

Who Are You, Mr. Adams?

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INTRODUCTION¹

American political reflections are informed by the singularly American experience, consisting of colonial history, the War of Independence, the making of a new state, and what Montesquieu called the spirit of the laws—that is, a set of objectively verifiable factors that inform the specific, unique perceptions of the categories that govern social and political life. However, the Founding Fathers and the subsequent generations of Americans had the comfort of being able to create the instruments of collective life in almost any way they wished, although it would be erroneous to think that they built in on “ploughed soil.” First, the organic communities that had functioned there for more than two hundred years had spontaneously formulated their rules of governance, and second, the long colonial experience under the British Empire was not without its aftermath. Also, it is quite significant that in the eighteenth century, when the foundations of American statehood were taking shape, turbulent events were unfolding in Europe, with a profound effect on the political reflection across the ocean.

After all, the founders of the United States were true sons of the old Europe, who never severed intellectual contact with it, so their deliberations were an extension of the disputes that troubled the old continent, though applied to the new, post-colonial circumstances. Thus, the local conditions, on the one hand, as well as the European pre-revolutionary and revolutionary experience, on the other, had a decisive impact on the political debates during the first decades of the United States. These two factors also determined the nature of political thought of the most emi-

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nent American political philosopher of the founding period, John Adams, whom Russell Kirk² and Peter Viereck³ recognized as being among the most important conservative thinkers. His name also features in the *Encyclopedia of American Conservatism*.⁴ However, I am not convinced whether such pigeonholing of the second President of the United States is correct or warranted. Therefore, in this brief analysis, I will try to answer the following question: was he a republican, a conservative, or perhaps a liberal? Naturally, I am aware that these categories are somewhat vague, which is why I will focus on several characteristic elements involved in an attempt to answer the above question. Simultaneously, this will provide an opportunity to outline the main themes in the political and constitutional thought of the author of *Discourses on Davila* against the backdrop of the republican, conservative, and liberal traditions. Consequently, I will first analyze Adams' vision of human nature, and subsequently discuss the relationships within the political community. I will then dissect Adams' views on democracy and the French Revolution, followed by his notions of the political system, before concluding with considerations relating to property.

At the outset, however, a few remarks are due on the intellectual or personal relationships with those who are considered to have inspired Adams or been his ideological companions. The second President showed substantial regard for the republican *neo-Roman* thinkers, most notably Sidney, of whose *Discourses on Government* he wrote that they still arouse his "fresh admiration" upon being read again after forty-six years.⁵ Thus, when drafting the constitution of Massachusetts, he made Sidney's words the state motto: *Manus haec inimica tyrannis ense petit. Placidam sub libertate quietem*. Elsewhere, speaking of the source of inspiration, he mentions Harrington, Locke, Montesquieu, and even Hobbes.⁶ In his writings, he also repeatedly invokes Machiavelli, Polybius, Livy, Herodotus, and Tacitus.

Meanwhile, his relationship with Burke and his attitude to the latter's philosophy should be described as distanced, which might be attributed to Adams' megalomania and quarrelsomeness. Their only meeting, which took place in London in 1783, was very briefly recounted in his diaries: "I was introduced, by Mr. Hartley, on a merely ceremonious visit, to the Duke of Portland, Mr. Burke, and Mr. Fox; but finding nothing but ceremony there, I did not ask favors or receive any thing

² Russell Kirk, *Conservative Mind: From Burke to Eliot* (Washington: Ragnery Publishing, Inc., 2001), 86–109.

³ Peter Viereck, *Conservative Thinkers: From John Adams to Winston Churchill* (London, New York: Routledge, 2005), 87–95.

⁴ Bruce Frohnen, Jeremy Beer, and Jeffrey O. Nelson, *American Conservatism: An Encyclopedia* (Wilmington: ISI Books, 2006), 9–11, 534–44.

⁵ John Adams, "To Thomas Jefferson, Quincy, 17 September, 1823," in *The Works of John Adams, Second President of the United States* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1850–56), 10: 410.

⁶ John Adams, "To J.H. Tiffany, Quincy, 31 March, 1819," in *The Works of John Adams, Second President of the United States*, 10: 377.

but cold formalities from ministers of state or ambassadors.”⁷ In a letter to Jefferson, however, he called Burke and Samuel Johnson “superstitious slaves, or self-deceiving hypocrites.”⁸ Still, there can be no doubt that he also harbored genuine words of contempt for Thomas Paine, Burke’s adversary.

HUMAN NATURE

Underlying Adams’ entire political philosophy is a definite vision of human nature, and the latter must be the cornerstone of all realistic and useful reflections on the state. As early as 1760, he noted in his diary that “all civil government, is founded and maintained by the sins of the People. All armies would be needless if Men were universally virtuous. . . . In short, Vice and folly are so interwoven in all human Affairs, that they could not, possibly, be wholly separated from them without tearing and rending the whole system of human Nature and state.”⁹ Clearly, Adams entertained no illusions about the human condition, thus markedly opposing Jefferson’s optimism. Historical retrospection, personal experience, and Calvinist formation¹⁰ prompted him to look upon the human as an inherently corrupt, depraved, vile, hypocritical being, and he adopted such assumptions when formulating his political conception. This should also be the premise around which political institutions must be constructed, because “if there were no ignorance, error, or vice, there would be neither principles nor systems of civil or political government.”¹¹

The two fundamental forces guiding human behavior are sex drive and the desire to acquire and hold property, which he expressed bluntly, in quite an undiplomatic manner: “That the first want of man is his dinner, and the second his girl, were truths well known to every democrat and aristocrat, long before the great philosopher Malthus arose, to think he enlightened the world by the discovery.”¹² If so, then primal drives take precedence over reason, self-love trumps love for others, virtue is the exception to transgression, altruism to self-interest, and lust for power to humble service to the homeland. “We know,” Adams wrote, “that ignorance, vanity, excessive ambition, and venality, will, in spite of all human precautions, creep into

⁷ John Adams, “Life of John Adams,” in *The Works of John Adams, Second President of the United States*, 1: 405.

⁸ John Adams, “To Thomas Jefferson, Quincy, 25 December, 1813,” in *The Works of John Adams, Second President of the United States*, 10: 82.

⁹ John Adams, “Diary, December 18, 1760,” in *The Works of John Adams, Second President of the United States*, 2: 107.

¹⁰ John P. Diggins, *John Adams* (New York: Macmillan, 2003), 17–18.

¹¹ John Adams, “Letter to Samuel Adams, 18 October, 1790,” in *The Works of John Adams, Second President of the United States*, 6: 415.

¹² John Adams, “Letter to John Taylor, Quincy, 15 April 1814,” in *The Works of John Adams, Second President of the United States*, 6: 516.

government, and will ever be aspiring at extravagant and unconstitutional emoluments to individuals, let us never relax our attention, or our resolution, to keep these unhappy imperfections in human nature, out of which material, frail as it is, all our rulers must be compounded, under a strict inspection and a just control.”¹³ Consequently, he finds absurd the fanciful delusions of Rousseau, Pain, Turgot, Condorcet, or Wollstonecraft, who speculate that with the development of knowledge and the liberation of reason from the fetters of superstition, morality will thrive and human ultimately achieve happiness, because the human will always and everywhere be guided by the primal passions, while “self-interest, private avidity, ambition, and avarice, will exist in every state of society, and under every form of government.”¹⁴ The drive for power is also intrinsic to every form of government, as it satisfies the need to stand out and gain recognition in the eyes of others. After all, nothing in human nature is “more essential or remarkable, than the *passion for distinction*. A desire to be observed, considered, esteemed, praised, beloved, and admired.”¹⁵ Machiavelli, in whose footsteps Adams follows, cogently argued that the latter desire is behind the development of society and the perpetual internal rivalry it is afflicted by. That desire is also responsible for both the existence of enslavement and the need for freedom. Some desire to transcend whatever limits their power may be subject to; others want to circumscribe it and gain power over their own destiny.

Such a concept of human nature is in line with the perspective adopted by Burke, for whom the state is an instrument for curbing human passions and uniting them in one direction, although he had more faith in the goodness and virtue of the human, their social penchant and moral imagination. The erstwhile, pre-revolutionary order was not a stage populated by ruthless individuals whose wickedness was constrained by power, but by actors who played their parts in a play written by the Creator. “All the pleasing illusions,” Burke wrote in *Reflections*, “which made power gentle, and obedience liberal, which harmonized the different shades of life, and which, by a bland assimilation, incorporated into politics the sentiments which beautify and soften private society, are to be dissolved by this new conquering empire of light and reason. All the decent drapery of life is to be rudely torn off. All the superadded ideas, furnished from the wardrobe of a moral imagination, which the heart owns, and the understanding ratifies, as necessary to cover the defects of our naked shivering nature, and to raise it to dignity in our own estimation, are to be exploded as a ridiculous, absurd, and antiquated fashion.”¹⁶ This is why Adams

¹³ John Adams, “On Self-Delusion,” in *The Works of John Adams, Second President of the United States*, 3: 437.

¹⁴ John Adams, “A Defence of the Constitutions of Government of the United States,” in *The Works of John Adams, Second President of the United States*, 6: 448.

¹⁵ John Adams, “Discourses on Davila,” in *The Works of John Adams, Second President of the United States*, 6: 232.

¹⁶ Edmund Burke, “Reflections on the Revolution in France,” in *Selected Works of Edmund Burke* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1999), 2: 170–71.

shares greater kinship with the classic republicanism of Machiavelli, or the English *neo-Roman* republican reflection of the latter half of the seventeenth century, for the Florentine sees the human as Adams does, observing in *Discourses on Livy* that “they who lay the foundations of a State and furnish it with laws must, as is shown by all who have treated of civil government, and by examples of which history is full, assume that ‘all men are bad, and will always, when they have free field, give loose to their evil inclinations; and that if these for a while remain hidden, it is owing to some secret cause, which, from our having no contrary experience, we do not recognize at once, but which is afterwards revealed by Time, of whom we speak as the father of all truth.’”¹⁷ For the representatives of the *neo-Roman* reflection, too, power is the remedy for human wickedness and depravity. Hence, Milton writes, “foreseeing that such courses must needs tend to the destruction of them all, they agreed by common league to bind each other from mutual injury, and jointly to defend themselves against any that gave disturbance or opposition to such agreement.”¹⁸ Meanwhile, Sidney observes that “Every man has passions; few know how to moderate, and no one can wholly extinguish them.”¹⁹ Naturally, both argue exploiting the contractualist method, much the same as Adams, but the crucial point is that they see human nature as essentially flawed, but also recognize its rational and social dimension. That depraved character bears on the relations within the society which, as Machiavelli had already demonstrated, involve a natural dialectic between the rich and the poor.

ARISTOCRACY AND THE PEOPLE

Therefore, Machiavelli maintains in *Discourses on Livy* that “in every republic, there are two conflicting factions, that of the people and that of the nobles,”²⁰ which engenders two tendencies: the people do not want to tolerate the rule and oppression of the aristocracy, while the aristocracy seeks to control and oppress the people. This results in a natural division into two warring factions separated by conflicting interests in terms of property and politics. Inspired by this fact, Harrington makes property the mainstay of power in the political society.²¹ Seeing himself as the latter’s disciple in this respect, Adams applies the same paradigm to divide society into strata in his own analysis. Like Hamilton or Madison, he was deeply convinced that

¹⁷ Niccolò Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, trans. Ninian H. Thomson (Mineola: Dover Publications, 2007), 31.

¹⁸ John Milton, “The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates,” in *The Prose Works of John Milton* (Philadelphia: John W. Moore, 1847), 1: 377.

¹⁹ Algernon Sidney, *Discourses Concerning Government* (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1990), 234.

²⁰ Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, 33.

²¹ James Harrington, “The Commonwealth of Oceana,” in *The Oceana and Other Works of James Harrington* (London: A. Millar, 1747), 39–40.

the inequality between people is natural and so was the correlation between property and political influence.²² Admittedly, people are born with equal rights, but “to teach that all men are born with equal powers and faculties, to equal influence in society, to equal property and advantages through life, is as gross a fraud, as glaring an imposition on the credulity of the people, as ever was practiced by monks, by Druids, by Brahmins, by priests of the immortal Lama, or by the self-styled philosophers of the French revolution.”²³ “When a citizen,” Adams writes elsewhere, “perceives his fellow-citizen, whom he holds his equal, have a better coat or hat, a better house or horse. . . . He cannot bear it.”²⁴

However, unlike his federalist friends, he was not an advocate of the power of the few. On the contrary, he saw it as a threat similar to the power of the democratic *masses*.²⁵ Nor did he share their belief in the ability of the electorate to control the elite, convinced that without appropriate institutional instruments, the very idea of representation would be destroyed. The existence of social inequality is a fact observed in any society, no matter how democratic or equal it claims to be. Due to the differences of wealth, merit, virtue, intelligence, or wisdom some “acquired the confidence and affection of their fellow-citizens to such a degree that the public have settled into a kind of habit of following their example and taking their advice. These sources of inequality, which are common to every people, and can never be altered by any, because they are founded in the constitution of nature.” Their existence is indispensable in the very institution of power and free government to exist as well. Such a *natural aristocracy* is the “brightest ornament and glory of the nation, and may always be made the greatest blessing of society, if it be judiciously managed in the constitution.” However, if its influence and role are not subject to reasonable restrictions, it will become “the most dangerous; nay, it may be added, it never fails to be the destruction of the commonwealth.”²⁶

²² Indeed, the Philadelphia Convention witnessed a clash between two opposing approaches to the future constitution: an aristocratic and a more democratic one. The Federalists took the predominance of the property elite for granted and deemed it no threat to the republican system. Conversely, the Anti-Federalists, who firmly believed in the ideal of adequate representation (reflecting the exact composition of society), saw it as the greatest threat. The fundamental differences between the two solutions were expounded by Madison in *Federalist No. 10*: “The two great points of difference between a democracy and a republic are: first, the delegation of the government, in the latter, to a small number of citizens elected by the rest; secondly, the greater number of citizens and greater sphere of country, over which the latter may be extended. The effect of the first difference is, on the one hand to refine and enlarge 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, and whose patriotism and love of justice, will be least likely to sacrifice it to temporary or partial considerations”—James Madison, “Federalist No. 10,” in Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay, *The Federalist*, ed. Jack R. Pole (Indianapolis, Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2005), 52.

²³ Adams, “Letter to John Taylor, III, Quincy, 15 April, 1814,” 453–54.

²⁴ Adams, “A Defence of the Constitutions of Government of the United States,” 6: 95.

²⁵ Diggins, *John Adams*, 167–68.

²⁶ Adams, “A Defence of the Constitutions of Government of the United States,” 6: 397.

Observation of the European states and the dominance of the nobility there—which was increasingly associated with the property-holding elite—led Adams to conclude that the rule of the few represented the gravest threat to the constitution and free republican government.²⁷ Of course, America was not encumbered by that aristocratic experience, but this did not matter to Adams because aristocracy always exists, regardless of its provenance or the name it assumes. The division into a *natural aristocracy*—the aristocracy of virtue, merit, or wisdom—and *artificial aristocracy*, deriving from money or lineage is irrelevant to Adams as far as its political role is concerned. The former is vague and indefinite, and the latter is more tangible, but the power of either is measured simply by how much support they manage to garner among the public. “Without searching volumes, Mr. Taylor, I will tell you in a few words what I mean by an aristocrat, and, consequently, what I mean by aristocracy. By an aristocrat, I mean every man who can command or influence two votes; one besides his own,” regardless of whether he does it through “his virtues, his talents, his learning, his loquacity, his taciturnity, his frankness, his reserve, his face, figure, eloquence, grace, air, attitude, movements, wealth, birth, art, address, intrigue, good fellowship, drunkenness, debauchery, fraud, perjury, violence, treachery, pyrrhonism, deism, or atheism; for by every one of these instruments have votes have been obtained and will be obtained.”²⁸ The existence of *aristocracy* as Adams understands it is therefore not linked to any legal distinction, convention, or title, as in old Europe, but to the ability to influence other citizens in the political process. In America there are no titles or hereditary nobility, but “nobility must and will exist, though without the name, as really as in countries where it is hereditary.”²⁹

This does not mean that Adams affirms the existence of a social hierarchy; as a realist, he merely acknowledges its existence, it is an undeniable fact and it would be naïve, even foolish, to ignore it. Does that constitute a conservative point of view? If conservatism is typified by political realism, then undoubtedly yes, but let us remember that, like Machiavelli, Adams tended to side with the people and saw a major threat to the republic in the aristocracy, because if its influence and role are not reasonably circumscribed, then it is “the most dangerous; nay, it may be added, it never fails to be the destruction of the commonwealth.”³⁰ This fundamentally contradicts Burke’s notions of aristocracy: “A true natural aristocracy is not a separate interest in the state, or separable from it. It is an essential integrant part of any large body rightly constituted. It is formed out of a class of legitimate presumptions, which, taken as generalities, must be admitted for actual truths. To

²⁷ Robert R. Palmer, *The Age of the Democratic Revolution: A Political History of Europe and America, 1760–1800*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), 67–74.

²⁸ Adams, “Letter to John Taylor, Quincy, 15 April 1814,” 456–57.

²⁹ Adams, “A Defence of the Constitutions of Government of the United States,” 6: 125.

³⁰ Adams, “A Defence of the Constitutions of Government of the United States,” 6: 397.

be bred in a place of estimation; to see nothing low and sordid from one's infancy; to be taught to respect one's self; to be habituated to the censorial inspection of the public eye; to look early to public opinion; to stand upon such elevated ground as to be enabled to take a large view of the wide-spread and infinitely diversified combinations of men and affairs in a large society." No nation may exist without it, therefore "The state of civil society which necessarily generates this aristocracy is a state of Nature; and much more truly so than a savage and incoherent mode of life."³¹

He found natural aristocracy to be the healthy core of any society, selflessly applying its excellent talents in the service of the public good. Society is by nature hierarchical, and Burke believes that this is an element of the Creator-given order, whereby he does not mean material divisions, but the fact that people possess different and unequal moral and intellectual qualifications. Being guided by virtue, concern for the common good, and ultimately the recognition of the essence of the ancient order are not available to everyone equally. The prudence enabling one to separate what is dangerous from what complies with the tradition of the community, to distinguish between freedom and license, is available only to the aristocracy of virtue and reason, not to the people viewed from a purely arithmetical standpoint. Asserting the opposite would have to result in subjecting the eternal and immutable rules of justice, the fundamental laws of the kingdom to an arbitrary will informed by the changing moods of the unpredictable masses. *Neo-Romans* argue in the same vein, seeing a fundamental difference between the virtue of the few and the majority who do not possess it.³² Perhaps Adams would have agreed that the natural aristocracy is endowed with special qualities of spirit and intellect, but he did not share the view that its interests were always aligned with those of the community. Inspired by the theories of political cycles developed by Polybius, Cicero, and Machiavelli, he was convinced that it invariably must transform into oligarchy in the end. Therefore, instead of extirpating human passions, he sought to channel them into actions beneficial to the state. Therefore, as he observed in *Discourses on Davila*, "to regulate (them) and not to eradicate them is the province of policy."³³ In contrast, Burke regarded the virtue of natural aristocracy as the sole bulwark against the destruction of policy and the disintegration of the world. Nonetheless, what Adams and the *last Old Whig* certainly have in common is an equally harsh assessment of democracy, the rule of the people, and the French Revolution.

³¹ Edmund Burke, *An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs* (London: J. Dodsley, 1791), 107–08.

³² See John Milton, "The Second Defence of the People of England," in *The Prose Works of John Milton*, 2: 503, 525.

³³ Adams, "Discourses on Davila," 246.

DEMOCRACY

This is because Adams entertains no illusions about the nature of democratic rule, even if it succeeds in avoiding or abolishing the rule of the aristocracy in one way or another. He kept a keen eye on the Shays' Rebellion and saw the aftermath of the anger of the unruly mob. Like their aristocratic adversaries, the democrats are envious, petty, and spoilt, desirous of power and profit. They are as eager to trample on minority rights as the aristocrats are to despise the rights of the majority.³⁴ He thus follows the path set out by the republicans of antiquity (Polybius and Cicero) and Machiavelli, to whom that system was one of license that worked to the detriment of the representatives of power and ordinary citizens. Consequently, in Adams' point of view, the events of the French Revolution were a perfect exemplification of how such governments end. He is particularly averse to the democratic superstitions that grant unlimited sovereignty to the *people* understood in a numerical sense. His remarks about the apostle of the *Age of Reason*—Thomas Paine—are quite forthright: "I am willing you Should call this the Age of Frivolity as you do: and would not object if You had named it the Age of Folly, Vice, Frenzy Fury, Brutality, Daemons, Buonaparte, Tom Paine, or the Age of The burning Brand from the bottomless Pitt: or any thing but the age of Reason. I know not whether any Man in the World has had more influence on its inhabitants or affairs for the last thirty years than Tom Paine. There can be no Severer satyr in the Age. For Such a mongrel between Pigg and Puppy, begotten by a wild Boar on a Bitch Wolf; never before in any Age of the World was suffered by the Poltroonery of mankind, to run through Such a Career of Mischief. Call it then the Age of Paine. He deserves it much more than the Courtezan who was consecrated to represent the Goddess in the Temple at Paris, and whose name, Tom has given to the Age. The real intellectual faculty has nothing to do with the Age the Strumpet or Tom."³⁵ The people and their tribunes are generally insatiable in their desires and, having seized power will use it unrestrainedly and unscrupulously, turning the state into a realm of anarchy. The dictatorship of the individual will be the only remedy, putting an end to chaos at the expense of free-

³⁴ "This is not my doctrine, Mr. Taylor. My opinion is, and always has been, that absolute power intoxicates alike despots, monarchs, aristocrats, and democrats, and jacobins, and *sans culottes*. I cannot say that democracy has been more pernicious, on the whole, than any of the others. Its atrocities have been more transient; those of the others have been more permanent. The history of all ages shows that the caprice, cruelties, and horrors of democracy have soon disgusted, alarmed, and terrified themselves. They soon cry, this will not do; we have gone too far! We are all in the wrong! We are none of us safe! We must unite in some clever fellow, who can protect us all, —Cæsar, Bonaparte, who you will! Though we distrust, hate, and abhor them all; yet we must submit to one or another of them, stand by him, cry him up to the skies, and swear that he is the greatest, best, and finest man that ever lived!"—Adams, "Letter to John Taylor, Quincy, 15 April 1814," 477.

³⁵ John Adams, "Letter to Benjamin Waterhouse, 29 October 1805," in *The Selected Writings of John and John Quincy Adams*, eds. Adrienne Koch and William Peden (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1946), 148.

dom. However, if democracy manages to escape becoming a military tyranny, then in time the *popular representatives*, the leaders of the people, will also enjoy their privileged position, laying the foundations for a new, this time the democratic elite of wealth or power. “We are told,” he observes mockingly in *Discourses on Davila*, “that our friends, the National Assembly of France, have abolished all distinctions. But be not deceived, my dear countrymen. Impossibilities cannot be performed. Have they leveled all fortunes and equally divided all property? Have they made all men and women equally wise, elegant, and beautiful?”³⁶ Thus, every democracy will eventually yield a new aristocracy, only to start this pernicious systemic cycle anew.

“You say—he addresses Taylor—I might have exhibited millions of plebeians sacrificed to the pride, folly, and ambition of monarchy and aristocracy.” This is very true. And I might have exhibited as many millions of plebeians sacrificed by the pride, folly, and ambition of their fellow plebeians and their own, in proportion to the extent and duration of their power. Remember, democracy never lasts long. It soon wastes, exhausts, and murders itself. There never was a democracy yet that did not commit suicide. It is in vain to say that democracy is less vain, less proud, less selfish, less ambitious, or less avaricious than aristocracy or monarchy. It is not true, in fact, and nowhere appears in history.³⁷ In *Letters on a Regicide Peace*, Burke arrives at the same diagnosis, judging the work of the French revolutionaries thus: “Instead of the religion and the law by which they were in a great politick communion with the Christian world, they have constructed their Republick on three bases, all fundamentally opposite to those on which the communities of Europe are built. Its foundation is laid in Regicide; in Jacobinism; and in Atheism.”³⁸ The destruction of the moral foundations of society simultaneously releases its members from their duties to their fellows and the community, and where the power of the state does not reach, human relations resemble the Hobbesian state of nature. The recognition of the sovereignty of the people elevates what is temporary and changeable to the status of a principle while deprecating what is eternal and enduring. In a situation in which there is no theoretical distinction between the rulers and the ruled, the arbitrary will of the majority, or the *general will* as Rousseau would have it, is relieved from any of its extraneous constraints, opening the way to tyranny exercised—perversely so—in the name of freedom.

“Such a constitution of freedom,” Burke wrote, “if such can be, is in effect no more than another name for the tyranny of the strongest faction; and factions in republics have been, and are, fully as capable as monarchs, of the most cruel oppression and injustice. It is but too true that the love, and even the very idea, of genuine liberty is extremely rare. It is but too true that there are many whose whole scheme of

³⁶ Adams, “Discourses on Davila,” 232.

³⁷ Adams “Letter to John Taylor, Quincy, 15 April 1814,” 484.

³⁸ Edmund Burke, “Letters on a Regicide Peace. Letter No. 1. On the Overtures of Peace,” in *Selected Works of Edmund Burke*, 3: 124.

freedom is made up of pride, perverseness, and insolence.”³⁹ The reification of public liberty thus construed invariably entails enslavement of individual life. To Burke, the simultaneous exercise of power and control over it is inconceivable, which corresponds with Adams’ view, though the latter derives it from an old conception of mixed polities, which emerged early on as part of this reflection.

THE BALANCE OF POWER

What could be done, then, to have the political system ensure the survival of the republic? Adams sought the answer in the achievements of classical republican political thought and the British experience. Indeed, attempts to solve the perennial problem of balance between the various elements of society may already be found in the deliberations of Polybius, whose *History*, book 4, describes the Roman Republic as a mixed system that combines the advantages of monarchy, the role of the leader and popular rule.⁴⁰ Tremendously important for the Romans, the balance of the social forces is also the backbone of Machiavelli’s disquisition in *Discourses*, where he elaborates on Polybius’ argument. This is crucial since it would be difficult to overstate Machiavelli’s influence on the Atlantic political discourse in the seventeenth century, as demonstrated by Pocock. The ceaseless dialectic between the mighty (*grandi*) and the people (*popolo*), whose desires, emotions (*umiori*) are mutually at odds, contributes to the creation of laws enacted for the sake of liberty, while political processes are shaped through the effect of individual social forces within the state. Thus, for a constitution to be legitimate it must be linked to the nature of the political society in which it operates. It must therefore provide the various groups and interests in a society with a sufficient level of influence and control while policies are being formulated. Such an approach to systemic rules, whereby they are a function of the principle of balance, characterized English political thought of the seventeenth century as well. The mindset was also shared by much of the republican milieu in the latter half of that century, who espoused the *neo-Roman* theory cited by Adams in his reflections, and by the English constitutional theorists of the following century, de Lolme in particular. He thus attempts to devise an institutional system that would mitigate the destructive influence of the aristocracy on political processes and ensure that the social balance between the aristocracy and the rest of the body politic is maintained. Since popular governments always degenerate into anarchy and aristocracies into oligarchy, only a government that combines all good features of the respective systems has a chance of survival be-

³⁹ Edmund Burke, *A Speech of Edmund Burke, Esq. at the Guildhall, in Bristol: previous to the late election in that city upon certain points relative to his parliamentary conduct* (London: J. Dodsley, 1780), 58.

⁴⁰ Wilfried Nippel, “Ancient and modern republicanism: ‘mixed constitution’ and ‘ephors,’” in *The Invention of the Modern Republic*, ed. Biancamaria Fontana (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 9.

cause it balances the conflicting interests of various social groups, the interests of the property elite, and the common people. As he stated in his speech in Braintree, “liberty depends upon an exact Ballance, a nice Counterpoise of all the Powers of the state. . . . The best Governments of the World have been mixed.”⁴¹ Then, in *Defence*, he argues thus: “Happiness, whether in despotism or democracy, whether in slavery or liberty, can never be found without virtue. The best republics will be virtuous, and have been so; but we may hazard a conjecture, that the virtues have been the effect of the well ordered constitution, rather than the cause. And, perhaps, it would be impossible to prove that a republic cannot exist even among highwaymen, by setting one rogue to watch another; and the knaves themselves may in time be made honest men by the struggle.”⁴² On the other hand, Adams cuts the umbilical cord that binds virtue and the republic: “It is not true, in fact, that any people ever existed who loved the public better than themselves, their private friends, neighbors, etc., and therefore this kind of virtue . . . is as precarious a foundation for liberty as honor or fear; it is the laws alone that really love the country.”⁴³ Thus, if having the rich and the poor agree voluntarily is impossible, they must be compelled to do so: one should artificially induce virtuous acts—that is, actions that aim at the good of the community and not just its part. Such a task, according to Adams, can only be accomplished by a properly designed institutional system involving bicameralism, where the upper house would be *aristocratic* and separate from the *popular* chamber. Here, Adams draws on the British experience, where the House of Lords, albeit influential, is somewhat weaker than the Commons, and constitutes an *exile* for outstanding individuals and a means of neutralizing them, though it still offers the opportunity to use their talents for the good of the state. The elevation of social status through ennoblement results at the same time in diminished influence and separation from the main political processes, which are focused in the Commons. The idea was realized in the Constitution for the State of Massachusetts, drafted by Adams in 1779. It was modeled on the British system of checks and balances, which, according to Adams, was the only one capable of ensuring systemic stability.⁴⁴ It was founded on wealth qualification for voters and candidates, whereby the qualification for Senate candidates was three times higher than for the representative chamber. A special role in the constitutional system designed by Adams would belong to the executive, which would neutralize particularly ambitious and influential individuals through absolute veto and an appointment system for the upper house. The author expected that since the executive was formed following general elections and remained linked to the lower house, it would be “the natural friend of the people,

⁴¹ John Adams, *Notes for an Oration at Braintree, 1772*, quoted after Gordon S. Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776–1787* (Chapel Hill, London: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 198.

⁴² Adams, “A Defence of the Constitutions of Government of the United States,” 6: 219.

⁴³ Adams, “A Defence of the Constitutions of Government of the United States,” 6: 208.

⁴⁴ David J. Siemers, “John Adams’s Political Thought,” in *A Companion to John Adams and John Quincy Adams*, ed. David Waldstreicher (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 109–15.

and the only defense which they or their representatives can have against the avarice and ambition of the rich and distinguished citizens.”⁴⁵ Adams thus envisaged the president to be the key element in the system, ensuring its stability and balance, “the attention of the whole nation should be fixed upon one point, and the blame and censure, as well as the impeachments and vengeance for abuses of this power, should be directed solely to the ministers of one man.”⁴⁶ Hence the great responsibility that rests on the authors of the American system, which is why he concludes his argument in *A Defence of the Constitutions* as follows: “All nations, under all governments, must have parties; the great secret is to control them. There are but two ways, either by a monarchy and standing army or by a balance in the constitution. Where the people have a voice, and there is no balance, there will be everlasting fluctuations, revolutions, and horrors, until a standing army, with a general at its head, commands the peace, or the necessity of an equilibrium is made appear to all, and is adopted by all.”⁴⁷ The above clearly manifests the influence of the English tradition, an inspiration of which Adams made no secret. He found balanced government emulating the British model a modern ideal that he wished to apply in the American circumstances.⁴⁸ However, contrary to Burke’s position, Adams was a determined and implacable enemy of the monarchy, despite almost lifelong accusations of monarchism. Adams detested the institution that was so crucial for the *Old Whig* as much as the ancient Roman republicans had done; *odium regni* invariably guided his political actions. Central to the conservatives, the institution was antithetical to the republican creed in Adams’ eyes. The contractualist notion of the origins of the state enabled him to create a political order *ad hoc*, though in a fundamentally different dimension than was the case with the revolutionaries. He drew on the past, seeking inspiration and models, embraced all that was useful, and rejected anything that he deemed absurd and outdated. Nonetheless, his approach was completely different to Burke’s, for whom the past and the ever-valid principles legitimized the present. The former structures, institutions, beliefs, convictions, and customs supplied the building blocks to construct the edifice of the present, one which cannot

⁴⁵ Adams, “A Defence of the Constitutions of Government of the United States,” 4: 585.

⁴⁶ Adams, “A Defence of the Constitutions of Government of the United States,” 4: 586.

⁴⁷ Adams, “A Defence of the Constitutions of Government of the United States,” 4: 588.

⁴⁸ As regards the British system of balance, Burke noted as follows: “He who thinks that the British Constitution ought to consist of the three members, of three very different natures, of which it does actually consist, and thinks it his duty to preserve each of those members in its proper place and with its proper proportion of power, must (as each shall happen to be attacked) vindicate the three several parts on the several principles peculiarly belonging to them. He cannot assert the democratic part on the principles on which monarchy is supported, nor can he support monarchy on the principles of democracy, nor can he maintain aristocracy on the grounds of the one or of the other or of both. All these he must support on grounds that are totally different, though practically they may be, and happily with us they are, brought into one harmonious body. A man could not be consistent in defending such various, and, at first view, discordant, parts of a mixed Constitution, without that sort of inconsistency with which Mr. Burke stands charged”—Burke, *An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs*, 31.

be built on demand nor altered at will. This is echoed in the famous passage from *Reflections*: “Society is indeed a contract. Subordinate contracts, for objects of mere occasional interest, may be dissolved at pleasure; but the state ought not to be considered as nothing better than a partnership agreement in a trade of pepper and coffee, callico or tobacco, or some other such low concern, to be taken up for a little temporary interest, and to be dissolved by the fancy of the parties. It is to be looked on with other reverence; because it is not a partnership in things subservient only to the gross animal existence of a temporary and perishable nature. It is a partnership in all science; a partnership in all art; a partnership in every virtue, and in all perfection. As the ends of such a partnership cannot be obtained in many generations, it becomes a partnership not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born. Each contract of each particular state is but a clause in the great primaeval contract of eternal society, linking the lower with the higher natures, connecting the visible and invisible world, according to a fixed compact sanctioned by the inviolable oath which holds all physical and all moral natures, each in their appointed place.”⁴⁹

LIBERTY AND PROPERTY

The ultimate goal of Adams’ envisaged arrangement of political life is to preserve liberty. One should therefore consider briefly what the second President meant by that term. His republican disposition and references to the antique republican ethos suggest that he may have had some form of Roman *libertas* in mind—that is, the possibility of participation in the public life of the community. This conjecture, however, is only half the truth, as liberty understood in this fashion is only a tool to achieve something that is much more important for Adams. In this respect, he repeatedly invokes the *pre-liberal* and *liberal* tradition when discussing the life, liberty, and property of individuals. Just as in *neo-Roman* thought, which ventured beyond the classical republican paradigm, liberty is a primal category, preceding the act of political unification. Although Adams does not argue in a contractualist style (although he believes that the consent of the people is the sole moral grounds for the government), he takes for granted what had been asserted about freedom by Milton,⁵⁰ Nedham,⁵¹ Sidney, or Neville, who explicitly invoked life, liberty and prop-

⁴⁹ Burke, “Reflections on the Revolution in France,” 192–93.

⁵⁰ “No man, who knows aught, can be so stupid to deny, that all men naturally were born free, being the image and resemblance of God himself, and were, by privilege above all the creatures, born to command, and not to obey: and that they lived so, till from the root of Adam’s transgression, falling among themselves to do wrong and violence”—Milton, “The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates,” 377.

⁵¹ “[T]he end of all Government is (or ought to be) the good and ease of the People, in a secure enjoyment of their Rights, without Pressure and Oppression”—Marchamont Nedham, *The Excellency of a Free State* (London: A. Millar and T. Cadell, 1767), 87.

erty, the classic Lockean triad. In any case, Locke himself defines freedom without reducing it merely to negative liberty,⁵² seeing it as the freedom to exercise natural rights within a community based on *non-domination*. Apparently, this is how Adams conceives it, as a kind of combination of *negative* liberty that can only be preserved through republican *positive* liberty. Hence, a participatory institutional system is supposed to safeguard the life, liberty, and property of the citizens. It is difficult to determine whether he interpreted them in line with the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of Citizen* or in terms of the English tradition founded on the ancient *Englishmen's Liberties*; still, the important thing is that he can undeniably be regarded as one of the fathers of the American constitutional tradition of liberty. Indeed, he was a great advocate of individual liberty, appreciating the importance of freedom of the press, religion, and trial by jury. When drafting the Massachusetts Constitution, he placed the declaration of rights at the very beginning of the document. Then, during the constitutional debate, he endorsed its ratification while opting to include the *Bill of Rights*, which he had persuaded Jefferson to write.

Among these rights, Adams prioritized property which, following Locke, he recognized as a sacred and inviolable right, therefore the degree to which it is protected is a yardstick of justice of government: "The moment the idea is admitted into society, that property is not as sacred as the laws of God, and that there is not a force of law and public justice to protect it, anarchy and tyranny commence."⁵³ This does not apply solely to the property of the rich, who are able to protect themselves. What Adams has in mind first and foremost is the property of the people, because it is the foundation of their system of representation. Its absence would cause the constitutional system of balances to collapse and the republic would descend into oligarchy: "The very name of a republic implies, that the property of the people should be represented in the legislature, and decide the rule of justice."⁵⁴ Clearly, Adams understands liberty and property like a liberal but defends them like a republican. They do, of course, play a role in stabilizing the system, but differently than in Burke, for whom they are immanent to the God-given earthly order that is best embodied in the *ancient* English constitution. "Our Constitution is like our island, which uses and restrains its subject sea; in vain the waves roar. In that Constitution I know, and exultingly I feel, both that I am free and that I am not free dangerously to myself or to others. I know that no power on earth, acting

⁵² "For liberty is, to be free from restraint and violence from others; which cannot be, where there is no law: but freedom is not, as we are told, a liberty for every man to do what he lists: (for who could be free, when every other man's humour might domineer over him?) but a liberty to dispose, and order as he lists, his person, actions, possessions, and his whole property, within the allowance of those laws under which he is, and therein not to be subject to the arbitrary will of another, but freely follow his own"—John Locke, "Two Treatise of Government," in *The Works of John Locke* (Oxford, Edinburgh: C. and J. Rivington et al., 1824), 4: 370.

⁵³ Adams, "A Defence of the Constitutions of Government of the United States," 6: 9.

⁵⁴ Adams, "A Defence of the Constitutions of Government of the United States," 4: 295.

as I ought to do, can touch my life, my liberty, or my property. I have that inward and dignified consciousness of my own security and independence, which constitutes, and is the only thing which does constitute, the proud and comfortable sentiment of freedom in the human breast.”⁵⁵ Consequently, liberty is the outcome of long-standing social development, a category aligned with the nature of a particular community and the freedoms of others. Liberty and power exist side by side, bound together in such a way that one cannot be without the other. Hence, it does not suffice for liberty to be only “connected with order; and that not only exists with order and virtue but cannot exist at all without them. It inheres in good and steady government, as in its substance and vital principle.”⁵⁶ He believed in natural rights, but any attempt at defining them must have culminated for Burke in the disaster of abstraction.

CONCLUSIONS

Let us then try to answer the initial question about John Adams’ ideological affiliation. Naturally, like any empirical doctrine, it is replete with ambiguities as well as occasional contradictions. However, in light of the above, it can hardly be considered a conservative doctrine in the sense attributed, for instance, to the reflection of Burke’s, the most eminent figure of European conservative thought. Thus, Adams does not revere the antiquity and *ancientness* of institutions, as their claim to legitimacy is altogether different, whereas old age and prescription do not inspire his respect. If something different is the case, it is only because it corroborates his philosophical propositions and justifies the validity of his argument through practice. As an enemy of monarchy and aristocracy, Adams thus found himself in the mainstream of contemporary American thought, which was in opposition to European conservatism. Furthermore, the most significant aspect is that Burke, like every conservative of the period, adopted a pessimistic attitude or, like de Maistre—living amidst the ruins—placed his last hope in God’s grace and some unspecified event that would change the face of the world after the collapse. Meanwhile, all that can be done is to defend the last enclaves of Tradition and the old world from the revolutionary deluge. Adams took a thoroughly opposite approach. One has to remember that in his youth he had been a revolutionary, though, of course, in a different sense to that which the term revolution acquired in the wake of events in the Paris revolt of 1789 and subsequent years. On the other hand, he was a realist and pragmatist, who realized that revolution had to be followed by a period in which a new political order was built. Even so, being one of its main architects, he

⁵⁵ Edmund Burke, “On the Reform of the Representation in the House of Commons,” in *The Works of the R.H. Edmund Burke* (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1856), 6: 151.

⁵⁶ Burke, *An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs*, 35.

did not avail himself of the building blocks originating with the French *literati* and their American admirers but took advantage of the material prepared much earlier, namely by the classical republican tradition, which was much more conservative than French republican thought. For this reason, his ideas sometimes ran parallel to those of Burke, though only coincidentally, as it were. For while the Irishman was intransigent in his fight against the Enlightenment, the second President considered himself its child, aspiring to implement the postulations of Enlightenment in a responsible and balanced manner, steering as clear from utopia as possible (incidentally, Burke also drew abundantly on the achievements of the Scottish Enlightenment, but sought to highlight its conservative themes). Instead of impeding political progress (a category alien to conservative thought), he wanted to channel it in the desired direction, to spare America the fate of France. Thus, nearing the end of his days, the embittered and pessimistic Burke ordered his ashes to be scattered so that the Jacobins would not defile his remains, whereas Adams wrote in a letter to David Sewall: "We shall leave the world with many consolations. It is better than we found it. Superstition, persecution, and bigotry are somewhat abated; governments are a little ameliorated; science and literature are greatly improved, and more widely spread. Our country has brilliant and exhilarating prospects before it, instead of that solemn gloom in which many of the former parts of our lives have been obscured. The condition of your State, I hope, has been improved by its separation from ours, though we scarcely know how to get along without you."⁵⁷ I am not convinced that these are the words of a conservative, as they rather befit a republican with the sensibility of a classical liberal. The fact that Adams was not a democrat does not make him a conservative in the least unless it is all it takes to be one in the United States.

Summary: The purpose of the chapter is to answer the question of whether John Adams' political thought placed him in the conservative, liberal, or republican trend. The main problem analyzed in the chapter concerns the essential elements of John Adams' political reflections, such as the intellectual inspirations of the second president of the United States, his concept of human nature, his analysis of the structure of political society, and the mechanics of the political system. These are presented from the point of view of the uniquely American social and political experience. The scientific analysis consists of reflecting on the key elements of John Adams' social and political philosophy from the perspective of conservatism, liberalism, and republicanism. This allows us to conclude that the fundamental categories that define these three styles of political thinking in Europe cannot be directly applied to American conditions. The chapter argues that despite the fundamental differences between the American and European political traditions, John Adams' thought is not conservative

⁵⁷ John Adams, "To David Sewall, Quincy, 22 May, 1821," in *The Works of John Adams, Second President of the United States*, 10: 399.

in nature, but much closer to neo-Roman republicanism and the classical pre-liberal and liberal traditions. The chapter shows how the study of political categories must always be conducted in the context of a particular political and social tradition and political experience.

Keywords: the Founding Fathers, John Adams, conservatism, republicanism, liberalism

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