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Source: *The William and Mary Quarterly*, Jul., 1982, Vol. 39, No. 3 (Jul., 1982), pp. 401-441

Published by: Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture

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Conspiracy and the Paranoid Style: Causality and Deceit in the Eighteenth Century

Gordon S. Wood

WERE the American Revolutionaries mentally disturbed? Was the Revolution itself a consequence of anxieties buried deep in the psyches of its leaders? Bizarre and preposterous questions, it would seem, and scarcely the sorts of questions one expects to be asked about the Founding Fathers. Yet these are precisely the questions some historians are now suggesting we ought to be asking about the Revolution.

The Revolution seems to have become very much a psychological phenomenon. Recent writings on the subject are filled with psychological terms, and popular interpretations such as the "search for identity" on the part of insecure provincials are grounded in psychological conceptions.[1] With the growing interest in family history and child rearing, historians are making strenuous although contradictory efforts to explore the "interrelationship of private and public experience."[2] The upbringing of the colonists is being linked to their rejection of their "mother" country and "fatherly" king, and the familial relationship between Britain and the colonies is being wrung dry of every bit of psychological significance it may contain.[3] One by one the Founding Fathers are psychoanalyzed and their unconscious fears and drives brought to the surface.[4] The restraints

Mr. Wood is a member of the Department of History at Brown University. He wishes to thank Bernard Bailyn, Lester H. Cohen, Norman S. Fiering, Thomas Haskell, Rhys Isaac, Judith Shklar, and the members of the Shelby Cullom Davis Center for their helpful criticism.

[1] Jack P. Greene, "Search for Identity: An Interpretation of the Meaning of Selected Patterns of Social Response in Eighteenth-Century America," *Journal of Social History,* III (1970), 189-220.

[2] Kenneth S. Lynn, *A Divided People* (Westport, Conn., 1977), 105. Cf. Philip Greven, *The Protestant Temperament: Patterns of Child-Rearing, Religious Experience, and the Self in Early America* (New York, 1977).

[3] The best and most restrained of these efforts is Edwin G. Burrows and Michael Wallace, "The American Revolution: The Ideology and Psychology of National Liberation," *Perspectives in American History,* VI (1972), 167-306. See also Winthrop D. Jordan, "Familial Politics: Thomas Paine and the Killing of the King, 1776," *Journal of American History,* LX (1973), 294-308.

[4] Fawn M. Brodie, *Thomas Jefferson: An Intimate History* (New York, 1974); Peter Shaw, *The Character of John Adams* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1976), and *American*

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of the British authorities, it now appears, threatened the colonists' "ego capacities" and aroused "large-scale personal anxiety, guilt, shame, and feelings of inadequacy that could only be overcome by a *manly* resistance to those restraints." Indeed, the colonists' widespread "fear of effeminacy," it has been suggested, may be "a source for some of the inner anxieties of many Americans" and "a useful clue to the psychological roots of the paranoid vision of the political world that dominated the politics of the period."[5] All of this psychologizing has been carried to the point where it is no longer strange or unreasonable to refer to the Revolution as "a cathartic event, . . . a psychological release" for a multitude of pent-up feelings and anxieties. It has even become possible to call the Revolution "a delusion explicable by the principles of psychology."[6]

No doubt much of this application of psychology to the Revolution can be explained by its influence on historical writing generally. Not only is psychohistory bidding to become a legitimate field, but psychological terms and theories have so insinuated themselves into our culture that we historians are often unaware that we are using them. Still, the recent impact of psychology on Revolutionary history writing is peculiarly intensive and cannot be accounted for simply by its effect on the discipline of history as a whole. What seems crucially important in explaining the extraordinary reliance on psychology in recent Revolutionary historiography is the coincidental publication in 1965 of two significant books—Bernard Bailyn's introduction to his *Pamphlets of the American Revolution* (subsequently enlarged and republished in 1967 as *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*) and Richard Hofstadter's *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*.[7] Neither of these works was influenced by the other, and each separately has strongly affected our understanding of American history. But when read together and interrelated in the thinking of

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Patriots and the Rituals of Revolution (Cambridge, Mass., 1981); John J. Waters, "James Otis, Jr.: An Ambivalent Revolutionary," *History of Childhood Quarterly,* I (1973), 142-150; Bruce Mazlish, "Leadership in the American Revolution: The Psychological Dimension," in *Leadership in the American Revolution,* Library of Congress Symposia on the American Revolution (Washington, D.C., 1974), 113-133.

[5] Jack P. Greene, "An Uneasy Connection: An Analysis of the Preconditions of the American Revolution," in Stephen G. Kurtz and James H. Hutson, eds., *Essays on the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1973), 60; Greven, *Protestant Temperament,* 351.

[6] Greene, "Search for Identity," *Jour. Soc. Hist.,* III (1970), 219; James H. Hutson, "The American Revolution: The Triumph of a Delusion?" in Erich Angermann *et al.*, eds., *New Wine in Old Skins: A Comparative View of Socio-Political Structures and Values Affecting the American Revolution* (Stuttgart, Ger., 1976), 179-194.

[7] Bailyn's introduction was entitled "The Transforming Radicalism of the American Revolution," in *Pamphlets of the American Revolution,* I (Cambridge, Mass., 1965), 3-202; Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays* (New York, 1965).

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historians, these books have taken on an unusual force in helping to shape our current interest in the Revolution as a psychological event.

Bailyn's interpretation of the origins of the Revolution is familiar enough. He argued that a pattern of ideas and attitudes bearing on the realities of colonial politics was "built into the very structure of political culture in eighteenth-century Britain and America" and provided "the sufficient background for understanding why there was a Revolution." A long-existing and integrated intellectual tradition drawn from various English sources, wrote Bailyn, prepared Americans for a particular interpretation of the welter of events that occurred in the 1760s and 1770s. "They saw about them, with increasing clarity, not merely mistaken, or even evil, policies violating the principles upon which freedom rested, but what appeared to be evidence of nothing less than a deliberate assault launched surreptitiously by plotters against liberty both in England and in America." It was the overwhelming evidence of a "design"—a conspiracy—"that was signaled to the colonists after 1763, and it was this above all else that in the end propelled them into Revolution."[8]

Bailyn's interpretation has had a powerful effect on our understanding of the Revolution, and every student of the Revolution has had to come to terms with it in one way or another. No one now can deny the prevalence of conspiratorial fears among the Revolutionaries. Indeed, historians largely take such fears for granted and have become preoccupied with explaining why the Revolutionaries should have had them. This need to make sense of these conspiratorial beliefs seems, more than anything else, to lie behind the extraordinary use of psychology in recent writing about the Revolution. While recognizing that there may be rational explanations for fears of conspiracy, most historians cannot help assuming that such fears are mainly rooted in nonrational sources. This assumption grew out of the experience of American politics, particularly McCarthyism, in the years following World War II—an assumption expressed in numerous sociological studies of those years and most strikingly in Hofstadter's conception of a "paranoid style."[9]

Hofstadter's book on the "paranoid style," which he found pervasive in American politics, demonstrated that the Revolutionary leaders were not unique in their fears of a conspiracy hatched by hidden diabolical forces. They were only one of many generations of Americans who have thought in terms of conspiracies throughout our history. Hofstadter became aware of Bailyn's interpretation when it was too late to integrate it into his argument, and thus he began his study of the "paranoid style" with the Bavarian Illuminati scare of the 1790s. He traced the style through the anti-Masonic, nativist, and Populist fears of the nineteenth century and

[8] Bernard Bailyn, *The Origins of American Politics* (New York, 1968), 13, and *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass., 1967), 94-95.

[9] For a typical example of the sociological studies of the early 1950s see Daniel Bell, ed., *The New American Right* (New York, 1955).

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concluded with an analysis of the beliefs in a Communist conspiracy in the 1950s. By leaving the Revolution out of his story and by assuming that the "paranoid style" was "the preferred style only of *minority* movements" and marginal elements in American society, Hofstadter avoided the troubling implications of describing the Revolutionaries as paranoid personalities.[10]

Hofstadter said his use of "paranoid style" was not intended to suggest any medical or clinical significance; he meant only to use the term metaphorically to describe "a way of seeing the world and of expressing oneself." Medically, as he pointed out, paranoia is defined as a chronic mental disorder characterized by systematized delusions of persecution. However overly suspicious and apocalyptical in expression American paranoid spokesmen may have been, said Hofstadter, they could not be described as "certifiable lunatics." Yet—and it was a very big, drawn-out yet—this style was not quite normal; it was, Hofstadter wrote, "a distorted style" and thus "a possible signal that may alert us to a distorted judgment." It indicated that some kind of "political pathology" was at work; it was a recurrent mode of expression in American public life "which has frequently been linked with movements of suspicious discontent." Although believers in conspiracy may not have been crazy, they were persons, Hofstadter suggested, who had perverse and fanciful views of reality and were thus fit subjects for the application of some sort of "depth psychology."[11]

Other historians, sharing Hofstadter's assumption that politics was often "a projective arena for feelings and impulses that are only marginally related to the manifest issues," also sought to relate Americans' recurring fears of conspiracy to some underlying social or psychological process.[12] Some thought "that fear of conspiracy characterizes periods when traditional social and moral values are undergoing change" and therefore focused on the unusual fluidity of American society. People who were unsure of their identity and status, socially disrupted or alienated in some way, were, it seemed, especially susceptible to conspiratorial interpretations of events. Possibly, suggested David Brion Davis, who has most meticulously uncovered the conspiratorial fears of nineteenth-century Americans, various groups, from Anti-Masons to opponents of the Slave Power, found in the paranoid style a common means of expressing their different torments and troubles. Obviously, historians were careful to note, the great numbers of people who relied on such imagery of subversion—from Abraham Lincoln to Justice Robert H. Jackson—could not be dismissed as "charlatans, crackpots, and the disaffected." Davis in particular warned against any facile assumption "that the fear of subversion is always generated by internal, psychological needs." Despite such qualifications and cautions, however, the implications of these historical accounts of the paranoid style were clear: Americans seemed prone to

[10] Hofstadter, *Paranoid Style*, 7.
[11] *Ibid.*, 4, 6, ix.
[12] *Ibid.*, ix.

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fears of subversion, and these fears were symptomatic of severe social and psychological strains.[13]

Once America's paranoid style was revealed to be so prevalent, its connection with the ideology of the Revolution became inevitable. Not only was Bailyn's account of the colonists' fears of conspiracy widely reprinted, but historians now suggested that the Revolution had set "the basic pattern" of the paranoid style. "Is it possible," asked Davis, "that the circumstances of the Revolution conditioned Americans to think of resistance to a dark subversive force as the essential ingredient of their national identity?"[14] With the paranoid style associated with the ideology of the Revolution in this way, historians were quick to find traces of it everywhere in their sources. Although Bailyn had stressed in his *Ideological Origins* the rational basis of the colonists' fears, the term "paranoia" soon proliferated in historical writings on the Revolution. "The insurgent whig ideology," it now seemed clear, "had a frenzied, even paranoid cast to it," and leaders like John Adams and Thomas Jefferson were even accused of suffering from some form of paranoia.[15] The mounting evidence could lead to only one conclusion: "The era of the American Revolution was a period of political paranoia" in which "visions of conspiracy were endemic."[16]

In many cases these references to paranoia were clearly metaphorical. But given the current interest in psychohistory, it is not surprising that other references to paranoia have taken on an authentically psychological character, presuming a close connection between paranoid thinking and particular psychic sensibilities. Some historians, while acknowledging that the American whigs' belief in a ministerial design against their liberties may have had some rational and conscious sources, have emphasized that "the fear of conspiracy also had roots buried deeply in the innermost recesses of the psyches of numerous Americans." Certain types of colonists unconsciously experienced tensions and anxieties over their personal autonomy and sexual identities "that may very well have shaped their public fears and fostered their sense of conspiracies endangering them."[17]

[13] Richard O. Curry and Thomas M. Brown, eds., *Conspiracy: The Fear of Subversion in American History* (New York, 1972), ix, x; Davis, ed., *The Fear of Conspiracy: Images of Un-American Subversion from the Revolution to the Present* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1971), xiv.

[14] Davis, *The Slave Power Conspiracy and the Paranoid Style* (Baton Rouge, La., 1969), 29; Davis, ed., *Fear of Conspiracy,* 23.

[15] James Kirby Martin, *Men in Rebellion: Higher Governmental Leaders and the Coming of the American Revolution* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1973), 34; Daniel Sisson, *The American Revolution of 1800* (New York, 1974), 130, 131, 132; Hutson, "American Revolution," in Angermann *et al.,* eds., *New Wine in Old Skins,* 179, 180.

[16] Lance Banning, "Republican Ideology and the Triumph of the Constitution, 1789 to 1793," *William and Mary Quarterly,* 3d Ser., XXXI (1974), 171.

[17] Greven, *Protestant Temperament,* 349, 352.

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Other writers, taking Bailyn's argument as a "point of departure," have attempted a stark and quite literal "psychological interpretation of the coming of the Revolution," even going so far as to suggest that the Revolutionary leaders were clinically paranoiac—that is, that they were suffering from actual delusions of persecution and were unable to assess reality in a rational fashion. Far from being profoundly reasonable men, they were "prone to emotional instability, predisposed to psychological problems, vulnerable to them under the goad of an appropriate precipitant," like the Stamp Act, which left "in its wake the paranoid delusions that Britain was conspiring to enslave Americans."[18]

II

How much further can we go? It is difficult to imagine that more psychological significance can be extracted from the conspiratorial beliefs of the Revolutionaries. Maybe it is time to pause in our psychological explorations, step back, and get a quite different, wider perspective on this mode of thinking—not to explain the Revolution but to explain why eighteenth-century Americans should have thought as they did. In other words, we need to reach through and beyond the Revolution to the larger culture of the English-speaking or, indeed, the entire Atlantic world of the eighteenth century. We may find that it was quite possible for all manner of people—not just British country-opposition groups and suspicious colonists, but "reasonable people," indeed the most enlightened minds of the day—to believe in malevolent conspiracies.[19]

[18] Hutson, "American Revolution," in Angermann *et al.*, eds., *New Wine in Old Skins,* 177, 180, 181, 182. In a more recent unpublished essay, "The Origins of 'the Paranoid Style in American Politics': Public Jealousy from the Age of Walpole to the Age of Jackson," Hutson has virtually repudiated his earlier psychological interpretation. He now suggests that "the special position the Revolution occupies in our national life" has inhibited historians from following him in making the Revolution "the first link on Hofstadter's paranoid chain." Perhaps other historians were quietly filling in behind him more than he realized. At any rate he has retreated from his exposed position and returned to one not very different from Bailyn's. In this new paper he describes the Americans' "paranoid style" as a product of their long tradition of jealousy and suspicion of governmental power. Such fears of abused political power, Hutson now concedes, made American conspiratorial views "altogether credible," at least up to 1830 or so. Only after that date, when American suspicions and jealousy were transferred from the government to nongovernmental agencies and groups, such as the Masons and the Roman Catholic Church, for which there was no tradition of past abuse, is it "possible," says Hutson, "to speak of these fears veering off towards pathology."

[19] "The British ministers of the Revolutionary Era," writes Hutson, "were shifting coalitions whose principal discernible goal was the preservation of power. How could reasonable people believe them capable of fiendish malevolence, cunningly concerted and sustained, year in, year out?" ("American Revolution," in Angermann *et al.*, eds., *New Wine in Old Skins,* 177.) Although not as boldly as Hutson, other historians trying to explain the Revolutionaries' conspiratorial beliefs in effect seem to be asking the same question.

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There are explanations for the eighteenth century's conspiratorial beliefs that are rooted not in any modern notions of psychic strain or even in the peculiar suspicions of the country-opposition tradition, but rather in the general presuppositions and conventions—in the underlying metaphysics—of eighteenth-century culture. Indeed, such conspiratorial beliefs grew so much out of the common ways in which enlightened thinkers conceived of events that they can scarcely be used to explain any particular happening of the period, including the Revolution. Such beliefs may accurately describe the American Revolutionaries' mode of thinking in the 1760s and 1770s, but they cannot account for the Revolution, and they cannot be used as evidence that the Revolutionaries were suffering from some emotional instability peculiar to themselves. For the one thing about conspiratorial interpretations of events that must impress all students of early modern Western history is their ubiquitousness: they can be found everywhere in the thought of people on both sides of the Atlantic.

More than any other period of English history, the century or so following the Restoration was the great era of conspiratorial fears and imagined intrigues. The Augustan Age, said Daniel Defoe, was "an Age of Plot and Deceit, of Contradiction and Paradox." Pretense and hypocrisy were everywhere, and nothing seemed as it really was. Politics, especially in the decades from the Restoration to the Hanoverian accession, appeared to be little more than one intrigue and deception after another. It had to be a "horrid plot," said Scrub in George Farquhar's *The Beaux' Stratagem* of 1707. "First, it must be a plot because there's a woman in't. Secondly, it must be a plot because there's a priest in't. Thirdly, it must be a plot because there's French gold in't. And fourthly, it must be a plot because I don't know what to make on't." With so many like Scrub wanting to know but with so little revealed, inferences of hidden designs and conspiracies flourished. So prevalent seemed the plotting that Jonathan Swift in his inimitable fashion suggested that only the most ingenious scatological devices could uncover the many conspirators. Everywhere people sensed designs within designs, cabals within cabals; there were court conspiracies, backstairs conspiracies, ministerial conspiracies, factional conspiracies, aristocratic conspiracies, and by the last half of the eighteenth century even conspiracies of gigantic secret societies that cut across national boundaries and spanned the Atlantic. Revolutionary Americans may have been an especially jealous and suspicious people, but they were not unique in their fears of dark malevolent plots and plotters.[20]

In the Anglo-American world at the time of the Revolutionary crisis there was scarcely a major figure who did not tend to explain political events in these terms. The American whigs were not unique; opponents of

[20] Defoe, quoted in Maximillian E. Novak, ed., *English Literature in the Age of Disguise* (Berkeley, Calif., 1977), 2; Farquhar, *The Beaux' Stratagem,* ed. Charles N. Fifer (Lincoln, Neb., 1977), act 4, sc. 1; Swift, *Gulliver's Travels,* Pt. III, chap. 6, in *The Writings of Jonathan Swift,* ed. Robert A. Greenberg and William Bowman Piper (New York, 1973), 162-163.

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the Revolution—American tories and members of the British administration alike—were convinced that they themselves were victims of subversives who cloaked what George III called their "desperate conspiracy" in "vague expressions of attachment to the parent state and the strongest protestations of loyalty . . . whilst they were preparing for a general revolt." Others besides the deeply involved participants in the Revolutionary crisis saw the world in these same terms. John Wesley did. So, too, did sophisticated thinkers like Horace Walpole and Edmund Burke rely on hidden schemes to account for otherwise inexplicable events. Such conspiratorial thinking, moreover, was not confined to the English-speaking world. Some of the most grandiose and elaborate plots of the century were imagined by Frenchmen of various social ranks. Like the American Revolution, the French Revolution was born in an atmosphere of conspiratorial fears. There were plots by the ministers, by the queen, by the aristocracy, by the clergy; everywhere there were secret managers behind the scenes pulling the strings of the great events of the Revolution. The entire Revolution was even seen by some as the planned consequence of a huge Masonic conspiracy. The paranoid style, it seems, was a mode of expression common to the age.[21]

If all manner of people in the eighteenth century resorted readily to conspiratorial modes of explanation and habitually saw plots by dissembling men behind patterns of events, can the paranoid style carry the peculiarly American significance attributed to it? Can it have been, as we are told, the particular means by which certain kinds of disturbed people, especially unsettled Americans, released their hidden fears into the public arena? Yet if the prevalent eighteenth-century disposition to think in conspiratorial terms was not simply a symptom of American emotional instability, what then was it?

To understand how "reasonable people" could believe in the prevalence of plots, we should begin by taking their view of events at face value and examine what it rationally implied. It was obviously a form of causal explanation, a "tendency of many causes to one event," said Samuel Johnson. To us this is a crude and peculiar sort of causal explanation because it rests entirely on individual intentions or motives. It is, as Hofstadter pointed out, a "rationalistic" and "personal" explanation: "decisive events are not taken as part of the stream of history, but as the consequences of someone's will." To those who think in conspiratorial

[21] Bailyn, *Ideological Origins,* 144-159, quotation on p. 153; Ira D. Gruber, "The American Revolution as a Conspiracy: The British View," *WMQ,* 3d Ser., XXVI (1969), 360-372; David T. Morgan, " 'The Dupes of Designing Men': John Wesley and the American Revolution," *Historical Magazine of the Protestant Episcopal Church,* XLIV (1975), 121-131; J. M. Roberts, *The Mythology of the Secret Societies* (London, 1972), 24; Georges Lefebvre, *The Great Fear of 1789: Rural Panic in Revolutionary France,* trans. Joan White (New York, 1973), 60-62, 210; Jack Richard Censer, *Prelude to Power: The Parisian Radical Press, 1789-1791* (Baltimore, 1976), 99.

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terms, things do not "just happen"; they are "brought about, step by step, by will and intention."[22] Concatenations of events are the products not, as we sophisticated historians might say, of "social forces" or "the stream of history" but of the concerted designs of individuals.

The paranoid style, in other words, is a mode of causal attribution based on particular assumptions about the nature of social reality and the necessity of moral responsibility in human affairs. It presumes a world of autonomous, freely acting individuals who are capable of directly and deliberately bringing about events through their decisions and actions, and who thereby can be held morally responsible for what happens. We are the heirs of this conception of cause, and its assumptions still permeate our culture, although, as our system of criminal punishment shows, in increasingly archaic and contradictory ways. Most of the eighteenth-century world of thought remains our world, so much so, indeed, that we have trouble perceiving how different we really are. We may still talk about causes and effects, but, as Hofstadter's invocation of "the stream of history" suggests, we often do so in ways the eighteenth century would not have understood. If we are to make sense of that period's predilection for conspiratorial thinking, we must suspend our modern understanding about how events ought to be explained and open ourselves to that different world.

There had, of course, been many conspiratorial interpretations of political affairs before the eighteenth century. Such interpretations rested on modes of apprehending reality that went back to classical antiquity. For centuries men had relied on "the spirit of classic ethical psychology, upon an *analyse du coeur humain,* not upon discovery or premonitions of historical forces" in explaining public events.[23] There was nothing new in seeing intrigue, deceit, and cabals in politics. From Sallust's description of Cataline through Machiavelli's lengthy discussion in his *Discourses,* conspiracy was a common feature of political theory. But classical and Renaissance accounts of plots differed from most of the conspiratorial interpretations of the eighteenth century. They usually described actions by which ambitious politicans gained control of governments: conspiracy was taken for granted as a normal means by which rulers were deposed. Machiavelli detailed dozens of such plots. Indeed, he wrote, "many more princes have lost their lives and their positions through them than through open war."[24] Such conspiracies occurred within the small ruling circles of a few great men—in limited political worlds where everyone knew every-

[22] Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language . . . ,* 12th ed. (Edinburgh, 1802); Hofstadter, *Paranoid Style,* 36, 32, 27.

[23] Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature,* trans. Willard Trask (Princeton, N.J., 1953), 463.

[24] Niccolo Machiavelli, "Discourses on the First Decade of Titus Livius, Book 3," in *The Chief Works and Others,* trans. Allan Gilbert, 3 vols. (Durham, N.C., 1965), I, 428. See also Letter CII in Montesquieu's *Persian Letters,* trans. George R. Healy (Indianapolis, Ind., 1964), 170.

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one else. The classical and Renaissance discussions of conspiracies have a matter-of-fact quality. They were not imagined or guessed at; they happened. Cataline actually plotted to take over Rome; Brutus and Cassius really did conspire against Caesar.

During the early modern era conspiracy continued to be a common term of politics. Seventeenth-century England was filled with talk and fears of conspiracies of all kinds. There were French plots, Irish plots, Popish plots, Whig plots, Tory plots, Jacobite plots; there was even "the Meal Tub Plot." Yet by this period many of the conspiracies had become very different from those depicted in earlier centuries of Western history. To be sure, some of them, like the Gunpowder Plot of 1605 to blow up Parliament or the "Rye House Plot" of 1683 to seize the king, were of the traditional sort described by Machiavelli, designed to subvert the existing government. But other references to conspiracy took a new and different form. The term was still pejorative and charged with suspicion, but now it became used more vaguely and broadly to refer to any combination of persons, including even members of the government itself, united for a presumed common end. The word acquired a more general and indeterminate meaning in political discourse. Its usage suggested confusion rather than certainty. Conspiracies like those of Charles II's Cabal became less matters of fact and more matters of inference. Accounts of plots by court or government were no longer descriptions of actual events but interpretations of otherwise puzzling concatenations of events. By the eighteenth century conspiracy was not simply a means of explaining how rulers were deposed; it had become a common means of explaining how rulers and others directing political events really operated. It was a term used not so much by those intimate with the sources of political events as by those removed from the events and, like Farquhar's Scrub, bewildered by them.

Unlike the schemes of antiquity and the Renaissance, which flowed from the simplicity and limitedness of politics, the conspiratorial interpretations of the Augustan Age flowed from the expansion and increasing complexity of the political world. Unprecedented demographic and economic developments in early modern Europe were massively altering the nature of society and politics. There were more people more distanced from one another and from the apparent centers of political decision making. The conceptual worlds of many individuals were being broadened and transformed. The more people became strangers to one another and the less they knew of one another's hearts, the more suspicious and mistrustful they became, ready as never before in Western history to see deceit and deception at work. Relationships between superiors and subordinates, rulers and ruled, formerly taken for granted, now became disturbingly problematical, and people became uncertain of who was who and who was doing what. Growing proportions of the population were more politically conscious and more concerned with what seemed to be the abused power and privileges of ruling elites. Impassioned efforts were made everywhere to arouse "the vigilance of the public eye" against those few men "who cannot exist without a scheme in their heads," those

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"turbulent, scheming, maliciously cunning, plotters of mischief." The warnings against rulers grew more anxious and fearful, the expressions of suspicion more frenzied and strident, because assumptions about how public affairs operated became more and more separated from reality. It was easy for a fifteenth-century nobleman, describing political events, to say that "it will be sufficient to speak of the high-ranking people, for it is through them that God's power and justice are made known."[25] But by the eighteenth century this tracing of all events back to the ambitions and actions of only the high-ranking leaders was being stretched to the breaking point. Society was composed not simply of great men and their retainers but of numerous groups, interests, and "classes" whose actions could not be easily deciphered. Human affairs were more complicated, more interdependent, and more impersonal than they had ever been in Western history.

Yet at this very moment when the world was outrunning man's capacity to explain it in personal terms, in terms of the passions and schemes of individuals, the most enlightened of the age were priding themselves on their ability to do just that. The widespread resort to conspiratorial interpretations grew out of this contradiction.

III

Conspiratorial interpretations—attributing events to the concerted designs of willful individuals—became a major means by which educated men in the early modern period ordered and gave meaning to their political world. Far from being symptomatic of irrationality, this conspiratorial mode of explanation represented an enlightened stage in Western man's long struggle to comprehend his social reality. It flowed from the scientific promise of the Enlightenment and represented an effort, perhaps in retrospect a last desperate effort, to hold men personally and morally responsible for their actions.

Personalistic explanations had, of course, long been characteristic of premodern European society and are still characteristic of primitive peoples. Premodern men lacked our modern repertory of explanations and could not rely on those impersonal forces such as industrialization, modernization, or the "stream of history" that we so blithely invoke to account for complicated combinations of events. They were unable, as we say, to "rise to the conception of movements."[26] For that different, distant world the question asked of an event was not "how did it happen?" but "who did it?"

Yet despite this stress on persons rather than processes, premodern

[25] *American Museum, or, Universal Magazine,* XII (1792), 172; Samuel Kinser, ed., *The Memoirs of Philippe de Commynes,* trans. Isabelle Cazeaux, I (Columbia, S.C., 1969), 361.

[26] Thomas Preston Peardon, *The Transition in English Historical Writing, 1760-1830* (New York, 1933), 35. See also Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (New York, 1978), 173.

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men always realized that much of what happened was beyond human agency and understanding. Even those classical and Renaissance writers who stressed that events were due to "the wisdoms and follies, the virtues and vices of individuals who made decisions" built their histories and tragic dramas around the extent to which such heroic individuals could prevail against unknown fortune. Ultimately the world seemed uncontrollable and unpredictable, ruled by mysterious forces of fate or chance, shadowed in inscrutability.[27]

At the opening of the modern era Protestant reformers invoked divine providence and the omnipotence of God in order to stamp out the traditional popular reliance on luck and magic and to renew a sense of design and moral purpose in the world. Life, they held, was not a lottery but the working out of God's purpose and judgments, or "special providences." Men were morally responsible for events; even natural catastrophes like earthquakes and floods were seen as divine punishments for human misbehavior.[28] Still, it remained evident that life was uncertain and precarious and that God moved in very mysterious ways. As the Puritan Increase Mather observed as late as 1684, "*things many times come to pass contrary to humane probabilities and the rational Conjectures and expectations of men.*" Nature itself was not always consistent, for things sometimes acted "*otherwise than according to their natures and proper inclinations.*" Humans might glimpse those parts of God's design that he chose to reveal, but ultimately they could never "be able fully to understand by what Rules the Holy and Wise God ordereth all events Prosperous and adverse which come to pass in the world." If there was comfort in knowing that what seemed chaotic, fortuitous, or accidental was in reality directed by God, it nonetheless remained true that the "ways of Providence are unsearchable."[29]

At the very time that Mather was writing, however, God was preparing to "let Newton be": the treatise that was to be enlarged into the first book of the *Principia* was completed in 1684. Of course the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century—or, more accurately, the new Western consciousness of which that revolution was the most important expression—did not make all immediately light. Yet many people now had less fear of chaos and contingency and greater confidence in their ability to understand events, so much so that sophisticates like George Savile, marquis of Halifax could even warn against "that common error of applying God's judgments upon particular occasions." The world lost some of its mystery and became more manipulatable. Although the new

[27] Myron P. Gilmore, *Humanists and Jurists: Six Studies in the Renaissance* (Cambridge, Mass., 1963), 59-60.

[28] Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (New York, 1971), 78-112.

[29] Increase Mather, *The Doctrine of Divine Providence Opened and Applyed* (Boston, 1684), quoted in Lester H. Cohen, *The Revolutionary Histories: Contemporary Narratives of the American Revolution* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1980), 27-29. Cohen's book is richly imaginative and by far the best work we have on early American historical thinking.

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science tended to remove man from the center of the physical universe, at the same time it brought him to the center of human affairs in ways that even classical and Renaissance thinkers had scarcely conceived of. It promised him the capacity to predict and control not only nature but his own society, and it proceeded to make him directly and consciously responsible for the course of human events. Ultimately the implications of this momentous shift created the cultural matrix out of which eighteenth-century conspiratorial interpretations developed.[30]

The new science assumed a world of mechanistic cause and effect in which what happens does so only because something else happened before. Philosophers since Aristotle had talked of causes but never before in terms of such machine-like regularity, such chains of consequences. "When the world became a machine," writes Jacob Bronowski, "[cause] became the god within the machine." Mechanistic causality became the paradigm in which the enlightened analysis of all behavior and events now had to take place. Cause was something that produced an effect; every effect had a cause; the cause and its effect were integrally related. Such thinking created a new world of laws, measurements, predictions, and constancies or regularities of behavior—all dependent on the same causes producing the same effects. "The knowledge of particular phenomena may gratify a barren curiosity," Samuel Stanhope Smith told a generation of Princeton students, "but they are of little real use, except, as they tend to establish some general law, which will enable the accurate observer to predict similar effects in all time to come, in similar circumstances, and to depend upon the result. Such general laws alone deserve the name of science."[31]

The change in consciousness came slowly, confusedly, and reluctantly. Few were immediately willing to abandon belief in the directing providence of God. Newton himself endeavored to preserve God's autonomy. "A God without dominion, providence, and final causes," he said, "is nothing but Fate and Nature." In fact, the Christian belief that nature was ordered by God's will was an essential presupposition of early modern science. Yet despite the continued stress by Newton's followers on God's control over the workings of nature, many eighteenth-century philosophers gradually came to picture the deity as a clockmaker, and some even went so far as to deny that God had anything at all to do with the physical movement of the universe. The logic of the new science implied a world that ran itself.[32]

[30] Halifax, quoted in Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic,* 109. On the scientific revolution see Herbert Butterfield, *The Origins of Modern Science, 1300-1800* (London, 1949), and J. Bronowski, *The Common Sense of Science* (Cambridge, Mass., 1953).

[31] Bronowski, *Common Sense of Science,* 40; Smith, *The Lectures . . . on the Subjects of Moral and Political Philosophy* (Trenton, N.J., 1812), I, 9, 122.

[32] Steven Shapin, "Of Gods and Kings: Natural Philosophy and Politics in the Leibniz-Clarke Disputes," *Isis,* LXXII (1981), 192; M. B. Foster, "The Christian Doctrine of Creation and the Rise of Modern Natural Science," in Daniel

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To posit the independence of the natural world was exciting enough; to conceive of a human world without God's judgments and providences was simply breathtaking: it was in fact what centrally defined the Enlightenment. The work of John Locke and other philosophers opened reflective minds to the startling supposition that society, though no doubt ordained in principle by God, was man's own creation—formed and sustained, and thus alterable, by human beings acting autonomously and purposefully. It came to seem that if men could understand the natural order that God had made, then perhaps they could eventually understand the social order that they themselves had made. From the successes of natural science, or what the eighteenth century termed natural philosophy, grew the conviction that moral laws—the chains of cause and effect in human behavior—could be discovered that would match those of the physical world. Thus was generated eighteenth-century moral philosophy—the search for the uniformities and regularities of man's behavior that has proliferated into the various social sciences of our own time.[33]

Finding the laws of behavior became the consuming passion of the Enlightenment. In such a liberal and learned world there could no longer be any place for miracles or the random happenings of chance. Chance, it was now said, was "only a name to cover our ignorance of the cause of any event." God may have remained the primary cause of things, but in the minds of the enlightened he had left men to work out the causes and effects of their lives free from his special interventions. All that happened in society was to be reduced to the strictly human level of men's motivations and goals. "Humanity," said William Warburton in 1727, "is the only cause of human vicissitudes." The source of man's calamities, wrote Constantin François de Chasseboeuf, comte de Volney in 1791, lay not in "the distant heavens. . . . it resides in man himself, he carries it with him in the inward recesses of his own heart."[34] Such beliefs worked their way through every variety of intellectual endeavor in the age. They

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O'Connor and Francis Oakley, eds., *Creation: The Impact of an Idea* (New York, 1969), 29-53; Francis Oakley, "Christian Theology and the Newtonian Science: The Rise of the Concept of the Laws of Nature," *ibid.,* 54-83; P. M. Heimann, "Voluntarism and Immanence: Conceptions of Nature in Eighteenth-Century Thought," *Journal of the History of Ideas,* XXXIX (1978), 271-292; Roy N. Lokken, "Cadwallader Colden's Attempt to Advance Natural Philosophy Beyond the Eighteenth-Century Mechanistic Paradigm," American Philosophical Society, *Proceedings,* CXXII (1978), 365-376; Margaret C. Jacob, *The Newtonians and the English Revolution, 1689-1720* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1976).

[33] The best brief discussion of the search for a science of human behavior in the eighteenth century is Gladys Bryson, *Man and Society: The Scottish Inquiry of the Eighteenth Century* (Princeton, N.J., 1945).

[34] Smith, *Lectures,* II, 22; Warburton and Volney are quoted in R. N. Stromberg, "History in the Eighteenth Century," *Jour. Hist. Ideas,* XII (1951), 300; Richard H. Popkin, "Hume: Philosophical Versus Prophetic Historian," in Kenneth R. Merrill and Robert W. Shahan, eds., *David Hume: Many-sided Genius* (Norman, Okla., 1976), 83-95.

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produced not only a new genre of literature—the novel with its authorial control and design—but also a new kind of man-centered causal history, one based on the same assumptions as the age's conspiratorial interpretations.[35]

English history since the Revolution of 1688, as Henry St. John, Viscount Bolingbroke saw it from the vantage point of the 1730s, was "not the effect of ignorance, mistakes, or what we call chance, but of design and scheme in those who had the sway at that time." This could be proved by seeing "events that stand recorded in history . . . as they followed one another, or as they produced one another, causes or effects, immediate or remote." "History supplies the defects of our own experience" and demonstrates that there are really no such things as accidents; "it shows us causes as in fact they were laid, with their immediate effects: and it enables us to guess at future events." "History," said Edward Gibbon simply, "is the science of causes and effects."[36]

Extending this concept from the realm of natural phenomena into the moral world of human affairs was not an easy matter. Natural philosophers like Newton had sought to stave off the numbing necessitarianism implied in a starkly mechanistic conception of cause and effect by positing various God-inspired "active principles" as the causal agents of motion, gravity, heat, and the like. Even those later eighteenth-century scientists who saw nature as self-contained and requiring no divine intervention whatsoever still presumed various energizing powers in matter itself.[37] The need for

[35] On the effects of the new causal thinking on the development of the novel see Edward M. Jennings, "The Consequences of Prediction," in Theodore Besterman, ed., *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford, 1976), CLIII, 1148-1149, and Martin C. Battestin, " 'Tom Jones': The Argument of Design," in Henry Knight Miller *et al.*, eds., *The Augustan Milieu: Essays Presented to Louis A. Landa* (Oxford, 1970), 289-319.

[36] Bolingbroke, *Historical Writings,* ed. Isaac Kramnick (Chicago, 1972), 21, 18, 22; Gibbon, "Essai sur L'Etude de la Litterature," in *Miscellaneous Works of Edward Gibbon . . .*, ed. John, Lord Sheffield (London, 1796), II, 477. These enlightened assumptions about man's responsibility for what happened led naturally to historical explanations that R. G. Collingwood thought were "superficial to absurdity." It was the Enlightenment historians, wrote Collingwood, "who invented the grotesque idea that the Renaissance in Europe was due to the fall of Constantinople and the consequent expulsion of scholars in search of new homes." For Collingwood, who usually had so much sympathy for the peculiar beliefs of the past, such personal sorts of causal attribution were "typical . . . of a bankruptcy of historical method which in despair of genuine explanation acquiesces in the most trivial causes for the vastest effects" (*The Idea of History* [Oxford, 1946], 80-81). Elsewhere Collingwood of course recognized the historical differentness of the eighteenth century (*ibid.,* 224).

[37] David Kubrin, "Newton and the Cyclical Cosmos: Providence and the Mechanical Philosophy," *Jour. Hist. Ideas,* XXVIII (1967), 325-346; P. M. Heimann and J. E. McGuire, "Newtonian Forces and Lockean Powers: Concepts of Matter in Eighteenth-Century Thought," *Historical Studies in the Physical Sciences,* III (1971), 233-306.

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some sort of active principle in human affairs was felt even more acutely, for the new mechanistic philosophy posed a threat to what Arthur O. Lovejoy has called the "intense ethical inwardness" of Western Christendom. The belief "that whatever moves and acts does so mechanically and necessarily" was ultimately incompatible with personalistic thinking and cast doubt on man's moral responsibility for his actions.[38] If human affairs were really the consequence of one thing repeatedly and predictably following upon another, the social world would become as determined as the physical world seemed to be. Theologians like Jonathan Edwards welcomed this logic and subtly used the new cause-and-effect philosophy to justify God's sovereignty. But other moral philosophers had no desire to create a secular version of divine providence or to destroy the voluntarism of either God or man, and thus sought to find a place for free will in the operations of the machine. They did so not by repudiating the paradigm of cause and effect but by trying to identify causes in human affairs with the motives, mind, or will of individuals. Just as natural scientists like Cadwallader Colden, believing that in a mechanistic physical world "there must be some power or force, or principle of Action," groped toward a modern concept of energy, so too did moral philosophers seek to discover the powers or principles of action that lay behind the sequences of human affairs—in effect, looking within the minds and hearts of men for the moral counterpart of Colden's physical energy.[39]

Such efforts to reconcile the search for laws of human behavior with the commitment to moral capability lay behind the numerous controversies over free will that bedeviled the eighteenth century. To be enlightened, it seemed, was to try one's hand at writing an essay on what David Hume called "the most contentious question of metaphysics"—the question of liberty and necessity. Despite all the bitter polemics between the libertarians and the necessitarians, however, both sides were caught up in the new thinking about causality. Both assumed, as Hume pointed out, that "the conjunction between motives and voluntary actions is as regular and uniform, as that between the cause and effect in any part of nature." Men's motives or will thus became the starting point in the sequential chain of causes and effects in human affairs. All human actions and events could now be seen scientifically as the products of men's intentions. If they were not, if men "are not necessarily determined by motives," then, said the Scottish moralist Thomas Reid, "all their actions must be capricious."[40]

[38] Lovejoy, *Reflections on Human Nature* (Baltimore, 1961), 153; [John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon], *Cato's Letters: Or Essays on Liberty, Civil and Religious, and Other Important Subjects,* 5th ed. (London, 1748), IV, 86; Hans Kelsen, *Society and Nature: A Sociological Inquiry* (London, 1946), 42. On the ways in which Arminian-minded Protestants reconciled individual responsibility with God's sovereignty, see Greven, *Protestant Temperament,* 217-243.

[39] Lokken, "Cadwallader Colden," Am. Phil. Soc., *Procs.,* CXXII (1978), 370; Heimann, "Voluntarism and Immanence," *Jour. Hist. Ideas,* XXXIX (1978), 273, 378-379.

[40] David Hume, "An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding," Sec. VIII,

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Only by identifying causes with motives was any sort of human science and predictability possible, and only then could morality be preserved in the new, mechanistic causal world.

Since it was "granted on all hands, that moral good and evil lie in the state of mind, or prevailing internal disposition of the agent," searching out the causes of social events meant discovering in these agents the motives, the "voluntary choice and design," that led them to act—the energizing principle, the inner springs of their behavior. "Every moral event must have an answerable cause. . . . Every such event must then have a *moral* cause."[41] Moral deeds implied moral doers; when things happen in society, individuals with particular intentions, often called "designs," must be at the bottom of them. All social processes could be reduced to specific individual passions and interests. "Ambition and avarice," wrote the Revolutionary historian Mercy Otis Warren, "are *the leading springs* which generally actuate the restless mind. From these *primary sources of corruption* have arisen all the rapine and confusion, the depredation and ruin, that have spread distress over the face of the earth from the days of Nimrod to Cesar, and from Cesar to an arbitrary prince of the house of Brunswick." This widespread belief that explanations of social phenomena must be sought in the moral nature of man himself ultimately reduced all eighteenth-century moral philosophy—its history and its social analysis—to what would come to be called psychology.[42]

Once men's designs were identified as the causes of human events, the new paradigm of causality worked to intensify and give a scientific gloss to the classic concern with the human heart and the ethical inwardness of Christian culture. Indeed, never before or since in Western history has man been held so directly and morally responsible for the events of his world. Because the new idea of causality presumed a homogeneous identity, an "indissoluble connection," between causes and effects, it became difficult to think of social effects, however remote in time, that were not morally linked to particular causes, that is, to particular human designs. There could be no more in the effects than existed in the causes. "Outward actions being determined by the will," they partook "of the nature of moral good or evil only with reference to their cause, viz. internal volition."[43]

It could now be taken for granted that the cause and the effect were so

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Pt. I, in *Essays, Moral, Political, and Literary,* ed. T. H. Green and T. H. Grose (New York, 1912), II, 77, 72; Reid, quoted in S. A. Grave, *The Scottish Philosophy of Common Sense* (Oxford, 1960), 216.

[41] [James Dana], *An Examination of the Late Reverend President Edwards's "Enquiry on Freedom of Will," . . .* (Boston, 1770), 89, 81; Stephen West, *An Essay on Moral Agency . . . ,* 2d ed. (Salem, Mass., 1794), 73-74.

[42] George L. Dillon, "Complexity and Change of Character in Neo-Classical Criticism," *Jour. Hist. Ideas,* XXXV (1974), 51-61; Warren, quoted in Cohen, *Revolutionary Histories,* 193-194; Bryson, *Man and Society,* 109.

[43] [Dana], *Examination,* xi, 50, 62, 66. See Jonathan Edwards, *Freedom of the Will,* ed. Paul Ramsey (New Haven, Conn., 1957), 156-162.

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intimately related that they necessarily shared the same moral qualities. Whatever the particular moral character of the cause, that is, the motive or inclination of the actor, "the effect appears to be of the same kind."[44] Good intentions and beliefs would therefore result in good actions; evil motives caused evil actions. Of course, mistakes might happen, and occasionally actions "proceeded not from design." But continued or regular moral actions could follow only from similar moral intentions. Only by assuming this close relationship between causes and effects—"this *inference* from motives to voluntary actions; from characters to conduct," said Hume—was the eighteenth-century science of human behavior made possible.[45]

This presumed moral identity between cause and effect, between motive and deed, accounts for the excited reaction of moralists to Bernard Mandeville's satiric paradox of "private vices, publick benefits." Mandeville was unusual for his time in grasping the complexity of public events and the ways in which political effects could outrun and differ from their causes. "We ought," he wrote, "to forebear judging rashly of ministers and their actions, especially when we are unacquainted with every circumstance of an affair. Measures may be rightly concerted, and such casualties intervene, as may make the best design miscarry. . . . Humane understanding is too shallow to foresee the result of what is subject to many variations."[46] Such skepticism could not be easily tolerated by that enlightened and moral age. Mandeville and all those who would ignore private intentions in favor of public results threatened to unhinge both man's moral responsibility for his actions and the homogeneous relation that presumably existed between cause and effect. To break the necessary moral connection between cause and effect, to make evil the author of good and vice versa, would be, it was said, "to confound all differences of

[44] Merle Curti and William Tillman, eds., "Philosophical Lectures by Samuel Williams, Ll. D., on the Constitution, Duty, and Religion of Man," Am. Phil. Soc., *Transactions,* N.S., LX, Pt. 3 (1970), 114. Since the moral effects of human behavior were determined by the causes or motives of the actors, James Wilson devoted a large section of his "Lectures on Law" to an attempt to demonstrate that "the common law measures crimes chiefly by the intention." Such intention, he said, presupposed the operation of both understanding and will. "If the operation of either is wanting," as in the case of lunatics, children, and other dependents, "no crime can exist" ("Of the Persons Capable of Committing Crimes; and of the Different Degrees of Guilt Incurred in the Commission of the Same Crime," in Robert Green McClosky, ed., *The Works of James Wilson,* II [Cambridge, Mass., 1967], 677). "In every moral action," wrote Samuel Stanhope Smith, "the principal ground on which we form a judgment of its rectitude or pravity is the disposition or intention with which it is performed" (*Lectures,* I, 313).

[45] [Dana], *Examination,* 50, 66, 96; Hume, "Concerning Human Understanding," Sec. VIII, Pt. I, in *Essays,* ed. Green and Gross, 74.

[46] Bernard Mandeville, *Free Thoughts on Religion, the Church, and Natural Happiness* (1720), quoted in H. T. Dickinson, "Bernard Mandeville: An Independent Whig," in Besterman, ed., *Studies on Voltaire,* CLII, 562-563.

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character, to destroy all distinction between right and wrong, and to make the most malicious and the most benevolent being of precisely the same temper and disposition."[47]

Mandeville clearly perceived that much of human activity had become an "incomprehensible Chain of Causes." But he, like others of his time, had no better way of describing the multitude of complicated and crisscrossing causal chains he saw than to invoke the traditional Protestant concept of "providence."[48] For those who would be enlightened and scientific, this resort to the mysterious hand of God was no explanation of human affairs at all but rather a step backward into darkness. Things happened, as John Adams noted, by human volition, either "by Accident or Design."[49] Some confusing event or effect might be passed off as an accident—the result of somebody's mistaken intention—but a series of events that seemed to form a pattern could be no accident. Having only the alternative of "providence" as an impersonal abstraction to describe systematic linkages of human actions, the most enlightened of the age could only conclude that regular patterns of behavior were the consequences of concerted human intentions—that is, the result of a number of people coming together to promote a collective design or conspiracy. The human mind, it seemed to Jonathan Edwards, had a natural disposition, "when it sees a thing begin to be," not only "to conclude certainly, that there is a *Cause* of it," but also, "if it sees a thing to be in a very orderly, regular and exact, manner to conclude that some Design regulated and disposed it." Although Edwards was arguing here for God's "exact regulation of a very great multitude of particulars," a similar leap from a particular cause to a general design was made by eighteenth-century theorists who sought to account for the regularity of human actions by the coincident purposes, not of God, but of human beings.[50]

Many enlightened thinkers of the eighteenth century could therefore no more accept the seeming chaos and contingency of events than the

[47] Curti and Tillman, eds., "Lectures by Williams," Am. Phil. Soc., *Trans.*, N.S., LX, Pt. 3 (1970), 121.

[48] Bernard Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees: Or, Private Vices, Publick Benefits,* ed. F. B. Kaye, II (Oxford, 1924), 239; J.A.W. Gunn, "Mandeville and Wither: Individualism and the Workings of Providence," in Irwin Primer, ed., *Mandeville Studies: New Explorations in the Art and Thought of Dr. Bernard Mandeville (1670-1733)* (The Hague, 1975), 101.

[49] Adams to Ebenezer Thayer, Sept. 24, 1765, in Robert J. Taylor *et al.*, eds., *Papers of John Adams* (Cambridge, Mass., 1977-), I, 135.

[50] Jonathan Edwards, *The Mind: A Reconstructed Text,* ed. Leon Howard (Berkeley, Calif., 1963), 76-78. The mind is "informed by means of observed motion, of design," wrote the British scientist James Hutton in 1792; "for when a regular order is observed in those changing things, whereby a certain end is always attained, there is necessarily inferred an operation somewhere, an operation similar to that of our mind, which often premediates the exertion of a power and is conscious of design" (quoted in Heimann and McGuire, "Newtonian Forces and Lockean Powers," *Hist. Studies in Physical Sciences,* III [1971], 283).

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Puritans had. Like the Puritans, they presumed the existence of an ordering power lying beneath the apparently confused surface of events—not God's concealed will, of course, but natural causes embodied in the hidden intentions and wills of men. Those who saw only random chance in events simply did not know enough about these hidden human wills. Just as devout Puritans believed that nothing occurred without God's providence, so the liberal-minded believed that nothing occurred without some person willing it. Earlier, men had sought to decipher the concealed or partially revealed will of God; now they sought to understand the concealed or partially exposed wills of human beings. That, in a nutshell, was what being enlightened was all about.

IV

It was precisely these assumptions that lay behind American whig conspiratorial thinking, indeed all conspiratorial thinking, in the eighteenth century. To be sure, there was a long-existing Christian tradition that stressed, in the words of Revelation 12:9, the wiles of "that old serpent, called the Devil, and Satan, which deceiveth the whole world." This creature, whether called the dragon, the beast, or Satan, was easily pictured by devout Christians and readers of John Milton as "the chief directing agent in all the dark plots of tyranny, persecution and oppression." There is no denying the importance of this religious tradition in preparing American Protestants to detect a British ministeral plot that was "as black and dark as the powder-treason plot." People who read their Bibles and heeded the fervid millennial sermons of their ministers were conditioned to believe that the forces of evil were like the frogs that issued from the mouth of the satanic dragon, "slyly creeping into all the holes and corners of the land, and using their enchanting art and bewitching policy, to lead aside, the simple and unwary, from the truth, to prepare them for the shackles of slavery and bondage." Sermons of the period were filled with references to the "hidden intent," the "pernicious scheme," and the "intrigues and dark plots"—references that owed more to the apocalyptic beliefs of the clergy than to the whig tradition of political jealousy and suspicion.[51] Nor can it be denied that the heated ideological atmosphere in America in the early 1770s intensified the colonists' readiness to suspect British intentions and to see deep dark plots at work. Yet ultimately it was neither the atmosphere of whiggish suspicion and mistrust nor the Christian tradition of a deceitful Satan that was fundamental to the age's susceptibility to conspiratorial interpretations; for people who were neither radical whigs nor devout Protestants nonetheless

[51] Samuel Sherwood, *The Church's Flight into the Wilderness: An Address on the Times* . . . (New York, 1776), 9, 13, 26, 29, 30, 38, 40, and *A Sermon, Containing Scriptural Instructions to Civil Rulers and All Free-born Subjects* . . . (New Haven, Conn., 1774), vi; Nathan O. Hatch, *The Sacred Cause of Liberty: Republican Thought and the Millennium in Revolutionary New England* (New Haven, Conn., 1977), 56; James West Davidson, *The Logic of Millennial Thought: Eighteenth-Century New England* (New Haven, Conn., 1977).

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believed naturally in conspiracies. What was fundamental is that American secular thought—in fact, all enlightened thought of the eighteenth century—was structured in such a way that conspiratorial explanations of complex events became normal, necessary, and rational.

The rush of momentous events in the years leading to the Revolution demanded explanation, for, as the colonists told themselves, "these unheard of intolerable calamities spring not of the dust, come not causeless." Some Americans, of course, still relied on traditional religious presuppositions and warned of the necessity to "remain ignorant of the intentions of Providence, until the series of events explain them," so "vastly large, complicate and intricate" was God's design. Others, mostly tories, doubted whether there was a design at all, whether in fact the actions of the British government added up to anything systematic. Most of the British acts, wrote the New York loyalist Peter Van Schaack as late as 1776, "seem to have sprung out of particular occasions, and are unconnected with each other." But most American patriots in the 1760s and 1770s gradually convinced themselves that the British actions were indeed linked in what Jefferson called "a deliberate, systematical plan of reducing us to slavery" and that this plan could be explained in terms not of the intentions of providence but of the intentions of British officials.[52]

Thus the central question for Americans from 1765 on was always: what were the members of the British government up to? John Dickinson rested the entire argument of his famous *Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania* on the colonists' ability "to discover the intentions of those who rule over us." The colonists in effect turned their decade-long debate with the mother country into an elaborate exercise in the deciphering of British motives. To know what response to make to British acts, wrote James Iredell in 1776, "it was necessary previously to consider what might be supposed the sentiments and views of the administration of Great Britain, the fatal original authors of all these dire extremities." Had George Grenville in promoting the Stamp Act of 1765, for example, "acted from *principle* and not from any *bad motive*"?[53]

[52] [Moses Mather], *America's Appeal to the Impartial World* . . . (Hartford, Conn., 1775), 59; Izrahiah Wetmore, *A Sermon, Preached before the Honorable General Assembly of the Colony of Connecticut* . . . (Norwich, Conn., 1775), 4, 11; Henry C. Van Schaack, *The Life of Peter Van Schaack* . . . (New York, 1842), 56; Jefferson, *A Summary View of the Rights of British America* . . . (Williamsburg, Va., 1774), in Julian P. Boyd *et al.*, eds., *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson,* I (Princeton, N.J., 1950), 125.

[53] [Dickinson], *Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania* . . . (Philadelphia, 1768), in Paul Leicester Ford, ed., *The Writings of John Dickinson* (Historical Society of Pennsylvania, *Memoirs,* XIV [Philadelphia, 1895]), 349, hereafter cited as Ford, ed., *Writings of Dickinson;* Griffith J. McRee, ed., *Life and Correspondence of James Iredell* . . . , I (New York, 1857), 312. "If the American public had not penetrated the intentions of the English government," noted Jefferson's Italian friend Philip Mazzei in 1788, "there would have been no revolution, or it would have been stillborn" (*Researches on the United States,* trans. and ed. Constance D. Sherman [Charlottesville, Va., 1976], 125).

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This was the crux of the matter, not only for the American Revolutionaries but for all eighteenth-century thinkers: how were the real intentions of individuals—what John Adams referred to time and again as "the Secret Springs, Motives and Principles of human Actions"—to be discovered? Certainly the motives of most humble men, the "people," the multitude, were easily known from their expressions. Such simple ordinary folk were "men of feeling": they wore their hearts on their sleeves and in their ignorance openly revealed their passionate, often violent, natures from which sprang the motives for their actions.[54] But the motives of others—the learned few, the gentlemanly elite, those who directed political affairs—were not so easily discovered. Some of these extraordinary men were of course "men of principle," acting benevolently out of disinterested judgment and with rational self-control; they revealed "sincerity" and "manly candor" in their actions. But others were men not of principle but of "policy," or concealed intentions, who exploited their reason and learning shrewdly and artfully to bring about selfish and wicked ends. Samuel Richardson's character Lovelace was an outwardly charming and respected gentleman, but he had "the plottingest heart in the universe." Such cultivated but evil-minded men could pretend they were something they were not and disguise their inner motives. They could smile and smile and yet be villains. "It is very hard under all these masks," wrote Defoe, "to see the true countenance of any man."[55]

Masquerades and hidden designs formed the grammar and vocabulary for much of the thought of the age. From Molière to Lord Chesterfield, intellectuals debated the advantages and disadvantages of politeness, frankness, and hiding one's true feelings in order to get along in the world. "Nothing in Courts is exactly as it appears to be," wrote Chesterfield. "Courts are unquestionably the seats of politeness and good-breeding; were they not so, they would be the seats of slaughter and desolation. Those who now smile upon and embrace, would affront and stab each other if manners did not interpose: but ambition and avarice, the two prevailing passions at Courts, found dissimulation more effectual than violence; and dissimulation introduced that habit of politeness which distinguishes the courtier from the country gentleman." Yet what was prudence and sociability to some became deceit and flattery to others. Perhaps never in Western history have the issues of hypocrisy and

[54] Adams, "Misanthrop, No. 2" (Jan. 1767), in Taylor *et al.*, eds., *Adams Papers,* I, 187. "There is not an emotion or thought which passes through the mind," wrote Smith, "that does not paint some image of itself on the fine and delicate lines of the countenance" (*Lectures,* I, 30). Beliefs such as this led to the faddish science of physiognomy promoted by the Swiss J. K. Lavater. See Samuel Miller, *A Brief Retrospect of the Eighteenth Century . . .* , I (New York, 1803), 433-434.

[55] Richardson, *The History of Clarissa Harlowe,* ed. William Lyon Phelps, IV (New York, 1902), 112 (Letter XXVIII); Defoe, quoted in Novak, ed., *Age of Disguise,* 2; Dillon, "Complexity and Change," *Jour. Hist. Ideas,* XXXV (1974), 51-61.

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sincerity been more centrally engaged.[56] John Adams filled his diary and other writings with lengthy analyses of "Dissimulation," which he called "the first Maxim of worldly Wisdom," and anxiously tried to work out the extent to which a public figure could legitimately conceal his motives. The patronage politics of the age put a premium on circumspection, discretion, and the suppressing of one's real feelings in the interest of cultivating the friendship of patrons. This in turn encouraged an opposition politics dedicated to the unmasking of hypocrisy.

By the middle of the eighteenth century, if not earlier, this concern with the deceit and dissembling of sophisticated elites had turned "courtier" into a generic term of abuse and was leading some to suggest that common people, "men of feeling," despite their ignorance, brutality, and simplicity, might be better trusted in political affairs than men of learning. Such simple folk at least could be counted on to express their inner passions and motives spontaneously and honestly. "Ninety-nine parts out of one hundred of mankind, are ever inclined to live at peace, and cultivate a good understanding with each other." Only members of "the remaining small part"—those whose "considerable abilities" were "joined to an intriguing disposition"—were "the real authors, advisers, and perpetrators of wars, treasons, and those other violences, which have, in all ages, more or less disgraced the annals of man." It was "necessary," wrote historian Mercy Otis Warren, "to guard at every point, against the intrigues of artful or ambitious men," since such men were involved in a "game of deception . . . played over and over." Everywhere there seemed to be a frightening gap between public appearances and the inner motives of rulers.[57]

Because no one could ever actually penetrate into the inner hearts of men, true motives had to be discovered indirectly, had to be deduced from actions. That is, the causes had to be inferred from the effects. Since the scientific paradigm of causality presumed a homogenous connection, a moral likeness, between causes and effects, such deductions and inferences, however elaborate, were not only plausible but necessary. "The actions of men," wrote the novelist Henry Fielding in a concise essay on this Augustan theme of the separation of appearance and reality, "are the surest evidence of their character." The intentions of sophisticated and cunning men, especially those in public life, could be known neither by their countenances nor by their statements, for these were but masks. Although an "honest man," wrote a South Carolina polemicist in 1769, was supposed "to let his language express the real sentiments of his soul,"

[56] Lord Chesterfield to his son, Aug. 21, 1749, in Bonamy Dobrée, ed., *The Letters of Philip Dormer Stanhope, 4th Earl of Chesterfield,* IV (London, 1932), 1382-1383. On the issue of sincerity see the engaging and learned article by Judith Shklar, "Let Us Not Be Hypocritical," *Daedalus* (Summer 1979), 1-25.

[57] John Adams, Aug. 20, 1770, in L. H. Butterfield *et al.,* eds., *Diary and Autobiography of John Adams,* I (Cambridge, Mass., 1961), 363; *Am. Museum,* XII (1792), 172; Warren, quoted in Cohen, *Revolutionary Histories,* 207, 208.

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words could no longer be trusted. Only men's outward actions could reveal their inner dispositions and expose deceit and dissembling. The "dark counsels" of the "Cabal" of Charles II's reign, wrote Hume in his *History of England*, "were not thoroughly known but by the event." "By their fruits so shall ye know them" was the common refrain of religious and secular thinkers alike.[58]

Americans in the 1760s and 1770s were far removed from the sources of what was happening—John Adams, for example, knew something was afoot "by somebody or other in Great-Britain"—and thus they necessarily fell back on this common inferential method of determining designs. "As in nature we best judge of causes by their effects, so," declared the Massachusetts minister Samuel Cooke in his Election Sermon of 1770, "rulers hereby will receive the surest information of the fitness of their laws and the exactness of their execution." For Americans, the execution of those laws provided the only way to discover whether Grenville and other ministers acted from principle or from bad motives. The intentions of the British officials, wrote Dickinson, were not to be judged by their declarations of good will; only "conduct . . . would in time sufficiently explain itself."[59] The British government's claim to have the interests of

[58] Henry Fielding, "An Essay on the Knowledge of the Characters of Men," in *The Works of Henry Fielding,* XI (New York, 1899), 190; William Henry Drayton, *The Letters of Freeman, Etc.: Essays on the Nonimportation Movement in South Carolina,* ed. Robert M. Weir (Columbia, S.C., 1977), 34; David Hume, *The History of England . . . ,* VI (New York, 1879 [orig. publ. Edinburgh, 1754-1762]), chap. 65, p. 16; Alan Heimert, *Religion and the American Mind: From the Great Awakening to the Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass., 1966), 308; Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel* (London, 1970), 283-287; Smith, *Lectures,* I, 10, 314. "In Truth," wrote Trenchard and Gordon, "every private Subject has a Right to watch the Steps of those who would betray their Country; nor is he to take their Word about the Motives of their Designs, but to judge of their Designs by the Event" (*Cato's Letters,* I, 86).

[59] Adams, "A Dissertation on the Canon and the Feudal Law," (1765), in Taylor *et al.,* eds., *Adams Papers,* I, 127; Cooke, *A Sermon Preached at Cambridge . . . May 30th, 1770* (Boston, 1770), in John Wingate Thornton, ed., *The Pulpit of the American Revolution: Or, the Political Sermons of the Period of 1776* (Boston, 1860), 167; [Dickinson], *Letters from a Farmer,* in Ford, ed., *Writings of Dickinson,* 348. The 18th-century fascination with power, both in physics and in politics, was enhanced by this need to infer causes from their effects. Power or causation, "which," said Joseph Priestley, "is only the same idea differently modified," was not found in our sensory experience. "We all see events one succeeding another," wrote Thomas Reid, "but we see not the power by which they are produced." Locke had called power a "mysterious quality," and it remained such for Americans well into the 19th century. Power was something observable only from its effects. Whether from a magnet attracting iron, from a charged electrical jar giving a shock, or from a series of tax levies, men got the idea that some sort of cause or agent was at work. Power, said James Hutton, was "a term implying an unknown thing in action" (Heimann and McGuire, "Newtonian Forces and Lockean Powers," *Hist. Studies in Physical Sciences,* III [1971], 280, 266, 286;

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the colonies at heart, while its actions seemed clearly harmful to those interests, only confirmed its duplicity in colonial eyes. Indeed, it was this sort of discrepancy between the professed motives of an actor and the contrary effects of his actions that lay behind the eighteenth century's preoccupation with deception.

V

The idea of deception became the means by which the Augustan Age closed the gaps that often seemed to exist between causes and effects, between men's proclaimed intentions and their contrary actions. Since cause and effect were inherently, mechanistically related, both possessing the same moral nature, any persistent discrepancy between the two presented a serious problem of explanation. Whenever effects seemed different from their ostensible causes, philosophers were certain, as Hume repeatedly pointed out, that "the contrariety of events" did "not proceed from any contingency in the cause but from the secret operation of contrary causes."[60] If bad effects continually resulted from the professedly benevolent intentions of an actor, then something was wrong. Some sort of deceit or dissimulation was to be suspected; the actor had to be concealing his real motives. It was, as Samuel Stanhope Smith said, the "arts of disguise" that made human actions complicated.[61]

This problem of deception was a source of continuing fascination in eighteenth-century Anglo-American culture. The Augustans, of course, did not invent the notion of deception; but because of their identification of cause and effect with human intentions and actions and because of their assumption of man-made designs lying beneath the surface of seemingly contingent events, they made much more of it than other ages have. Given the influence of Locke's sensationalist epistomology, people were always in danger of mistaking false appearances for reality, words for things. Radical whigs constantly warned of the ease by which the human mind was misled. If people were dependent for their knowledge on the information provided by their senses, then they had to be especially careful of what they saw and heard. Like jugglers fooling people by "sleight of Hand," artful political leaders knew how "to dally and play" upon the people's "Foibles" by using "fine Figures and beautiful Sounds" to "disguise and vanish Sense." What men often saw and heard was not reality. Beneath the surface of experience there existed, they had been told, a wonderful but

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Thomas Brown, "Inquiry into the Relation of Cause and Effect," *North American Review,* XII [1821], 401).

[60] Hume, "Concerning Human Understanding," Sec. VIII, Pt. I, in *Essays,* ed. Green and Grose, 71. See also *ibid.,* Sec. VI, 48-49.

[61] Smith, *Lectures,* I, 254. The colonists, writes Bailyn, had "a general sense that they lived in a conspiratorial world in which what the highest officials professed was not what they in fact intended, and that their words masked a malevolent design" (*Ideological Origins,* 98).

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invisible world of forces—gravity, electricity, magnetism, and fluids and gases of various sorts—that produced, said Joseph Priestley, "an almost infinite variety of visible effects."[62]

No wonder then that men were tempted to think that they were "formed to deceive and be deceived," that "Mankind are in Masquerade, and Falsehood assumes the Air of Reality." In a rapidly changing world of sense impressions, nothing seemed as it really was, and hypocrisy was a charge on everyone's lips. Men presumed, as did Robert Munford's hero in *The Patriots*, that "secrecy is generally the veil of iniquity" from which followed the "confident" conclusion of "some evil design." Sincerity, which Archbishop John Tillotson defined as making "our outward actions exactly agreeable to our inward purposes and intentions," became an ever more important ideal.[63] There even developed a politics of sincerity, with which republicanism became associated. With all social relationships in a free state presumably dependent on mutual trust, it is not surprising that the courts of eighteenth-century Massachusetts treated instances of cheating and deception far more severely than overt acts of violence.[64] The differences between appearance and reality, disguise and sincerity, were

[62] Jay Fliegelman, *Prodigals and Pilgrims: The American Revolution against Patriarchal Authority, 1750-1800* (Cambridge, 1982), chap. 1; [Trenchard and Gordon], *Cato's Letters,* III, 330, 334; Priestley, quoted in Robert Darnton, *Mesmerism and the End of the Enlightenment in France* (Cambridge, Mass., 1968), 16.

[63] William Livingston, *The Independent Reflector: Or Weekly Essays on . . . the Province of New-York,* ed. Milton M. Klein (Cambridge, Mass., 1963), 218; Courtlandt Canby, ed., "Robert Munford's *The Patriots*," *WMQ,* 3d Ser., VI (1949), 492; Tillotson, quoted in Leon Guilhamet, *The Sincere Ideal: Studies on Sincerity in Eighteenth-Century English Literature* (Montreal, 1974), 16. American Protestantism was always preoccupied with the problem of deception and hypocrisy. While 17th-century New England Puritans had recognized man's ultimate inability to discover who was saved or not and had accepted the possibility of some hypocrites being within the visible church, early 19th-century Christian perfectionists were sure they could tell who the deceivers were, for those "who bear a bold and living testimony against all sin, and confirm the same by their works" could not feign; their behavior thus "puts a period eventually, to all the contentions and debates, about Who is a christian and who is not" (Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: From Colony to Province* [Cambridge, Mass., 1953], 68-81; John Dunlavy, *The Manifesto, or a Declaration of the Doctrines and Practice of the Church of Christ* [Pleasant Hill, Ky., 1818], 284-285, 283, 268).

[64] Henrick Hartog, "The Public Law of a County Court: Judicial Government in Eighteenth-Century Massachusetts," *American Journal of Legal History,* XX (1976), 321-322. For some even the administration of all criminal justice could be reduced to the unmasking of deception. James Wilson thought that the word "felony"—"the generical term employed by the common law to denote a crime"—was derived from both Latin and Greek meaning "to deceive." It was not an injurious action alone that causes a crime, said Wilson; instead, the action revealed that the actor had a dispostion unworthy of the confidence of the community, "that he is false, deceitful, and treacherous: the crime is now completed" ("Law Lectures," in McClosky, ed., *Works of Wilson,* II, 622).

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the stock themes of eighteenth-century literature and drama. The artful manipulation of innocent virtue was the traditional device by which most comic situations in novels and plays were created.

Satire, the kind of literature celebrated by the age—indeed, the eighteenth century was the greatest era of satire in Western history—presumed the prevalence of deception. It posited a distinction between appearance and reality—that the world we see is not the world that really exists—and rested on the discrepancy between what people profess to be and what they really are.[65] Satire was made for an enlightened age; it took for granted that individuals are autonomous rational beings fully responsible for the good and evil they bring about. Its object was always to expose to shame and ridicule any behavior contrary to what men of reason had a right to expect, to strip away the virtuous appearances that vice used to clothe itself. Since everyone professed to be pursuing truth and virtue, how was it, asked John Adams in one of his many discourses on this problem, that human affairs so often resulted "in direct opposition to both?" Only deception, including self-deception, could explain the discrepancy. "From what other source can such fierce disputations arise concerning the two things [truth and virtue] which seem the most consonant to the entire frame of human nature?"[66]

The conspiratorial interpretations of the age were a generalized application to the world of politics of the pervasive duplicity assumed to exist in all human affairs.[67] Only by positing secret plots and hidden machinations by governments was it possible, it seemed, to close the bewildering gaps between what rulers professed and what they brought forth. It was true, wrote Hume in his history of Charles II's court, that at first beliefs in conspiracies and cabals seemed preposterous and that often no concrete evidence could be found for them. "But the utter impossibility of accounting, by any other hypothesis, for those strange measures embraced by the court, as well as for the numerous circumstances which accompanied them obliges us to acknowledge, though there remains no direct evidence of it, that a formal plan was laid for changing the religion and

[65] P. K. Elkin, *The Augustan Defence of Satire* (Oxford, 1973); Maynard Mack, "The Muse of Satire," in Richard C. Boys, ed., *Studies in the Literature of the Augustan Age: Essays Collected in Honor of Arthur Ellicott Case* (New York, 1966); Basil Willey, *The Eighteenth Century Background: Studies on the Idea of Nature in the Thought of the Period* (New York, 1940), 100, 106.

[66] [Adams], "U" to the *Boston Gazette,* Aug. 29, 1763, in Taylor *et al.,* eds., *Adams Papers,* I, 78, 79.

[67] So Eustache LeNoble wrote in the preface to his novel *Abra-Mule* (1696): "The actions of sovereigns always have two parts, one is the public element which everyone knows and which forms the material of gazettes and the greater part of histories; the other, which these sovereigns hide behind the veil of their policy, are the secret motives of intrigue which cause those events, and which are known or revealed only to those who have had some part in these intrigues, or who by the penetration of their genius know how the one part becomes the other" (quoted in Rene Godenne, *Historie de la Nouvelle Française aux XVII^e et XVIII^e Siècles* [Geneva, 1970], 96).

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subverting the constitution of England, and that the king and the ministry were in reality conspirators against the people."[68]

The same notion of deception lay behind Edmund Burke's celebrated "Thoughts on the Cause of the Present Discontents" (1770), which more than any other single piece of writing in the pre-Revolutionary period pinpointed the nature of the deceit at work in the early years of George III's reign. There were, said Burke, no discernible causes that would explain the present discontents of the British nation—no great party agitations, no famine, no war, no foreign threat, no oppression. The effects, the national discontents, were out of all proportion to the apparent causes. They could be accounted for only by hidden causes—the existence of a "double cabinet," thought Burke, operating behind the scenes of George III's government against the will of the people. If enlightened thinkers like Hume and Burke could use such logic, it is not surprising that others relied on it as well.[69] As political consequences in an increasingly complicated world appeared more and more contrary to the avowed aims of rulers, only deception on a large scale seemed capable of resolving the mysterious discrepancies.

No wonder, then, that mistrust and jealousy grew, for, as the South Carolina merchant Henry Laurens noted in 1765, a "malicious Villain acting behind the Curtain . . . could be reached only by suspicion." Such suspicion could ripen into certainty through events. Words lost all capacity to reveal motives; only actions could reveal the secret designs of those in power. "What was their view in the beginning or [how] far it was Intended to be carried Must be Collected from facts that Afterwards have happened."[70] The more glaring the disparity between these facts and the

[68] Hume, *History of England,* VI, 64-65. In the years between the Restoration and the era of George III, the modern English notion of the criminal law of conspiracy was essentially formed. Basic to this notion was the belief that the criminality of conspiracy lay in the intent, which was revealed by the acts done. A justice in *Rex* v. *Sterling* (1664) had suggested that "the particular facts" were "but evidence of the design charged." A century later Lord Mansfield in *Rex* v. *Parsons et al.* elaborated the point by instructing the jury "that there was no occasion to prove the actual fact of conspiring, but that it might be collected from collateral circumstances" (James Wallace Bryan, *The Development of the English Law of Conspiracy,* Johns Hopkins University Studies in Historical and Political Science, XXVII [Baltimore, 1909], 77, 78-79, 81. I owe this reference to Stanley N. Katz).

[69] Burke, "Thoughts on the Cause of the Present Discontents" (1770), in *The Works and Correspondence of . . . Edmund Burke,* ed. Charles William and Richard Bourke (London, 1852), III, esp. 112-114, 130-131. For the prevalence of the belief in a "double cabinet" operating "behind the curtain" in the era of George III, see Ian R. Christie, *Myth and Reality in Late-Eighteenth-Century British Politics and Other Papers* (London, 1970), 27-54.

[70] Laurens to John Brown, Oct. 28, 1765, in George C. Rogers, Jr., *et al.,* eds., *The Papers of Henry Laurens,* V (Columbia, S.C., 1976), 30; Staughton Lynd, ed., "Abraham Yates's History of the Movement for the United States Constitution," *WMQ,* 3d Ser., XX (1963), 232, 231.

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professed good intentions of their perpetrators, the more shrill became the accusations of hidden designs and dark plots. Some might continue to suggest that "the ways of Heaven are inscrutable; and frequently, the most unlooked-for events have arisen from seemingly the most inadequate causes," and of course others continued to believe that motives and actions did not always coincide, trusting with Dr. Johnson in the old English proverb that "Hell is paved with good intentions."[71] But for those who knew how cause and effect really worked, deception and conspiracy were more morally coherent and intellectually satisfying explanations of the apparent difference between professions and deeds. When effects "cannot be accounted for by any visible cause," it was rational to conclude that "there must be, therefore, some men behind the curtain" who were secretly bringing them about.[72] This commonplace image of figures operating "behind the curtain" was the consequence of a political world that was expanding and changing faster than its available rational modes of explanation could handle.

VI

Such were the presuppositions and circumstances that explain the propensity of Anglo-Americans and others in the eighteenth century to resort to conspiratorial interpretations of events. The belief in plots was not a symptom of disturbed minds but a rational attempt to explain human phenomena in terms of human intentions and to maintain moral coherence in the affairs of men. This mode of thinking was neither pathological nor uniquely American. Certainly, the American Revolution cannot serve as an adequate context for comprehending the obsession with conspiratorial beliefs. Perhaps we can perceive better their larger place in Western history by examining, however briefly, the newer modes of causal explanation that gradually came to replace them.

Well before the close of the eighteenth century, even while conspiratorial interpretations were flourishing under the aegis of enlightened science, alternative ways of explaining events were taking form, prompted by dynamic social changes that were stretching and contorting any simple linkage between human intentions and actions, causes and effects. The expanding, interdependent economic order obviously relied on the activi-

[71] Richard Henry Lee to ———, May 31, 1764, in James Curtis Ballagh, ed., *The Letters of Richard Henry Lee,* I (New York, 1911), 7; James Boswell, *Life of Samuel Johnson,* Modern Library ed. (New York, n.d.), 532. Even someone as enlightened and prone to conspiratorial thinking as John Adams repeatedly fell back on the "inscrutable" designs of "providence" in order to account for strange turns of events. This providential tradition, associated especially with Protestantism, was the only means in the 18th century, other than conspiracies, to account for events that seemed inconsistent with their causes (Taylor *et al.,* eds., *Adams Papers,* II, 84, 236).

[72] Nathanael Emmons, *A Discourse, Delivered on the National Fast, April 25, 1799* (Wrentham, Mass., 1799), 23.

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ty of thousands upon thousands of insignificant producers and traders whose various and conflicting motives could hardly be deciphered, let alone judged. The growing number of persons and interests participating in politics made causal evaluations ever more difficult. Causes seemed farther and farther removed from their consequences, sometimes disappearing altogether into a distant murkiness. As a result, the inferences of plots and deceptions used to close the widening gap between events and the presumed designs of particular individuals became even more elaborate and contrived. Many were still sure that every social effect, every political event, had to have a purposive human agent as a cause. But men now distinguished more frequently between "remote" and "proximate" causes and between "immediate" and "permanent" effects. Although many continued to assume that the relationship between causes and their effects was intrinsic and morally homogeneous, some moralists noted bewilderingly and sometimes cynically how personal vices like self-love and self-interest could have contrary, indeed beneficial, consequences for society. Men everywhere wrestled with the demands the changing social reality was placing on their thought. Some suggested that self-love might even be a virtue; others complained of "a kind of *mandevillian* chymistry" that converted avarice into benevolence; still others questioned the presumed identity between private motives and public consequences.[73]

Little of this was followed out in any systematic way in the Anglo-American world until the appearance in the latter half of the eighteenth century of that remarkable group of Scottish intellectuals who worked out, in an extraordinary series of writings, a new understanding of the relationship between individuals and events. These Scottish "social scientists" did not and could not by themselves create a new way of conceiving of human affairs, but their writings were an especially clear crystallization of the changes gradually taking place in Western consciousness during the last third of the eighteenth century. Adam Ferguson, Adam Smith, and John Millar sought to undermine what Duncan Forbes has called "a dominant characteristic of the historical thought of the age"—the "tendency to explain events in terms of conscious action by individuals." These Scottish moral philosophers had come to realize more clearly than most eighteenth-century thinkers that men pursuing their own particular aims were led by an "invisible hand" into promoting an end that was no part of their intentions. Traditional historians, complained Ferguson in his *History of Civil Society,* had seen all events as the "effect of design. An author and a work, like cause and effect, are perpetually coupled together." But reality was not so simple. Men, "in striving to remove inconveniencies, or to gain apparent and contiguous advantages, arrive at ends which even their

[73] *Boston Evening-Post,* Dec. 29, 1766. See Lovejoy, *Reflections on Human Nature,* 129-215, and Albert O. Hirschman, *The Passions and the Interests: Political Arguments for Capitalism before its Triumph* (Princeton, N.J., 1977).

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imagination could not anticipate, . . . and nations stumble upon establishments, which are indeed the result of human action, but not the execution of any human design."[74]

Such momentous insights would in time help to transform all social and historical thinking in the Western world. But it took more than the writings of philosophers—it took the experiencing of tumultuous events—to shake most European intellectuals out of their accustomed ways of thinking. The French Revolution, more than any other single event, changed the consciousness of Europe. The Revolution was simply too convulsive and too sprawling, involving the participation of too many masses of people, to be easily confined within conventional personalistic and rationalistic modes of explanation. For the most sensitive European intellectuals the Revolution became the cataclysm that shattered once and for all the traditional moral affinity between cause and effect, motives and behavior. That the actions of liberal, enlightened, and well-intentioned men could produce such horror, terror, and chaos, that so much promise could result in so much tragedy, became, said Shelley, "the master theme of the epoch in which we live." What the French Revolution revealed, wrote Wordsworth, speaking for a generation of disillusioned intellectuals, was "this awful truth" that "sin and crime are apt to start from their very opposite qualities."[75] Many European thinkers continued, of course, to describe what happened as the deliberate consequence of the desires and ambitions of individuals. But the scale and complexity of the Revolution now required conspiratorial interpretations of an unprecedented sort. No small group of particular plotters could account for its tumult and mass movements; only elaborately organized secret societies,

[74] Duncan Forbes, " 'Scientific' Whiggism: Adam Smith and John Millar," *Cambridge Journal,* VII (1954), 651, 653-654; Adam Ferguson, *An Essay on the History of Civil Society* (1767), ed. Duncan Forbes (Edinburgh, 1966), 123, 122.

[75] M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (New York, 1971), 328; William Wordsworth, "The Borderers," in William Knight, ed., *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth,* I (Edinburgh, 1882), 109. François Furet notes the differing views of the two French Revolutionary leaders, Brissot de Warville and Robespierre, over what was happening. Brissot, writes Furet, argued publicly in 1792 that "it was impossible to foresee the turn of events and that human intentions and the course of history were two separate matters." This "kind of historical objectivity, which made it possible to disregard the possibility—indeed, in this case, the probability—that evil intentions were at work, was by definition totally alien to Robespierre's political universe, in which it was implicitly assumed that intentions are perfectly coherent with the actions they prompt and the effects they aim at. . . . In such a universe, action never had unforeseeable consequences, nor was power ever innocent." The difference that Furet finds between the thinking of Brissot and Robespierre is precisely the difference between our modern conception of reality and that of the American Revolutionaries (*Interpreting the French Revolution,* trans. Elborg Forster [Cambridge, 1981], 67-68).

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like the Illuminati or the Freemasons, involving thousands of individuals linked by sinister designs, could be behind the Europe-wide upheaval.[76]

Although such conspiratorial interpretations of the Revolution were everywhere, the best minds—Hegel's in particular—now knew that the jumble of events that made up the Revolution were so complex and overwhelming that they could no longer be explained simply as the products of personal intention. For these thinkers, history could no longer be a combination of individual events managed by particular persons, but had to become a complicated flow or process, a "stream," that swept men along.

VII

The story of this vast transformation in the way men explain events is central to the history of modern Western thought. Indeed, so huge and complicated is it that our easy generalizations are apt to miss its confused and agonized significance for individuals and to neglect the piecemeal ways in which it was worked out in the minds of people—not great philosophers like Hegel or Adam Smith, but more ordinary people, workaday clergymen, writers, and politicians caught up in the problems and polemics of the moment.

Certainly late eighteenth-century Americans did not experience this transformation in consciousness as rapidly and to the same extent as Europeans, but it is evident that some were coming to realize that the social and moral order was not as intelligible as it once had been. Few active minds were able to resist the pressures a new complicated commercial reality was placing on familiar assumptions about human nature and morality. Even the cynical and worldly New York merchant-politician, Gouverneur Morris, found himself ensnared in an apparent conflict between motives and consequences, and in an unfinished essay, groped to make sense of the problematical nature of late eighteenth-century experience.

Morris began his essay on "Political Enquiries," as nearly all eighteenth-century writers did, with happiness and declared his agreement with the conventional belief that virtue and the avoidance of evil were the keys to realizing it: "To inculcate Obedience to the moral Law is therefore the best Means of promoting human Happiness." But immediately problems

[76] See esp. Roberts, *Secret Societies,* 160-167. On Apr. 17, 1798, the recent immigrant to America Benjamin Henry Latrobe wrote to his Italian friend Giambattista Scandalla of the unprecedented turmoil of the French Revolution. "At the present moment the great convulsions of empires and nations, are so violent, that they lay hold of, and move individuals with an effect unknown in the former wars of kings. The surface—the great men of every nation—were once the only part of the mass really interested. The present storm is so violent, that the ocean is moved to the very depth, and you and I who inhabit it, feel the commotion" (*The Correspondence and Miscellaneous Papers of Benjamin Henry Latrobe,* I [forthcoming]).

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arose. Which should government encourage more, public or private virtue? "Can there be any Difference between them? In other Words," asked Morris, in a question that directly confronted Mandeville's paradox, "can the same Thing be right and wrong?" Could selfishness, for example, result in public benefits? If so, how should self-interest be judged? "If an Action be in its own Nature wrong," said Morris in a summary of the traditional moral view, "we can never justify it from a Relation to the public Interest." It had to be judged "by the Motive of the Actor." But then, "who can know his Motive?" Was motive the criterion of judgment after all? "From what Principle of the human Heart," wondered Morris, "is public Virtue derived?"[77]

Despite such scattered musings and questionings, most Americans found it as difficult as Morris to escape from the presuppositions of a traditional moral order. Only by assuming that the beliefs or motives of individuals caused events could those individuals be held morally accountable for what happened. These assumptions had underlain the Revolutionaries' charge of a British conspiracy, and they underlay every succeeding American notion of conspiracy. By the last decade of the eighteenth century, however, the polemics surrounding these continuing charges of conspiracy were unsettling older views and forcing new explorations into the problems of causation in human affairs.

The climax in America of the late eighteenth century's frenzy of plots and counterplots came in 1798 with the most serious crisis the young nation had yet faced. This crisis brought the country close to civil war and led, in New England at least, to Federalist accusations that the Republican party was in league with an international Jacobinical conspiracy dominated by the Order of the Bavarian Illuminati. This Illuminati conspiracy, the Federalists charged, had not only brought about the French Revolution but was now threatening to subvert America's new government. In elaborating for their fellow Americans the nature of this plot, impassioned Federalists, especially those in the standing order of New England clergy, were compelled to expose the premises of their ideas about causality in an unprecedented manner.[78]

Federalist spokesmen in 1798 argued that Americans ought to be suspicious of the Illuminati and other similar organizations that claimed to have benevolent purposes. Had not the perpetrators of the French Revolution likewise professed a "fraternal intention" and made "splendid

[77] Gouverneur Morris, "Political Enquiries," in Willi Paul Adams, ed., " 'The Spirit of Commerce Requires that Property Be Sacred': Gouverneur Morris and the American Revolution," *Amerikastudien/American Studies,* XXI (1976), 328. Adams dates Morris's unpublished essay at 1776, but the content suggests that it was more likely written a decade or so later.

[78] The fullest account of the Illuminati scare is Vernon Stauffer, *New England and the Bavarian Illuminati* (New York, 1967 [orig. publ. 1918]). On conspiratorial thinking in the early republic see J. Wendell Knox, *Conspiracy in American Politics, 1787-1815* (New York, 1972).

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and passionate harangues on universal freedom and equality"? But everyone knew what "evil effects" they had produced. Such men were designing hypocrites, "void of sincerity" and not to be trusted.[79] Yet such suspicion and mistrust, such fears of duplicity, could just as easily be turned against any leaders, as the Federalists knew only too well. Throughout the 1790s the Republicans had accused them of just this sort of deception, of fomenting beneath their high-sounding professions of devotion to the new republic secret designs for monarchizing American society and government. In self-defense, therefore, the Federalists were pressed in the debates of the late 1790s into exploring the ways in which people could distinguish between hypocrisy and sincerity in their leaders. The public needed to be convinced that Federalist leaders were men whose words and motives could be trusted. The Federalists thus set out to show why people should confide their government only into the hands of honest, respectable, and well-bred gentlemen like themselves, who in contrast to the upstart and irreligious Republicans, had the worth, religiosity, and status deserving of political authority.

The Federalists were thoroughly eighteenth-century minded (which is why they resorted to satire much more readily than did their Republican opponents). They assumed the existence of a rational moral order and a society of deliberately acting individuals who controlled the course and shape of events. They were sure that men's beliefs or motives mattered in determining actions and that such causes and effects were intrinsically related. "As the volitions and consequent actions of men are mainly governed by their prevailing belief," David Tappan, Hollis Professor of Divinity at Harvard, declared in 1798, "so he who steadily believes and obeys truth is a virtuous man; while he who chooses and obeys falsehood is a vitious character." Clinging to this traditional assumption that events were the direct consequence of individuals' intentions and opinions, which they summed up as "character," the Federalists could only conclude that the character of individuals, particularly of leaders, shaped the general character of society. Society in fact was only the individual writ large. "If each man conducts himself aright, the community cannot be conducted wrong," said Timothy Dwight, president of Yale. "If private life be unblamable, the public state must be commendable and happy." This being so, it followed that the established Federalist gentry, who even the Republicans admitted were honest and respectable men of character, were the best leaders for the society and could do it no harm. Good private motives, in other words, could have only good public consequences.[80]

[79] David Tappan, *A Discourse Delivered in the Chapel of Harvard College, June 19, 1798* (Boston, 1798), 13, 19-21.

[80] Tappan, *Discourse, June 19, 1798*, 6; Dwight, *The Duty of Americans, at the Present Crisis, Illustrated in a Discourse Preached, on the Fourth of July* . . . (New Haven, Conn., 1798), 16. It was this traditional assumption about the cause-effect relationship between beliefs and behavior that lay behind the Federalists' enactment of the Sedition Act of 1798. They could scarcely appreciate the emerging notion set forth by some Republicans that Americans should be free to believe and express whatever opinions they pleased.

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Confronted with these self-serving arguments, Jeffersonian Republicans and others who opposed the privileged position of the Federalist gentry were eventually led to question and defy the Federalists' basic assumption: that men's intentions and beliefs—their private "character"—were necessarily and directly translated into public consequences. No one struggled more persistently with this issue than the fiery Connecticut Jeffersonian, Abraham Bishop. Although Bishop eventually accused the Federalists of fomenting their own Illuminati conspiracy, he also tried in a series of speeches to work out an explanation for the perplexing discrepancy between causes and effects in human affairs. His thought was remarkable for both its boldness and originality.

Bishop at times fell back on the conventional notion of deception. "The great, the wise, rich and mighty men of the world" were always trying to delude those beneath them "with charming outsides, engaging manners, powerful address and inexhaustible argument." But Bishop admitted that such an explanation was not fully satisfactory. He knew that many of the Federalist leaders possessed "integrity in *private* life." Yet at the same time this private integrity had "no manner of connection with *political* character." How then account for the difference between this respectable private character and its obnoxious public effects? Perhaps, Bishop suggested, honest and reputable men behaved differently in groups and organizations. "Thus committees of societies, selectmen and legislators will do certain things, officially, which would ruin them as individuals." It was hard to know how things happened; all we can know, said Bishop, is that men who exhibited no wicked passions at home or among their neighbors did so as politicians, as "evinced by correspondent actions."[81]

Perhaps, suggested Bishop, with an audacity rare among eighteenth-century Americans, personal character and intentions do not really count at all in explaining events. Since men always profess decent motives for their actions, he argued, we can never judge them by their motives. People seem to be caught up in a "system," and it is the "system," and not particular individuals, that we must combat and condemn. To account for the country's revolt against Great Britain, said Bishop, Americans in the 1770s had blamed the greater part of the respectable men in the British nation. "Did we by this intend to charge each of these men with a personal disposition to oppress, plunder and destroy us? Surely not!—But we charged to the system, which they supported, all these dispositions, and dreadful facts proved our charges to be well-founded."[82]

[81] Abraham Bishop, *Connecticut Republicanism. An Oration on the Extent and Power of Political Delusion* . . . (Albany, N.Y., 1801), 8, and *Oration Delivered in Wallingford on the 11th of March 1801* . . . (New Haven, Conn., 1801), 24. I owe some of these citations relating to the *Illuminati* conspiracy to David C. Miller, "The Ideology of Conspiracy: An Examination of the *Illuminati* Incident in New England" (seminar paper, Brown University, 1977).

[82] Bishop, *Proofs of a Conspiracy, against Christianity, and the Government of the United States* . . . (Hartford, Conn., 1802), 10-12, and *Oration Delivered in Wallingford,* 25, 26.

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These kinds of thoughts were too new and too frightening in their moral implications to be easily followed up.[83] But at least one American saw very clearly what belief in conspiracies, like that of the Bavarian Illuminati, meant for men's understanding of events. In 1799, in a brilliant review of one of the many Federalist Fourth of July orations that laid out the diabolical designs of the Illuminati, the novelist and editor Charles Brockden Brown went right to the heart of the misconception that was at work.

Those who believe in such conspiracies, Brown wrote, have no idea how things really happen. They have no sense that "men are liable to error, and though they may intend good, may commit enormous mistakes in the choice of means." While enlightened philosophes, for example,

> imagine themselves labouring for the happiness of mankind, loosening the bonds of superstition, breaking the fetters of commerce, outrooting the prejudice of birth, by which father transmits to son absolute power over the property, liberty and lives of millions, they may, in reality, be merely pulling down the props which uphold human society, and annihilate not merely the chains of false religion, but the foundations of morality—not merely the fetters of commerce, and federal usurpations upon property, but commerce and property themselves. The apology which may be made for such is, that though their activity be pernicious, their purposes are pure.

But those who believe in the Illuminati conspiracy deny liberal reformers "the benefits of this construction." They assume that all the disastrous consequences were produced by certain individuals and were "*foreseen* and *intended*." To avoid such simple-minded conspiratorial beliefs, wrote Brown, we must be "conscious of the uncertainty of history" and recognize that "actions and motives cannot be truly described," for they are not always integrally related.[84]

Brown returned again and again to this theme of what has been called "the unanticipated consequences of purposive action."[85] Indeed, his

[83] By avowing that " 'holiness' is no 'guarantee for political rectitude'," Bishop, wrote a stunned Federalist David Daggett, was undermining the moral order of society. "What security then" asked Daggett, "have we for 'political rectitude'?" (*Three Letters to Abraham Bishop* . . . [Hartford, Conn., 1800], 27.)

[84] *Monthly Magazine and American Review,* I (1799), 289; Brown, "Walstein's School of History," in *The Rhapsodist and Other Uncollected Writings,* ed. Harry R. Warfel (New York, 1943), 147. In discussing the conspiratorial interpretation that saw the Order of the Bavarian Illuminati bringing about the French Revolution, Hofstadter wrote that "what is missing [in it] is not veracious information about the organization, but sensible judgment about what can cause a revolution" (*Paranoid Style,* 37). The basic question is why we think one judgment "sensible" and another not.

[85] Robert K. Merton, "The Unanticipated Consequences of Purposive Social Action," *American Sociological Review,* I (1936), 894-904. Fisher Ames, the most

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significance as a writer comes not from his creation of the American romance or the American gothic tale, but from his relentless attempts to probe Wordsworth's "awful truth," to examine the moral implications of evil caused by well-intentioned and benevolent persons. Unlike the oppressive didactic fiction of his American contemporaries, Brown's novels are intellectual explorations into causality, deception, and the moral complexity of life. In his fiction not only do moral obligations such as sincerity and benevolence often contradict one another, but virtuous motives time and again lead to contrary consequences. Despite all the tedious analyses of motives his characters go through, none of them is able to avoid unfortunate results.[86] Each, like Wieland, finds he has "rashly set in motion a machine over whose progress [he] had no control." "How little cognizance have men over the actions and motives of each other!" Brown's character Edgar Huntly exclaimed. "How total is our blindness with regard to our own performances!" Motives and intentions, Brown suggested, could no longer be crucial in judging moral responsibility, since "the causes that fashion men into instruments of happiness or misery, are numerous, complex, and operate upon a wide surface. . . . Every man is encompassed by numerous claims, and is the subject of intricate relations. . . . Human affairs are infinitely complicated."[87]

These American explorations into the relationship between aims and consequences were only small and modest examples of what was taking place generally in Western thought during the late eighteenth century. Others elsewhere were also becoming more and more conscious of the complicatedness of human affairs. The growing awareness of the difficulty of delving into the human heart and the increasing unwillingness to

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pessimistic of Federalists, was one of the few Americans of these years who came to think like a European about revolutions and the "stream" of history. "Events," he wrote, "proceed, not as they were expected or intended, but as they are impelled by the irresistible laws of our political existence. Things inevitable happen, and we are astonished, as if they were miracles, and the course of nature had been overpowered or suspended to produce them" ("The Dangers of American Liberty" (1805), in Seth Ames, ed., *Works of Fisher Ames . . .*, II [Boston, 1854], 345).

[86] See W. B. Berthoff, " 'A Lesson on Concealment': Brockden Brown's Method in Fiction," *Philological Quarterly,* XXXVII (1958), 45-57; Michael Davitt Bell, " 'The Double-Tongued Deceiver': Sincerity and Duplicity in the Novels of Charles Brockden Brown," *Early American Literature,* IX (1974), 143-163; John Clemen, "Ambiguous Evil: A Study of Villains and Heroes in Charles Brockden Brown's Major Novels," *ibid.,* X (1975), 190-219; Mark Seltzer, "Saying Makes It So: Language and Event in Brown's *Wieland*," *ibid.,* XIII (1978), 81-91; and David H. Hirsch, *Reality and Idea in the Early American Novel* (The Hague, 1971), 74-100.

[87] Brown, *Wieland; or, the Transformation* (Philadelphia, 1889 [orig. publ. 1798]), 234, *Edgar Huntly, or Memoirs of a Sleep Walker* (Philadelphia, 1887 [orig. publ. 1799]), 267, and "Walstein's School of History," in *Rhapsodist,* ed. Warfel, 152, 154.

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esteem men simply for their aristocratic character were forcing moralists, sometimes imperceptibly, to shift the basis of judgment of human action from the motives and personal qualifications of the actors to the public consequences of their acts. The common practice of deducing motives from their effects in actions only furthered this transition and blurred what was happening. What counted now was less the beliefs and intentions, or the "character," of the actor and more the consequences of his actions, or his contributions to human happiness. And any man, however much he lacked "character," however ordinary and insignificant he may have been, could make such contributions.

In just such shifts from motives to consequences was a democratic consciousness strengthened and what came to be called utilitarianism created. Naturally for most people there remained no discrepancy between benevolent aims and good effects, and the familiar belief that private virtue was the obvious source of human happiness continued strong. But for Jeremy Bentham and other stark utilitarians there could no longer be any such thing as good or bad motives: "If they are good or bad, it is only on account of their effects, good on account of their tendency to produce pleasure, or avert pain: bad, on account of their tendency to produce pain, or avert pleasure."[88]

Many Americans were reluctant to separate motives from consequences, causes from effects, in this unequivocal utilitarian manner. But by the early nineteenth century there were some, usually those most eager to disparage "aristocratic" heroic individuals and to magnify the popular "masses," who increasingly emphasized what Bishop had clumsily called the "system" of society. Now it was described as the "natural order" or the

[88] Jeremy Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (Oxford, 1907 [orig. publ. London, 1789]), 102. Utilitarianism has often been used rather loosely by historians and equated simply with utility or happiness. Although late 18th- and early 19th-century Americans were centrally interested in the usefulness of behavior, most did not mean by it what Bentham did, the abandonment of a concern with motives in favor of consequences. This sort of Benthamite utilitarianism had very little influence in America. See Paul A. Palmer, "Benthamism in England and America," *American Political Science Review,* XXXV (1941), 855-871; Morton White, *The Philosophy of the American Revolution* (New York, 1978), 230-239; and Wilson Smith, "William Paley's Theological Utilitarianism in America," *WMQ,* 3d Ser., XI (1954), 402-424. Even in criminal legislation, where, through the influence of Beccaria, utilitarianism was rampant, an ultimate concern with motives insinuated itself. In designating punishments for various offenses, wrote New York penal reformer Thomas Eddy, modern legislators could scarcely take into account "the moral condition" of the criminals; they could "regard only the tendency of actions to injure society, and distribute those punishments according to the comparative degrees of harm such actions may produce." Yet this stark utilitarianism in criminal legislation was justified in Eddy's mind only because it gave the supervisors of the penitentiaries the opportunity of "distinguishing the shades of guilt in different offenders" and thus of effecting the moral reformation of the criminals (*An Account of the State Prison or Penitentiary House, in the City of New York* [New York, 1801], 51-52).

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"aggregate result" of events formed out of the diverse and clashing motives of countless insignificant individuals. Men no doubt caused this "aggregate result," but they did so in large numbers and unthinkingly by following their particular natural inclinations. This concept of the social process eventually became identified with what Jacksonian Democrats called the "voluntary" or "democratic principle"—the principle that was able by itself "to work out the best possible general result or order and happiness from the chaos of characters, ideas, motives and interests: human society." Despite this separation of individuals' intentions from the consequences of their actions, the consequences nonetheless seemed to form a process or pattern that could be trusted. Perhaps, it was suggested, there was some kind of moral force in each person—sympathy or a moral feeling of some sort—that held the innumerable discordant individuals in a society together and, like gravity in the physical world, created a natural harmony of interests.[89]

Although this concept of the social process transcending the desires of particular individuals presaged a new social order, it was in some respects merely a throwback to a premodern Protestant understanding of divine sovereignty. Many Americans, even nonevangelicals like George Washington, had always been able to "trace the finger of Providence through those dark and mysterious events."[90] Now this traditional notion of providence took on a new importance and even among secular-minded thinkers became identified with "progress" and with the natural principles of society created by multiplicities of people following their natural desires free from artificial restraints, particularly those imposed by laws and government. Providence no longer meant, as it often had in the past, the special interpositions of God in the events of the world but was now increasingly identified almost wholly with the natural pattern these events seemed to form.[91] With such a conception, the virtuous or vicious character of individual beliefs and intentions in the movement of events no longer seemed to matter. Even the "pursuit of gold" could have beneficial results, for "by some interesting filiation, 'there's a Divinity, that shapes our ends'."[92]

[89] "Introduction," *United States Magazine and Democratic Review,* I (Oct. 1837), in Joseph L. Blau, ed., *Social Theories of Jacksonian Democracy: Representative Writings of the Period 1825-1850* (New York, 1954 [orig. publ. 1947]), 28.

[90] Washington (1788), quoted in Paul C. Nagel, *One Nation Indivisible: The Union in American Thought, 1776-1861* (New York, 1964), 149.

[91] Jacob Viner, *The Role of Providence in the Social Order: An Essay in Intellectual History* (Philadelphia, 1972), 111. "God governs the world by the laws of a general providence," observed Perez Forbes in 1795. Things did not happen in violation of these laws, for "this would introduce such a train of miraculous events, as would subvert the whole constitution of nature, and destroy that established in connexion between cause and effect, which is now the principal source of human knowledge and foresight" (*A Sermon Preached before His Excellency Samuel Adams . . . Being the Day of General Election* [Boston, 1795], 12).

[92] Charles Stewart Daveis, *An Address Delivered on the Commemoration at Fryeburg, May 19, 1825* (Portland, Me., 1825), in Blau, ed., *Social Theories,* 40.

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Although these ideas of a collective social process were strongly voiced by some Jacksonian Democrats and permeated some of the history writing of the romantic era, they were never able to dominate nineteenth-century American popular thinking.[93] Many Americans were too sure of the integral and homogeneous relationship between cause and effect, and too preoccupied with the moral purposes of men, to embrace fully and unequivocally any notion that stressed the impersonal and collective nature of the workings of society. Despite all the talk of usefulness and happiness as the consequence of behavior, most Americans in the early nineteenth century could scarcely conceive of a moral order that was not based on intentions. America as a republic, Timothy Dwight said, was necessarily "a government by motives, addressed to the understanding and affections of rational subjects, and operating on their minds, as inducements to voluntary obedience."[94] Many agreed with John Taylor that "it is unnatural that evil moral qualities, should produce good moral effects"; it was "a violation of the relation between cause and effect" and a denial of "the certainty with which moral inferences flow from moral causes." Traditionalists and moralists of all sorts clung determinedly to what Alexis de Tocqueville called the "aristocratic" assumption that society was still composed of autonomous individuals capable of deliberately causing good or evil events and therefore of being held morally accountable for them.[95]

In an oration of 1825 commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the battle of Concord, Edward Everett paused to ponder the dilemma faced by anyone seeking to explain how things happened. It was difficult, Everett noted, to separate out of the processes of history "what is to be ascribed to the cooperation of a train of incidents and characters, following in long succession upon each other; and what is to be referred to the vast influence of single important events." Thoroughly captivated by the paradigm of mechanistic causality, Everett could readily perceive in the

[93] On the romantic historians' view of the progressive patterning of events that sometimes transcended individual motives see David Levin, *History as Romantic Art: Bancroft, Prescott, Motley and Parkman* (Stanford, Calif., 1959), 40-43.

[94] Dwight, quoted in Marie Caskey, *Chariot of Fire: Religion and the Beecher Family* (New Haven, Conn., 1978), 39; see also Lyman Beecher, *Sermons, Delivered on Various Occasions,* II (Boston, 1852), 156-158. Although Beecher and the other New Haven theologians believed that people had free wills, they also believed that the law of cause and effect operated in the moral as in the natural world, "the laws of mind, and the operation of moral causes, being just as uniform as the laws of matter." This made revivalism a science like engineering (Conrad Cherry, "Nature and the Republic: The New Haven Theology," *New England Quarterly,* LI [1978], 518-520).

[95] Taylor, *An Inquiry into the Principle and Policy of the Government of the United States* (New Haven, Conn., 1950 [orig. publ. 1814]), 96; Tocqueville, *Democracy in America,* ed. Phillips Bradley, II (New York, 1945), 85. "It is evidently a general constitution of providence," wrote Nathaniel Chipman as late as 1833, "that the general tendency of *vice* is to produce misery to the agent, of *virtue,* to produce happiness, connected in both by the relation of cause and effect" (*Principle of Government; a Treatise on Free Institutions . . .* [Burlington, Vt., 1833], 22).

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history of the American Revolution "a series of causes and effects, running back into the history of the dark ages in Europe." Yet at the same time he knew that on that particular day, April 19, 1775, in Concord, "the agency of individual events and men" was crucial in bringing on the Revolution. There seemed to be two distinct viewpoints—one a long-term distant perspective that traced a "chain of events, which lengthens, onward by blind fatality," involving innumerable participants; the other, a close-up perspective that focused on the heroic individuals and actions of the day itself, against which "every thing else seems lost in the comparison." Like many other Americans, Everett was reluctant to envelop the glorious and willful exploits of America's individual patriots in the deterministic processes of history. Despite their underlying sense that history was an orderly chain of causes and effects, most of America's early national historians continued to stress the contingency and openness of events and the moral responsibility of individual actors.[96]

As nineteenth-century society became more interdependent and complicated, however, sensitive and reflective observers increasingly saw the efficient causes of events becoming detached from particular self-acting individuals and receding from view. "Small but growing numbers of people," writes historian Thomas L. Haskell in the most perceptive account we have of this development, "found it implausible or unproductive to attribute genuine causal power to those elements of society with which they were intimately and concretely familiar."[97] As these ideas evolved, laying the basis for the emergence of modern social science, attributing events to the conscious design of particular individuals became more and more simplistic. Conspiratorial interpretations of events still thrived, but now they seemed increasingly primitive and quaint.

By our own time, dominated as it is by professional social science, conspiratorial interpretations have become so out of place that, as we have seen, they can be accounted for only as mental aberrations, as a paranoid style symptomatic of psychological disturbance. In our post-industrial, scientifically saturated society, those who continue to attribute combinations of events to deliberate human design may well be peculiar sorts of persons—marginal people, perhaps, removed from the centers of power, unable to grasp the conceptions of complicated causal linkages offered by sophisticated social scientists, and unwilling to abandon the desire to make simple and clear moral judgments of events. But people with such conspiratorial beliefs have not always been either marginal or irrational. Living in this complicated modern world, where the very notion of causality is in doubt, should not prevent us from seeing that at another time and in another culture most enlightened people accounted for events in just this particular way.

[96] Everett, *An Oration Delivered at Concord, April the Nineteenth 1825* (Boston, 1825), 3-4; Cohen, *Revolutionary Histories*, 86-127.

[97] Haskell, *The Emergence of Professional Social Science: The American Social Science Association and the Nineteenth-Century Crisis of Authority* (Urbana, Ill., 1977), 40.

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