Chapter 1

Three Pillars of the American Founding

*Marcin Gajek**

INTRODUCTION

The Founding Era occupies a very special place in the American political tradition. Countless books and articles discussing various aspects of the political ideas of the Founders have been published and continue to be published. The fascination of both scholars and the general public with the Founding is understandable and could be, at least partly, explained by the desperate need of a relatively young nation to constitute its own national political mythology. As a result, the Founding Fathers are frequently presented as national heroes, almost demi-gods, who founded a new nation on philosophically sound principles and skillfully designed its political institutions in a fashion resembling the ancient lawgivers, such as Solon or Lycurgus. However, what often escapes our attention is the extent to which these men operated within the frameworks of both religious and philosophical ideas inherited from their ancestors. That is one of the reasons why Russel Kirk decided to write about *The Roots of American Order* instead of *The Creation of the American Republic* as Gordon S. Wood did.[1] Kirk's purpose was to demonstrate that "America's order did not arise *de novo* but emerged from a patrimony of thought and the lessons of experience."[2] Obviously, that does not mean that the Founders were slavishly attached to the past, nor that they merely replicated the old institutions on American soil. They

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[1] Russell Kirk, *The Roots of American Order* (Chicago: Open Court Publishing Company, 1977); Gordon S. Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776–1787* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press: 1987).

[2] Jeff Polet, "Did America Have a Founding?", Intercollegiate Studies Institute, February 8, 2021, https://isi.org/modern-age/did-america-have-a-founding/.

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truly were people of their times, and the influence of eighteenth-century Enlightenment philosophy on American legal and political institutions is beyond any dispute. The purpose of this article is simply to demonstrate that certain political concepts, which we usually identify with the Age of Reason, could be ingrained in America more naturally due to the prior existence of religious and political ideas, which had already taken root there during the colonial era. I will discuss certain fundamental convergences and discrepancies between these intellectual trends and demonstrate how the interplay between them resulted in the shaping of a specifically American, and thus unique, political tradition.

PROTESTANTISM

The Puritans were, according to Herbert L. Osgood, the only "politically self-conscious" group out of the early settlers arriving in America,[3] and for that reason we should discuss their contribution to American political tradition first. It needs to be stressed, however, that this contribution is multi-faceted. On the one hand, it has been observed on numerous occasions that Puritanism (and Protestantism in general) created favorable conditions for the growth of political liberalism and a democratic form of government. On the other hand, the history of American puritanism includes a quasi-theocratic regime established in Massachusetts, accompanied by an open hostility towards democracy and egalitarianism. The foundations for the latter were laid by Calvin himself, who taught that the church was a community of believers to which only those can be admitted whose piety had been rigorously tested by others. Proving to oneself and to fellow believers that one was an elect of God was a permanent obligation. It also required strict discipline. Although the Christ alone "ought to rule and reign in the Church," under his absence here on Earth "he uses the ministry of men whom he employs as his delegates" to do "his works by their lips." Thus, the clergy should occupy a privileged position, since they are "his ambassadors to the world" and "the interpreters of his secret will."[4] Needless to say, a church based on the foregoing convictions could hardly be egalitarian. The elitist element was introduced and justified by Calvin as part of God's wisdom. Additionally, his aversion to disorder and anarchy resulted in a system that greatly limited freedom both of thought and of religious practice.

Naturally, many of the foregoing views were transferred to America by the Puritans. The famous sermon *A Model of Christian Charity* delivered by John Win-

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[3] Herbert L. Osgood, "The Political Ideas of the Puritans," *Political Science Quarterly* 6, no. 1 (1891): 1.

[4] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. John Allen (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1816), vol. 3, book 4, chap. 3, 54.

throp in 1630 begins with the extensive justification of social stratification, which is presented by the preacher as a part of God's plan.[5] While the entire sermon is community-oriented and emphasizes the obligations of (especially more prosperous) members of the community towards each other (the very essence of 'Christian charity'), it clearly sanctions social inequalities, which are easily translated into political realities. On a different occasion, Winthrop openly criticized democracy, which did not possess any sanction in the Bible and was frequently "accounted the meanest and the worst of all forms of government" among most nations. It was "branded with reproachful epithets,"[6] while historians noted its instability and tendency to disorder. Winthrop's views on this matter were shared by a substantial part of the Puritans. Suffice to mention a personal letter from John Cotton, in which he wrote: "Democracy, I do not conceive that ever God did ordain as a fit government, either for church or commonwealth."[7] The Boston preacher vehemently defended a political system in which only church members of good standing would enjoy the right to vote and hold public offices and, by analogy, condemned a democratic design in which policy decisions would be made by popular assemblies.

To summarize, the Puritans settling in America in the first half of the seventeenth century were by no means revolutionaries. They did not envision a radically egalitarian society. "The political theory which first came to the front in Massachusetts and which dominated its policy for half a century was moderately aristocratic."[8]

Yet, it would be a mistake to believe that the antiegalitarian attitudes of Winthrop and Cotton dissociate them entirely from the views of the Founding Fathers. On the contrary, in the age of the American Revolution, hardly any leading American statesmen considered himself a democrat. While they all shared strong republican sentiments, combined with the aversion towards monarchy, the majority of them viewed democracy with open antipathy. They perceived it as the rule of an unpredictable mob and, consequently, dismissed it as a form of government that does not provide stable frameworks for practicing liberty. For these reasons, they preferred the republican form of government, which "refine(s) and enlarge(s) the public views, by passing them through the medium of a chosen body of citizens, whose wisdom may best discern the true interest of their country." Their vision of the government, based on the principle of "the delegation of the government . . . to a small number of citizens elected by the rest"[9] was actually quite close to the views of these Puritan

[5] John Winthrop, "A Model of Christian Charity," in *Puritan Political Ideas, 1558–1794*, ed. Edmund S. Morgan (Indianapolis, New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1965), 70–73.

[6] Quoted after Osgood, "The Political Ideas of the Puritans," 20.

[7] John Cotton, "Copy of a Letter from Mr. Cotton to Lords Say and Seal in the Year 1636," in *Puritan Political Ideas*, 163.

[8] Osgood, "The Political Ideas of the Puritans," 19.

[9] James Madison, "Federalist No. 10," in *The Federalist Papers*, ed. Clinton Rossiter (New York: Penguin Publishing Group, 2003), 76.

leaders who advocated a Presbyterian (rather than congregational) model of church organization, in which the power was entrusted to the hands of 'elders' (in practice, a body composed of the elite, elected both from the clergy and laymen).

That said, Puritanism also contained numerous elements which paved the way for the democratic political institutions in America. And, as in the previous case, the roots of these 'progressive' elements can be traced back to Calvin himself. Despite the semi-authoritarian features of the regime he has established in Geneva, the French theologian on numerous occasions expressed his negative opinion of monarchy as a form of government easily degenerating into tyranny. He certainly did not believe in the divine right of kings to rule. While assuming the absolute sovereignty of God, Calvinism at the same time was hostile to absolutism both in the church and in the state. Overall, as Osgood argues, "Calvinism, in spite of the aristocratic character which it temporarily assumed, meant democracy in church government."[10] In the political debates of the age, it consequently placed its bets "against absolutism and on the side of limited or popular power."[11]

The American Puritans followed their teacher in this regard as well. The already quoted Winthrop, while critical of democracy, maintained that political power must be limited and that no government should be arbitrary. He argued that while magistrates should possess a relatively large administrative power, the freemen were the real source of political authority and should have a right to elect their representatives.[12] Also in this regard, the views of the Massachusetts governor were accompanied by those of John Cotton. In his commentary on the Book of Revelation, he saw it necessary "that all power that is on earth be limited, Church-power or other."[13] He based his views in this regard on a conviction that power has a corruptive influence on man, thereby laying grounds for precisely that sort of argument which more than a century later James Madison so eloquently advanced in the *Federalist No. 51*.[14] The Puritan anthropology based on the concept of the original sin provided an additional argument for those of the Framers, who propagated the necessity of basing the constitutional framework on the division of powers and the mechanism of checks and balances.

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[10] Herbert L. Osgood, "The Political Ideas of the Puritans II," *Political Science Quarterly*, 6, no. 2 (1891): 229. It needs to be added that in the realities of the colonial New England the Puritan model of church organization was easily transferred into domain of politics.

[11] Osgood, "The Political Ideas of the Puritans," 8.

[12] Osgood, "The Political Ideas of the Puritans," 20.

[13] John Cotton, "An Exposition Upon the Thirteenth Chapter of the Revelations," in *American Political Thought: Readings and Materials*, ed. Keith E. Whittington (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 25.

[14] "If men were angels, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary. In framing a government which is to be administered by men over men, the great difficulty lies in this: you must first enable the government to control the governed; and in the next place oblige it to control itself."—James Madison, "Federalist No. 51," in *The Federalist Papers*, 319.

On the other hand, however, Puritan theology emphasized certain 'liberal' elements in human nature. After all, God equipped man with both reason (necessary to make informed, rational decisions) and free will. It was beyond dispute for the Puritans that freedom of man was a part of God's plan. Puritan political archetypes were republican in nature. They included both resistance to tyranny and the glorification of freedom of choice.[15] But not only that. Through the concept of a covenant, revitalized and reinterpreted in a specific protestant fashion, they prepared the grounds for liberal political concepts. The Puritan clergyman and cofounder of New Haven, John Davenport, argued in his *Discourse about Civil Government in a New Plantation* that the divine origins of power not only sanction and strengthen it but also impose on public official additional obligations. The ultimate purpose of government is "the public and common Good."[16] Power executed on behalf of the Creator must reflect his intentions. And since he has blessed man with the gifts of free will and reason, political authorities must create conditions allowing man to make use of those gifts. Ultimately, among the fundamental duties of the government, which result directly from God's plan, is the requirement to guarantee "life, good order, liberty and prosperity."[17] As Alice Baldwin rightly noted, the theory of government delivered by the Puritan clergyman constituted the basis for the system in which the rights and liberties of the people must be protected by the restrictions imposed upon the rulers. In a very Lockean fashion (though more than a quarter of a century before the publication of the *Two Treaties of Government*), Davenport argued that "governments are limited by the purpose for which they were founded, viz. the good of the people."[18]

The concept of the (new) covenant with God, developed by Calvin in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, also proved to have profound democratic implications for church organization. According to the teachings of one of the first English Separatists, Robert Browne, "the church is a company of a number of Christians or believers, which by a willing covenant made with their God are under the government of God and Christ."[19] The concept of a covenant with God, however, was easily translated into political terms. In 1639, the New England clergy stated that "Every city is united by some covenant among themselves; the citizens are received into *jus civitatis*, or right of city privileges by the same oath."[20]

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[15] Cf. Stanisław Filipowicz, *Pochwała rozumu i cnoty. Republikańskie credo Ameryki* (Kraków, Warszawa: Znak, Fundacja im. Stefana Batorego, 1997), 51.

[16] John Davenport, *A Discourse about Civil Government in a New Plantation Whose Design Is Religion* (Cambridge, Mass.: Samuel Green and Marmaduke Johnson, 1663), 17, accessed December 18, 2022, https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/evans/N00042.0001.001/1:2?rgn=div1;view=fulltext.

[17] Alice Baldwin, *The New England Clergy and the American Revolution* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1928), 23.

[18] Baldwin, *The New England Clergy and the American Revolution*, 23.

[19] Quoted after Osgood, "The Political Ideas of the Puritans," 14.

[20] Quoted after Osgood, "The Political Ideas of the Puritans," 24. One of the most comprehensive discussions of the contribution of the Protestant concept of covenant into American political and legal

Apart from paving the way for the concept of a social contract (one of the constitutive elements of the political philosophy of liberalism), the idea of a covenant found its logical complement in the conviction that legitimate government can only be based on the consent of the governed (which later became one of the central philosophical ideas of the *Declaration of Independence*). Richard Hooker offered one of the best-known expressions of that doctrine in his famous sermon delivered in 1638, in which he observed that "the foundation of society is laid firstly in the free consent of the people" and that "the choice of public magistrate belongs unto the people by God's own allowance."[21] There is widespread agreement among scholars that Hooker's views greatly influenced the form and the content of the *Fundamental Orders of Connecticut* adopted in 1639 and celebrated as the first written constitution in American history. The citizens of the three towns that made up the colony declared in the document's preamble that they "associate and conjoin" themselves "to be as one Public State or Commonwealth"[22] thereby practicing the social contract well before it was advanced as a theoretical concept by Thomas Hobbes and later by John Locke.

Progressive ideas, despite aversion presented by some more conservatively oriented Massachisetts clergy, were diffusing quickly and ultimately have founded perhaps their best-spoken advocates in Roger Williams and John Wise. The former, expelled from the Massachusetts Bay Colony, founded the Rhode Island and Providence Plantations on the basis of an egalitarian constitution that provided for majority rule and guaranteed religious liberty. As he argued in one of his best-known treaties, "civil states with their officers of justices in their respective constitutions and administrations are . . . essentially civil, and therefore not judges, governors, or defenders of the spiritual or Christian state and worship,"[23] thus laying the foundations for the doctrine of the separation of state and church. He also believed that "the sovereign, original, and foundation of civil power lies in the people" and that, consequently, all governments are established by the people and possess "no more power, nor for no longer time, than the civil power or people consenting and agree-

tradition was offered by Donald S. Lutz and Jack D. Warren in *A Covenanted People: The Religious Tradition and the Origins of American Constitutionalism* (Providence: John Carter Brown Library, 1987).

[21] James Hammond Trumbull, "Abstracts of Two Sermons by Rev. Thomas Hooker," in *Collections of the Connecticut Historical Society* (Hartford: Published for the Society, 1860), 1: 20.

[22] "Fundamental Orders of Connecticut," The Avalon Project. Documents in Law, History and Diplomacy, accessed December 18, 2022, https://avalon.law.yale.edu/17th_century/order.asp.

[23] Roger Williams, "The Bloody Tenet of Persecution for Cause of Conscience," in *American Political Thought*, eds. Kenneth M. Dolbeare, and Michael S. Cummings (Washington: CQ Press, 2010), 19. In the same treaty, he argued that "magistrates, as magistrates, have no power of setting up the form of church government, electing church officers, punishing with church censures, but to see that the church does her duty herein. And on the other side, the churches as churches, have no power . . . of erecting or altering forms of civil government, electing of civil officers, inflicting civil punishment."—Williams, "The Bloody Tenet of Persecution for Cause of Conscience," 21.

ing shall betrust them with."[24] While Williams' views might have been too radical for the Massachusetts clergy in the 1640s, only seven decades later John Wise could openly claim that "Democracy is Founded in Scripture" without risking banishment.[25]

Finally, the congregational model of church organization established in Plymouth, despite initial resistance from the Massachusetts clergy, who favored Presbyterianism, quickly became dominant in all the colonies which had their roots in Massachusetts Bay. It is crucial, however, to point out that in seventeenth-century New England, religious and political views were closely intertwined and theories regarding the proper church organization were easily translated into the domain of politics. Religious congregations quickly became the basis for political self-government. Puritan congregations offered their members opportunities for developing civic and political skills by giving them direct control over all important aspects of how the community functioned: from the erection of a church building, through hiring a preacher, to supervising the finances. The congregations were, in effect, miniature political systems with diverse interests, leaders and committees, conflicts, and consensus. In other words: Puritanism helped to develop a participatory political culture—a necessary element of a well-functioning form of government based on the idea of self-government. At the beginning of the eighteenth century—several decades before the American Revolution began—the intellectual grounds for it had been already prepared by merging religious beliefs with political vocabulary. Since we have already discussed the former, let us now turn our attention to the latter.

THE "WHIG SCIENCE OF POLITICS"

While considering the origins of American constitutionalism, Gordon S. Wood argues that "the Founders who created America's constitutional structure at the end of the eighteenth century were Englishmen with a strong sense that they were heirs of the English tradition of freedom."[26] That is why the philosophical and legal arguments used by them while justifying separation from Great Britain replicated, to a great extent, the language and vocabulary of the English Whigs. The similarity of the arguments was so significant that some scholars consider the American Revo-

[24] Williams, "The Bloody Tenet of Persecution for Cause of Conscience." Osgood claims that although for specific historical, social, and political circumstances at times Puritan clergy supported theocracy, "the theory of the secularized state" was "inherent in the very idea of the Reformation" and that we can find the "germ of it" already in the writings of Calvin—Herbert L. Osgood, "The Political Ideas of the Puritans II," 211–13.

[25] John Wise, "Democracy is Founded in Scripture," in *American Political Thought*, 23–28.

[26] Gordon S. Wood, *The Idea of America. Reflections on the Birth of the United States* (New York: Penguin Press, 2011), 173.

lution as one of the "three British revolutions."[27] The writings of James Harrington, Algernon Sidney, John Trenchard, and Thomas Gordon were, next to those of John Locke, Charles Montesquieu, and David Hume, among those most frequently cited by the creators of the American republic.

What made their writings so popular among Americans was the fact that the 'Whig science of politics' provided archetypes that perfectly suited the political situation of colonists considering separation from the Crown. It juxtaposed freedom (identified with parliamentarism and self-government) and tyranny (associated with the personal power of the kings). The Whigs embraced an early idea of the natural rights of the people, whom they regarded as the true sovereign. "The participation by the people in the government was what the Whigs commonly meant by political or civil liberty."[28] English Whigs, just like their American counterparts, were predominantly Puritans and Congregationalists. Their views on the proper organization of the church went hand in hand with the appreciation of self-government. However, since direct democracy, while remaining the ideal, was impossible to practice in the realities of modern societies, Whigs embraced and put great emphasis on the idea of representation. This, logically, resulted in a conviction about the supremacy of parliament in the constitutional structure, since the members of parliament are directly elected by citizens and therefore can truly represent their interests, as well as be easily held accountable for their actions. From the perspective of the Whigs, representatives should strictly follow the instructions of their constituents strictly and therefore they truly represent the will and interests of the people.

Overall, the Whigs favored a republican form of government (identified with liberty, virtue, and public interest) and regarded monarchy with disdain (as a form of government easily degenerating into tyranny).[29] Their political ideas included, as Wood phrased it, a "paranoic mistrust of power"[30] based on the conviction that all power has a tendency to degenerate and people administering it tend to abuse it. "Men that are above all fear, soon grow above all shame," reminded the authors of *Cato's Letters*.[31] "Considering what sort of a creature man is, it is scarcely possible

[27] See John G. A. Pocock, ed., *Three British Revolutions. 1641, 1688, 1776* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980).

[28] Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic. 1776–1787*, 24. It is worth noting that the classical republican tradition defined citizenship in the same terms: "The citizen . . . is defined by no other thing so much as by partaking in decision and office"—Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. Carnes Lord (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), book 3, chap. 1, 1275a23–24, 63.

[29] Trevor Colbourn's *The Lamp of Experience. Whig History and the Intellectual Origins of the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1965) remains one of the best overviews of the English Whigs' political theories and its adoption by the Founding Fathers. Cf. Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776–1787*, 3–45.

[30] Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776–1787*, 17.

[31] Thomas Gordon and John Trenchard, *Cato's Letters*, vol. 1 (Indianapolis, 1724), Liberty Fund Network, accessed December 20, 2022, https://oll.libertyfund.org/title/gordon-cato-s-letters-vol-1-november-5-1720-to-june-17-1721-lf-ed.

to put him under too many restraints, when he is possessed of great power."[32] The constitutional limitations imposed on the rulers are, therefore, a *sin qua noncondition* of the preservation of liberty. The 'Whig science of politics' incorporated the Puritan view of human nature as being prone to evil. Men are governed "by their passions; which being boundless and insatiable, are always terrible when they are not controlled," warned Gordon and Trenchard.[33]

But the need to control the rulers is preceded by the need to control the ruled. The Whigs' glorification of liberty should not be mistaken for the consent for anarchy. Human nature itself provides the strongest arguments for the necessity of political power. Without a government controlling human passions, liberty quickly transforms into a license. Overall, individual liberty cannot exist without order implemented by lawmakers, but it is equally in danger if the power of rulers is not bounded by laws. Madison's already quoted argument formulated in the *Federalist No. 51* simply restated the knowledge inherited by the Founders from their English predecessors. Constitutional government, which embodies both the concept of the rule of law and that of limited government, is therefore one of the cornerstones of liberty. Power based on the arbitrary will of the ruler is the very definition of tyranny. "Whenever law ends, tyranny begins," succincyly observed Locke.[34]

However, laws alone are not a sufficient guarantee of freedom. The other necessary condition is virtue. Moreover, in this regard, the Whigs followed the path laid out by classical republican thinkers. *Res publica*, the form of government dedicated to the common good and based on broad political participation, cannot survive without citizens capable of thinking about and acting for the public good. Liberty is conditioned by civic virtue, understood as the ability to accept reasonable sacrifices for the common good. Rejecting virtue is equivalent to the primacy of egoistic instincts. When virtue disappears, the commonwealth dies. The republic degenerates, as Aristotle warned, into democracy, the rule of the self-interested mob. And if one trusts the opinion expressed by Plato, democracy sooner or later turns into tyranny. On the eve of the American Revolution, political writers on both sides of the Atlantic bemoaned corruption and moral decay as the primary sources of the political crisis. "England's very greatness as an empire had created a poison which was softening the once hardy character of the English people, sapping their time-honored will to fight for their liberty, leaving them, as never before in history, weakened prey the designs of the Crown."[35] The English Constitution, once admired all over the world and praised as the foundation of Englishmen's political freedom, had been undermined "till at length, under the hands of bribery and corruption, it

[32] Gordon and Trenchard, *Cato's Letters*.

[33] Gordon and Trenchard, *Cato's Letters*.

[34] John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government* (Cambridge, Mass.: Cambridge University Press, 1967), chap. 16, 202, 418.

[35] Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776–1787*, 36.

seems *rotten* to the very core," as Enoch Huntington, a clergyman from Connecticut, phrased it in his sermon in 1775.[36]

In light of the foregoing remarks, it should not surprise us that the American Revolution was frequently presented by its adherents as an act of moral regeneration. On the eve of the announcement of the Declaration of Independence, John Adams wrote in a letter to his wife Abigail that "the new Governments we are assuming . . . will require a Purification from our Vices and an Augmentation of our Virtues."[37] Things were seen in the same vein by his cousin Samuel Adams, who viewed the American revolution as a "golden opportunity of recovering the Virtue and reforming the Manners of our Country."[38] Despite their preoccupation with properly designed political institutions—as attested by the ratification debate—the Founding Fathers (just like the English Whigs) remained faithful students of the ancient authors, who believed that republican government cannot last without civic virtues. Without them, even the most wisely and carefully framed political institutions are doomed to failure. During the ratification debate in Virginia, James Madison called it a "chimerical idea" to suppose "that any form of government will secure liberty or happiness without any virtue."[39]

Thus, the American Revolution was supposed to be an act of moral regeneration. But at the same time, it was presented on numerous occasions as an act of political regeneration, a return to the true principles of English freedom, which have their roots in the Magna Carta and have been solidified by the Glorious Revolution and its offspring, the Bill of Rights. On countless occasions, American colonists presented their resistance to the Crown in terms of the fight for their rights as Englishmen.[40] They repeatedly claimed, as James Wilson did in 1775, that it was "both the letter and the spirit of British Constitution" which provided grounds for their actions.[41] Americans "sincerely believed," argues Wood, "they were not creating any new rights or new principles prescribed only by what ought to be, but saw themselves claiming 'only to keep their old privileges,' traditional rights and principles of all Englishmen, sanctioned by what they thought had always been."[42] That is one of the reasons why

[36] Quote after Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776–1787*, 12.

[37] John Adams, "John Adams to Abigail Adams, July 3, 1776," in *The Political Writings of John Adams*, ed. George W. Carey (Washington: Regnery Publishing, 2000), 652.

[38] Quoted after Pauline Maier, *The Old Revolutionaries: Political Lives in the Age of Samuel Adams* (New York: Vintage Books, 1982), 33.

[39] Jonathan Elliot, ed., *The Debates in the Several State Conventions on the Adoption of the Federal Constitution* (New York: B. Franklin, 1888), 3: 537.

[40] See, for example, "The Resolutions of the Stamp Act Congress, October 19, 1765," in *Principles and Acts of the Revolution in America*, ed. Hezekiah Niles (Baltimore: W.O. Niles, 1822), 456–57 or "Declaration and Resolves of the First Continental Congress, October 14, 1774," Teaching American History, accessed December 21, 2022, https://teachingamericanhistory.org/document/declaration-and-resolves-of-the-first-continental-congress.

[41] Quoted after Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776–1787*, 12.

[42] Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776–1787*, 13.

the American Revolution was frequently characterized as quintessentially conservative. It was not so much a rebellion as an act of restitution in the eyes of the people who carried it out. Just like the political writings of the Whigs guided the Founders' pens, the British Constitution guided their actions.

However, the importance of Whig political theories for shaping American political culture in the Founding era extends beyond the mere fact of their English credentials. One of their most profound contributions to the political theory of the era was their ability to combine the classical republican tradition with modern, post-Renaissance, and proto-liberal ideas. Thereby, the Whigs provided a crucial link in the long chain connecting the eighteenth-century project created by the Founding Fathers with the classical republican tradition. Americans were engaged in multilevel retrospection. Thus, when reconstructing the intellectual pillars of the American Founding, we are forced to work backward—from the theories of eighteenth- and seventeenth-century English thinkers to the ancient philosophers.

REPUBLICANISM

According to Stanisław Filipowicz, the creed of the American Revolution is embodied in the notion of the republic.[43] While reconstructing the meaning of the term, the Founders reached directly to the source—the writings of Aristotle, Cicero, and Polybius. In colonial times, the Americans had already familiarized themselves with the political and intellectual legacy of antiquity. The number of references to the classics increased dramatically in the Founding Era.[44] In 1775, John Adams identified the principles of the American Revolution with "the principles of Aristotle and Plato, of Livy and Cicero."[45] However, the Founders' reception of the classical republican tradition was selective, and so the following discussion thereof must be likewise selective.

[43] Filipowicz, *Pochwała rozumu i cnoty. Republikańskie credo Ameryki*, 11.

[44] Out of the huge literature on the subject let us mention: Richard M. Gummere, *The American Colonial Mind and the Classical Tradition. Essays in Comparative Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963); Richard M. Gummere, "The Classics in a Brave New World," *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 62 (1957); Meyer Reinhold, *Classica Americana: The Greek and Roman Heritage in the United States* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1984); John Latimer, "The Classical Tradition in America," *The Classical World* 58, no. 5 (1965); Carl J. Richard, *The Founders and the Classics: Greece, Rome, and the American Enlightenment*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995); Mortimer N. Sellers, *American Republicanism. Roman Ideology in the United States Constitution* (New York: New York University Press, 1994); Caroline Winterer, *The Culture of Classicism: Ancient Greece and Rome in American Intellectual Life 1780–1910* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002); Carl J. Richard, *Greeks & Romans Bearing Gifts: How the Ancients Inspired the Founding Fathers* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2008); Thomas E. Ricks, *First Principles: What America's Founders Learned from the Greeks and Romans and How That Shaped Our Country* (New York: HarperCollins, 2020).

[45] John Adams, "Novanglus," in *The Political Writings of John Adams*, 26.

The Founders, following the teaching of the ancient authors, treated it as an axiom that some forms of government are simply better than others since they reflect the natural order of things, including the natural right of man to self-governance. The above-cited Adams was convinced that "there is no good government but what is republican,"[46] since only a republic is agreeable with human nature.

Out of numerous elements constituting the classical republican tradition, the concept of natural law was proved to be of crucial importance for Americans justifying their rebellion against the British Crown. "When the English Constitution with its emphasis on the rights of Englishmen failed to provide adequate succor, the colonial radicals turned to a law which transcended all human contrivances."[47] They claimed that they based their actions on the "principles of nature and eternal reason."[48] Since all men "have one common original," argued Alexander Hamilton, "they participate in one common nature, and consequently have one common right."[49] According to John Zvesper, the Founders followed, to a great extent, the classical, Aristotelian vision of politics as inherently ethical activity, and presented happiness (*eudaimonia*) as the ultimate end of both man and the government.[50] But at the same time, from the foregoing assumption, they drew quite modern conclusions, providing a solid philosophical justification for the concept of political liberty and individual rights. Since happiness was the natural end of humanity, then the basic natural rights included "enjoyment of life and liberty, with the means of acquiring and possessing property, and pursuing happiness and safety."[51]

But apart from fundamental philosophical assumptions about the nature of politics and political association, the republican tradition also provided Americans with some practical instructions concerning the construction of government. The glorification of the republic went hand in hand with the commendation of the mixed government. In this regard, ancient writers, English Whigs, and American Founders spoke in unison, but the classical origins of the concept need to be acknowledged. It was Cicero who praised the mixed republican government for its stability and longevity provided by a certain degree of equality and equilibrium.[52] Needless to say,

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[46] John Adams, "Thoughts on Government," in *The Political Writings of John Adams*, 484. In a letter to his cousin Samuel Adams he repeated the very same thought: "It is a fixed principle that all good government is and must be republican."—"John Adams to Samuel Adams, October 18, 1790," in *The Political Writings of John Adams*, 665.

[47] Charles F. Mullet, "Classical Influences on the American Revolution," *The Classical Journal* 35, no. 2 (1939): 94–95.

[48] Adams, "Novanglus," 26.

[49] Quoted after John Zvesper, "The American Founders and the Classical Political Thought," *History of Political Thought* 10, no. 4 (1989): 705.

[50] Zvesper, "The American Founders and the Classical Political Thought," 705–06.

[51] "The Virginia Declaration of Rights," National Archives, accessed December 29, 2022, https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/virginia-declaration-of-rights.

[52] Marcus Tullius Cicero, "On the Republic," in *On the Republic and On the Laws*, trans. David Fott (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014), I.69–70, 60–61.

the Framers supplemented the idea of mixed government with the modern concept of the division of powers (as well as the mechanism of checks and balances). James Otis argued in his *Rights of the British Colonies* that "those states have ever made the greatest figure, and have been most durable, in which those powers have not only been separated from each other, but placed each in more hands than one, or a few."[53]

However, the concept of mixed government, in addition to providing stability, also referred to the idea of a common good. After all, the republic was understood as a form of government that transcends narrow particularisms. Although it could take many particular forms, Aristotle distinguished it from the corrupted forms of government by its preoccupation with the common good.[54] It was Plato who laid the foundations for such an understanding of the nature of political community when arguing that "it's not the concern of law that any one class in the city fare exceptionally well, but it contrives to bring this about in the city as a whole, harmonizing the citizens by persuasion and compulsion, making them share with one another the benefit that each is able to bring to the commonwealth."[55] Republicanism assumed a certain fundamental community of ends and interests.

Regardless of significant revisions, Italian Renaissance thinkers also presented a mixed form of government as an arrangement that guarantees, to a degree, the participation of all social groups in the political process. Such a design provided equilibrium and stability, but it also guaranteed that the policies of the state would accommodate the needs and interests of all groups constituting the political community.[56]

This way of thinking was replicated in eighteenth-century America, where "no phrase except 'liberty' was invoked more often by Revolutionaries than 'the public good.'"[57] Therefore, when Otis claimed that the end of every government is "the good of the whole,"[58] he was simply expressing the widespread sentiment of the era. It was self-evident by "both reason and revelation" that "the public safety" and the "good of the community" were "the supreme law of the state—being standard and measure" by which all laws and government actions were to be judged.[59]

The common reverence for the public good had its logical consequence in the glorification of self-government. Since in a republic the common good was identi-

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[53] James Otis, "The Rights of the British Colonies Asserted and Proved," in *Collected Political Writings of James Otis*, ed. Richard Samuelson (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2015), 128.

[54] Aristotle, *Politics*, book 3, chap. 6–7, 1279a18–1279b10, 73–74.

[55] Plato, *The Republic*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1991), 519e–520a, 198. In the earlier passage, he instructed: "In the founding the city we are not looking to the exceptional happiness of any one group among us but, as far as possible, that of the city as a whole." Plato, *The Republic*, 420b, 98.

[56] See Maurizio Viroli, *Republicanism* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2002), 5.

[57] Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776–1787*, 55.

[58] Otis, "The Rights of the British Colonies Asserted and Proved," 125.

[59] Samuel West, "A Sermon Preached Before the Honorable Council, and the Honorable House of Representatives of the Colony of the Massachusetts-Bay, May 29th, 1776," in *The Pulpit of the American Revolution: or, the Political sermons of the Period of 1776*, ed. John W. Thornton (Boston: Gould and Lincoln, 1860), 297.

cal to the happiness and welfare of the people, the best way of realizing it was to allow the people to have a voice in government. Although this did not necessarily imply praise for direct democracy, it certainly assumed the necessity of the people's political participation in self-governmental institutions. For that reason, in his sermon Samuel West condemned all forms of government that are "not subject to the control of the people" and that do not provide for "a proper representation of the people" as being "very apt to degenerate into tyranny."[60] The concern for the common good and political liberty mutually conditioned each other.

But also in this regard, the generation of the Founders replicated the way of thinking about the government that had been defined by classical republicans. Liberty and equality were for the ancients the characteristics of the political sphere, as opposed to the domain of the private household (*oikos*), characterized by the absolute rule of the master over the rest of the household members and slaves. The republican concept of liberty was founded on the idea of non-domination; citizens were subject only to collectively established laws (and magistrates executing these laws) and not to the arbitrary will of another person (the latter being a characteristic feature of tyranny as well as of the relations between slave and master). The republican tradition created a sharp juxtaposition between a subject and a citizen. The latter is "defined by no other thing so much as by partaking in decision and office."[61] Therefore, the right to participate in public (political) life was both a characteristic of a citizen and the essence of political liberty.

Despite significant differences in the ancient and modern understanding of politics, there can be no doubts that the roots of the principle of the people's sovereignty, so greatly glorified by the eighteenth-century revolutionaries, lay in classical republicanism and, for that reason, the American Founders referred to it both in search for inspiration and in order to find useful arguments in their dispute with the British parliament. They fully agreed with Montesquieu, who argued that since "in a free state, every man, considered to have a free soul, should be governed by himself, the people as a body should have legislative power."[62] Yet, the French thinker was a great advocate of political representation, as were the American Founders. Good government did not mean direct democracy, but it did imply the consent of the governed. The institution of elections—allowing people to hold their representatives accountable for their actions—was the cornerstone of the modern republican project. As Wood explained, "(by) allowing the people to elect their magistracy, republicanism would work to 'blend the interests of the people and their rulers' and thus 'put down every animosity among the people.' In the kind of states where

[60] West, "A Sermon Preached Before the Honorable Council, and the Honorable House of Representatives of the Colony of the Massachusetts-Bay, May 29, 1776," 280–81.

[61] Aristotle, *Politics*, 1275a23–24, 63.

[62] Montesquieu, *The Spirit of Laws* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), book 11, chap. 6, 159.

'*their governors shall proceed from the midst of them*', the people could be surer that their interests would be promoted exclusively, and therefore, in turn, would 'pay obedience to officers properly appointed' and maintain 'no discontents on account of their advancement.'"[63]

The foregoing quote draws our attention to the fact that in the American case, the peans to freedom were accompanied by an emphasis put on obedience and order. As an endless number of American authors repeated, liberty does not mean license or lawlessness. It refers to the classical concept of autonomy, which, by definition, means self-imposing (*auto*) certain rules (*nomoi*) on one's own behavior. That is why republican freedom is founded on and guaranteed by the rule of law. However, the mere laws, as we have already observed, are not enough to sustain republican institutions. They are equally supported by the character and spirit of the people. What made the ancient republics great was not their military force but the virtues of their citizens. And what ultimately destroyed them was not an external military threat but an internal disease: the decay of *mores*. The stress put on the necessity of civic virtues was yet another element that created a full circle between the eighteenth-century American Founders, English Whigs, and ancient republican thinkers.

CONCLUSIONS

As I attempted to demonstrate, the roots of the American political tradition reach much deeper than the social and political thought of the Enlightenment. We can identify them in the writings of seventeenth-century English political writers, sixteenth-century Church reformers, and Renaissance thinkers rediscovering republican ideas, while the longest of them reach back to the times of Polybius, Cicero, and Aristotle. Thomas Jefferson, writing retrospectively to Henry Lee about the object of the Declaration of Independence, stated that it was "not to find out new principles, or new arguments, never before thought of, not merely to say things which had never been said before; but to place before mankind the common sense of the subject, in terms so plain and firm as to command their assent, and to justify ourselves in the independent stand we are compelled to take. Neither aiming at originality of principle or sentiment, nor yet copied from any particular and previous writing, it was intended to be an expression of the American mind and to give to that expression the proper tone and spirit called for by the occasion. All its authority rests then on the harmonizing sentiments of the day, whether expressed in conversation, in letters, printed essays, or in the elementary books of public right, as Aristotle, Cicero, Locke, Sidney, etc."[64] In light of the foregoing quote, we should

[63] Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776–1787*, 57.

[64] Thomas Jefferson, "Thomas Jefferson to Henry Lee, May 8, 1825," in *Writings* (New York: The Literary Classics of the United States, 1984), 1501.

regard the events of 1776 not as the foundation of the American political tradition but rather as the embodiment of its most important elements, which started taking shape as soon as the signatories of the Mayflower Compact had gone ashore. Its peculiarity consists in the unique combination of faith and reason, optimism and skepticism, utopianism and realism, the past and the present. While many of its constitutive elements may seem incompatible, we need to remember that the Founders of the American Republic were statesmen (in other words: practicing politicians, lawyers, public officers, ambassadors, etc.) first and only later (and only relatively few of them) political thinkers. That is why their use of philosophical, religious, and ideological arguments was driven by pragmatism rather than by academic or philosophical rigor. Lance Banning was certainly correct when he observed that although logically it could have been "inconsistent to be simultaneously liberal and classical. Historically it was not."[65] In the eyes of the eighteenth-century American statesmen, it was perfectly possible to combine the classical republican ideas of the common good and virtue with modern protoliberal concepts of individual rights and an appreciation of private property. They "may have drawn from a coherent (which is not to say consistent) universe of thought that could contain important elements of both philosophies in a persistent, fruitful tension."[66] For the same reasons, they were perfectly capable of combining enlightened rationalism with evangelical Calvinism. They were interested in what we might call an applied political theory rather than in the 'purity' of certain categories and 'labels' (such as republicanism, liberalism, conservatism, etc.) that contemporary historians of political thought so frequently use.

This abundance of inspirations contributed to the eclecticism of the American political tradition, which, despite occasional attempts made by some scholars, cannot be reduced to a single 'school' of thought or ideology.[67] Classical republican, protoliberal, and puritan ideas, filtered through the optimism and rationalism of the Enlightenment, melted on American soil into a peculiar synthesis, which continues to fascinate scholars and students of political thought.

Summary: The paper offers a brief discussion of the main intellectual sources which inspired the American Founding Fathers. It argues that the generation of the Founders operated to

[65] Lance Banning, "Jefferson Ideology Revisited: Liberal and Classical Ideas in the New American Republic," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 43, no. 1 (1986): 12.

[66] Banning, "Jefferson Ideology Revisited: Liberal and Classical Ideas in the New American Republic," 19.

[67] Louis Hartz's *Liberal Tradition in America* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1955) remains probably the best-known attempt of such a one-dimensional presentation of the American political tradition. On the eclecticism of the early American political thought see Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1967), chap. 2, 22–54.

a considerable extent within the frameworks of political, religious, and philosophical ideas whose origins extend far beyond the Enlightenment. These ideas prepared the ground for many political institutions usually associated with the Age of Reason and, despite occasional discrepancies, made the advancement of liberal democracy in the consecutive decades more natural. Furthermore, it argues that the unique and distinctive character of the American political tradition cannot be understood properly without taking into account its eclectic intellectual foundations.

Keywords: the Founding Fathers, Protestantism, republicanism, Whigs

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