

Liberalism *and*
Republicanism
in the Historical
Imagination



Joyce Appleby

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IN THE HISTORICAL IMAGINATION

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For Martha

*In love and gratitude to my sister
who was also my first teacher*

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Acknowledgments

IT WAS WITH great delight that I realized that the publication of these essays in book form would give me the chance to thank publicly those cherished friends who have also been thoughtful critics. Academic life is a curious blend of intense isolation and engaged collegiality. The first is lonely, but necessary to the cultivation of an independent perspective; the latter repairs the loneliness as it broadens and challenges one's singular position.

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LIBERALISM AND REPUBLICANISM
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Liberalism and Republicanism in the Historical Imagination

LIBERALISM entered the history of America as a set of powerful ideas; it remained to dominate as a loose association of unexamined assumptions. What in Europe formed the program for a political party became in the United States a description of reality. Core liberal affirmations were expressed explicitly for the first time in the quarter of a century between Independence and the election of Thomas Jefferson. They can be stated simply: Human nature manifests itself universally in the quest for freedom. Political self-government emanates from individual self-control. Nature has endowed human beings with the capacity to think for themselves and act in their own behalf. This rational self-interest can be depended upon as a principle of action. Free choice in matters of religion, marriage, intellectual pursuits, and electoral politics is the right of every individual. Free inquiry discloses the nature of reality, whose laws are accessible to reason. True religion teaches the sanctity of each person and the need to glorify God through the cultivation of one's gifts and talents. The rule of law is binding on all citizens as long as its positive statutes conform to the natural law protection of life, liberty, and property. Vicious tyrannies over the body and mind, established in the infancy of human history, have blocked the spread of knowledge and its liberating potential. And, finally, the human personality presumed in these propositions is male.

Like most American children, I accepted this liberal worldview

as a description of reality. The affirmations listed above were part of the given of that world. I could learn to behave as a member of my liberal society, but it was more difficult to accept unthinkingly its factual propositions. Because its norms were explicitly male-modeled, there was a conceptual incongruity between its givens and my self-understanding. With the active social roles reserved for men, I was pushed to the margins where opportunities for observation greatly surpassed those for participation. From this angle, the distortions in the liberal description of human nature were hard to ignore. Its claims to describe how the world actually was could only create in a woman what the psychologists call cognitive dissonance. But what produced confusion in an adolescent became in time a fruitful vantage point for a professional historian.

The specific research that prompted my work on liberalism was prompted by my first teaching assignment at San Diego State University. All first-year students there learned American history from a collection of primary documents. The book we used, *The People Shall Judge*, presented a canon of liberal texts, and from that canon came my question: How had Adam Smith been able to take for granted a description of human nature that would have been utterly unthinkable a century and a half earlier? Neither Puritan or Anglican congregations nor Elizabethan theatergoers were regaled with statements about the steady, reasonable, wholly natural self-interested behavior of all men. Yet such a description of human nature clearly had become a part of Smith's world. Where had it come from? Searching for the elaboration of this concept led me to a new body of seventeenth-century literature: the largely ephemeral writings on commerce. Looking back after a quarter-century, I can see that that question was my Ariadne's thread through the labyrinth of liberal assumptions that had molded my thinking. I began with a straightforward inquiry about the origins of the conception of human nature underlying liberal social theory, and I ended up with an appreciation of the ways in which that theory had decisively shaped Americans' historical consciousness while it insinuated itself into every public discourse. Now both the theory and the history have lost their coherence, forcing us to question how mutually dependent they are.

For a long time American historical writing simply explained

how the United States became the territorial embodiment of liberal truths. Instead of narratives describing men and women responding discretely to life's contingencies, historians depicted them as the carriers of ideas that unfolded over time. In political history the story was the extension of the suffrage, the perfection of representation, the creation of the two-party system, and the enunciation of a constitutional jurisprudence. Economic history was devoted to working out complex systems of production and marketing, themselves the result of a natural mechanism that promoted successful applications of human ingenuity. Historians of science featured the solitary discoverer whose bold experiments revealed the unfolding power of the human mind. Intellectual historians produced a great chain of liberating thought. A canon of liberal documents beginning with the seventeenth-century English philosophical tradition of Bacon, Locke, and Newton was assembled to illustrate core ideas and to show as well how the baton of liberalism had passed to the United States at the time of the Revolution. Thus, the authors of the *Federalist Papers* became the true heirs of Locke, and America's democratic statesmen the practical interpreters of Adam Smith.

As social discourse liberalism achieved its fullest explanatory power in the early nineteenth century, when people began to use the rapidly maturing natural sciences as both model and proof of the validity of new theories about the universality of market economics and democratic politics. The emerging synthesis reflected sympathetic affinities more than a coherent philosophy, but it served as the basis for a forward-looking and optimistic modern stance. The quickened expectation of general social improvement brightened the future as it dulled the past, separating the enthusiasts of the new learning from those who saw its destructive implications. Once politicized, scientific inquiries acquired an explosive potential, nicely captured by one of Jefferson's ardent critics, Clement Clarke Moore, who commented that whenever "modern philosophers talk about mountains, something impious is likely to be at hand."¹ But modern philosophers continued to talk about mountains, and with greater certainty. Scientists, as they began to be called, exuded a

1. As cited in Linda Kerber, *Federalists in Dissent: Imagery and Ideology in Jeffersonian America* (Ithaca, 1970), 91. See also Robert Kelley, *The Cultural Pattern in American Politics: The First Century* (New York, 1979), 122–123.

spirit of mastery that redounded to the benefit of the popularizers of science and the social values they endorsed.

Despite Adam Smith's place in the liberal canon, his writings were not influential in the United States until formal economics entered the college curriculum in the early nineteenth century. Rather it was the capacity of the economy to act as a natural moral arbiter that excited attention. The stunningly swift transformation of America's physical environment wrought by private initiatives in the thirty years after 1789 validated the claim that free enterprise built character—habits of planning, work, and thrift—as it built the farms, cities, post roads, and bridges of the expanding nation. Materialism and morality fused as easily as scientific inquiry and political freedom merged to form that web of associated notions which has become known as American liberalism. Jeremy Bentham's utilitarian philosophy, which might seem well attuned to American sensibilities, in fact found little resonance in the United States. The well-being of the individual rather than the mass of the people was being promoted, and that individual was seen as the material embodiment of moral virtue. During these same years evangelical Protestants successfully propagated an individualized Christian message that challenged much of Calvinist orthodoxy.² They compared liberation from sin to liberation from tyranny as a kind of individual empowerment, thus providing a Christian foundation for the civil religion forming around natural rights.

For several generations the history of the United States was told as the history of the *progress* of the nation, its people, and its institutions. Individuals personified the developments that marked progress: George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, John Marshall, H. D. Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Carl Schurz, Abraham Lincoln. Very much like an oral tradition that winnows out discordant story lines through repeated retelling, American history shed illiberal elements. Gone was the proud intolerance of the orthodox Puritans who founded New England, the genteel self-fashioning of parvenu planters in Virginia, and the coercive conformity of one-church communities sprinkled throughout the colonies.

2. Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven, 1989), 213–222.

Loyalists were consigned to neglect. Immigrants who had sought nothing more than fertile ground in which to transplant their cherished ways of life were turned into intrepid pioneers voting with their feet on the traditionalism of Europe. Aristocratic ideals of excellence, honor, martial splendor, prescribed deference, and leisured living, so long cherished as the marks of civilization, simply baffled those who encountered their vestigial traces in the colonial past. No explanation of why men endorsed liberal ideas was required. Truth in this historiography was irresistible. Conflict arose when defenders of old ways stood in the way of progress. The obvious clarity of the motives of liberal heroes answered the question of historical causation.

One can hear this seductive reasoning in Jefferson's account of his presidential election. He hailed it as the revolution of 1800, "as real a revolution in the principles of our government as that of 1776 was in its form," and went on to interpret his victory through the striking dichotomies of a new liberal idiom.³ His opponents looked backward, not forward for improvement, he said. They feared the ignorance of the people, as his party did the selfishness of rulers unchecked by the people. Jeffersonians advocated the reform of institutions in step with the progress of science, maintaining that "no definite limits could be assigned that progress"; "the enemies of reform, on the other hand, denied improvement and advocated steady adherence to the principles, practices and institutions of our fathers which they represented as the *akmé* of excellence, beyond which the human mind could never advance."⁴ With apocalyptic fervor, Jefferson exulted, "We can no longer say there is nothing new under the sun, for this whole chapter in the history of man is new."⁵

Leaving slavery in a conceptual limbo, Jefferson claimed that America stood for free men, free land, free institutions, and free choice—a direction it had been moving toward ever since the May-

3. Jefferson to Spencer Roane, Sept. 6, 1819, in *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Paul L. Ford (New York, 1892–1899), X, 140.

4. Jefferson to Abigail Adams, Sept. 11, 1804, in *Adams-Jefferson Letters*, ed. Lester J. Cappon (Chapel Hill, 1959), I, 278–280; Jefferson to John Adams, June 15, 1813, *ibid.*, II, 332.

5. Jefferson to Joseph Priestley, Mar. 21, 1801, in *Writings*, ed. Ford, XVIII, 54–56.

flower Compact. The Revolution was being fulfilled in the nineteenth century through democratic politics, continental expansion, and material abundance. God had sent choice grain into the wilderness and now there were fruited plains from sea to shining sea. The intentionality of the Almighty merged with the intentionality of all men, when left free to choose. Venerable distinctions between the learned and the vulgar, the virtuous and the ignoble, the authorized and the unauthorized, were dissolving before the imperative to liberate the human potential for self-activation.

Such an interpretation of American history thrust an insignificant country of several million people, three thousand miles from any major civilization, into the foreground of human destiny. Citizens of a provincial outpost, nineteenth-century Americans could transcend their isolation by universalizing and exalting what was peculiar to them: their success in establishing free institutions; their efforts to build communities in the wilderness; their liberation of the ordinary ambitions of ordinary men. What might be construed by Europeans as uninterestingly plebian was elevated by the liberal imagination to a new epoch for mankind.

Told in this way, the settlement of America has all the simple rhythms and repeated choruses of a popular ballad. We can easily see in our mind's eye the undaunted colonists landing in the proverbial wilderness and immediately setting to work to convert natural abundance into marketable commodities, knowing all the while that they were laboring to bring forth a nation that would be the liberal refuge for the world. The story begins with English Pilgrims fleeing persecution and ends with Lincoln's fervid hope that "government of the people, by the people and for the people shall not perish from the earth." It is this version of our national history that prompted Richard Hofstadter to comment that America was the only country which started with perfection and aspired to progress.

We may smile at the naïveté of this first national history, but we would be foolish to underrate its effect. More than a literary production, it created social values and distributed political power. It provided the rationale for displacing the Indians whose ancestral lands lay astride the American march to the West. Its compelling picture of industrious individuals seeking fresh starts in a new land

blotted out the memory of those uprooted Africans and cast-off Europeans who had also become Americans. Like liberalism itself, this history contained an attack upon dependency and difference. Disciplined white families made homes for themselves as they moved across the continent, but the solidarity of groups bound by a common religion or birthplace, loyal, even submissive, to the whole, evoked suspicion. Here we see the tensions generated by a history which glorified freedom and taught that the only thing people were free to do was pursue individual ambitions. The universality of this relentless self-improvement was essential if the United States was to serve as a model for the human race.

These assertions which look so dubious in a retrospective view were the weapons with which rebellious intellectuals in the late eighteenth century fought the hierarchical structures, communitarian customs, and aristocratic ideals of their day. Their opponents, defenders of the status quo, could draw upon history, experience, and common sense to explain the permanence of what had always been. It took no effort to accept the givenness of the world and a great exercise of imagination to overcome it. Liberal reformers had to explain away reality if they were to infuse the world with hope. It was not enough to expose the insufficiency and stupidity of the actual in their vendetta against the *ancien régime*; they had to produce attractive alternatives. Rejecting the tactile and the palpable, they used theories about natural simplicity to promote dissatisfaction with the ornate and byzantine arrangements of traditional society.⁶ They dwelt upon abstractions like the social contract, free trade, future progress, and autonomous man, which, following Newtonian cosmology, pointed to a reality hidden by appearances. Their use of analytical reasoning helped them supplant traditional wisdom, but this insistence on universal norms and reliance upon abstract models remained to shape the mature liberal theory.

Conservatives argued for caution, but their pessimism was turned against them. Their negative evaluation of human nature, their persistent belief in the classical cycles of change, their willing sacrifice of individual independence to social stability—all were castigated

6. Jefferson to William Johnson, June 12, 1823, *ibid.*, X, 226n–227n. Still reflecting on the divisions of 1800, he spoke of the other party as believing that experience was a safer guide than “mere theory.”