The Struggle Between Equality and Hierarchy in Early 19th Century America

The early 19th century saw many different groups of Americans struggle to find their identity in the country’s social structure, which took on a hierarchical form as a result of the great social diversity between groups of people living in the country. During the period from about 1790-1820, most Americans recognized the vertical social structure propagated by the slavery system and an influx of immigrants to the country. Whereas groups of white men that were higher on the hierarchy strove to perpetuate the social structure, relatively powerless groups appealed to the injustices that arose from it. As the 19th century progressed, although some Americans’ stubborn obsession with identity and social boundaries continued to impede the shift to ideals of equality, many more Americans began to find voices with which to cry for equality and an abolishment of the hierarchy. Over the course of the early 19th century, more people were committed to the ideal of equality than that of hierarchy.

The period from about 1790-1820 was characterized by a universal recognition by all groups of people living in America that the dominant feature of American society was its hierarchical structure. The hierarchy was primarily recognized by groups at the bottom of the hierarchy such as Native Americans and blacks, who did not have the power to shift the society toward one that valued equality. Some Native Americans petitioned to local state governments: “Our most humble and earnest request is, that our dish of suckutash may be equally divided amongst us…that he may eat quietly and do with his dish as he pleases.” This form of non-violent petitioning had little effect on the social structure, which remained hierarchical; that simply asking for equality was ineffectual taught later groups such as anti-slavery societies that activists would have to take a more proactive approach. Sometimes Americans at the top of the hierarchy feigned sympathy. For instance, Benjamin Banneker—a free black living in Maryland—appealed to Thomas Jefferson, “One
universal Father hath given being to us all...however variable we may be in society or religion, however diversified in situation or color, we are all of the same family, and stand in the same relation to him.”iii In response, Benjamin Franklin essentially admitted the injustice of the slavery system in terms of the unfair hierarchy it created.³ This rhetoric of compassion, so notably devoid of any substance or action, suggests that while whites at the top of the American social hierarchy recognized its existence, they were unwilling or unmotivated to shift to a society that emphasized equality.iv Thus, both the people who sought the power to shift to equality and the people who had the power to relinquish the system of hierarchy recognized the hierarchy that arose from American expansion westward into Native American territories and the continuation of the slavery system.

Most white men at the top of the American hierarchy were motivated to perpetuate it rather than relinquish or degrade it. To this end, white working-class men like William Otter restricted their interactions with non-whites to “set things to rights”, or to put non-whites and immigrants in their place by cruelly beating them.v Otter and other “nativists” operated under the guise of patriotism and used fear, hatred, and violence in attempts to stabilize the American experiment of expansion and democratization.vi Moreover, white men were so conditioned to the American societal hierarchy that it simply was not unreasonable to them to maintain it. Throughout the country’s entire existence, from the colonial period through the revolutionary period and into the post-revolutionary period, there had been a widespread white assumption of white racial superiority and black racial inferiority; it was the normal way of life for many decades and many generations.vii Since the slavery system was the mainstay of the American social hierarchy, and because slavery was considered by white men to be a Christian and American way of life, there was no direct stimulus or driving force for whites to want to shift to a practice of equality.

As the 19th century progressed, the assumption that whiteness was superior still played a role in the perpetuation of the American social hierarchy. Two major court cases in the 1850s
established that although anti-slavery groups in America were gaining traction, white men at the top of the social hierarchy were still capable of reminding blacks where they belonged, just as Otter did with physical violence fifty years prior. In 1855, the Supreme Court of Georgia resisted against a slaveowner’s testamentary desire to manumit his slaves: “Shall [the slaveowner]…invoke the aid of the Courts of the State to carry into execution his false and fatal views of humanity?”\textsuperscript{viii} The court attempted to maintain slavery on this individual basis in order to emphasize the point that the social system was built upon the inequality of slaves. In a similar case, the United States Supreme Court ruled against protecting the rights of Dred Scott because he was not white. “It is too clear for dispute,” Roger Taney writes in the majority opinion, “that the enslaved African race were not intended to be included [in the Declaration of Independence].”\textsuperscript{ix} In affirming this continuation of the social hierarchy, the highest court in America provided support for those groups in America who pushed for the continuation of the social hierarchy. Therefore, the shift to equality was impeded by a continuation of whites’ ideals of superiority.

Despite the stubbornness of many white people to embrace a shift to a social system based on equality, more groups that sought the power to enact this shift began speaking and acting out in the period from 1820-1860. Federalism in the American government system set the stage for equality in the American societal system, because following the election of Andrew Jackson in 1828 there was a strong feeling of coexistence, rather than dominance, between the national and state bodies of government.\textsuperscript{x} This represented an unprecedented shift in the overall character of America to support of the ideal of equality. Other groups in America, specifically the working class and black people, began fighting for equality in the mid 1800s with more resolve than in the past, although they still struggled with the question of how to translate ideas of equality into political activism.\textsuperscript{7} For example, the working class men of New York City appealed that they were “entitled to Equal Means to obtain moral happiness, and social enjoyment, and that all lawful and
constitutional measures ought to be adopted to the attainment of those objects.”\textsuperscript{xii} Although the working class men did not have the power of the corporate aristocracy, they were committed to fighting for equality with respect to their social position. Moreover, British industrialist and social reformer Robert Owen sought to abolish any American distinctions of class or hierarchy. “Until the individual system shall be entirely abandoned, it will be useless to expect any substantial, permanent improvement in the condition of the human race.”\textsuperscript{xii} In other words, the system of inequality and hierarchy that plagued 19\textsuperscript{th} century America created oppression, ignorance, and viciousness in society. In addition to people who sought equality on the basis of class, abolitionists remained dedicated to the ideal of equality on the basis of race in the mid-1800s. In 1830, black intellectual David Walker appealed to the reasoning of whites and blacks alike by quoting the Declaration of Independence and commenting, “Compare your own language…extracted from your Declaration of Independence, with your cruelties and murders.”\textsuperscript{xiii} By referencing a document that represents a historical break from the British-colonist hierarchy, Walker smartly offers logical grounding for the shift away from white-black hierarchy. Furthermore, the American Anti-Slavery Society argued in 1833 that “all persons of color, who possess the qualifications which are demanded of others, ought to be admitted forthwith to the enjoyment of the same privileges…as others.”\textsuperscript{xiv} By assembling into a group and formally declaring blacks’ equality to whites—an equality that whites are already aware of, but unwilling to admit, according to Frederick Douglass\textsuperscript{xv}—the American Anti-Slavery Society represented a shift in activism to supporting equality. Visibly, groups that did not have the power to enact true equality such as the working class and blacks were nevertheless firmly committed to trying to bring about equality.

As the 19\textsuperscript{th} century progressed, the norm of social hierarchy began to see fiercer and fiercer resistance. Although white men at the top of the hierarchy during the period from 1790-1820 enjoyed the hierarchy’s continued existence, groups of oppressed people began more aggressively
attacking the ideal of classification and social hierarchy. These people assembled into many
sizeable, unified groups and fought against the antiquated hierarchical structure, while the only
people who remained committed to the social hierarchy were those whites that were in charge—that
is, the white males at the top of the ladder. As a result of the growing resistance to these white
males, more people in the first half of the 19th century were committed to the principle of equality
than to that of hierarchy.

i "Petition to the Connecticut State Assembly" (1789), in Calloway, p. 178
ii Henry Highland Garnet, speech before the National Negro Convention, Buffalo NY (August
1843).
iii Benjamin Banneker to Thomas Jefferson (August 19, 1791)
iv Lecture notes, November 2, 2010
v William Otter (1787-1856), autobiography (1807).
vi Lecture notes, November 11, 2010
vii Lecture notes, November 18, 2010
viii A Master Tries to Free His Slaves in Georgia (1850-1855), in Peabody, p. 93
ix United States Supreme Court (7-2), Dred Scott v. Sandford (1857).
xi "The Federative Crisis", in Bender, p. 138
xii Northern working men’s declarations (1829-1844)
xiii Robert Owen, critique of individualism (1825-1826)
xiv David Walker, Appeal To the Coloured Citizens of the World (1830)
xv American Anti-Slavery Society, Declaration of Sentiments (December 6, 1833)
xvi Frederick Douglass, speech sponsored by the Rochester Ladies’ Anti-Slavery Society, Rochester
NY (July 5, 1852).