud, and cruelty, infuse into her citizens a spirit of humanity, benevolence, brotherly kindness, charity, and a desire in each to promote the welfare of all. In these labors of love, the anti-slavery society would be both his pioneer and guide, for her grand object, is to remove the foulest stain from the national character and give efficacy to this national boast, “We hold these truths to be self-evident; that all men are created equal; that their Creator endows them with certain inalienable rights; that among these, are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness (Camp 1839, 1).

He asserts that abolition commends itself to the Christian to such an extent that it is so obvious that it does not need explaining. Then, he explains it, drawing on the decades of Christian abolitionist reasoning.

Competing Nationalist Narratives

The ideological assumptions of Creedal Nationalism are highlighted in the abolitionist discourse when set alongside those who did not share those assumptions. John Conant, a businessman and state legislator in Brandon, Vermont, describes in a letter to

the *Vermont Telegraph* in 1837 why he was an abolitionist. He says he is for truth, and the Declaration of Independence is divinely inspired, with the truth being the Creedal sentence. He goes on to say that the US Constitution is sacred as well and that “the great body of that convention saw the propriety of framing that sacred instrument in strict accordance with the declaration above, and that they were decidedly against the system of slavery, so repugnant to the rights of man and ‘self-evident truth,’ and also to their better judgment and feelings (Conant 1837, 2).” He called for abolition with the slaves made free citizens of the states. He also makes the typical religious arguments after the Creedal is presented.³

In contrast, the powerful American politician and slave-owner from Kentucky, Henry Clay, famously only nominally favored gradual abolition and colonization to prevent people who were not white from becoming part of the American nation, not unlike Thomas Jefferson himself. In October 1842, while traveling to Indiana in his campaign to become President, Henry Clay was given a petition in front of a crowd that asked him to immediately emancipate his slaves due to the Creed in the Declaration of Independence. Clay addressed the crowd who had just heard him give a short speech published in numerous newspapers. Clay described how he did not like slavery and called it a great evil, but that the Declaration of Independence was merely a statement of some principles that apply when forming a society. However, the equality asserted within does not apply to equality in society. It could never be applied to women, minors, insane, etc. He mocks the assumption that the Declaration says anything regarding slavery and that the Constitution recognized the lawfulness of slavery. Further, he says it would be impossible to allow the two races to mix in the same country “that no human law could enforce a union between the races. [If it was tried], a contest would inevitably ensue between the two races: civil war, carnage, pillage, conflagration, devastation, and the ultimate extermination or expulsion of the blacks. Nothing is more certain (Clay 1842, 2).” He goes on to say things are getting better for slaves in general and that he treats his slaves so well that they are better off remaining his slaves.

Henry Clay’s speech was consistent, naturally, with those of the prominent Whig pamphleteer writing under the name Junius from 1843 to 1844 and laying out the policies of the Whigs, with the fourth pamphlet of what they called the *Junius Tracts* praising and detailing the life of Henry Clay, candidate for President (Junius 1844, 49-64). Junius Tract number five was entitled “Political Abolition (Ibid, 65-80).” The pamphlet presented the Whig argument for “state’s rights” concerning abolition and that it was unconstitutional and morally wrong for the United States government to abolish slavery politically. The first half of the pamphlet is dedicated to this position. The pamphlet then transitions to attacking the arguments of the abolitionist movement, starting with the meaning of the language of the Jefferson Declaration. It quotes the Creed and states that:

[T]he purpose for which the Declaration was framed, and the object to which it was then applied, was to deny the divine right of kings and the claimed prerogatives of high birth and to assert and establish the right of a people to govern themselves. That the principles here stated . . . apply to slavery anywhere must be admitted. But there is no inconsistency in this Declaration, as it was applied by those who framed and adopted it; they had exclusive regard to the Colonies’ relations to the British Crown and to the latter’s tyranny over the former. . . . slavery is undoubtedly a wrong done to the natural rights of those enslaved, and the earliest possible emancipation, when unable to gain their freedom, will be contrived and effected for them by those who appreciate the value of the right (Ibid, 75).

Despite this faint nod to the violation of the social contract that took place sometime in the past, Junius immediately waffles. He says enslaving people is wrong, but righting that wrong now is complicated and will take a great deal of time. The pamphlet argues that slave states must decide for themselves when and how to eliminate slavery, that the abolition movement is deeply corrupt in its leadership and has actually made things worse for slaves, and that slaves aren’t that badly treated anyway. Most of the rest of the pamphlet attacks the abolitionist movement as being too religious and that its religious claims to abolish slavery are necessarily a violation of the freedom of religion, the nation was founded on because it is the imposition through politics of one group’s religious beliefs upon another’s.

Crevecoeur asked, “What is an American?” The relevance of the narrative construction of what constitutes an appropriate member of the American nation between the competing rhetoric of the anti-immigration, ethno-nationalist Nativist movements and the abolitionist movement is self-evident. A nativist newspaper was founded in 1835 in Louisiana by John Gibson after leaving the job of editor of the *New Orleans Argus* after a disagreement over immigration (LSU Libraries 2022). Nativist movements, naturally, were ethnic nationalists who opposed abolition, at least without colonization. The name of the newspaper itself was the *True American*. A search of the Library of Congress digitized collection found no instances of “all men are created equal” in the *True American*.

In 1845, an abolitionist newspaper was created by Cassius Marcellus Clay in Kentucky, who called the newspaper *The True American*. Clay dedicated the newspaper, according to the banner, to Universal Liberty and Gradual Emancipation in Kentucky and was outspoken about the need for freedom of the press. Just three months after founding the paper, he published an editorial that argued the inevitability of abolition and an opposition to colonization, asserting the need for the emancipated to

³John Conant was a very big fan of the founders. He named one of his sons John Adams Conant and another Thomas Jefferson Conant. T.J. Conant became a famous Biblical scholar.

have all the rights of citizenship and be seen as members of the same nation without prejudice. He references the founding documents as pronouncing “all men equal and having equal rights” as the basis for why the emancipated should have full and equal political rights, how unjust anything else would be based on the accident of skin color (Clay 1845, 3). Clay asserts at this point in his argument that all men being equal is declared in the Constitution, the Declaration Creed having become so associated with the discourse about the country’s founding principles amongst creedal nationalists. After printing the editorial, known for often fighting duels, he bunkered down in his printing shop with guns and brass cannons to defend it. He was merely shut down through the court system and forced to move his printing operation to Cincinnati.

Conclusion: a Nation Built on Narrative

All nationalism is grounded in a mythological construction of ties to a historical past that is imagined as a community of people sharing some connection constructed through acts and discourse in the public sphere. Ethnic nationalism, as post-colonial literary theorists such as Bhabha highlight, is constantly reinventing itself through the ever-changing narratives it constructs to imagine a nation. In early 19th century America, a competing narrative of the nature of the American nation began to be expressed in the public sphere of newspapers and pamphlets explicitly supporting social movements that sought to expand the political and civil rights of people marginalized away from membership and full participation in public life, governance, and the economy. Labor, abolitionist, and women’s rights movements developed a language constructed out of myths concerning what could be claimed during patriotic celebrations as a founding document of the country.

For the abolitionist movements, the Enlightenment discourse surrounding the social contract and liberty had always had direct relevance to the evil of slavery and, particularly, the slave trade. This discourse of basic liberalism expanded and changed into a nationalism based on a dialogue debating the nature of the American nation rooted in a repurposing of the language of rights and equality found in the Jefferson Declaration. The shift split the abolitionist movement and helped push along demands for emancipation, driving the anti-slavery movement to move beyond religious arguments and arguments based on a liberal right of self-governance. The narrative that all people are equal to each other as a basis of the American nation gave support in public debates against factions that were anti-slavery but saw freed slaves as incompatible with American society. Creedal nationalists constructed a nation that could imagine anyone belonging to the community. The struggle to create this national identity in American political development deserves to be remembered, despite the myth the identity itself constructs that the identity was present from the American Revolution itself. The competition between ethnic nationalism and creedal nationalism continues to shape the public dialogue hundreds of years after it began.

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