Power And The Declaration Of Independence Essay, Research Paper

Power and The Declaration of Independence

There are many abstractions in the Declaration of Independence. These abstractions such as: rights, freedom, liberty and happiness have become the foundations of American society and have helped to shape the “American Identity.” Power, another abstraction that reoccurs in all the major parts of the Declaration of Independence plays an equally important role in shaping “America identity.” One forgets the abstraction of power, because it appears in relation to other institutions: the legislature, the King, the earth, and the military. The abstraction of power sets the tone of the Declaration, and shapes the colonists conception of government and society. Power in the Declaration of Independence flows from distinct bodies within society such as the King, the legislature, the military, and the colonists.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines power as, “the ability to do or effect something or anything, or to act upon a person or thing” (OED 2536). Throughout the ages according to the dictionary the word power has connoted similar meanings. In 1470 the word power meant to have strength and the ability to do something, “With all thair strang \*poweir” (OED 2536) Nearly three hundred years later in 1785 the word power carried the same meaning of control, strength, and force, “power to produce an effect, supposes power not to produce it; otherwise it is not power but necessity” (OED 2536). This definition explains how the power government or social institutions rests in their ability to command people, rocks, colonies to do something they otherwise would not do. To make the people pay taxes. To make the rocks form into a fence. To make the colonists honor the King. The colonialists adopt this interpretation of power. They see power as a cruel force that has wedded them to a King who has “a history of repeated injuries and usurptions.” The framers of the Declaration of Independence also believe powers given by God to the people must not be usurped. The conflict between these spheres of power the colonists believe, justifies their rebellion.

The uses of the word power set the tone of the Declaration of Independence. In the first sentence of the Declaration colonists condemn the King’s violation of powers given by god to all men.

When in the Course of human events it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of natures God Entitle them (Wills 375).

In this passage the writers of the Declaration of Independence are explaining their moral claim to rebel. This right finds its foundation on their interpretation of the abstraction of power. Colonists perceive power as bifurcated, a force the King uses to oppress them, and a force given to them by God allowing them to rebel. In the Declaration of Independence the colonists also write about power as a negative force. In the following quote power takes on a negative meaning because power rests in the hands of the King and not the people, “to cause others to be elected; whereby the Legislative powers, incapable of Annihilation, have returned” (Wills 376). Power when mentioned in association with the power of the people to make their own laws has a positive connotation, “He has affected to render the Military independent of and superior to Civil power” (Wills 377).

These two different uses of the word power transform the meaning and tone of the Declaration of Independence. The meaning changes from just a Declaration of independence from Britain because of various violations of tax laws, military expenditures, and colonists’ rights; to a fundamental disagreement about power. Whether the King or civil authorities have a right to power. The colonists believe in the decentralization of power. The British support a centralized monarchy. The colonists believe power should flow up from the people to the rulers. The British believe power should flow down from the King to the subjects.

The two different uses of the world power also change the tone of the document. The colonist’s definition of power as coercive in the hands of the King and good in the hands of civil authorities identifies the King as the enemy. He takes on the role of the enemy because he clutches the power in pre-colonial society. The tone of the Declaration of Independence becomes more severe; the Declarations vilifying of the fundamental power imbalances between the colonies and the King make the break between the two unbridgeable. The break between the colonies and the King became not just a tax or policy difference anymore, but a fundamental philosophical difference.

The colonists meaning of the word power changes depending on who possesses the power. In the hands of the King power corrupts in the hands of the colonists and the people it takes on divine qualities. The colonist’s analysis of who has power fascinates. The colonists believe power to be a force that emanates from fixed points in society. In contrast more modern thinkers such as Nietzche and Foucault believe power flows throughout all of society (Miller 15). The colonists perceive in England power emanates directly from the King. Because of this interpretation they blame the King for the many wrongs they list in the body of the Declaration of Independence. The colonists do not blame the people of England or the English legislature. This allows the tone of the Declaration of Independence to soften. Instead, of being an attack on the institutions of English society the Declaration only attacks the King, the holder of power. Foucault’s interpretation of power would differ sharply from the framers of the Declaration Of Independence. Foucault sees power as coming from the many technologies that society uses to control people: tax systems the law, patriarchy, family systems, legislatures, and even democracy. These technologies according to Foucault all represent different ways in which society controls its members (Foucault 307). The King under Foucault’s interpretation of power bares little responcibilety for the grievances colonists have with England. The King in his view plays merely a role in the web of different technologies of control. Foucault would see the King as being controlled by many of the forces in society. Fulfilling his role is not so much his manifestation of his power as the power of English society and its ability to control the colonies and their inhabitants. If the colonists when writing the Declaration of Independence had this conception of power in mind the, the tone of the document would have been much stronger indicting all of English society.

The colonists interpretation of power has serious repercussions on the subsequent formulation of the US government. Because the colonists philosophical break with England was over the power of the King the framers of the Declaration of Independence sought to prevent a monarchy from arising in the United States. They sought to disperse power among the states and set up a system of counterbalancing branches of government that would prevent any single branch from having too much power. The ideas of federalism and decentralization were a direct outgrowth of the colonists interpretation of power. Power, in the Declaration of Independence carries more than just grammatical significance to the document. It shapes the document’s meaning making it philosophically harsh toward the institution of the King and tempered toward English society.

49e

Wills, Garry. Inventing America. New York: Random House, 1978

Miller, James. The Passion of Michel Foucault. New York: Anchor Books, 1993

Foucault, Michel. Discipline and Punish. New York: Vintage Books, 1975

Oxford English Dictionary. London: Oxford University Press, 1994