It’s not quite unexpected, though nevertheless amazing, how things don’t change, but the same problems occur over and over and over again. Mostly we forget, until we’re forced to remember and then it all seems so natural, until we forget again. Like we have pretty much forgotten the reasons for the American Revolution, that the British rulers themselves had forgotten the reasons for the Glorious Revolution of 1688 and were unwilling to extend to their colonies the rights of Englishmen, the civil rights that made us safe and secure from oppressive government, and the political rights that the mass of people be consulted rather than merely have the government impose on them (the no taxation without representation argument). That this was no temporary aberration, not a sign of the mother country elite’s temporary forgetfulness, is obvious, when you consider the same complaints coming over and over again from Ireland, from India, from all their colonies which are now ex-colonies.

Of course all cultural traditions it seems have their hypocrisies, their blind spots, their egotisms. American society is so free and so market-oriented because it was thought, even long before the American Revolution, at the time of the Protestant Reformation, that the kings of Catholic Europe were tyrannical and their subjects were hypocrites, and it was the latter that concerned the reformers more. They saw the mass of people as drowning in a sea of low moral standards because the rules of the Catholic Church had become so complex that the mass of people ended up picking and choosing the ones they wished to follow, and then it was up to the bureaucracies of both the Church and the State, either alone or in tandem, to monitor the people and remind them when they the bureaucrats thought standards had fallen too low. So ultimately, it was these bureaucrats, not individual consciences, that set moral standards, and the hypocrisies of the rulers of both Church and State ran unabated, for they often set standards for others which they did not follow themselves. They were no longer expected to be moral exemplars as was often the case for rulers in simpler societies, and in a hierarchical society were the only ones who for all practical
purposes got to forgive themselves, and so were not held accountable to the people they claimed to serve but in reality ruled over.

The end result in Britain was not quite what the Protestant reformers had in mind, for they simplified the rules, leaving a few in place which were given special weight (such as basic morality regarding family life) and allowed individual improvisation to handle the rest, so that individualism, that bane of Catholic and Islamic thought, was born, in a sense spreading from elites to the masses, or at least to the middle-class part of them. The effect over time as communities continued to decline in cohesiveness was to give puritanical morality an all-or-nothing quality, for what was left to enforce these rules was the individual conscience (often what was learned in childhood), and without a bureaucracy to monitor things, standards could over time decline, and did. However, in reaction evangelical revival movements have also remained a constant in American life. If anything, such tendencies were stronger in the colonies than in the British motherland, but it took a long time for such tendencies toward extreme rootlessness to become obvious, and there was enough of a sense of community at the time of the American Revolution that the leaders of that revolution could still claim with accuracy that they followed the standards of true British gentlemen, and that the leaders of the motherland were the true hypocrites.

Yet moral decay had already set in, particularly in the slave colonies. One obvious effect of this all-or-nothing approach to individualistic morality was that Protestant slave owners were not supposed to have children with their slave mistresses, nevertheless they often did and just pretended it didn’t happen, while in the Catholic colonies of Latin America they had a long-standing tradition of how to handle moral relapses, in this case what to do with children out of wedlock, and were more likely to acknowledge these children and pay attention to their upbringing. If nothing else the State and Church bureaucracies were there to step in and make sure certain standards were met, even if the father wasn’t so inclined. Their stepping-in, however, was often heavy-handed and authoritarian, destroying native people’s traditions and religions in the process. Thus in the Spanish colonies no matter how many native mistresses soldiers took, the elite made sure there was no dilution of Spanish Catholic culture among the leaders of society since society would always be ruled from the top down.

What does this all have to do with democracy? Well, even in Britain the elites wanted to step in before social cohesion eroded too much,