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Gordon S. Wood's influential essay "**Classical Republicanism and the American Revolution**" examines how the political ideology of the eighteenth century—particularly neo-classical, civic humanist, and republican traditions—influenced the origins, arguments, and outcomes of the American Revolution. Wood argues that the Revolution cannot be fully understood without grasping the deep intellectual commitments of the period: commitments to virtue, the public good, fear of corruption, and a belief that liberty existed only within particular social and political conditions. These commitments shaped how Americans perceived British actions, how they justified rebellion, and ultimately how they attempted to build new governments after independence.

The essay's central claim is that **republican ideology was not peripheral but foundational** to colonial political consciousness. Rather than being driven primarily by economic self-interest or proto-liberal individualism, early American revolutionary thought reflected an older, classically inspired view of politics that emphasized the fragility of liberty and the constant threat of corruption. Classical republicanism provided a moral and conceptual framework that made British imperial policies appear not as isolated administrative disputes but as existential threats to a way of life grounded in civic virtue and balanced constitutionalism.

I. Intellectual Foundations: The Classical Republican Tradition

Wood begins by situating the colonists within a long-standing tradition of political thought stretching back to antiquity, particularly the writings of **Cicero, Polybius, Aristotle**, and later Renaissance and early modern thinkers such as **Machiavelli, Harrington**, and the republicans of

seventeenth-century England. This tradition stressed several interconnected themes:

1. Virtue as the Foundation of Free Government

Classical republicanism taught that republics depended on the moral qualities of their citizens. Liberty was not simply the absence of external restraint but rather a condition sustained by **virtue**, self-sacrifice, and devotion to the common good. A republic's health depended on preventing private interest, factionalism, and luxury from eroding public spirit.

2. Corruption as the Ever-Present Danger

Republican thinkers believed societies followed a cyclical pattern: they rose from simplicity and virtue, reached refinement, then descended into corruption and tyranny. Corruption did not only mean bribery or wrongdoing; it meant the decay of civic virtue and the intrusion of private, selfish motives into public life. Luxury, standing armies, monopolies, and executive overreach all signaled corruption.

3. Liberty Preserved Through Balanced Government

A mixed or balanced constitution—combining monarchical, aristocratic, and democratic elements—was the ideal way to maintain liberty. Balance prevented any one group from dominating and kept government responsive to the common good. For the colonists, the British constitution was long admired as the best historical example of such mixed government.

Wood emphasizes that these ideas were not abstract theory. They constituted the **common political language** of the eighteenth-century Atlantic world. Colonial pamphleteers, merchants, clergy, and legislators all drew intuitively on these concepts, making classical republicanism the “grammar” of political argument.

II. The British Empire and American Perceptions of Decline

Wood explains that before the imperial crisis, Americans saw themselves as part of a stable constitutional order. But beginning in the 1760s, they detected signs of corruption in Britain: rising debt, patronage, centralization, taxation schemes, and reliance on standing armies. Policies such as the **Stamp Act**, the **Townshend Duties**, and coercive measures after the Boston Tea Party were interpreted through the lens of republican ideology.

1. The Sense of British Corruption and Decline

Colonists believed Britain was undergoing a moral and civic decay similar to the Roman Empire. The ministry seemed increasingly controlled by court influence, aristocratic self-interest, and political patronage. Writers warned that Britain had entered the degenerative stage of the classical cycle—luxurious, overextended, and ripe for tyranny.

2. Threats to the Balance of the Constitution

American pamphleteers argued that Parliament had exceeded its traditional role in seeking to tax and regulate the colonies without representation. This was not seen as a technical violation but as evidence that the delicate balance of the English constitution was failing. A corrupt Parliament, unchecked by the crown or the people, threatened liberty for the entire empire.

3. Standing Armies and the Fear of Militarization

The stationing of British troops in North America confirmed republican fears. Standing armies were historically associated with the destruction of freedom; they signaled that civil authority was collapsing and military coercion was replacing civic consensus.

Through this ideological lens, the colonists saw imperial actions not as misunderstandings but as part of a broader pattern of corruption that endangered their own republican way of life. Thus, the Revolution emerged not only from grievances but from a deep belief in the necessity of preserving a constitutional order rooted in virtue and liberty.

III. Republican Rhetoric and the Justification of Revolution

Wood argues that classical republicanism provided the colonists with a coherent framework for interpreting events and justifying resistance. This rhetoric emphasized **self-sacrifice**, **public virtue**, and **the defense of liberty against corruption**.

1. The People as Guardians of Liberty

Americans increasingly portrayed themselves as the last bastion of virtue within the British Empire. While Britain succumbed to luxury and corruption, the colonies—simpler, more agrarian, less hierarchical—seemed closer to the ideal republican society. This self-understanding gave Americans a sense of moral mission.

2. Resistance as an Expression of Virtue

Revolutionary leaders insisted that resisting imperial tyranny was not merely a matter of convenience or interest but a civic duty. Pamphleteers

argued that passive submission would be an act of corruption. Only the virtuous citizen, willing to sacrifice for the common good, could defend liberty.

3. The Language of Conspiracy and the Fear of Tyranny

Because republican ideology stressed the fragility of liberty, colonists interpreted British measures as part of a calculated conspiracy to enslave them. Even minor acts were woven into a narrative of tyranny. Wood notes that this conspiratorial thinking was not irrational but a logical consequence of their ideological framework, which predisposed them to see liberty as perpetually threatened.

Through these arguments, classical republicanism transformed the colonial crisis into a moral drama: virtuous Americans defending an endangered constitutional tradition against a corrupt and declining imperial center.

IV. The Republican Transformation of American Political Culture

Wood stresses that the Revolution was not only an act of resistance but the catalyst for a profound transformation in American political culture. Once independence was declared, republican ideology shaped the design of new governments and the redefinition of political authority.

1. From Monarchy to Republicanism

Breaking with monarchy required more than removing a king. Americans had to rethink political legitimacy. Without hereditary authority, government had to rest on the sovereignty of the people. This shift accelerated the democratizing tendencies of the period.

2. Virtue and the Problem of Scale

Republican theorists long believed that republics had to be small to maintain virtue. The United States posed an unprecedented problem: Could a large, diverse society sustain republican government? This question preoccupied political thinkers throughout the 1780s and 1790s and shaped the debates over the Constitution.

3. The Debate Over Institutional Design

Republican ideology drove the push for annual elections, rotation in office, and limits on executive power. But it also fueled worries about factionalism and private interest. These concerns eventually led some thinkers, including Madison, to reinterpret or revise classical republican concepts in order to justify a stronger federal government capable of moderating factions and maintaining stability.

4. The Social Consequences of Republicanism

The Revolution democratized social relations. Hierarchical deference declined; ordinary citizens gained political voice; public virtue became a widespread expectation rather than an aristocratic ideal. The rejection of monarchy also encouraged moral and cultural shifts—greater emphasis on education, civic engagement, and moral improvement.

Wood argues that even as American political thought evolved toward more modern, liberal, and interest-based models, **classical republicanism left an enduring imprint**: a suspicion of power, a belief in civic responsibility, and an ideal of public virtue.

V. Classical Republicanism's Limits and the Emergence of a New Political Order

Wood acknowledges that while classical republicanism was powerful, it ultimately proved insufficient for governing a large, commercial republic. Its emphasis on virtue and fear of self-interest did not fully account for the realities of social diversity, economic ambition, and political pluralism.

1. The Rise of Liberal and Pluralist Ideas

By the 1780s, American thinkers such as Madison began to articulate a more modern conception of politics. They argued that self-interest was inherent and could be managed, not eradicated. Factions were inevitable and could be balanced in a large republic.

2. The Constitution as a Departure from Classical Republicanism

The 1787 Constitution created a stronger central government than classical republican theory typically permitted. It institutionalized checks and balances, a large republic, and mechanisms to channel competing interests—all innovations that signaled a shift from moralistic to structural solutions.

3. Persistence of Republican Rhetoric

Even after the rise of liberal ideas, republican language remained potent. Americans continued to speak of virtue, corruption, liberty, and the public good well into the nineteenth century. The classical tradition thus provided a moral vocabulary that shaped political culture long after formal theory had evolved.

Conclusion

Gordon S. Wood's "Classical Republicanism and the American Revolution" presents a compelling interpretation of the Revolution as a profoundly ideological event. Classical republicanism—rooted in ancient political thought and adapted through Renaissance and English traditions—provided the intellectual framework through which Americans interpreted imperial policy, justified rebellion, and attempted to construct a new political order.

Wood's analysis highlights several key contributions:

1. **Republican ideology unified political, moral, and social concerns** and gave coherence to the revolutionary movement.
2. **The fear of corruption and devotion to civic virtue** shaped both resistance to Britain and post-independence institutional design.
3. **The Revolution triggered a complex transformation**, moving Americans from classical republicanism toward a more modern, liberal, interest-based political understanding.
4. **Even as newer theories emerged**, classical republican values left an enduring legacy in American political culture.

Ultimately, Wood demonstrates that the American Revolution cannot be understood merely as a struggle for independence or material advantage; it was a profound ideological effort to preserve and reimagine the principles of republican liberty in a world perceived to be threatened by corruption and tyranny.

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CLASSICAL REPUBLICANISM AND THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

GORDON S. WOOD*

Republicanism was the ideology of the American Revolution, and as such it became the source of much of what we Americans still believe, the source of many of our noblest ideals and most persistent values. Indeed, republicanism is today so much taken for granted that it is difficult for us to appreciate its once revolutionary character. We live in a world in which almost all states purport to be republican; even those few states such as Britain or Sweden that remain monarchies are more republican in fact than some others that claim to be in theory. But in the eighteenth century most governments were monarchies, and republicanism was their enemy.

It is not surprising, therefore, that when eighteenth-century Americans and Frenchmen alike revolted against royal authority, they chose to replace monarchy with republicanism. The late eighteenth century in the Atlantic world has been called "the age of the democratic revolution." It might better be called "the age of the republican revolution." For it was eighteenth-century republicanism that ultimately destroyed the monarchy that had dominated Europe for centuries.

But it did not happen at one moment—neither in 1776 with the Declaration of Independence, nor in 1789 with the calling of the French Estates General, nor even in 1793 with the execution of Louis XVI. Republicanism did not replace monarchy all at once; it ate away at it, corroded it, slowly, gradually, steadily, for much of the eighteenth century. Republicanism seeped everywhere in the eighteenth-century Atlantic world, eroding monarchical society from within, wearing away all the traditional supports of kingship, ultimately desacralizing monarchy to the point where, as David Hume observed, "the mere name of king commands little respect; and to talk of a king as God's vice-regent upon earth, or to give him any of these magnificent titles which formerly dazzled mankind, would but excite laughter in everyone."¹

So confused and blended did monarchy and republicanism become

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1. Hume, *Of the Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences*, in *ESSAYS: MORAL, POLITICAL, AND LITERARY* 51 (E. Miller ed. 1985); see also Colley, *The Apotheosis of George III: Loyalty, Royalty and the British Nation, 1760-1820*, 102 *PAST AND PRESENT* 94-129 (1984).

in the eighteenth century that people, especially in the English-speaking world, had trouble defining them precisely. Republicanism, in particular, assumed a wide range of meanings and, as Alexander Hamilton said, was "used in various senses."² By the early nineteenth century John Adams professed to believe that he had "never understood" what republicanism was, and thought that "no other man ever did or ever will."³ He concluded in frustration that republicanism "may signify any thing, every thing, or nothing."⁴ And so it did, becoming at times virtually indistinguishable from monarchy. Certainly it stood for something other than a set of political institutions based on popular election. In fact, republicanism was not to be reduced to a mere form of government at all; instead it was what Franco Venturi has called "a form of life," ideals and values entirely compatible with monarchical institutions.⁵ Republicanism "was separated from the historical forms it had taken in the past, and became increasingly an ideal which could exist in a monarchy."⁶

Promoting republicanism as an actual form of government was of course forbidden in that monarchical world. No one in his right mind dared suggest deposing kings and replacing them with republican governments. That was dangerous, seditious, and treasonous.⁷ Besides, few who believed in republicanism actually intended to foment revolution and overthrow monarchy. The self-proclaimed republics in Europe—the Swiss cantons, the Italian city-states, and the Dutch provinces—were scarcely fit models for the sprawling monarchies of Europe. And no one wanted to try the disastrous seventeenth-century English experiment in republican government again.

True, the intellectuals and critics who invoked republican principles and sentiments were opposed to the practices and values of the dominant monarchical world. But they sought to reform and revitalize their society; they wanted to enlighten and improve monarchy, not cut off the heads of kings. These critics and many others—including good loyal colonial subjects of His Britannic Majesty—used republicanism merely as a counterculture to monarchy. Though rarely cited specifically by name, republicanism represented all those beliefs and values that confronted

2. Hamilton, *quoted in* G. STOURZH, *ALEXANDER HAMILTON AND THE IDEA OF REPUBLICAN GOVERNMENT* 44 (1970).

3. Letter from John Adams to Mercy Warren (July 20, 1807), *MASS. HIST. SOC'Y*, 4 *COLLECTIONS* 353 (5th Ser. 1878).

4. Letter from John Adams to J. H. Tiffany (Apr. 30, 1819), *reprinted in* 10 *WORKS OF JOHN ADAMS* 378 (C. Adams ed. 1854).

5. F. VENTURI, *UTOPIA AND REFORM IN THE ENLIGHTENMENT* 71 (1971).

6. *Id.* at 62.

7. Adams, *Republicanism In Political Rhetoric Before 1776*, 1970 *POL. SCI. Q.* 397-421.

and criticized the corruption and abuses of the eighteenth century monarchical world.

But republicanism was no less revolutionary for all that. In fact, it was in every way a radical ideology—as radical for the eighteenth century as Marxism was to be for the nineteenth century. It challenged the primary assumptions and practices of monarchy—its hierarchy, its inequality, its devotion to kinship, its patriarchy, its patronage, and its dependency. It offered new conceptions of the individual, the family, the state, and the individual's relationship to the family, the state, and other individuals. Indeed, republicanism offered nothing less than new ways of organizing society. It defied and dissolved the older monarchical connections and presented people with alternative kinds of attachments, new sorts of social relationships. It transformed monarchical culture and prepared the way for the revolutionary upheavals at the end of the eighteenth century.

Many like Adam Smith believed that all governments in the world could be reduced to just two—monarchies and republics—and that these were rooted in two basic types of personalities: monarchists who loved peace and order, and republicans who loved liberty and independence. Late in his life, Jefferson likewise thought that all people by nature could be divided into just two parties. They existed in all countries, he said, whether called tories and whigs, aristocrats and democrats, right and left, ultras and radicals, or serviles and liberals. Jefferson left no doubt where his own sympathies lay: “the sickly, weakly, timid man, fears the people, and is a tory by nature. The healthy, strong and bold, cherishes them, and is formed a whig by nature.”⁸

But most intellectuals in the mid-eighteenth century never tried to distinguish between monarchy and republicanism as sharply as Jefferson did. Instead, they often discussed monarchy and republicanism as governments that mingled with and reinforced one another. David Hume thought that as perfect as the monarchical form may have appeared to some political leaders, “it owes all its perfection to the republican.”⁹ It was not possible for a pure despotism established among a barbarous people to refine and polish itself. “It must borrow its laws and methods, and institutions, and consequently its stability and order, from free governments. These advantages,” said Hume, “are the sole growth of repub-

8. Letter from Thomas Jefferson to Marquis de Lafayette (Nov. 4, 1823), reprinted in 10 THE WRITINGS OF THOMAS JEFFERSON 281 (P. Ford ed. 1892-99).

9. Hume, *Of the Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences*, in ESSAYS: MORAL, POLITICAL, AND LITERARY 125 (E. Miller ed. 1985).

lics.”¹⁰ Such statements by a variety of intellectual figures helped to make republicanism a common and integral part of the dominant monarchical culture.

It was Montesquieu, however, (“the most comprehensive and piercing genius of his age,” the Rev. Thomas Robbins of Massachusetts called him¹¹) who most systematically and comparatively set forth the principles of monarchy and republicanism for that enlightened age. Although Montesquieu’s ideal models of government were sometimes overly rigid and his moral and social prescriptions for each type of government sometimes meticulously specific (“The less luxury there is in a republic, the more it is perfect”¹²; “As honor is the principle of a monarchical government, the laws ought to be in relation to this principle”¹³), his aphoristic treatise, *The Spirit of the Laws*, comprehensively weighed the advantages and disadvantages of monarchies and republics, described the adhesive forces of each, and suggested that most modern governments were mixtures of both to one degree or another.

Most European readers of *The Spirit of the Laws*, even those who lived in the France of Louis XV and Louis XVI, could readily conclude that their societies shared in the spirit of both monarchy and republicanism. Had not Montesquieu himself previously written (in his *Persian Letters* of 1721) that there were no pure monarchies left in Europe? Surely monarchies like that of France could benefit from some further infusion of republican principles. Montesquieu and others even implied that France might borrow something from the balanced constitution of the English monarchy; that is, it might become more republican.

I. ENGLISH POLITICAL LIFE

The English constitution was by far the most republican of the monarchies of Europe. Already by the beginning of the century the English monarchy had lost much of its sacredness. The man-made dynastic alterations of 1688 and 1714 and the rationalizing of religion inevitably weakened the sense of hereditary mystique, and Parliament’s limiting of the crown’s prerogatives and finances damaged the king’s independent dignity.¹⁴ None of the Hanoverian monarchs before the American Revolution ever achieved more than a fleeting popularity. Neither

10. *Id.*

11. Diary entry of Thomas Robbins (July 31, 1791), reprinted in 1 DIARY OF THOMAS ROBBINS, D.D. 1796-1854, at 38 (I. Tarbox ed. 1886).

12. 7 C. MONTESQUIEU, THE SPIRIT OF THE LAWS, ch. 2 at 97 (F. Neumann ed. 1949).

13. 5 C. MONTESQUIEU, THE SPIRIT OF THE LAWS, ch. 9, at 53 (F. Neumann ed. 1949).

14. Colley, *supra* note 1, at 94-129.

George I nor George II seemed to care about the monarchy's public image, and both kings tended to avoid displaying the trappings of royalty. It was not easy for the English populace to get very excited about them, and more often than not London crowds treated the monarchy in public with less respect than they would pay to it in the nineteenth century. It was as if George I, by abolishing the royal touch, had begun a steady process of desacralizing the English crown. It reached the point where radical whigs like "Cato" could describe the king as being no different from the mayor of a town: "they are both Civil Officers."¹⁵

The English thought they lived in a republicanized monarchy, and they were right. Their famous "limited" or "mixed" monarchy was in fact a republicanized one. The English kings, it was said, were not typical kings. Far from being traditional power-hungry monarchs, the English kings were "the Scourges of Tyrants, and the Assertors of Liberty."¹⁶ They were "beloved by a nation of Freemen and Heroes," and they, like their people, aspired after "those brighter Trophies that are earn'd in the Paths of Virtue and heroic Deeds."¹⁷ The British king was the ultimate disinterested republican leader, the "sovereign umpire" of the realm.¹⁸

Nearly everyone agreed that the mixture of republicanism in the English constitution was a crucial source of its strength. Some Englishmen were even willing to admit openly that the English constitution was republican. Thomas Wentworth in 1710 said that "King, lords, and commons, each a check upon the other," was "calculated for the good of the whole," which meant "that it may more properly be called a commonwealth than a monarchy."¹⁹ The English constitution was judged by republican standards. Each part of the triad of king, lords, and commons was praised for its independence, and any loss of that independence was widely condemned as corruption, particularly when the crown gained power at the expense of the commons. Radical whigs were full of praise of republicanism. Trenchard and Gordon were certain "that our Government is a Thousand Degrees nearer akin to a Commonwealth (any sort of Commonwealth now subsisting or that ever did subsist in the World) than it is to absolute Monarchy."²⁰ James Burgh went further in

15. 2 CATO'S LETTERS; OR ESSAYS ON LIBERTY, CIVIL AND RELIGIOUS, AND OTHER IMPORTANT SUBJECTS 25 (J. Trenchard & T. Gordon, reprinted 1969) (3d ed. 1733).

16. W. LIVINGSTON, THE INDEPENDENT REFLECTOR OR WEEKLY ESSAYS ON SUNDRY IMPORTANT SUBJECTS 81 (M. Klein ed. 1963).

17. *Id.* at 80-81.

18. J. MARSTON, KING AND CONGRESS: THE TRANSFER OF POLITICAL LEGITIMACY, 1774-1776, at 27 (1987).

19. F. VENTURI, *supra* note 5, at 63.

20. J. Trenchard & T. Gordon, *supra* note 15, at 28.

his celebration of republicanism and even suggested that the English people had a sovereign right to establish a republic if they wished.²¹ Many Britons agreed with Adam Smith's reputed view that for the English constitution "a commonwealth" was the "platform for monarchy."²²

Republicanism did not belong only to the margins, to the extreme right or left, of English political life. Monarchical and republican values existed side-by-side in the culture, and many good monarchists and many good English Tories adopted what were in substance, if not in name, republican ideals and principles without realizing the long-run political implications of what they were doing. Although they seldom mentioned the term, educated people of varying political persuasions celebrated republicanism for its spirit, its morality, its freedom, its sense of friendship and duty, and its vision of society. Republicanism as a set of values and a form of life was much too pervasive, comprehensive, and involved with being liberal and enlightened to be seen as subversive or as anti-monarchical.

This republican tradition, therefore, was not some thin eddy that ran only on the edges of European culture. Rather, it was an important current in its own right that blended and mingled with the monarchical mainstream and influenced its color, tone, and direction. Eighteenth-century republicanism did not so much displace monarchy as transform it. Republicanism was never a besieged underground ideology, confined to cellar meetings and marginal intellectuals. On the contrary: there were no more enthusiastic promoters of republicanism than many members of the English and French nobility, who were presumably closest to monarchy and who depended upon it for their status. All those French nobles who, in 1785, flocked to the Paris salon to ooh and ah over Jacques-Louis David's severe classical painting *The Oath of the Horatii* had no idea they were contributing to the weakening of monarchy and their own demise.²³ Nor did all those aristocrats who, in 1786, applauded Mozart's *Marriage of Figaro*, with its celebration of humanist and egalitarian values, believe that they were espousing republicanism and undermining monarchy.²⁴ Likewise, all those aristocratic sponsors of the 1730 edition of James Thompson's whiggish poem *The Seasons*—including "the

21. 1 J. BURGH, *POLITICAL DISQUISITIONS: OR, AN ENQUIRY INTO PUBLIC ERRORS, DEFECTS, AND ABUSES* 9 (London 1774-1775); 2 J. BURGH, *supra*, at 18; 3 J. BURGH, *supra*, at 173, 277, 425.

22. Forbes, *Skeptical Whiggism, Commerce, and Liberty*, in *ESSAYS ON ADAM SMITH* 195 (A. Skinner & T. Wilson ed. 1975); see also Sheps, *The American Revolution and the Transformation of English Republicanism*, in 2 *HISTORICAL REFLECTIONS* 3-28 (1975).

23. S. SCHAMA, *CITIZENS: A CHRONICLE OF THE FRENCH REVOLUTION* 172 (1989).

24. P. ROBINSON, *OPERA AND IDEAS: FROM MOZART TO STRAUSS* 8-57 (1985).

queen, ten dukes, thirty-one earls and countesses, and a larger number of the lesser peerage" and their sons and daughters—little sensed that they were contributing to the erosion of the values that made their dominance possible.²⁵ "Radical chic" was not an invention of the twentieth century.

II. ENLIGHTENMENT

In essence, republicanism was the ideology of the Enlightenment. If the Enlightenment was, as Peter Gay has called it, "the rise of modern paganism," then classical republicanism was its creed.²⁶ In the eighteenth century to be enlightened was to be interested in antiquity, and to be interested in antiquity was to be interested in republicanism. Certainly classical antiquity could offer meaningful messages for monarchy too, but there is no doubt that the thrust of what the ancient world had to say to the eighteenth century was latently and at times manifestly republican.

All the ancient republics—Athens, Sparta, Thebes—were familiar to educated people in the eighteenth century—their names had "grown trite by repetition," said one American—but none was more familiar than Rome.²⁷ People could not hear enough about it. "It is impossible," said Montesquieu, "to be tired of so agreeable a subject as ancient Rome."²⁸ The eighteenth century was particularly fascinated by the writings of the golden age of Roman literature—"the First Enlightenment," as Peter Gay has called it—the two centuries from the breakdown of the republic in the middle of the first century B.C. to the reign of Marcus Aurelius in the middle of the second century A.D.²⁹

These Roman writers—Cicero, Virgil, Sallust, Tacitus, among others—set forth republican ideals and values about politics and society that have had a powerful and lasting effect on Western culture.³⁰ These classical ideals and values were revived and refurbished by the Italian Renaissance—becoming what has been variously called "civic humanism" or "classical republicanism"—and were carried into early modern Europe and made available to wider and deeper strata of the population.

25. J. BARRELL, *THE DARK SIDE OF THE LANDSCAPE: THE RURAL POOR IN ENGLISH PAINTING, 1730-1840*, at 7 (1980).

26. P. GAY, *THE ENLIGHTENMENT: AN INTERPRETATION: THE RISE OF MODERN PAGANISM* (1966).

27. G. WOOD, *THE CREATION OF THE AMERICAN REPUBLIC, 1776-1787*, at 51 (1969).

28. 9 C. MONTESQUIEU, *THE SPIRIT OF THE LAWS*, ch. 13, at 167 (F. Numann ed. 1949).

29. B. BAILYN, *THE IDEOLOGICAL ORIGINS OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION* 25 (1967); see also P. GAY, *supra* note 26, at 109.

30. H. PARKER, *THE CULT OF ANTIQUITY AND THE FRENCH REVOLUTIONARIES* 22-23 (1937).

By the eighteenth century monarchical culture was thoroughly infused with these classical values and to that extent at least was republicanized.³¹

Of course, Englishmen subscribed to these classical republican values with varying degrees of intensity, and the term "republican" remained pejorative, something to hang on the head of an opponent in order to damage his credibility, if not his loyalty to the crown. Nevertheless, what is remarkable is the extent to which the thinking of eighteenth-century educated Englishmen on both sides of the Atlantic was republicanized in substance, if not in name. Many Englishmen were quick to respond as the editor of the South Carolina Gazette, Peter Timothy, did in 1749 when he was denounced as a republican for publishing *Cato's Letters*: he was not a "Republican," Timothy said, "unless Virtue and Truth be Republicans."³² These antique republican ideals became the best means by which dissatisfied Britons everywhere could criticize the luxury, selfishness, and corruption of the monarchical world in which they lived.

The literature of the first half of the eighteenth century in Great Britain—both belles lettres and political polemics—was at heart a literature of social criticism; and this social criticism was steeped in classical republican values. Most English writers of the period—whether tory satirists like Pope and Swift or radical whig publicists like Trenchard and Gordon—expressed a deep and bitter hostility to the great social, economic, and political changes taking place in England during the decades following the Glorious Revolution of 1688. The rise of banks, trading companies, and stock markets, plus the emergence of new moneyed men, the increasing public debt, and the corruption of politics all threatened traditional values and led opposition poets and polemicists alike to set classical models and morality against the spreading commercialization.³³

Classical republican Rome, like some South Sea tribes for twentieth-century anthropologists, became the means by which enlightened eighteenth-century Englishmen could distance themselves from their own society and criticize it. Gibbon admired Juvenal because the Roman

31. J. POCOCK, *THE MACHIAVELLIAN MOMENT: FLORENTINE POLITICAL THOUGHT AND THE ATLANTIC REPUBLICAN TRADITION* (1975).

32. South Carolina Gazette, July 29, 1749, *quoted in* H. COHEN, *THE SOUTH CAROLINA GAZETTE, 1732-1775*, at 218 (1953).

33. C. ROBBINS, *THE EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY COMMONWEALTHMAN: STUDIES IN THE TRANSMISSION, DEVELOPMENT, AND CIRCUMSTANCE OF ENGLISH LIBERAL THOUGHT FROM THE RESTORATION OF CHARLES II UNTIL THE WAR WITH THE THIRTEEN COLONIES* (1959); *see also* I. KRAMNICK, *BOLINGBROKE AND HIS CIRCLE: THE POLITICS OF NOSTALGIA IN THE AGE OF WALPOLE* (1968).

satirist refused to surrender his republican ideals in the face of monarchical realities. He had, said Gibbon, "the soul of a republican" and was "the sworn enemy of tyranny."³⁴ Thus Dr. Johnson found that the best way to condemn the corruption of eighteenth-century London was to imitate Juvenal's third satire on Nero's Rome.³⁵

So pervasive, so dominant, was this literature of social criticism that it is difficult to find anything substantial that stood against it. All the great eighteenth-century British writers spoke in republican tones. The long administration of Sir Robert Walpole (1722-1742) eventually united in intellectual opposition all of what William Pulteney called "the *gay*, the *polite*, and *witty Part of the World*"; and that opposition, whether the tory John Gay in the *Beggars Opera* or the whig James Thompson in his poem *Liberty*, inevitably drew on classical republican values to voice its love of freedom and its antagonism to corruption.³⁶ Hume in 1742 thought that more than half of what had been written during the previous twenty years had been devoted to satirizing the machination of Walpole, the figure who seemed most responsible for what ailed Britain.³⁷ One administration defender in 1731 concluded that, simply for the sake of getting at Walpole, "the *whole Nation* hath been abused, Corruption and Degeneracy universally charged."³⁸ All the country-opposition citations to Roman writers were moral strictures against a polluted court and a despotic monarchy; and as such they were often unwitting celebrations of republican values.

In fact, most of the eighteenth century's invocations of classical antiquity became covert championings of republicanism. Although some Englishmen in the late seventeenth century had found in the age of Augustus a model of restored stability where the arts were allowed to flourish, after 1688 most Englishmen, even aristocrats close to the court, criticized Augustus and looked to the Roman Republic for values and inspiration. Cicero and Cato, not Augustus, were the Romans to be admired. To Voltaire, Augustus was "*ce poltron qui osa exiler Ovide*."³⁹ Augustus, Montesquieu said, had led the Romans "gently into Slavery,"

34. 2 GIBBON, *DECLINE AND FALL OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE* 103-04 (Modern Liberty ed., n.d.), quoted in H. WEINBROT, *AUGUSTUS CAESAR IN "AUGUSTAN" ENGLAND: THE DECLINE OF A CLASSICAL NORM* 165 (1978).

35. W. JACKSON BATE, *SAMUEL JOHNSON* 171-72 (1975).

36. B. GOLDAR, *WALPOLE AND THE WITS: THE RELATION OF POLITICS TO LITERATURE, 1722-1743*, at 135 (1976).

37. *Id.* at 3.

38. *Id.* at 26.

39. W. GRANT, *NEO-LATIN LITERATURE AND THE PASTORAL* 255 (1965) (Translated "that spiritless coward who had the nerve to exile Ovid.").

and most Englishmen agreed.⁴⁰ Augustus became a code word for tyrant, and as such he was attacked by nearly everyone except royal absolutists.⁴¹ The tories, thinking of George I, called Augustus a despot, but the court whigs and all defenders of the Hanoverian settlement, thinking of the Stuarts, did likewise.⁴² From 1688 on, the need for the government to defend the whig settlement and to attack the Stuart pretensions to the crown meant that a quasi-republican, anti-royalist bias was necessarily built into the official center of English culture. During Walpole's era both court and country writers alike condemned Augustus as an imperial dictator, the murderer of Cicero, and the destroyer of the Republic.⁴³ From Addison to Dr. Johnson, English intellectuals expressed their admiration for Tacitus' anti-Augustan republican view of Roman history. Thomas Gordon originally dedicated his edition of Tacitus to Walpole, his patron, but the work so fully expressed a republican antagonism toward Augustus ("the best of his Government was but the sunshine of Tyranny") that it was celebrated by English commonwealthmen as well.⁴⁴ David Hume thought that even the tories had been "so long obliged to talk in the republican stile" that they had at length "embraced the sentiments as well as language of their adversaries."⁴⁵

III. CLASSICAL REPUBLICANISM-PUBLIC VIRTUE

These continual appeals to antiquity made anything other than a classical conception of governmental leadership all the more difficult to justify. It was almost always classical standards—Catoic and Ciceronian standards—that British opposition writers invoked to judge the ragged world of eighteenth-century politics. They placed the character of classical republicanism—integrity, virtue, and disinterestedness—at the center of public life. Whatever the partisan origins of a work like Richard Glover's *Leonidas* (1737), which contrasted the bravery and patriotism of the Spartan commander and his soldiers with the selfishness and corruption of Walpole and his followers, the repeated use of such classical models only led to the further spreading of republican ideals.⁴⁶ The civic republican tradition necessarily dominated political discussion in eighteenth-century Britain.

40. H. WEINBROT, *supra* note 34, at 223.

41. *Id.* at 53.

42. *Id.* at 62, 64.

43. *Id.* at 47-48.

44. *Id.* at 48.

45. E. Miller, *supra* note 9, at 72.

46. J. JOHNSON, *THE FORMATION OF ENGLISH NEO-CLASSICAL THOUGHT* 95-105 (1967); see also R. BROWNING, *POLITICAL AND CONSTITUTIONAL IDEAS OF THE COURT WHIGS* 5 (1982).

According to this classical tradition, man was by nature a political being, a citizen who achieved his greatest moral fulfillment by participating in a self-governing republic. Public or political liberty—or what we now call positive liberty—meant participation in government. And this political liberty in turn provided the means by which the personal liberty and private rights of the individual—what we today call negative liberty—were protected. In this classical republican tradition our modern distinction between positive and negative liberties was not yet clearly perceived, and the two forms of liberty were still often seen as one.⁴⁷ Liberty was realized when the citizens were virtuous, that is, willing to sacrifice their private interests for the sake of the community, including serving in public office without pecuniary rewards. This virtue could be found only in a republic of equal, active, and independent citizens. To be completely virtuous citizens, men (never women, because it was assumed they were never independent) had to be free from dependence, and from the petty interests of the marketplace. Any loss of independence and virtue was corruption.

The virtue that classical republicanism encouraged was public virtue. Private virtues such as prudence, frugality, and industry were important but, said Hume, they only made men “serviceable to themselves, and enable them to promote their own interest”; they were not “such as make them perform their part in society.”⁴⁸ Public virtue was the sacrifice of private desires and interests for the public interest. It was devotion to the commonweal. All men of genius and leisure, all gentlemen, had an obligation to serve the state. “Let not your love of Philosophical Amusements have more than its due Weight with you,” Benjamin Franklin admonished New York royal official Cadwallader Colden in 1750.⁴⁹ Public service was far more important than science. In fact, said Franklin, even “the finest” of Newton’s “Discoveries” could not have excused his neglect of serving the commonwealth if the public had needed him.⁵⁰

Republicanism thus put an enormous burden on individuals. They were expected to suppress their private wants and interests and inculcate disinterestedness—the term the eighteenth century most often used as a

47. Skinner, *The Idea of Negative Liberty: Philosophical and Historical Perspectives*, in *PHILOSOPHY IN HISTORY* 193-221 (R. Rorty ed. 1984); see also Ignatieff, *John Millar and Individualism*, in *WEALTH AND VIRTUE: THE SHAPING OF POLITICAL ECONOMY IN THE SCOTTISH ENLIGHTENMENT* 320-30 (I. Hont & M. Ignatieff eds. 1983).

48. D. HUME, *TREATISE ON HUMAN NATURE* 587 (L. Selby-Bigge & P. Nidditch eds. 1978).

49. Letter from Benjamin Franklin to Cadwallader Colden (Oct. 11, 1750), reprinted in *4 PAPERS OF BENJAMIN FRANKLIN* 68 (L. Labaree ed. 1959).

50. *Id.*

synonym for civic virtue: it better conveyed the increasing threats from interests that virtue now faced. Dr. Johnson defined disinterest as being "superior to regard of private advantage; not influenced by private profit."⁵¹ We today have lost most of this older meaning. Even some educated people now use disinterested as a synonym for uninterested, meaning indifferent or unconcerned. Perhaps we cannot quite conceive of the characteristic that disinterestedness describes: we cannot quite imagine someone who is capable of rising above private profit and private advantage and being unselfish and unbiased where a personal interest might be present.⁵²

Precisely because republics required civic virtue and disinterestedness among their citizens, they were very fragile polities, extremely liable to corruption. Republics demanded far more morally from their citizens than monarchies did of their subjects. In monarchies each man's desire to do what was right in his own eyes could be restrained by fear or force, by patronage or honor. In republics, however, each man must somehow be persuaded to sacrifice his personal desires, his luxuries, for the sake of the public good. Monarchies could tolerate great degrees of self-interestedness, private gratification, and corruption among their subjects. After all, they were based on dependence and subservience and had all sorts of adhesives and connections besides virtue to hold their societies together. Monarchies relied on blood, family, kinship, patronage, and ultimately fear, as one loyalist clergyman in western Massachusetts tried to make clear to several of his neighbors who were thinking of taking up arms against their king in 1775. Do not do it, the cleric warned. "The king can send a company of horse through the country and take off every head; and in less than six weeks you will be glad to labor a week for sheep's head and pluck."⁵³ But republics could never resort to such force. In their purest form they had no adhesives, no bonds holding themselves together, except their citizens' voluntary patriotism and willingness to obey public authority. Without virtue and self-sacrifice republics would fall apart.

Although set within a monarchical framework, these classical republican ideals established the foundations both for a liberal arts education and for political debate in the English-speaking world. The writings

51. JOHNSON, A DICTIONARY OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE (London 1755).

52. Wood, *Interests and Disinterestedness in the Making of the Constitution*, in *BEYOND CONFEDERATION: ORIGINS OF THE CONSTITUTION AND AMERICAN NATIONAL IDENTITY* 84 (R. Beeman ed. 1987).

53. G. NOBLES, *DIVISIONS THROUGHOUT THE WHOLE: POLITICS AND SOCIETY IN HAMPSHIRE COUNTY, MASSACHUSETTS, 1740-1775*, at 182 (1983).

of classical antiquity provided more than window-dressing for educated Englishmen on both sides of the Atlantic; they were in fact the principal source of their public morality and values. Political leaders were held to ancient republican standards:

You then whose Judgment the right Course wou'd steer,
Know well each ANCIENT'S proper *Character*,
His *Fable*, *Subject*, *Scope* in ev'ry Page,
Religion, *Country*, *Genius*, of his Age.⁵⁴

So Alexander Pope told his countrymen, and nearly every gentleman agreed. Public morality was classical morality; people could not read enough about Cato and Cicero. Although Hume attempted to explain the need for corruption in the working of the British constitution, it was virtually impossible, especially in the North American colonies, for anyone to justify holding office simply as a means of selfish aggrandizement. Classical republican values forbade it. Good monarchists inevitably accepted, at least rhetorically, the civic humanist ideals of disinterested public leadership. Even royal governors at times denied "all pretension to Eminence or Distinction" in favor of what was more valuable—the cultivation of "those Virtues of a social Nature."⁵⁵

One did not have to be a professed republican or a radical whig to believe in virtue and the other classical values that accompanied it. Virtue, along with the concept of honor, lay at the heart of all prescriptions for political leadership in the eighteenth-century English-speaking world. Throughout the century Englishmen of all political persuasions—whigs and tories alike—struggled to find the ideal virtuous leader amid the rising and swirling currents of financial and commercial interests that threatened to engulf their society. Nothing enhanced William Pitt's reputation as the great patriot more than his pointed refusal in 1746 to profit from the perquisites of the traditionally lucrative office of paymaster of the forces.⁵⁶ Pitt was living proof of the possibility of disinterestedness—that a man could be a governmental leader and yet remain free of corruption.⁵⁷

If virtue were based on liberty and independence, then it followed that only autonomous individuals free from any ties of interest and paid

54. Pope, *An Essay on Criticism*, lines 118-21, in *POETRY AND PROSE OF ALEXANDER POPE* 41 (A. Williams ed. 1969).

55. *JOURNALS OF THE HOUSE OF BURGESSSES OF VIRGINIA, 1752-1755, 1756-1758*, at 4 (H. McIlwaine ed. 1909).

56. J. BREWER, *PARTY IDEOLOGY AND PARTY POLITICS AT THE ACCESSION OF GEORGE III*, at 97 (1976).

57. J. BREWER, *supra* note 56; see also Cable, *The Idea of a Patriot King in the Propaganda of the Opposition to Walpole, 1735-1739*, 18 *PHIL. Q.* 119-30 (1939).

by no master were qualified to be citizens. Jefferson and many other republican idealists hoped that all ordinary yeoman farmers who owned their own land and who depended for their subsistence only on "their own soil and industry" and not "on the casualties and caprice of customers" would be independent and free enough of pecuniary temptations and marketplace interests to be virtuous.⁵⁸

Others, however, questioned the capacity of most ordinary people to rise above self-interest, particularly those who were dependent on "the casualties and caprice of customers." Common people and others involved in the marketplace were usually overwhelmed by their interests and were incapable of disinterestedness. Yet, of course, they were not to be the leaders of the society. Although republicanism compared to monarchy rested on a magnanimous view of common people, it retained a traditional patrician bias in regard to officeholding. Many good whigs and republicans believed that important public offices, even including membership of grand juries, ought to be filled only with "the better sort because they are less liable to temptations, less fearful of the frowns of power, & may reasonabl[y] be supposed of more improved capacities than those of an inferior station."⁵⁹ People who had occupations, who needed to engage in the market, who worked with their hands, who were without a liberal education—such ordinary people could scarcely possess the enlightenment and disinterestedness to stand above the haggling of the marketplace and act as impartial umpires.

For many this disinterested leadership could only be located among the landed gentry whose income from the rents of tenants came to them, as Adam Smith said, without their exertion or direct involvement in the interests of the marketplace.⁶⁰ Merchants, unlike the landed gentry, gained their profits in the workaday world of interests and were considered to be necessarily motivated by avarice rather than by virtue.⁶¹ Even Smith believed that the interest of merchants and all who thought more "about the interest of their own particular branch of business, than about that of the society" was "always in some respects different from, and even opposite to, that of the public."⁶²

Perhaps only a classical education that made "ancient manners familiar," as Richard Jackson once told Benjamin Franklin, could "pro-

58. T. JEFFERSON, *NOTES ON THE STATE OF VIRGINIA* 165 (W. Penden ed. 1955).

59. R. Livingston, *quoted in* Friedman, *The Shaping of the Radical Consciousness in Provincial New York*, 56 J. AM. HIST. 786 (1970).

60. A. SMITH, 1 *WEALTH OF NATIONS* 265-67 (R. Campbell & A. Skinner ed. 1976).

61. R. Campbell & A. Skinner, *supra* note 60, at 266-67.

62. Micklus, *The History of the Tuesday Club: A Mock-Jeremiad of the Colonial South*, 40 WM. & MARY Q. 53 (3d Ser. 1983).

duce a reconciliation between disinterestedness and commerce; a thing we often see, but almost always in men of a liberal education."⁶³ Yet no matter how educated merchants were or how much leisure they managed for themselves, while they remained actively engaged in commerce, they could never quite acquire the character of genteel disinterestedness essential for full acceptance as political leaders. Lord George Germain expressed conventional wisdom in declaring that he "would not have men in [a] mercantile cast every day collecting themselves together and debating on political matters."⁶⁴ Consequently, those active merchants who wanted to participate in politics had great difficulty justifying their ambitions.

Mechanics and others who worked with their hands were thought servile and totally absorbed in their narrow occupations and thus unqualified for disinterested public office. Indeed, the very term "occupation" by which everyone except gentleman was designated meant being occupied and having no leisure for public service. Even members of the liberal professions, if they were too dependent on their work as a source of income, were regarded as ill-equipped for virtuous leadership. On the eve of the Revolution Virginians debated in the newspapers whether or not lawyers practiced "a grovelling, mercenary trade."⁶⁵ Although one critic conceded that lawyers constituted one of the "three genteel Professions," he argued that they were guilty of more "petit Larceny" than doctors and clergymen.⁶⁶ James Madison's college friend William Bradford was defensive about his decision to become a lawyer. He knew that the behavior of most lawyers was "reproachable," but he argued that they were at least different from merchants.⁶⁷ The sole pursuit of merchants was gain, and thus they were "much more likely to contract an inordinate desire of wealth than the Lawyers, whose pursuit is as much after fame as Wealth."⁶⁸ Madison, reluctant himself to choose a profession, was not convinced by his friend; but he did concede that the profession of law would at least allow Bradford to use the knowledge both of them had acquired at Princeton. A liberal education, he said, "is

63. Letter from Richard Jackson to Benjamin Franklin (June 17, 1755), *reprinted in* 6 PAPERS OF FRANKLIN 82 (Labaree ed. 1963).

64. Germain, *quoted in* E. WRIGHT, FRANKLIN OF PHILADELPHIA 166 (1986).

65. A. ROEBER, FAITHFUL MAGISTRATES AND REPUBLICAN LAWYERS: CREATORS OF VIRGINIA LEGAL CULTURE, 1680-1810, at 156 (1981).

66. *Id.* at 157.

67. Letter from William Bradford to James Madison, *reprinted in* 1 THE PAPERS OF JAMES MADISON 96 (W. Hutchinson & W. Rachel eds. 1962).

68. *Id.*

a sort of General Lover that woos all the Muses and Graces."⁶⁹

Eighteenth-century Englishmen were preoccupied with the moral character of their leaders precisely because leaders were the source of despotism. The very abilities that made patricians and gentry likely leaders also made them potential tyrants. "Men of great talents by nature and polish[ed] by Art" were no doubt necessary for all government.⁷⁰ But, said Nathanael Greene, in a common reckoning such accomplished men, especially if they had "a general Acquaintance with mankind," were as well "the most dangerous persons to be connected with unless"—and this qualification identified the crux of the whole republican tradition—"unless they steadily persevere in the practice of Virtue."⁷¹ Such men knew "the secret avenues to the human Heart and, having the power to make the worse appear the better," they had the capacity for ensnaring ordinary people in chains.⁷² "Ninety-nine parts out of one hundred of mankind, are ever inclined to live at peace, and cultivate a good understanding with each other."⁷³ Only members of "the remaining small part"—those whose "considerable abilities" were "joined to an intriguing disposition"—were "the real authors, advisers, and perpetrators of wars, treasons, and those other violences, which have, in all ages, more or less disgraced the annals of man."⁷⁴

Controlling and channeling the overweening passions of these extraordinary men—the aristocratic passions of avarice and ambition: "the Love of Power and the Love of Money," as Benjamin Franklin called them—seemed to many to be the central political problem of the age.⁷⁵ Some thought that "ambition and avarice are springs of action so utterly opposite, that they never did or ever will unite in the same person."⁷⁶ Others, however, were convinced not only that these two great passions "may subsist together in the same breast," but that when "united in View of the same Object, they have in many minds the most violent Effects. Place before the Eyes of such Men a Post of *Honour*, that shall at the same time be a Place of *Profit*, and they will move Heaven and Earth to

69. Letter from James Madison to William Bradford, *reprinted in* 1 THE PAPERS OF JAMES MADISON 96 (W. Hutchinson & W. Rachel eds. 1962).

70. Letter from Nathanael Greene to Samuel Ward (Apr. 1772), *reprinted in* 1 THE PAPERS OF GENERAL NATHANAEL GREENE 28 (R. Showman ed. 1976).

71. *Id.*

72. *Id.*

73. Wood, *Conspiracy and the Paranoid Style: Causality and Deceit in the Eighteenth Century*, 34 WM. & MARY Q. 423 (3d Ser. 1982).

74. *Id.*

75. Franklin, *Speech on Salaries* (1787), in 9 THE WRITINGS OF BENJAMIN FRANKLIN 591 (A. Smyth ed. 1906), *reprinted in* G. STOURZH, BENJAMIN FRANKLIN AND AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY 18 (1954).

76. THE DEFENCE OF INJUR'D MERIT UNMASKED 9 (n.p. 1771).

obtain it."⁷⁷

For all those who claimed to speak for the interests and the good of the people, the crown and all other rulers with soaring passions were dangerous, and the people were always justified in their suspicion and jealousy of power. Precisely because rulers in government were thought to be men of extraordinary and frightening capacities—"like elephants in war," said one colonial minister—they had to be watched constantly.⁷⁸ Radical whigs turned "Political Jealousy" into a "necessary and laudable Passion."⁷⁹ The people had to be suspicious of their rulers, for, as Henry Laurens said in 1765, a "malicious Villain acting behind the Curtain . . . could be reached only by suspicion."⁸⁰ Assuming as they did that patterns of events were always the intended consequence of particular human designs, the enlightened men of the age were ready to see plots and conspiracies everywhere.⁸¹

But suspicion and jealousy, essential as they might be in protecting liberty in a monarchy, were not noble or praiseworthy emotions in themselves. They were in fact necessary evils to offset the soaring passions of ambition and desires for power expressed by rulers or great men. And, therefore, to the degree that the rulers became virtuous and republicanized, the people could relax their jealousy and suspicion and become open and trustful. Barriers could be erected, bills of rights established, contracts negotiated, charters written, institutions arranged and balanced, and the people allowed a share of participation in government; but ultimately the most enlightened of that enlightened age believed that the secret of good government and the protection of popular liberty lay in ensuring that good men—men of character and disinterestedness—wielded power. In the end there was no substitute for classical republican virtue in the society's rulers; and everyone on the political spectrum paid at least lip service to the need for it.

IV. AFFECTIVE REPUBLICANISM

In 1776 Americans at long last had an opportunity to put these re-

77. Franklin, *supra* note 75.

78. Turner, *A Sermon Preached Before His Excellency Thomas Hutchinson, Esq., Governor* 11 (Boston 1773).

79. Hutson, *The Origins of "The Paranoid Style in American Politics": Public Jealousy from the Age of Walpole to the Age of Jackson*, in *SAINTS AND REVOLUTIONARIES: ESSAYS ON EARLY AMERICAN HISTORY* 339 (D. Hall, J. Murrin & T. Tate eds. 1984).

80. Letter from Henry Laurens to John Brown (Oct. 28, 1765), reprinted in *5 THE PAPERS OF HENRY LAURENS* 30 (G. Rogers, Jr. ed. 1968).

81. Wood, *Conspiracy and the Paranoid Style: Causality and Deceit in the Eighteenth Century*, 34 *WM. & MARY Q.* 401 (3d Ser. 1982).

publican principles into effect. This meant nothing less than reconstructing their society. Not that they intended to overturn one class and replace it with another. They could as yet scarcely conceive of society in these modern terms. What the revolutionaries desired was to destroy all the remaining traditional ties of a monarchical society—those “Secret bonds of Society,” as Jeremy Belknap called them: bonds of blood, family, and patronage—and replace them with new republican adhesives.⁸² Somehow American society would have to be tied together in new ways.

How to attach people to one another and to the state? That was one of the central obsessions of the age. Lacking our modern appreciation of the force of nationalism, eighteenth-century thinkers had difficulty conceiving of what Bishop Butler called the “distinct cements of society” in anything other than personal terms, in terms of the individual’s relationship to some other individual.⁸³ Monarchy had been so powerful because its social adhesives—force, kinship, patronage, and dependencies of various sorts—had seemed so substantial. But since at least the beginning of the eighteenth century reformers had sought to republicize monarchy by replacing its social cements with other more affective, more emotional, more natural ties. The Enlightenment came to believe that there was “a natural principle of attraction in man towards man,” and that these natural affinities were by themselves capable of holding the society together.⁸⁴ This Enlightenment thinking in turn transformed classic civic republicanism.

These natural affinities, the love and benevolence that men felt toward each other, were akin to traditional classical republican virtue but not identical to it. By mid-century this classical virtue seemed too demanding and too severe for the civilized societies of Europe. Ancient Sparta and Rome, said Hume, were no doubt free republican states, and their citizens were virtuous and self-sacrificing. But they were also small states that were almost continually in arms. Therefore it was not surprising that citizens were soldiers as well as farmers.

Could we convert a city into a kind of fortified camp, and infuse into each breast so martial a genius, and such a passion for public good, as to make every one willing to undergo the greatest hardships for the sake of the public; these affections might now, as in ancient times,

82. Belknap, *quoted in* W. ADAMS, *THE FIRST AMERICAN CONSTITUTION: REPUBLICAN IDEALOGY AND THE MAKING OF THE STATE CONSTITUTIONS IN THE REVOLUTIONARY ERA* 27 (1980).

83. Butler, *Sermons*, in 1 *BRITISH MORALISTS, BEING SELECTIONS FROM WRITERS PRINCIPALLY OF THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY* 204 (L. Selby-Bigge ed. 1897).

84. *Id.* at 203. See N. FIERING, *JONATHAN EDWARDS’S MORAL THOUGHT AND ITS BRITISH CONTEXT* (1981).

prove alone a sufficient spur to industry, and support the community. It would then be advantageous, as in camps, to banish all arts and luxury.⁸⁵

But Hume and many others concluded that such martial and moral spirit was "too disinterested and too difficult to support" in this modern age of sprawling commercial societies.⁸⁶

The kind of classical virtue that Montesquieu had described was too forbidding, harsh, and austere, too much a "visionary principle."⁸⁷ Such virtue was too much of a passion, "the offspring of a rugged impracticability of character," an "enthusiasm" not based on reason.⁸⁸ It was too transcending of the demands of a corrupt human nature and thus resembled the Christian conquest of self, ultimately achieved only by divine grace. This antique conception of virtue was like Chinese foot-binding; it ran against human nature. All that was needed was to allow human nature "fair play," and it would take care of itself.⁸⁹ Man "cannot alter his nature; he can only cultivate it."⁹⁰ Kings were "unnatural," said Benjamin Rush; hence their authority had to be "imposed by oaths, garters, guards, picture on coins &c."⁹¹ Without kings and other unnatural interferences, republican society could develop a new kind of virtue, could express the natural adhesives, what Rush called the natural "affections" appropriate to a modern enlightened society.⁹²

Such a new modern virtue was associated with affability and sociability, with love and benevolence, indeed, with the new emphasis on politeness, which James Wilson and his friend William White defined in 1768 as "*the natural and graceful expression of the social virtues.*"⁹³ Politeness tamed and domesticated the older civic humanist conception of virtue. Virtue became less the harsh self-sacrifice of antiquity and more the willingness to get along with others for the sake of peace and prosperity. Virtue became identified with decency.⁹⁴ Where the ancient classical virtue was martial and masculine, as revealed, for example, in David's painting *The Oath of the Horatii*, the new virtue was soft and feminized,

85. Hume, *Of Commerce*, in *ESSAYS: MORAL, POLITICAL, AND LITERARY* 262-63 (E. Miller ed. 1985).

86. *Id.*

87. 2 *AM. MUSEUM* 228-37 (1787).

88. *Id.*

89. *Id.*

90. *Id.*

91. *THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF BENJAMIN RUSH: HIS "TRAVELS THROUGH LIFE" TOGETHER WITH HIS COMMONPLACE BOOK FOR 1789-1813*, at 199 (G. Corner ed. 1948).

92. *Id.* at 198.

93. Conrad, *Polite Foundation: Citizenship and Common Sense in James Wilson's Republican Theory*, 1984 *SUP. CT. REV.* 361 (emphasis in original).

94. *Id.* at 363.

and capable of being expressed by women as well as men; indeed, some thought it was even better expressed by women.⁹⁵ The new social virtue was much more Addisonian than it was Spartan. Indeed, the powerful appeal of Addison's play *Cato* could scarcely have rested on the austere and self-denying character of Cato himself. The hero's forbidding sternness and his inexorable suicide on behalf of liberty represented behavior not easily emulated by the prosperous and civilized audiences of the eighteenth-century. More attractive was young Juba, the Prince of Numidia and Cato's prospective son-in-law. His message was the Enlightenment's message:

A Roman soul is bent on higher views:
To civilize the rude unpolish'd world,
And lay it under the restraint of laws;
To make Man mild, and sociable to Man;
To cultivate the wild licentious savage
With wisdom, discipline, and liberal arts;
Th' embellishments of life: virtues like these
Make human nature shine, reform the soul,
And break our fierce barbarians into men.⁹⁶

Promoting social affection was in fact the object of the civilizing process. "What does the idea of politeness and refinement of a people suppose? Is it not this, that they cultivate intimate friendships; that they mutually sympathize with the misfortunes of each other, and that a passionate show of affections is promoted."⁹⁷

Although some like William Livingston stressed that "Benevolence is the Parent of Patriotism,"⁹⁸ clearly something essential in the republican tradition had changed. Classical virtue had flowed from the citizen's participation in politics; government had been the source of his civic consciousness and public spiritedness. But modern virtue flowed from the citizen's participation in society, not in government, which the liberal-minded increasingly saw as the source of the evils of the world. "Society," said Thomas Paine in a brilliant summary of this common enlightened separation, "is produced by our wants and government by our wickedness; the former promotes our happiness *positively* by uniting our affections, the latter *negatively* by restraining our vices. The one encour-

95. *Id.* at 365. Bloch, *The Gendered Meanings of Virtue in Revolutionary America*, 13 SIGNS J. WOMEN CULTURE SOC'Y 37 (1987).

96. Addison, *Cato: A Tragedy* (1721), in 1 THE WORKS OF THE RIGHT HONOURABLE JOSEPH ADDISON 225 (R. Hurd ed. 1811) (1721) (quoting from act I, sc. iv).

97. 2 NEW YORK MAG. 406 (1792).

98. W. LIVINGSTON, *supra* note 16, at 219.

ages intercourse, the other creates distinctions.”⁹⁹ Even someone as different from Paine as James Wilson made a similar point in suggesting that government was “highly necessary” only because of man’s “fallen state.”¹⁰⁰ Society, “particularly domestic society,” said Wilson, was “better” than public life.¹⁰¹ People were wrong to consider society as merely the scaffolding of government; “[i]n the just order of things, government is the scaffolding of society: and if society could be built and kept entire without government, the scaffolding might be thrown down, without the least inconvenience or cause of regret.”¹⁰² It was society—the affairs of private social life—that bred sympathy and the new domesticated virtue. Mingling in drawing rooms, clubs and coffeehouses—partaking of the innumerable interchanges of the daily comings and goings of modern life—created affection and fellow-feeling. Some now argued that even commerce, that traditional enemy of classical virtue, was in fact a source of modern virtue. “[I]ts effects,” said Benjamin Rush, were “next to those of religion in humanizing mankind.”¹⁰³ It formed, said James Sullivan, Republican leader of Massachusetts, “a chain of confidence and friendship throughout the world.”¹⁰⁴

The importance of this domestication of virtue for American culture can scarcely be exaggerated. It was not nostalgic or backward-looking but progressive. It not only helped reconcile classical republicanism with modernity and commerce. But it laid the basis for all reform movements of the nineteenth century, and indeed for all subsequent modern liberal thinking. We still yearn for a world in which everyone will love one another.

People were optimistic and confident of social harmony and progress because the new modern virtue was no utopian fantasy but an enlightened conclusion of the modern science of society. Most clergymen of course remained satisfied with urging Christian love and charity upon their ordinary parishioners. But educated and enlightened people wanted something more: to secularize Christian love and find in human nature itself a scientific imperative for loving one’s neighbor as oneself. Ultimately the Enlightenment aimed at nothing less than discovering the

99. T. PAINE, *COMMON SENSE*, in 1 *THE COMPLETE WRITINGS OF THOMAS PAINE* 4 (P. Foner ed. 1969) (1776) (emphasis in original).

100. Wilson, *Lectures of Law*, in 1 *THE WORKS OF JAMES WILSON* 86-87 (R. McClosky ed. 1967) (1791).

101. *Id.* at 86.

102. *Id.*

103. Rush, *Thoughts on the Mode of Education Proper in a Republic*, in 1 *AMERICAN POLITICAL WRITING DURING THE FOUNDING ERA* 689 (C. Hyneman & D. Lutz eds. 1983) (1786).

104. J. SULLIVAN, *THE PATH TO RICHES: AN INQUIRY INTO THE ORIGIN AND USE OF MONEY* 8 (Boston 1792).

hidden forces in the moral world that moved and held people together, forces that could match the great eighteenth-century scientific discoveries of the hidden forces—gravity, magnetism, electricity, and energy—that operated in the physical world. Philosophers such as John Witherspoon, president of Princeton, dreamed of a time “when men, treating moral philosophy as Newton and his successors have done natural, may arrive at greater precision.”¹⁰⁵

This scientific investigation of the moral and social order was not simply the work of such great minds as Shaftesbury, Bishop Butler, Francis Hutcheson, and Adam Smith. There was hardly an educated person in all of America who did not at one time or another try to describe the natural forces holding society together. By the middle of the century writers of every description—novelists, essayists, clergymen—were excitedly exploring and promoting the natural ways people related to one another. By 1754 Esther Burr, the daughter of Jonathan Edwards and the new bride of Aaron Burr, Sr., president of the College of New Jersey, had come to realize that because of “so many just thoughts” on benevolence and compassion expressed by recent writers, “the World is agoing to have better notions about friendship than they used to.”¹⁰⁶ Mrs. Burr did not anticipate the half of it. “Were we not form’d for Society? . . . And can that Society be carried on without a che[er]ful and benevolent Disposition?” were questions central to the Enlightenment.¹⁰⁷

“Man,” it was said over and over, “is formed for *social life*.”¹⁰⁸ He had an instinct, “an irresistible urge to associate with his fellow-beings.”¹⁰⁹ Which is why solitary confinement as a criminal punishment was regarded by some in the eighteenth century as a terror worse than death. Americans like young Nathanael Greene marvelled at the way the “Spirits and minds of men” were “drawn together into communities, friendships and the various species of Society” by some “principle of attraction.”¹¹⁰ This harmony “in the moral and intellectual world” was no different from the rest of the universe.¹¹¹ “In the whole scope of Creation” there was “a certain correspondence of parts, a similitude of opera-

105. 3 J. WITHERSPOON, *THE WORKS OF JOHN WITHERSPOON* 470 (Philadelphia 1800-01).

106. *THE JOURNAL OF ESTHER EDWARDS BURR, 1754-1757*, at 63 (C. Karlsen & L. Crumpacker eds. 1984).

107. Micklus, “*The History of the Tuesday Club*”: *A Mock-Jeremiad on the Colonial South*, 40 *WM. & MARY Q.* 60 (3d Ser. 1983).

108. Warren, *Oration Delivered at Boston* (March 5, 1772), in *PRINCIPLES AND ACTS OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION IN AMERICA* 4 (H. Niles ed. 1876) (emphasis in original).

109. T. BURGESS, *SOLITUDE AND SOCIETY CONTRASTED* 10, 15 (Providence 1797).

110. Letter from Nathanael Greene, *supra* note 70, at 27.

111. *Id.*

tions and unity of design.”¹¹² Liberal clergy were especially ecstatic to learn that Christian love was natural to man and in accord with the teachings of science. “Just as the regular motions and harmony of the heavenly bodies depend upon their mutual gravitation towards each other,” said Jonathan Mayhew, so too did love and benevolence among people preserve “order and harmony” in the society.¹¹³ Love between humans was akin to gravity of the moral world, and it could be studied and perhaps even manipulated more easily than the gravity of the physical world. “Benevolence,” said Samuel Cooper of Boston in 1753, “is the Cement and Support—of Families—of Churches—of States and Kingdoms—and of the great Community of Mankind. It is the single Principle that constitutes and preserves all the Peace and Harmony, all the Beauty and Advantage of Society.”¹¹⁴

Such love, many thought, was so natural and so powerful because it rested ultimately on self-love. “There is, in the human Breast, a social Affection, which extends to our whole Species,” John Adams told his wife in 1775 in a conventional description of the moral science at work.¹¹⁵ This affection centering on the self, said Adams, reaches outward to embrace in widening concentric circles ever larger numbers of people, to the family, the neighborhood, the town, the county, the province, the nation, eventually reaching across nations and taking in all mankind.¹¹⁶ Francis Hutcheson even thought that such love might extend into outer space. Although this love got steadily weaker as it moved outward from the self, many thought it was always tied to the self and received its strength from the self. In fact, said Samuel Cooper, self-love was “at least as necessary to the Support and Happiness of the World as social [love].”¹¹⁷ Benevolence was not some “mad” emotion by which a person “becomes wholly devoted to the Gratification of others, without any Concern or Relish for his own private Happiness.”¹¹⁸ Without self-love there could be no benevolence and without benevolence there could be no private happiness.¹¹⁹ Since it seemed scientifically evident that the greatest happiness for people came from their love and friendship with others, then “the more we cultivate benevolence the more we shall pro-

112. *Id.*

113. J. MAYHEW, SEVEN SERMONS UPON THE FOLLOWING SUBJECTS 126 (Boston 1749).

114. S. Cooper, *A Sermon Preached in Boston, New England, Before the Society for Encouraging Industry, and Employing the Poor* 13 (Boston 1753).

115. Letter from John Adams to Abigail Adams (Oct. 19, 1775), reprinted in 1 ADAMS FAMILY CORRESPONDENCE 318 (L. Butterfield ed. 1963).

116. *Id.*

117. Cooper, *supra* note 114, at 2.

118. Andrews, *A Sermon on the Importance of Mutual Kindness* 17 (Philadelphia 1790).

119. *Id.*

mote our own happiness." Thus if only the natural tendencies of man were allowed to flow freely, "unclogged by civil impediments," society would prosper.¹²⁰ There would be no need any longer for compacts and charters, no need for "municipal monitors."¹²¹ The natural feelings of love and benevolence between people could become republican substitutes for the artificial monarchical connectives of family, patronage, and dependency and the arrogance, mortification and fear that they had bred.¹²²

Of course, for many this belief in the capacity of love and benevolence to hold republican societies together soon became as much a "visionary principle" as the belief in ascetic classical virtue had been, and hardnosed skeptics like Alexander Hamilton and others came to doubt and deny its efficacy.

Post-revolutionary society revealed itself as much too popular, much too unruly, and much too acquisitive to be bound together merely by love and benevolence. By the early nineteenth century Americans came to realize that their society was so new and so extraordinary that no conventional wisdom seemed to apply to it. In fact, so much had changed so rapidly that many concluded that ancient Rome had lost its relevance for Americans. Classical Rome was now thought to be too stolid and imitative to express the restlessness and originality of this new democratic society. Ancient Greece was a better model, said Edward Everett.¹²³ Ancient Greece was tumultuous, wild, and free, "free to licentiousness, free to madness."¹²⁴

V. AMERICAN CONSTITUTIONAL POLITICS-INTEREST

In the decades following the Revolution the rapid emergence of democracy virtually destroyed the classical republican dream of leisured aristocrats who stood above the private interests and occupations of others and made impartial judgments for the good of the whole society. Jefferson and many of the other founding fathers had considered public office as an obligation of rank and talent. It ought to be undertaken in accord with "the Roman principle," he said; it contributes "neither to advantage nor happiness."¹²⁵ But by the early nineteenth century public

120. *Id.*

121. *Id.*

122. 2 AM. MUSEUM 30 (1787).

123. Everett, *Oration before the Society of Phi Beta Kappa*, in AMERICAN PHILOSOPHIC ADDRESSES, 1700-1900, at 67, 77-78. (J. Blau ed. 1946) (1824).

124. *Id.* at 77.

125. Letter from Thomas Jefferson to William Duane (Oct. 1, 1812), reprinted in 13 THE WRITINGS OF THOMAS JEFFERSON 186 (A. Lipscomb & A. Bergh, eds. 1903); Letter from Thomas Jeffer-

office-holding had become a much sought-after occupation like any other, and it was open to anyone, whether artisan or businessman, who could get the support of a party and garner enough votes. No longer were government officials to play the classic role of umpires; no longer were they to stand above the competing interests of the marketplace and make disinterested judgments about what was good for the whole society. In the new democratic politics elected officials were to bring the partial, local, and acquisitive interests of Americans right into the workings of government. By the middle of the nineteenth century America gave as free play to commercial activity and the self-interestedness of people as any society in history.

To keep this entrepreneurial-minded and bumptious American people from flying apart in their licentious pursuits of happiness something other than virtue, whether classical or modern, had to be found; and for many that something was "Interest . . . the greatest tie one man can have on another."¹²⁶ By the 1830s Tocqueville saw what had happened clearly enough. "Americans are not a virtuous people," he wrote, "yet they are free."¹²⁷ In America, unlike the classical republics, "it is not disinterestedness which is great, it is interest."¹²⁸ Such a diverse, rootless, and restless people—what could possibly hold them together? "Interest. That is the secret. The private interest that breaks through at each moment, the interest that moreover, appears openly and even proclaims itself as a social theory."¹²⁹ In America, said Tocqueville, "the period of disinterested patriotism is gone . . . forever."¹³⁰

But of course Tocqueville exaggerated. The ideals of classical republicanism did not die away. They remain to temper the scramble for private wealth and happiness and they continue to underlie for many of our ideals and aspirations: for our belief in equality and our dislike of pretension and privilege; our deep yearning for individual autonomy and freedom from all ties of dependency; our periodic hopes, expressed, for example, in the election of military heroes and in the mugwump and progressive movements, that some political leaders might rise above parties and become truly disinterested umpires and deliberative representatives; our long-held conviction that farming is morally healthier and freer

son to Francis Willis (Apr. 13, 1790), in 5 THE WRITINGS OF THOMAS JEFFERSON 157 (P. Ford ed. 1895).

126. Wood, *Interests and Disinterestedness*, BEYOND THE CONFEDERATION 81-82 (R. Beeman ed. 1987).

127. *Id.* at 103.

128. *Id.*

129. *Id.*

130. *Id.*

of selfish marketplace concerns than other activities; our preoccupation with the fragility of the republic and its liability to corruption; and, finally, our remarkable obsession with our own national virtue—an obsession that still bewilders the rest of the world.