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# AMERICAN CREDO

The Place of Ideas  
in US Politics

**MICHAEL FOLEY**

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# American Credo

*The Place of Ideas in US Politics*

MICHAEL FOLEY

OXFORD  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

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*For Adele, Nick, and Dylan*

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Aberystwyth 2007

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# Part I

## Approaches

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# Introduction

The place of political ideas in the United States has a mixed reputation. The society is commonly characterized as one rooted in eighteenth-century strictures on natural rights, personal freedoms, and the ethos of limited government. Constitutional precepts pertaining to the legitimate sphere of the state in society, combined with a historical development in which the condition of liberty has been a constant theme, have fostered a cultivated usage of concepts in the normal conduct of political exchange. Yet, running concurrently alongside this social ease towards complex conceptual themes is an equally well-founded reputation for a poorly developed repertoire of political thought and for a public sphere characterized more by a dearth of political ideas than by an exuberance of conceptual invention. American identity has become closely associated with a settlement of principle that has allowed the United States to establish a self-image of exceptionalism. While other societies and cultures have been afflicted with deep ideological conflict, it can be claimed that America's historical and social unity has displaced the need for advanced critical thought. In effect, American politics can be said to have followed a template of social formation in which the range of ideas has arguably narrowed to the point of conceptual collapse.

## NO IDEAS NEED APPLY

At first sight, a preponderance of evidence would appear to coincide with the latter perspective. The apparent needlessness of conceptual innovation and critical evaluation remains a popular virtue in a society that has a strong conviction in its spontaneous emanation from the natural conditions of the New World. Its atypical status as a society apart from the rest has encouraged a view of itself that is centred upon the existence of a single and integrated set of core values (e.g. freedom, individualism, democracy, egalitarianism, rights, and the rule of law). Such a professed consensus, or creed of genetically indivisible ideas, can be used explicitly, or implicitly, to explain the absence of those European ideologies that are derived from intractable positions on both the right and the left. Louis Hartz's dictum on living within a monolith of ideas underlines the connection between the volume of American political activity and its narrowness of range. The settlement of deep moral questions on the basis of a 'submerged and absolute

liberal faith'<sup>1</sup> marks the end of speculation upon them: 'It is only when you take ethics for granted that all problems emerge as problems of technique'.<sup>2</sup> Far from diminishing politics, the existence of an intuitive agreement on fundamentals gives licence to an expansive sphere of political position taking and, with it, a capacious potential for negotiated settlement. In this framework, the imposition of ideas giving rise to radical alternatives and polarizing attitudes are deemed to be egregious, dysfunctional, and more likely than not, un-American in character.

This restricted outlook upon the role of ideas in American society was particularly salient during the cold war when the primary imperative was to maximize national integration while at the same time minimizing the potential for class-based divisions to align upon ideological alternatives. In competing with the Soviet Union and its allies, American leaders and opinion formers worked assiduously to develop a national consciousness based upon the thematic unity of American ideas and upon the open assimilation of diverse groups into American society through the agency of a universal doctrine of rights and freedoms. In this guise, American political ideas came to represent not only the prospective sphere of western liberation but also the social substance of America's classless pluralism.

It was during this era that some American scholars pronounced 'the end of ideology'. The post-war social consensus in the United States seemed final proof that America was the model of a successful society because it appeared to have palpably overcome the need for ideologies. In the light of this perspective, the problems of industrialization and modernization had been effectively resolved. The only disputes that remained were those that could be negotiated to a satisfactory solution through the use of technical adjustments. The discipline and solidarity produced by the cold war helped to intensify the consensus still further. In doing so, it also helped to establish the idea of a society with neither the capacity nor the need for critical and analytical thought. During these years, the United States believed itself to be the 'good society' incarnate. This view was shared, either enthusiastically or reluctantly, in many other areas of the world. The United States gave the impression of a new kind of progress that had superseded and moved beyond those ideologies that had originated in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It saw itself as the vanguard of western societies, showing how, under the right conditions, clashing political ideologies of the left and right could wither away to a residue of democratic competition between endlessly compatible interests.<sup>3</sup>

The close relationship between a high level of social cohesion and a controlling paradigm of dominant ideas was just as evident after the cold war. With the disintegration of the eastern bloc and the subsequent abandonment of communism as a viable alternative to liberal capitalism, the United States was left in the position

<sup>1</sup> Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1955), p. 10.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> See Seymour M. Lipset, *Political Man* (London: Heinemann, 1960), pp. 403–17; Daniel Bell, *The End of Ideology: On the Exhaustion of Political Ideas in the Fifties* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), ch. 13; Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Vital Center: The Politics of Freedom* (Cambridge, MA: Riverside, 1961).

of being not only the sole remaining superpower but also the emblematic culmination of a pre-eminent ideology. When in 1992 Francis Fukuyama pronounced the 'end of history',<sup>4</sup> there was little doubt that his affirmation of universal liberal democracy and technologically driven capitalism had been inspired by the United States. Fukuyama's exposition carried such conviction in the 1990s because it resonated with a policy shift towards neoliberal priorities (e.g. privatization of public services, deregulation of industry, budget deficit reduction, labour markets flexibility, and trade liberalization) and because it rationalized the increasing scale of globalizing conformity by reference to a 'Washington consensus' upon the axiomatic requirements of progress.<sup>5</sup> In these conditions, Fukuyama was able to popularize the notion that ideological evolution had reached an end point. He postulated that western liberal democracy had emerged as the final form of human government. As such, it could be concluded that all the major questions of contemporary political order had in essence reached a state of final and conclusive settlement.

To those who believe that American society is distinguished by an aversion to ideological engagement, the post-cold war era bears a close relationship to the cold war period. Both epochs can be deployed as material support in advancing the proposition that the historical and social experience of the United States has produced an extraordinary capacity either to transcend ideological dispute or to reduce different ideologies to an uncontested values system. The same predisposition towards non-ideological unanimity appeared to mark the reaction of the United States to the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington in September 2001. The impulse to rally defensively around the flag was extended to more offensive responses with an ease of transition that suggested an underlying exclusion of ideas. Joan Didion, for example, complained during this period that the country had come to tolerate many 'fixed opinions, or national pieties, each with its own baffles of invective and counterinvective, of euphemism and downright misstatement, its own screen that slides into place whenever actual discussion threatens to surface'.<sup>6</sup> At a time of national emergency, it appeared that the collective endorsement of American ideals and purpose was to be embodied in a generic avoidance of ideational complexities.

This apparent aversion to, or dismissal of, ideological politics can be conveyed in various forms. It is suggested by the widely cited significance of an absent socialist tradition and a failure to challenge the dominion of concentrated property with alternative constructions of historical progress, democratic action, and the public interest. The asserted dearth of political ideas in American politics is also attached to the notion of a dominant paradigm of social formation, historical tradition, ethical attachment, and national distinction. The avowed openness of an assimilative and legally non-hierarchical polity set in a predominantly

<sup>4</sup> Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (London: Penguin, 1992).

<sup>5</sup> See John Williamson, 'What Washington Means by Policy Reform', in John Williamson (ed.), *Latin American Adjustment: How Much Has Happened?* (Washington, DC: Institute for International Economics, 1990).

<sup>6</sup> Joan Didion, *Fixed Ideas: America since 9.11* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2003), p. 24.

rights-based culture accounts for another rationale supporting a lack of ideational consciousness within the society as a whole.

What is common to all these interpretive alignments is the operational premise that the United States is not merely bound by a unifying corpus of ideas but is defined by these ideas, by the presumption in their internal coherence, and by their popular currency as points of cultural allegiance. As a consequence, it is commonplace for the United States to be referred to as a moral community based upon a unanimity of belief. In the twenty-first century, the United States retains its distinctive identity as a society bound together not by race or descent but by its interior conformity to a civil religion and to the sense of national purpose generated by a catechism of public beliefs. During the cold war, Richard Hofstadter made the following celebrated observation: 'It has been our fate as a nation not to have ideologies, but to be one'.<sup>7</sup> This spirit of cohesion based upon a common foundation of principle continues to be invoked in the present era and has lain as the subtext to a profusion of speeches given by President George W. Bush in his call to arms, and minds, in the 'war on terror'. In his second inaugural address, for example, the President stressed the significance of a unity of national purpose formed from the social cohesion of shared values:

When the Declaration of Independence was first read in public and the Liberty Bell was sounded in celebration, a witness said, 'It rang as if it meant something.' In our time it means something still. America, in this young century, proclaims liberty throughout all the world, and to all the inhabitants thereof. Renewed in our strength—tested, but not weary—we are ready for the greatest achievements in the history of freedom.<sup>8</sup>

The implication of these maxims, and the conventions of usage that surround them, can be interpreted as tantamount to a restriction of perspective and to the presence of an intuitive conformity to a fixed repertoire of values. In essence, it can be claimed that in possessing only one set of values, American society denies to itself the basis for a fully developed form of ideational politics.

## CREEDAL PASSIONS

While this attenuated conceptual landscape has been given widespread credence, it provides neither a wholly accurate picture of the status and leverage of ideas in the public domain of the United States, nor a sense in which these key ideas are fused together with traditions, values, and interests in the synergy of American political discourse. On the contrary, it can be claimed that it gives a distorted perspective of the dynamics between political ideas and public action in the United States. Far from constituting a homogenized concomitant of a durable and self-sustaining

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in Seymour M. Lipset, *American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword?* (New York: Norton, 1996), p. 18.

<sup>8</sup> President George W. Bush, 'Inaugural Address', 20 January 2005, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2005/01/20050120-1.html>.

consensus, the clash of competing principles, contested categories, and normative claims represent an equally enduring feature of American political behaviour. Political themes are routinely invested with the rhetoric of high principles and fundamental values. In like manner, political positions are habitually dismantled to reveal their inner composition in relation to the deep-set values of the United States.

The capacity for principled division can even be said to be rooted in the very traditions of the United States and in its processes of political development. Rogers M. Smith, for example, has been highly influential in using immigration policies, naturalization regulations, and citizenship laws to substantiate the assertion that the United States has had throughout its history a conspicuously illiberal tradition of inequality alongside the more established orthodoxies of liberalism and republicanism. In Smith's view, the United States cannot adequately be accounted for by reference to one overarching tradition. He refers instead to a condition of 'multiple traditions' and to a historiography that cannot be reduced to Hartz's consensus ideology, relying as it does upon the cultural premise of Lockian liberalism conjoined to an indigenous equality. Instead, Smith and many other analysts of civic identity and political development point to the presence of 'ascriptive' processes relating to an entrenched behavioural and normative inequality that has not only condoned but actively promoted discriminatory practices based upon race, gender, ethnicity, religion, heredity, and country of origin.<sup>9</sup> These popular and legal constructions of citizenship are cited as having had far-reaching consequences for American society—particularly in the projection and understanding of political differences and the way they have been habitually expressed in terms of competing conceptions of fundamental ideas. To Smith, the various infringements and restrictions in relation to citizenship were 'blatant, not "latent"' and revealed that 'America was not born equal but instead has had extensive hierarchies justified by illiberal, undemocratic traditions of ascriptive Americanism'.<sup>10</sup>

The extent to which the notion of 'multiple traditions' can be said to be responsible for the nature of political debate is an issue that is open to interpretation. What is not in question is that the United States possesses a marked facility for expansive debate. The language of political advocacy and critique in the United States is conspicuously impregnated with references to cultural norms, moral strictures, republican values, and national narratives because it is through this medium that the competition for legitimacy is conducted. As a consequence, American politics is distinguished by an evident facility for organizing political engagement by reference to a set of unresolved tensions between, and within, a series of core ideas. It is not merely that value-based terms are habitually deployed in political debate, but that those who deploy them do so with a willingness and an intention to inject fundamental precepts and non-negotiable distinctions into

<sup>9</sup> Rogers M. Smith, 'Beyond Tocqueville, Myrdal, and Hartz: The Multiple Traditions in America,' *The American Political Science Review*, vol. 87, no. 3. (Sept. 1993), pp. 549–66; Rogers M. Smith, *Civic Ideals: Conflicting Visions of Citizenship in U.S. History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997).

<sup>10</sup> Smith, *Civic Ideals*, pp. 15, 36.



the political discourse. It is for this reason that American politics has a reputation for inflammatory rhetoric and principled intransigence. As a consequence, it is commonly observed that because in the United States 'political debate revolves around values to a much greater extent than in Europe... even technical matters become moral questions'.<sup>11</sup>

The incidence of value-laden political argument is sufficient to pose serious questions about the sustainability of such principled conflict within a stable political order. A common response is to claim that for the most part ideational dissonance is sublimated into a form of viable coexistence which is periodically punctuated by eruptions of ideologically charged political insurgency. For example, the languid consensus politics of the 1950s was followed by the disjointed radicalism and social disorder of the 1960s. The tumult induced by war and civil dissent, drugs and crime, urban riots and political assassination, pornography and violence provided the background to a widespread questioning of the social and economic order of the United States. The drive for revelation, realism, and critical evaluation produced a sceptical revision of the 1950s. Americans became far more sensitized to the existence of structures of political thought. They became more aware of the linkages between political belief and social conditions. As a result, the 'end of ideology' became recognized for what it had always been: an ideology in its own right.

In raising the ideological stakes and subjecting the customary parameters of the core ideas of the United States to critical review, the political energy of the 1960s not only polarized political attitudes but also created a sense of disjunction between the apparent tranquillity of the ideologically suppressed 1950s and the fervent attachment to ideational speculation in the social dislocation and moral agitation of the succeeding decade. This era of ferment became increasingly identified with disorder, instability, violence, and governmental failure. Subsequently, the period's propensity for critical and innovative ideas became widely discredited as divisive, counterproductive, and even degenerate. As a consequence, the turbulence quickly subsided in the 1970s, which came to acquire a reputation for retrenchment and consolidation. During this period, American politics became preoccupied with the contemporary challenges of the industrial order (e.g. 'stagflation', unemployment, energy shortfalls, pollution, and budget and trade deficits). These problems were generally interpreted to be technical in nature.

The spasmodic character of the 1960s gives material support to those analysts who hold to the theory that the course of American history discloses a rhythmic pattern of ideational intensity and political activism. In this light, the currency and impact of conflicting ideas are confined to a recurrent cycle in which episodes of heightened sensitivity to the emancipatory potential of core principles and traditional norms are followed by periods of reconstructed equilibrium. For example, in *American Politics: The Promise of Disharmony* (1981),<sup>12</sup> Samuel Huntington

<sup>11</sup> 'Living with a Superpower', *The Economist*, 4 January 2003.

<sup>12</sup> Samuel P. Huntington, *American Politics: The Promise of Disharmony* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1981).

specifically portrays American history and social movement in recurrent terms. He posits the existence of a cycle of political and ideational activity in respect to the republic's creed of liberty, equality, individualism, democracy, and the rule of law. According to Huntington, this cycle has produced four such outbursts of supercharged devotion to the political creed of the United States (i.e. 'creedal passion'): the American Revolution, the Jacksonian era, the Progressive age, and the angst of the 1960s and early 1970s.<sup>13</sup> They were all motivated by the desire to resolve the dichotomy between promise and practice in American politics.<sup>14</sup>

The principal problem relating to the formulation of such cycles is the underlying premise that the periods of stated normality are in some way ideologically neutral or ideationally quiescent. One corollary to this premise is that American social stability is dependent upon an absence, or near absence, of conscious social thought. Another corollary is that the operation of ideas can only generally be equated with explicit division and conflict. These assumptions, however, overlook the steady-state capacity for individual values, and even different civic traditions, to conflict with one another on a day-to-day basis within the remit of American politics. The 1990s, for example, was widely characterized as an era of conservative ascendancy which was distinguished by an ostensible consensus on market-driven growth, deregulation, and deficit reduction. Yet, during this period, conservative forces were as attentive as ever to the need to consolidate and advance the conservative leverage on the formation of issues, agendas, and coalitions. So much so in fact that it is estimated that in the 1990s, conservative think tanks, research institutes, and advocacy organizations spent over \$1 billion on framing the terms of political debate in the United States.<sup>15</sup>

To confine the system's capacity for ideological disputation to aberrant and unsustainable episodes of value consciousness is to dismiss the preponderant condition of coexisting values held in varying degrees of tension. The strains between values with equal credentials to American authenticity are very much part of the normal state of political existence in the public sphere of the United States. Far from being an unusual or egregious feature of social development, the clash of values can be seen as thoroughly conventional.

Contrary to popular reputation, it is therefore quite possible to be ideologically contentious in the United States and still remain genuinely American. It is wholly legitimate to challenge political ideas and principles with other political ideas and principles without being regarded as subversively ideological or irredeemably divisive. In fact, it is the general norm. An ideological challenge can be particularly effective when it is based upon a set of principles integral to the indigenous experiences and traditional ideals of the United States. Many campaigns in support of principled changes to an established mix of value and policy priorities have

<sup>13</sup> Huntington, *American Politics: The Promise of Disharmony*, ch. 5.

<sup>14</sup> For a different formulation and timescale of American historical cycles, see Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., 'The Cycles of American Politics', in Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. (ed.), *The Cycles of American History* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1989), pp. 23–48.

<sup>15</sup> David Callahan, *\$1 Billion for Ideas: Conservative Think Tanks in the 1990s* (Washington, DC: National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy, 1999).

been successful not by denying the indigenous capacity for ideational challenge and experimentation of the United States, but by exploiting its potential for interpretive latitude.

The American facility for engaging in conflict based upon, and expressed through, divergent ideas should not be underestimated. Even those who claim the existence of a cultural singularity of values concede that the strains and divisions occasioned by the interpretive variability of such core principles can be no less intense than those conflicts based upon explicit ideological dichotomies. As Huntington makes it clear, a general agreement on values can actually promote conflict. Other commentators, who are sceptical of the Hartzian perspective of American society, point out that even if a liberal consensus is assumed to exist, 'a liberal mold does not end the opportunities for political disagreement'.<sup>16</sup> On the contrary, 'interesting and plausible though theories such as Hartz's are, they are not necessarily correct in asserting that the American political agenda will be tightly constricted'.<sup>17</sup>

Far from being synonymous with a calming equanimity, the presence of core values can be seen as a licence for dispute. The object of concord becomes a medium in which complaints are advanced in relation to how shared principles can and should be applied, as well as to how they have been reconfigured, subverted, or even ignored. In spite of the claims that the United States possesses a unitary foundation of liberal ideals, American politics is animated by a furious competitive urge to align positions with core principles. It is conceivable that it is precisely because the United States has such a strong attachment to a set of guiding dogmas that it promotes an extraordinary array of inventive strategies to secure for different positions the imprimatur of American authenticity.

The continual struggle over the priorities given to different variants, derivatives, and constructions of American values and the language of ideational engagement that accompanies it is symbolized by what is loosely termed the 'culture wars' of the United States.<sup>18</sup> A series of issues (e.g. abortion, pornography, sex education, drug abuse, gun control, gay rights, 'family values', the place of religion in public life) have allegedly underlined the existence of deep-seated public differences not just over the definition and application of core values, but also over the composition and ownership of American identity. Notwithstanding the general assumption that American values possess a unitary and interdependent quality, advocates on both sides of these controversial issues argue their cases on the grounds of high principle and absolute moral conviction. Whether these adversarial groupings

<sup>16</sup> Graham K. Wilson, *Only in America: The Politics of the United States in Comparative Perspective* (Chatham, NJ: Chatham House, 1998), p. 26.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> See John K. White, *The Values Divide: American Politics and Culture in Transition* (New York: Chatham House), 2003, p. 18. See also William J. Bennett, *The Broken Hearth: Reversing the Moral Collapse of the American Family* (New York: Doubleday, 2001); John Sperling, Suzanne Helburn, Samuel George, John Morris, and Carl Hunt, *The Great Divide: Retro vs. Metro America* (Sausalito, CA: PoliPoint Press, 2004); Sidney Blumenthal, *The Clinton Wars* (New York: Viking, 2003), chs. 2, 3, 5, 11, 12.

are termed traditionalists and progressives, or religious dogmatists and secular humanists, the polarizing properties of their respective outlooks underlines the way that American values such as equity, freedom, democracy, choice, and legal protection can be used to support diametrically opposed positions.

While there may continue to be a consensus on what American values are in the abstract, there remain sharp disagreements over what they mean in an operational sense. The resultant debate is 'a struggle not just for political supremacy...but over the idea of just what values the nation stands for, and how they should be translated into public policy'.<sup>19</sup> Far from being atypical of American politics, it can be claimed that the mindset and language of the 'cultural wars' are thoroughly representative of the style that gives the conduct of political exchange in the United States its particular character. The paradox of divisions forming over a supposed unity of fixed principles is a controlling theme of American political discourse. It is one that requires exceptional agility in the formulation of arguments, and imaginative subtlety in the competitive displacement of opponents seeking to give the same points of reference a different coloration.

This kind of conflict can be depicted in many different ways. For example, it can be characterized as a dispute between different liberalisms, between the respective claims of liberty and democracy, or between the distinctive implications of freedom and equality. It can be said to assume the form of a divergence between a generalized presumption of equality and the sustained social presence of different categories of inequality. Alternatively, conflict may be depicted as an episode in which a 'liberal establishment' is pitted against a movement of conservative insurgency. On the other hand, it may constitute evidence that the 'political system has no genuine Left but does have a genuine Right'.<sup>20</sup> Another perspective presents an established liberal order having been ideologically outmanoeuvred by radical conservatives who have assumed an ascendant position as a 'new governing elite'.<sup>21</sup> Its compulsive appeals to American ideas have enabled this emergent elite to shape the 'frames of reference that are used repeatedly in policy debates'.<sup>22</sup> In effect, it is not only the legitimacy of the participants' respective positions that are disputed amongst themselves, but also the interpretations that are given to their conflicts by observers which remain continually open to question.

Some argue that the central value of the American tradition is liberty; others, equality; still others, communal solidarity. These schools of thought are all partially correct, but ultimately wrong. The perennial American tradition cannot be defined in terms of any single value. Rather it consists of a complex of values—values that are complementary, not contradictory.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>19</sup> White, *The Values Divide*, p. 18.

<sup>20</sup> Walter D. Burnham, 'The Turnout Problem', in A. James Reichley (ed.), *Elections American Style* (Washington, DC: Brookings, 1987), p. 127.

<sup>21</sup> Robert Reich, 'Dismal Democrats', *Prospect*, May 2004.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> Ted Halstead and Michael Lind, *The Radical Center: The Future of American Politics* (New York: Anchor, 2001), p. 33.

Even Halstead and Lind's measured conclusion is open to dispute because in many respects the severity of much of the political argument in the United States is fuelled by the intrinsic contradictions of the society's purportedly complementary values.

## A COMPOUND REPUBLIC

The controlling premise of this study is that the United States possesses a little-understood ability to engage in deep conflicts over political ideas, while at the same time reducing adversarial positions to legitimate derivatives of American history and development. Americans may be hostile to the thought of ideologies. They may ostensibly regard social theory to be an uncomfortable and unnecessary diversion. The United States may simply not have the background or temperament for the totality of European-style ideologies. Nevertheless, what remains noteworthy is that the normal processes of American politics are distinguished by having both the means and the motivation to engage in profound disputes over political ideas but without succumbing to the intractability and entirety of European ideological conflicts.

In many respects, America's historical experience can be translated into a history of its experience with the role of ideas in politics. This has produced an enriched idiom of ideational engagement in which American political discourse can draw upon a set of political currents set within its own historical and social development. These currents are intensely varied in content and application. They provide American politics with the raw material for its conduct, in that this repository of ideas, along with the values and traditions enfolded into them, serves to inform the language of political discourse and to provide the currency with which issues are identified and argued out in American society. Such a common core of indigenous principles can be used in varying permutations and with different degrees of emphasis to produce a startling diversity of political rationales.

The fundamental aim of this study is to examine the traditions and usages of American political ideas within the arena of practical politics. By locating them in their respective contexts, it will be possible to assess both their changing meanings and their shifting relationships to one another. In surveying the core ideas of the United States both in isolation and in combination, it will enable the study to reach an informed awareness of their political and cultural leverage as forms of persuasion and sources of legitimacy. The intention is to root the examination of American political ideas in the milieu of social drives, political movements, and contemporary issues within which the ideas themselves are embedded. This will not only allow the study to investigate the interior properties and traditional priorities of the key values of the United States but also permit the conceptual implications and practical consequences of these ideas to be traced and evaluated. In effect, the inquiry accepts the complex usage of ideas on its own multidimensional terms.

In embarking upon this survey, it is important to underline the self-imposed limitations of the project. Because the emphasis is laid firmly upon the employment of ideas in political activity, the objective is neither to provide a genealogy of American ideas within their different social and development contexts, nor to offer a philosophical inquiry into the meaning, logic, and implications of different ideas elicited from within an American framework. The study recognizes 'the interdependence of political theory and practical controversy'<sup>24</sup> but it gives primary consideration to the effect of this symbiosis on the latter rather than upon the analytical or philosophical developments of the former. The prospectus, therefore, is not one of using the United States as an instrument of explication and analysis on behalf of a series of individual ideas; and it is not one of fashioning a history of ideas through the lens of the American experience. While some elements of these approaches and perspectives will be discernible, they remain secondary to the main objective of examining the ways in which the origins, properties, and usages of a set of seminal ideas give the nature of American politics its special resonance.

Other caveats need to be underlined. The purpose of the exercise is not to use analytical political theory in order to arrive at an integrated account of belief systems, or at an overarching project of conceptual organization. It is equally the case that the study is not motivated by an intention to provide a survey of ideas and contextual interpretation for the purpose of eliciting generalizations over the dynamics between categories such as history, language, meaning, identity, legitimacy, socialization, consciousness, culture, and political action. An extensive and sophisticated literature already exists that explores the theoretical, conceptual, and empirical complexities involved in formulating any clear and uncontested rules of engagement in the construction of symmetries within such a multidimensional area.<sup>25</sup> While many rich insights may be accrued from this literature, the study is not guided by an ambition to add to it in any concerted way. The animating theme is more modest but arguably no less challenging in the scale of its remit: to examine the way in which a set of ideas has informed, and continues to structure, both the framework of American political discourse and the character of American national identity.

The book's organization reflects both the nature of the subject matter and the strategy of inquiry suggested by it. The analysis is organized into two main parts. Part II provides a set of individual surveys in which each of nine elemental ideas are closely inspected, and Chapters 1–9 examine the abstract characteristics and principled components of each idea. In addition, they review the historical and social circumstances that transformed these ideas into political traditions that

<sup>24</sup> Ronald Dworkin, *Sovereign Virtue: The Theory and Practice of Equality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), p. 4.

<sup>25</sup> For example, see Quentin Skinner, 'Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas', *History and Theory*, vol. 8, no. 1 (1969), pp. 3–53; J. G. A. Pocock, *Politics, Language and Time: Essays on Political Thought and History* (London: Methuen, 1972); Terence Ball, James Farr, and Russell L. Hanson (eds), *Political Innovation and Conceptual Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Michael Freeden, *Ideologies and Political Theory: A Conceptual Approach* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996); Gerald F. Gaus, *Political Concepts and Political Theories* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2000).

continue to animate the content and style of political argument in the United States. Again it is important to note the imposed limitations of these chapters. They are not intended to provide a comprehensive survey of each idea or a systematic analysis of their historical lineage and patterns of indigenous development. The aim is not to establish a prospectus that offers a detailed account of how each particular idea came to possess its contextual currency. Likewise, the rationale of the study is not to identify the complex patterns of historical evolution, or to establish clear reasons for the variability in both their meanings and their relationships to one other. To this extent, the book is not centred upon the *history of ideas* as such. It is rather more concerned with acknowledging the significance of history in examining the usages and continuities of these ideas in contemporary American politics. The standpoint, therefore, is not that of working from the past and tracing the course of ideas to the present, but of using the past to illustrate the social significance, the cultural depth, the political leverage, and the civic legacies that continue to be invested in each idea.

With this in mind, the individual surveys given in Chapters 1–9 are intended to convey the sweep and scale of each idea within the substance of American politics. In order to achieve this effect, it is necessary to refer to historical illustrations and to discernible traditions within American experience. Almost inevitably the presented evidence will be selective. This is not only because of the constraints of space but also because of the nature of the analytical agenda itself which is focused upon producing a concise but accurate representation of the richness, range, and depth of the ideas that inform and animate American political exchange.

The social currency and ubiquitous usage of these basic ideas allow for a profusion of common linkages and substantive connections to be made between them. In fact, their adhesive qualities in the American context give rise to an array of important coalescences and aggregates amongst them, which dominate the architecture of political argument in the United States. Six of the most durable and influential of these corporate entities are surveyed in Chapters 10–15 (i.e. Part III). The selection of these conceptual composites may well provoke some dispute because of the exclusion of other well-qualified illustrations. In response, it is contended that the choice was made in order both to demonstrate the usable variability of the foundational ideas and to convey the inventiveness and adaptability with which these core themes can be conjoined for political effect. Even though composites like communitarianism and feminism are not allotted chapter-length space, they are taken into account, either implicitly or explicitly, in the course of the analysis. This will not resolve the disputes over the choice of compounds for extended inquiry, but it will underline the contestable nature of what best epitomizes the dynamics within these amalgamations.

Part III is central to the purposive rationale of the entire study. It illustrates the phenomenon of political argument being rooted in collective aggregates of core ideas. In doing so, it makes manifest the political effects of what in the United States is a conventional inclination, and even a compulsive drive, to incorporate the full set of these ideas into political positions in the competition for cultural legitimacy. While these clusters of ideas may have radically different interpretive

profiles and policy implications, they share a common connection to a historically and socially embedded foundation. The emphasis in the analysis is therefore placed upon revealing the presence of what is arguably an extraordinary agility in organizing ideas for principled conflict, while at the same time giving recognition to the conditioning and constraining effects of the shared source base of those ideas. Accordingly, the focus is primarily directed to this ideational matrix, and to the compounds that are reducible to it, rather than to an agenda seeking to determine the precise relational aspects of different ideas in respect to philosophical categories or to changing historical periods. While the latter fields of inquiry will often be germane to the study, the book is not designed to offer a concerted or systematic engagement with these alternative approaches.

In Part IV, Chapter 16 offers an overview of the ecology of ideas in American politics. It discusses the various means by which political participants engage with a multiple constituency of core values in the competitive struggle for advantage and legitimacy. It also reviews how analysts have sought to come to terms with the dual existence of a fixed set of central principles within society, and the fluid and innovative style by which these core values are articulated and aggregated for political effect. Finally, Chapter 17 discusses the contemporary challenges confronting the established conventions and dynamics associated with America's ideational arrangements.

The ensuing survey proceeds on the understanding that ideas are a basic part of associational life in the United States. They are not merely an incidental feature of political exchange. Ideas have an instrumental role and a substantive status in the way that issues are defined and contested. Just as the foundations of American society are universally expressed in the language of ideas, so is political conflict articulated in terms of different value claims, or more particularly by reference to divided interpretations of commonly recognized values. As a consequence, American discourse is suffused with grand statements relating to big questions and sweeping principles. But the net effect of this form of politics is not a monochrome world of mutual disengagement. It is a densely packed space in which complex cross-currents of ideas are selected and formulated into hosts of nuanced hybrids in order to maximize their political appeal. James Madison's reference to the segmented yet interdependent structure of American government as a 'compound republic'<sup>26</sup> finds its equivalent in the aggregative dimension of the republic's core principles. In the United States, ideas are nothing if not promiscuous. Their advocates are equally eclectic in the manner in which they fashion ideas into evermore adaptable mutations. It is the virtuosity of these ideas and their usages to which this book is dedicated.

<sup>26</sup> James Madison, 'Federalist Paper No. 51', in Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay, *The Federalist Papers*, introduced by Clinton Rossiter (New York: Mentor, 1961), p. 323.



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## Part II

## Elements

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# Freedom

## INTRODUCTION

The most abiding and durable self-characterization of the United States is that of freedom. The concept of freedom lies at the heart of American identity. It is at one and the same time a foundational ethic, a cultural reference point, a defining ideal, a controlling precept, a depiction of social reality, a medium of political exchange, a mobilizing source of aspiration, and a device of historical and political explanation. The idea of liberty is integral to the American republic. It permeates not only the origins and development of the United States, but also the nation's sense of what it embodies as a social entity. As a consequence, American consciousness remains firmly attached to the principles and demands of liberty. The success of the United States as a national and cultural entity is habitually equated with its success in being free and in embodying a universal idea of liberty. Just as problems are habitually defined in terms of freedom, so are solutions presented and rationalized by reference to their ability to restore or refine or enlarge human freedoms. Given the cultural centrality of citizenship rights such as the freedom of religion, freedom of assembly, freedom of speech, and freedom of conscience, and given that liberty has been the dominant theme in the narratives of success in the United States, it is widely acknowledged that freedom is the 'most resonant, deeply held American value'.<sup>1</sup>

Freedom is seen to be not merely an attribute but a vast organizing theme giving shape and continuity to the history and composition of the American experience. Essentially, freedom occupies a central position in the national narratives that give form to the identity of the United States. In the United States, the concept and social meaning of freedom remains fused with a sense of time and place. The origins of American freedom and the inception of the United States are regarded as being simultaneous and interconnected developments. The claim that America commenced with a state of freedom, and subsequently remained inextricably rooted within that condition, quickly acquired the status of a self-evident truth.

This axiomatic equation of the United States with liberty was founded upon a compound of political principle and social situation. The original eighteenth-century appeal of natural rights, social contract, constitutional liberties, and

<sup>1</sup> Robert Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton, *Habits of the Heart: Americans in Search of Themselves* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985), p. 23.

republican self-government was conjoined to a set of conditions that made colonial Americans not only highly susceptible to the substance of these principles but in many respects also gave them the appearance of providing the natural contexts and immediate expressions of these principles. The transition to the United States, therefore, was widely accepted as marking a reaffirmation of the social attachment to the ideals of freedom. Since then, Americans have been raised with the conviction that their society first rose to national consciousness during the revolutionary era when the 'sons of liberty' defied the imperial superpower in order to defend their liberties. They then resorted to a declaration of independence, to a rebellion, and to a long war of emancipation from the British Crown (1775–83) in an effort to secure those liberties for themselves and to make America free from outside control.

The nation is therefore celebrated for having been 'conceived in liberty' and dedicated to the proposition that freedom is a natural right which conditions and constrains all succeeding social arrangements. Patrick Henry's admonition to 'give me liberty or give me death' was the rallying call of the War of Independence, but it also became the battle cry of all subsequent American wars. The pre-eminence of liberty in the formative processes of America is still visible in the symbols and mottoes of those states, which declared their independence in 1776. While the flag of Virginia portrays the destruction of tyranny, New York's flag is dedicated to the figures of liberty and justice. The flag of New Jersey also features the cap of liberty and has the motto, 'Liberty and Prosperity'. Pennsylvania promotes 'Virtue, Liberty, and Independence' and Massachusetts declares that 'With the sword she seeks peace, order, and liberty'. Such signs and symbols help to sustain the belief that America originated in a condition of freedom and that American liberty was accordingly 'a matter of birthright and not of conquest'.<sup>2</sup> In Thomas Jefferson's words, 'the God who gave us life, gave us liberty at the same time',<sup>3</sup> by which he meant that the acquisition of independence was not simply a historical event, but a recognition that liberty was a condition natural to America and integral to its independent existence. Even when it was necessary for the Founding Fathers to form a stronger union and a necessarily more centralized framework of government, the effort was still successfully couched in terms of 'securing the blessings of freedom'.<sup>4</sup> The circumstances of America's emergence as a separate entity had made 'liberty an American speciality'<sup>5</sup> and set America on a course that would forever combine it with the prospects and promises of liberty and, thereupon, render America an exceptional society of universal and prophetic significance.

<sup>2</sup> Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Politics of Hope* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1964), p. 63.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Jefferson, 'A Summary View of the Rights of British America', in Merrill D. Peterson (ed.), *The Portable Thomas Jefferson* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1977), p. 21.

<sup>4</sup> Taken from the Preamble to the Constitution of the United States.

<sup>5</sup> Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation*, vol. II—*The Science of Freedom* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1970), p. 557.

## FREEDOM AND AMERICAN IDENTITY

The relationship between the United States and the concept of liberty, therefore, is not generally seen as merely a loose conjunction of history and principle. On the contrary, these component elements are normally interpreted as constituting a symbiosis in which liberty becomes indistinguishable from the formative processes and subsequent evolution of the United States. With freedom taken to be both a fixed essence and a conditional republican reflex, the political culture is one that is permeated with the meanings and values of liberty. American society continues to be bound up with the ideals and intoxication of liberty. 'No idea is more fundamental to Americans' sense of themselves and as a nation than freedom. The central term in our political vocabulary, "freedom" ... is deeply embedded in the record of our history and the language of everyday life'.<sup>6</sup> The country possesses a formidable array of symbols, legends, and insignia, which ensure that America's equation with freedom remains a constant theme and an irrepressible object of commendation. As a result, outside 'observers have frequently been struck by the depth of Americans' devotion of freedom, as well as our conviction, as James Bryce put it, that we are the "only people" truly to enjoy it'.<sup>7</sup> Because of this attachment both to the virtues of freedom and to the conviction in its existence in the New World, the 'idea does seem to occupy a more prominent place in public and private discourse in the United States than elsewhere'.<sup>8</sup> Ultimately, liberty can be said to be 'more deeply embedded in the nation's system of values than any of the others'.<sup>9</sup> As a consequence, '[n]o value in the American ethos is more revered'.<sup>10</sup>

Whenever the United States is mobilized into an enhanced state of historical consciousness, it is almost invariably done so by recourse to the need to protect or extend freedom. In 1941, President Franklin D. Roosevelt sought to energize the American nation in the preparation for war by portraying a future world order drawn from the American experience of liberty. President Roosevelt was persuasive because he 'presented a vision in which the American ideals of individual liberties were extended throughout the world'.<sup>11</sup> In articulating 'the ideological aims of the conflict... he appealed to Americans' most profound beliefs about freedom'. The necessity for war was based upon what Roosevelt termed the 'four freedoms'<sup>12</sup>:

<sup>6</sup> Eric Foner, 'American Freedom in a Global Age', *The American Historical Review*, vol. 106, no. 1 (February 2001), p. 7.

<sup>7</sup> Eric Foner, 'The Meaning of Freedom in the Age of Emancipation', *The Journal of American History*, vol. 81, no. 2 (September 1994), p. 436.

<sup>8</sup> Foner, 'American Freedom in a Global Age', p. 5.

<sup>9</sup> Herbert McCloskey and John Zaller, *The American Ethos: Public Attitudes towards Capitalism and Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), p. 18.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> National Archives, 'Powers of Persuasion', [http://www.archives.gov/exhibit\\_hall/powers\\_of\\_persuasion/four\\_freedoms/four\\_freedoms.html](http://www.archives.gov/exhibit_hall/powers_of_persuasion/four_freedoms/four_freedoms.html).

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

The first is freedom of speech and expression—everywhere in the world. . . . The second is freedom of every person to worship God in his [*sic*] own way—everywhere in the world. . . . The third is freedom from want, which, translated into world terms, means economic understandings which will secure to every nation a healthy peacetime life for its inhabitants—everywhere in the world. . . . The fourth is freedom from fear, which, translated into world terms, means a worldwide reduction of armaments to such a point and in such a thorough fashion that no nation will be in a position to commit an act of physical aggression against any neighbor—anywhere in the world.<sup>13</sup>

During the cold war, President John F. Kennedy committed the United States to ‘pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival and the success of liberty’.<sup>14</sup> At the time, this was not regarded as an excessive declaration so much as a simple statement of compulsive intent driven by the country’s generic association with liberty. America’s entry into the First World War had been marked by a similar avowal of national purpose, i.e. ‘for the rights and liberties of small nations, for a universal dominion of right by such a concert of free peoples as shall bring peace and safety to all nations and make the world itself at last free’.<sup>15</sup> In similar vein, the United States’ engagement in the Second World War was defined by the choice between ‘human slavery and human freedom’.<sup>16</sup> As the ‘perpetual home of freedom’, there was no choice for, as President Roosevelt stated, ‘our freedom would never survive surrender’.<sup>17</sup>

An American crisis, therefore, is always defined as both a crisis *of* liberty and a crisis *for* liberty. When the United States was subjected to a series of coordinated terrorist attacks on 11 September 2001, President George W. Bush did not hesitate in identifying the perpetrators as simply the ‘enemies of freedom’. As a result, the ‘country [had been] awakened to danger and called to defend freedom’.<sup>18</sup> No other rationale or mission would have been as effective in eliciting the emergency response. The President explicitly equated the safety of the nation with its self-image as the bastion of liberty. In a succession of speeches, he repeatedly used the theme of freedom to define both the nature of the crisis and the form of the response. In his address to a joint session of Congress in September 2001, he declared that freedom and the United States were in jeopardy: ‘Freedom and fear are at war. . . . I will not relent in waging this struggle for freedom and security for the American people’.<sup>19</sup> On other occasions, he underlined America’s historical commitment to spreading freedom to beleaguered parts of the world that had

<sup>13</sup> President Franklin D. Roosevelt, ‘Message to Congress’, 6 January 1941, <http://www.libertynet.org/~edcivic/fdr.html>.

<sup>14</sup> President John F. Kennedy, ‘Inaugural Address’, 20 January 1961, <http://odur.let.rug.nl/~usa/P/jk35/speeches/jfk.htm>.

<sup>15</sup> President Woodrow Wilson, ‘War Message to a Joint Session of Congress’, 2 April 1917, <http://www.geocities.com/presidentialspeeches/warwilson.htm>.

<sup>16</sup> President Roosevelt, Radio Address Announcing the Proclamation of an Unlimited National Emergency, ‘We Choose Human Freedom’, 27 May 1941, <http://www.usmm.org/fdr/emergency.html>.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> President George W. Bush, ‘Address to a Joint Session of Congress and the American People’, 20 September 2001, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010920-8.html>.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

been denied liberty and which, as a result, had become centres of oppression and even terrorism.

Our commitment to liberty is America's tradition. . . . The advance of freedom is the surest strategy to undermine the appeal of terror in the world. Where freedom takes hold, hatred gives way to hope. When freedom takes hold, men and women turn to the peaceful pursuit of a better life. American values and American interests lead in the same direction: We stand for human liberty.<sup>20</sup>

President Bush applied pressure in precisely the way that previous presidents had done in the past. He connected events to the touchstone of American identity and, thereby, maximized the potential for social cohesion and national purpose.

In the view of Michael Novak, the 'interpretive key' of President Bush's speeches has been the 'concentration of liberty as the scarlet thread of human affairs', and a sense that the nation's history can effectively be encapsulated by the driving imperative of freedom.<sup>21</sup> This was exemplified in the President's Second Inaugural Address (2005) which was in essence an elegy to 'America's ideal of freedom' and to 'the great liberating tradition of this nation'.<sup>22</sup> In rededicating the nation to the epic battle for 'freedom's cause', President Bush made it clear that the United States would work to enhance the moral sphere of freedom at the direct expense of tyranny: 'There is only one force of history that can break the reign of hatred and resentment, and expose the pretensions of tyrants, and reward the hopes of the decent and tolerant, and that is the force of human freedom'.<sup>23</sup> Such a blanket affirmation of freedom as the centrepiece of a national strategy to combat global terrorism prompted one discerning commentator to remark that 'such a speech could only have been delivered in the United States'. The spread of freedom was 'advanced by a government not just as part of a non-military strategy but as *the* entire strategy and even as a way of avoiding . . . other things'.<sup>24</sup>

## FREEDOM AS A CONTESTED CATEGORY

In spite of the reputation of the United States as a reification of freedom, the exact nature of this reciprocal identity has been highly problematic. For example, even

<sup>20</sup> President Bush, 'Announces that Major Combat Operations in Iraq Have Ended', Remarks by the President from the USS *Abraham Lincoln*, 1 May 2003, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2003/05/iraq/20030501-15.html>.

<sup>21</sup> Michael Novak, 'W., Underestimated: The Surprisingly Good Speeches of President Bush', *National Review Online*, 2 December 2003, <http://www.nationalreview.com/novak/novak-200312020910.asp>.

<sup>22</sup> President Bush, 'Inaugural Address', 20 January 2005, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/inaugural/>.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Anatol Lieven, 'Bush's Choice: Messianism or Pragmatism?', *Open Democracy*, 22 February 2005, [http://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-americanpower/article\\_2348.jsp](http://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-americanpower/article_2348.jsp).



if the proposition of an original state of freedom is accepted as the foundational condition of the republic, it raises the question of how that freedom has been, or can ever be, reconciled to the needs of a social organization. An amorphous and even abstract freedom may be a benign ideal and one that is capable of assimilating a range of different constructions and emphases. Nevertheless, such liberty is only viable up to the point where it becomes necessary to determine its priorities, to apply it to material conditions, and to define how it relates to other values.

Another dimension to this problem relates to the difference between a liberating experience and acquiring the experience of freedom. Liberation may be a precondition of freedom but, as Hannah Arendt has explained, this is not the same as a sustainable condition of liberty. This is a far more elusive property and one that is dependent upon social arrangements.<sup>25</sup> In the American context, the anarchic freedom of being liberated from European forms and structures needed to be transformed and organized into a set of material practicalities. Thereupon, each immigrant would have had to come to the realization that liberty needed to be placed in a social context of reciprocal obligations and restraints before it could acquire meaning and actual content. But in being accommodated to social arrangements, the pure water of idealized liberty would necessarily be muddled with qualifications, provisos, and ambiguities.

Another problem is posed by the attributed relationship between American history and the presence of freedom. The difficulties posed by attempting to translate a protean concept into a single thematic construction of a complex and contested history are not so much surmounted as habitually dismissed or transcended. At root is a circular process of mutual definition. Just as liberty is categorized as a historical condition, so is history used both to reaffirm the validity of the specified point of origin and to legitimize any succeeding development in terms of a necessary continuity from that base. This dynamic generates a loop in which freedom becomes a static and generalized presumption, while history compounds the obfuscation by becoming a prolonged adjunct to an underlying state of presumptive freedom. The net effect is that American freedom becomes evermore opaque and rooted in an increasingly formalized and arguably indeterminate past.

A further difficulty raised by the close association of freedom with the United States relates to the way that each tends to become the litmus test for the other. This can allow alternative interpretations to be overlooked. More significantly, it can lead to the United States being assessed and appraised not so much in terms of itself but as an abstract exemplar of liberal society per se. By being used as the society that typifies the principles and norms of mainstream liberal order, the United States becomes the object of generalized evaluations based upon undifferentiated attitudes towards liberalism in a wider global context. The lack of discrimination often leads either to unqualified praise or, alternatively, to complete condemnation on the grounds of what the United States *represents* rather than how American society functions in practice.

<sup>25</sup> Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Viking, 1963).

Severe though these problems may be, it can be argued that they are not as contentious or as disruptive as another source of difficulty surrounding the principle and practice of freedom in the United States. This relates to the profusion and depth of tensions that pervade the pursuit of freedom in a social organization. Far from being reconciled within a liberal society, these tensions constitute an integral and continuing part of it. The divisions and disjunctions drawn from the divergent claims of liberal priorities characterize American society and dominate the conduct of American politics. In fact it can be claimed that no other society attaches greater significance or devotes more resources to the analysis and evaluation of these competing claims of liberal legitimacy. Enumerated below are some of the most cited points of interpretative contention to have characterized the political arguments surrounding freedom in the United States. These contested perceptions and constructions of freedom have both shaped the interplay of political positions in the United States and defined the properties and strategies of American political engagement.

- Freedom conceived as an a priori general condition within society; as a consequence, freedoms are seen as reducible to, and motivated by, a core conception of a generic and unified freedom...*set against*... Freedom which can only be explained and valued through the existence of defined freedoms that may or may not necessarily be derivatives of a single notion of freedom.
- Freedoms translated into absolute rights that are treated as non-negotiable claims...*set against*... Freedoms as individual claims contingent both upon negotiated accommodations with other freedoms and upon social requirements and responsibilities.
- Freedom in which the emphasis is on emancipation from the restraining structures of society and government...*set against*... Freedom that takes account of the extent to which individuals are in a position to exercise their freedoms, and which allows government to take remedial action to secure a minimal level of economic opportunity and freedom of choice.
- Freedom as a continuously mutating and open-ended process of adaptation, interpretation, and refinement...*set against*... Freedom as a closed and completed product in which positions can be argued out in fundamentalist terms by reference to a fixed, static, and historically sanctioned finality.
- Freedom as a distant source of general and varied inspiration...*set against*... Freedom as a specific source of detailed instruction and designated output.
- Freedom as primarily an economic value...*set against*... Freedom as primarily a social value.
- Freedom as the origin and expression of a single, capacious, and binding culture...*set against*... Freedom as the licence to permit a diversity of multiple coexisting cultures.

- Freedom viewed and used as a motivating cause and a protest ideal used to precipitate social change and reform...*set against*... Freedom viewed as a current de facto condition and used defensively as a device by which to challenge, oppose, obstruct, resist, and retard the onset of change.
- Freedom associated with the provision of civil rights secured and guaranteed by government...*set against*... Freedom in the form of civil liberties in which government is prevented from intervening in the private and public spheres of the individual.
- Freedom conceived as a primary value and as an end in its own right...*set against*... Freedom conceived as a secondary principle with only an instrumental or functional value related to the utility of those outcomes secured through its operation.
- Freedom accepted as a basis for social order...*set against*... Freedom characterized in terms of an emancipatory and libertarian impulse against the constraints of order.
- Freedom centred upon, and expressed through, the individual as the foundational core and primary condition of a free existence...*set against*... Freedom as an aggregate expression of a group or communal identity privileging a collective claim to substantive liberty.

The issues arising from these disjunctions are a testament to the way that the meanings, usages, traditions, and logics of this iconic principle have not only been generic to American political history and development but have also sustained an enduring level of intensive cultural engagement. If the United States can be said to have a prevailing public philosophy and a defining discourse, then it is one that pivots upon the meaning of freedom and its leverage as a political resource. The value of freedom either as a presumptive condition or as an aspirational objective has been an integral feature of Americanization and an epic reference point in the emergence of national narratives on the theme of a collective identity. Just as the society developed an extensive capacity for assimilation, so the theme of American freedom underwent a comparable process of accommodation. As a cultural point of reference, it has remained unsurpassed and has allowed American society to be successively reconfigured under the aegis of a unifying ideal.

In the nineteenth century, for example, the United States rapidly developed into an increasingly industrialized society. American traditions and understanding of freedom evolved in line with this social transformation. Accordingly liberty was recast in terms of personal acquisition, technological efficiency, material prosperity, and social progress. As wealth was no longer reducible to land, freedom was no longer synonymous with land ownership. This was a world in which the old rural frontier was being replaced by new 'frontiers' in the form of scientific invention, social mobility, profit maximization, industrial production, and concentration of ownership. As liberty in this new abundance was emancipating the inner resources of the continent, the new wealth was vindicated in terms of what it could provide to ever-larger numbers of people.

A similarly radical recasting of liberty occurred during the great wave of immigration in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Under these conditions, the freedoms associated with Thomas Jefferson's ideal of yeoman farmers facilitating a graduated maturation of republican virtue were displaced by a more mass-produced notion of an instantly acquired freedom secured by the passage to Ellis Island.<sup>26</sup> Freedom became a commodity to be acquired through movement and relocation. As a consequence, it was increasingly seen to be a matter of consumer choice and a concomitant of mass migration. The commonplace conviction at the time was that because America was a place of freedom, it made people free and kept them free by force of location. As a result, freedom became a narrative of re-enactment for every immigrant and has continued to be so up to the present day.

These kinds of reconfiguration did not resolve the tensions and disputes engendered by a culture formally dedicated to freedom. On the contrary, they underlined the continuing salience surrounding the meaning of liberty and its significance as a medium of exchange and leverage within American society. In a 'nation obsessed with liberty',<sup>27</sup> the currency of political dispute has remained dominated by this competition for authenticity, i.e. the legitimization of an interpretation or construction of freedom by reference to its relationship to past conditions or foundational intentions. It is precisely because the idea of liberty is so central to American culture that there continues to be so much interest in its origins. The status of American liberty as idiosyncratic, and therefore authentic, has always been strongly influenced by its own historical roots. America's conception of itself as liberated enough to be uniquely free from the rest of the world is necessarily linked to the conception of its formative processes. In this way, the forward march of American liberty has been led by a continual and compulsive retrospection in pursuit of historical verification. It is for this reason that the origins of American freedom have continued to play such a vital role in the architecture of political debate in the United States.

## THE ROOTS OF AMERICAN LIBERTY

The controversy which best illustrates the nature and influence of this search for validity, and which remains a source of so many claims and counterclaims over the rightful conception of American freedom, is the central dispute over genealogy. The debate pivots upon whether liberty in the New World was primarily a product

<sup>26</sup> See Maldwyn A. Jones, *American Immigration*, 2nd edn (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1992), chs. 7, 8; Alan M. Kraut, *The Huddled Masses: The Immigrant in American society, 1880–1921*, 2nd edn (Wheeling, IL: Harlan Davidson, 2001), ch. 4.

<sup>27</sup> Clinton Rossiter, *Conservatism in America: The Thankless Persuasion*, 2nd edn, rev. (New York: Vintage, 1962), p. 72.

either of experience or of ideas. Those who base the conception of American freedom within the dimension of received experience give primary consideration to the ingredients and processes of a particular social chemistry that is alleged to have produced an unprecedented and spontaneous form of sustained liberation. According to this perspective, the engine of emancipation was based upon the unmediated experience of American conditions and upon the social dynamics generated by them. Individuals were thrown into entirely novel circumstances from which communities arose that were free from the dynastic, class, and feudal divisions of the Old World. The sheer abundance of land and other resources provoked allusions to a state of nature and to a unique historical opportunity to engage in a continuous process of individual and collective liberation. It was not simply that America was seen as having relatively more freedom within its borders than that of other contemporary societies. It was the conviction that America could be nothing other than an agency of emancipation from prior structures and patterns of social organization. In this respect, the state of American nature conferred upon liberty the conditions not only of its own existence but also of its fullest maximization.<sup>28</sup> As a consequence, American freedom was, and continues to be, depicted as the summation of its extraordinary experience. Thus, America was free; it made people free and kept them free by force of its own spontaneous dynamics.

It is liberty in this visceral and immediate sense which has remained a defining characteristic of the United States. Liberty in such a guise has a seductive power in offering the simple prospect of experiencing freedom by experiencing America. The correlate of this guiding premise is that the United States is free from the Old World of Europe. It has been common feature of the American outlook to assert with pride that 'America was new in nature, new in people, new in experience, new in history. Nothing had prepared the old world for what now confronted it, fearfully, alluringly, implacably'.<sup>29</sup> Many in the Old World were only too willing to concur with this vision of America and to add their weight to the notion of America being the embodiment of liberty. Goethe, for example, praised the fact that the Americans were not riven by useless memories and that there were no crumbling castles in America to keep alive the dissensions of feudalism. Hegel also celebrated America. He saw it as 'the land of the future...and of desire for all those who are weary of the historical lumber-room of Old Europe'.<sup>30</sup> In this respect, America appears to be a wholly exceptional society in that by freeing itself from the Old World, it emancipated itself from all preconceived structures and impositions; so much so that America is often reputed to be the first entirely new

<sup>28</sup> See Perry Miller, *Nature's Nation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press/Belknap Press, 1967).

<sup>29</sup> Henry S. Commager, *The Empire of Reason: How Europe Imagined and America Realized the Enlightenment* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1978), p. 64.

<sup>30</sup> Quoted in Hugh Honour, *The New Golden Land: European Images of America from the Discoveries to the Present Time* (London: Allen Lane, 1976), p. 248.

nation, free from the past, free from historical processes, and, therefore, free from the intractable restrictions upon liberty found elsewhere.<sup>31</sup>

It can be claimed that the United States was not, and is not, an unqualified haven of civil liberties, constitutional rights, and political freedoms. Nevertheless, this is overlooking the central point of such an experience-centred perspective. In this respect, the American order was extraordinarily liberal both in the circumstances of its inception and in its subsequent development. In effect, the society is interpreted as the embodiment of a 'bottom-up' arrangement of social processes released through the special circumstances of the New World. The notion of a self-generated national character drawn from an accelerated mix of history and people in combination with a generalized attachment to libertarian doctrines continues to be a compulsively attractive proposition. The nature and appeal of this idiosyncrasy is perhaps best represented in the work of Daniel J. Boorstin. In *The Genius of American Politics*, for example, Boorstin responds to the American desire to be as free of external influences as it is of theoretical accoutrements by referring to the notion of 'givenness' in the manner of America's inception and durability.<sup>32</sup> Givenness relates both to the belief in American values having been 'preformed' within the peculiarities of the American experience and to the idea that American history has an inherent conformity so that 'our past merges indistinguishably into our present'.<sup>33</sup> The conviction in a 'perfectly preformed theory'<sup>34</sup> that is believed to have been 'born with the nation itself'<sup>35</sup> has created a 'naturalistic approach to values'<sup>36</sup> which to Boorstin means that the 'quest for the meaning of our political life has been carried on through historical rather than philosophical channels'.<sup>37</sup> The principle of givenness makes Americans the rightful beneficiaries of a natural inheritance and in the process precludes the need for them to 'invent a political theory'.<sup>38</sup> It was axiomatic to Boorstin that America had no need for theoretical abstractions because it already possessed a core theory through the processes of its history:

The limitations of our history have perhaps confined our philosophical imagination; but they have at the same time confirmed our sense of the continuity of our past and made the definitions of philosophers seem less urgent.<sup>39</sup>

Set against this background of historical spontaneity, the challenge of understanding American freedom could simply be reduced to apprehending the experience of the New World.

An alternative way of explaining the origins and, thereby, the nature of American liberty is through the influence of ideas. This approach to American freedom

<sup>31</sup> Miller, *Nature's Nation*.

<sup>32</sup> Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Genius of American Politics* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1953).

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.

throws into doubt not just its claim to social autonomy, but also its claim to be the cradle of liberty. For example, it can be argued that the early American affection for the classics led to a cultural dependence on the principles and virtues of antiquity. These interpretations plot the influence of Greek and Roman authors like Plato, Aristotle, Sophocles, Thucydides, Plutarch, Cicero, Tacitus, Seneca, Ovid, Cato, Justinian, Lucretius, and Polybius upon the development of colonial ideas on law, forms of government, political stability, republicanism, tyranny, and liberty. It is claimed that these ideas became so ingrained in colonial political life that they were a major source of the Americans' ideology of dissent against Britain, and later became the inspiration behind the new constitutions of the independent republics in the 1780s.<sup>40</sup>

Another interpretation gives emphasis to the more immediate contemporary context of the British constitution, within which the initial American struggle took place, and in reference to which much of the subsequent American speculation concerning the roots of government and the meaning of liberty has been made. Since the 'colonists of every political shade were dedicated wholeheartedly to the English constitutional tradition...and could count no greater blessing...than their inheritance of the English form of government',<sup>41</sup> it could be said that the newly independent Americans could not help but be moulded by hallowed English precedents. It is claimed that the Americans were guided by the desire to reinstate the ideal of the English balanced state through the strength of their own Whig allegiances and their zeal for the liberties of England's Glorious Revolution of 1688.<sup>42</sup>

An important variation of this perspective holds that while American conceptions of liberty were strongly influenced by Britain's political culture, that influence was drawn far more from what was called the republican or 'Commonwealthman' tradition. This term refers to those early eighteenth-century dissenters and radicals who sought to revive the spirit of an ancient English liberty which had been so effectively exploited by the republican apologists of the Commonwealth in the seventeenth century (e.g. James Harrington, John Milton, and Andrew Marvel). These writers identified authentic English liberty as existing in the freehold tenure of Saxon times before the imposition of the Norman 'yoke'.<sup>43</sup> Over the centuries, this original state of indigenous freedom had been progressively

<sup>40</sup> Richard M. Gummere, 'The Classical Ancestry of the United States Constitution', *The American Quarterly*, vol. 14 (Spring 1962), pp. 3–18; Gilbert Chinard, 'Polybius and the American Constitution', *Journal of History of Ideas*, vol. 1, no. 1 (January 1940), pp. 38–58.

<sup>41</sup> Clinton Rossiter, *Seedtime of the Republic: The Origin of the American Tradition of Political Liberty* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1953), p. 143.

<sup>42</sup> See Michael Lienesch, 'In Defense of the Anti-Federalists', *History of Political Thought*, vol. 4, no. 1 (Spring 1983), pp. 65–88; Herbert J. Storing, *What the Anti-Federalists Were for: The Political Thought of the Opponents of the Constitution* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1981).

<sup>43</sup> See Caroline 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* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1959).

reinstated, but the process had not been completed. The struggle continued. The Glorious Revolution (1688) of the Whigs was not the culmination of the process. On the contrary, the Commonwealthmen concluded that liberty was as fragile as ever and constantly in danger of being eroded away. It was this Commonwealthman tradition which, it is claimed, appealed to the non-conformist American dissenters and which permeated their conception of liberty and republicanism. Instead of the founding of America being dominated by the constitutional arrangements, legal rights, and property consciousness of the Whig tradition, it has been argued that it was much more the product of an English-cum-classical republican ethos which stressed civic virtue, moral fervour, self-sacrifice, and the ideal of community.<sup>44</sup>

The historiography of the civic republican tradition in America has itself been the subject of some dispute.<sup>45</sup> As noted above, some have located the republican strand in the principles and controversies surrounding the Commonwealthman discourse. But others see the lineage stretching back not only to the world of Renaissance republicanism and of Florentine thought in particular, but even to the classical period of Aristotle.<sup>46</sup> In the process, they have sought to underline the existence of a continuity of civic republicanism that can and does embrace the American republic. Another point of controversy that has been particularly pertinent in the United States is the nature of the relationship between commerce, property, and money on the one hand, and the virtues and logic of republicanism on the other. Again, opinions have varied between those historians of civic republicanism who claim that private property was an inherently corrupting force in a republic, and those who believe that there was no inconsistency and that republicanism was properly attentive to the protection and support of property ownership.<sup>47</sup> These republican debates have been highly significant in the United States not just also because of the cultural importance attached to

<sup>44</sup> See Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1967); Gordon S. Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776–1787* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1969); Robert E. Shalhope, 'Toward a Republican Synthesis: The Emergence of an Understanding of Republicanism in American Historiography', *William and Mary Quarterly*, vol. 29, no. 1 (January 1972), pp. 49–80.

<sup>45</sup> For example, see Robert E. Shalhope, 'Republicanism and Early American Historiography', *William and Mary Quarterly*, vol. 39, no. 2 (April 1982), pp. 334–56; Daniel T. Rogers, 'Republicanism: The Career of a Concept', *Journal of American History*, vol. 79, no. 1 (June 1992), pp. 11–38; Joyce Appleby, *Liberalism and Republicanism in the Historical Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992); Anthony Molho, 'Italian Renaissance, Made in the USA', in Anthony Molho and Gordon S. Wood (eds.), *Imagined Histories: American Historians Interpret the Past* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), pp. 263–94.

<sup>46</sup> For example, see J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975); J. G. A. Pocock, 'The Machiavellian Moment Revisited', *Journal of Modern History*, vol. 53, no. 1 (March 1981), pp. 49–72; J. G. A. Pocock, 'Civic Humanism and its Role in Anglo-American Thought', in J. G. A. Pocock, *Politics, Language, and Time: Essays on Political Thought and History* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1989), pp. 80–103.

<sup>47</sup> William J. Connell, 'The Republican Idea', in James Hankins (ed.), *Renaissance Civic Humanism: Reappraisals and Reflections* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 14–29.



America's republican identity but because of the substance and meaning that has been imputed to republicanism as a prior historical and ethical standard against which contemporary society can be judged and resistance justified. In essence, republicanism and its historically rooted conception of an instinctive communal liberty can be cited as an authentic American tradition and one that can be differentiated from the more conventional liberal construction of American development.<sup>48</sup>

Notwithstanding the attachments to a republican ethos, the genealogy of American liberty has customarily given emphasis to the liberal ferment of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment which coincided with America's rise to independence. This era witnessed the rise of the modern concept of nature being a single entity directed by its own permanent and objective principles of operation. The belief that the rational order of nature's laws was accessible to human intelligence became the inspiration behind the Enlightenment's emancipation of reason. Building upon John Locke's arguments in the seventeenth century for natural rights as representing the central condition behind the original formation of any civil government, the Enlightenment thinkers proceeded on the assumption that nature was no longer simply a philosophical device to reason into the source and meaning of social arrangements, but a material force to be elicited and channelled into positive use. Since humanity was part of the natural order, it was believed that the mechanics of social nature could be discovered, and political organizations could be constructed that would provide the best fit for mankind's inner properties. Many American scholars have been particularly susceptible to the idea that clinical reasoning and a conscious synthesis of empirically derived knowledge on government and politics explain the origins of America's constitutional freedom. Accordingly, America can be seen as having been 'conceived by a mental act, in the spirit of liberty'<sup>49</sup> by which emancipated reason became the handmaiden of colonial liberation.

Gertrude Himmelfarb points out that the American Enlightenment bore a close resemblance to the latitudinarian instincts and social virtues (e.g. compassion, benevolence, sympathy) of the British Enlightenment, in contrast to the violent certitude of rationality associated with the French Enlightenment. Notwithstanding this shared element of reasonableness, Himmelfarb concludes that America was the only Enlightenment culture in which political liberty became the central motivating force for change.<sup>50</sup> Within such a milieu, the pursuit and organization of freedom in America became a practical science.<sup>51</sup> It is within such a context that the creation of the American polity could be depicted as 'history's first

<sup>48</sup> For example, see Rogers M. Smith, *Civic Ideals: Conflicting Visions of Citizenship in U.S. History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999).

<sup>49</sup> Garry Wills, *Inventing America: Jefferson's Declaration of Independence* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1978), p. xv.

<sup>50</sup> Gertrude Himmelfarb, *The Roads to Modernity: The British, French, and American Enlightenment* (New York: Knopf, 2004).

<sup>51</sup> Gay, *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation*, pp. 555–67.

great political experiment and massive effort at political engineering'.<sup>52</sup> From this standpoint, it is possible to construe American liberty as being so direct a derivative of Enlightenment principles that it might justifiably warrant the depiction of America as the talisman of the Enlightenment's emancipatory spirit.

It should be acknowledged at this point that the Enlightenment amounts to a generic term that includes a variety of philosophical and social agendas which are resistant to any coherent or exclusive set of meanings. Robert Ferguson is particularly adept at dissecting the different strands of the American Enlightenment and in underlining the way that it was deeply connected to a 'Bible culture of extraordinary vitality'.<sup>53</sup> Distinctions between the secular and the religious were not as clearly drawn as the reputation of the Enlightenment would imply.

The American Enlightenment does not quarrel with religious orthodoxies as its French counterpart does; it rests, instead, in the common or shared rhythms and patterns that the Enlightenment has taken from Christianity. The parallels in intellectual reference—salvation and progress, the health of the soul and the corresponding gauge of public interest, the regenerate Christian and the virtuous citizen, exultation of the divine and celebration of design—are homologues in American thought rather than substitutes, one for the other, as in European philosophy.<sup>54</sup>

In this view of the American Enlightenment, the emancipatory potential of reason can be interpreted as being correlated with the dissenting social energies of vigorous Protestantism.

Notwithstanding the different nuances and cultural stimuli even within the American Enlightenment, the realm of organized reason and principled logic does amount to a noteworthy alternative construction of American freedom compared to the explanations drawn exclusively from the themes of historical continuity, cultural autonomy, and traditional habits.<sup>55</sup> Instead of viewing liberty simply as a pre-existing condition or primordial inheritance, those who give emphasis to the history of ideas point to a level of cultural dependence and cosmopolitan intrusion which the advocates of a unique historical experience tend to dismiss as either marginal in effect or a gross distortion of the past. Whether these allegedly seminal ideas are perceived as inherently European in origin, or whether they are seen as being transmuted into essentially American principles of foundation, the net effect is one in which the priority is given and value is afforded to the presence of fundamental principles. These revered ideals constitute an external framework

<sup>52</sup> Austin Ranney, '“The Divine Science”: Political Engineering in American Culture', *American Political Science Review*, vol. 70, no. 1 (March 1976), p. 140.

<sup>53</sup> Robert A. Ferguson, *The American Enlightenment, 1750–1820* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 77.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 42–3.

<sup>55</sup> For a highly sophisticated synthesis of the influence of eighteenth-century republican ideology, and the idiosyncratic nature of New World conditions whereby Americans could not be said to have been born free but came to be so as a result of the long-term repercussions of the American Revolution, see Gordon S. Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: Vintage, 1993).

of fixed norms that offer a continuing standard of political legitimacy in relation to the everyday interplay of political interests and social experience. Of these central ideas which shape, condition, and structure political debate, none has as much cultural significance or operational leverage as that of freedom.

### FREEDOM AS A MEDIATING DEVICE

The exact genealogy of American freedom has always been an open question and it remains an area of constant inquiry and heated reference. In reality, the currents of political thought are interwoven into social experience. The appeal of certain ideas is governed by what they offer in terms of cultural integrity, political mobilization, or master narrative. In the United States, freedom has a generic priority because of the way it can account for, and give expression to, an identity rich in axiomatic principle and experiential narratives.

The duality inherent in the concept and usage of freedom continues to shape political argument. In some circumstances, ideas can seem to lag behind experience. For example, it can be claimed that eighteenth-century concepts of liberty have had to be transformed in order to accommodate more modern notions of franchise extension, racial equality, and women's rights. In other circumstances, it would appear that on the evidence of experience many aspects of American society have failed to fulfil the normative standards espoused in the founding documents of the republic. In these circumstances, a fundamentalist approach to eighteenth-century principles can provide a compelling point of critique and prescription. An eighteenth-century perspective can serve to highlight the contrast between historical ideals and current realities. Such principles can be enjoined to point up the occurrences of illiberal behaviour, to underline the repressive disjunctions and anomalies within an otherwise liberal society, and to act as the mobilizing points for arguments and pressure in support of remedial action.<sup>56</sup>

The relationship between ideas and experience—between norms and conduct—continues to animate American politics and to account for much of its energy and ingenuity of argument. This is because the prize is so valuable: the mantle of authentic American freedom. But this is a prize which is never secured for the benefit of any one position for any length of time. The state of American freedom and the authenticity of claims to American freedom are continuously contested. In *The Myth of American Individualism*, for example, Barry Shain challenges the explanatory value of both the liberal and republican traditions in accounting for the origins and development of American freedom.<sup>57</sup> To Shain, the secularism of the liberal and republican conceptions of social order have

<sup>56</sup> See Rogers M. Smith, 'Beyond Tocqueville, Myrdal, and Hartz: The Multiple Traditions in America', *The American Political Science Review*, vol. 87, no. 3 (September 1993), pp. 549–66; *idem*, *Civic Ideals: Conflicting Visions of Citizenship in U.S. History*.

<sup>57</sup> Barry A. Shain, *The Myth of American Individualism: The Protestant Origins of American Political Thought* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994).

overlooked the religious basis of American community life during the formative period of the United States. Because individual well-being and spiritual salvation were intrinsically tied to a communally directed ethos, freedom in Protestant settlements was seen more as an instrumental rather than an intrinsic value. Shain concludes that early American society was approvingly oriented towards the conformity of the faithful and coercive will of communal oversight. Another strand of critical review focuses on the issue of American immigration and assimilation. The record of controls and regulations are replete with instances of discrimination against minorities in the face of traditional structures of power and the customs of established social orders.<sup>58</sup> The history of immigration and naturalization has prompted Gary Gerstle to echo Shain's reference to a conflation of liberty and compulsion. Freedom on the margins of society could thus be characterized as being a 'mixture of opportunity and coercion',<sup>59</sup>—both of them being 'intrinsic to our history and the process of becoming American'.<sup>60</sup>

A more recent encounter with the disputatious properties of American freedom has centred upon foreign policy. Earlier in the chapter, attention was drawn to the enriched references made by President Bush in mobilizing support for the campaign to counter terrorism. But even in the circumstances of a national emergency, he was not able to monopolize the usage of freedom as a political instrument. Others were able to call upon the principles of liberty in order to underline the areas of 'unfreedom' present in American society and, in particular, to allege that American foreign policy had illiberal properties. Critics deployed a different usage of freedom to challenge the systemic continuities of policy and to open up the space for dissent in support of an emancipatory campaign for a substantive freedom from conditions such as exploitative trading practices, global inequality, environmental degradation, disease, and starvation.<sup>61</sup>

Instead of freedom to consume U.S. products and lifestyles, a definition of freedom focusing upon human rights is needed. Bush's political freedom, in part, has stemmed from wrapping himself in the vagueness of freedom and its centrality to the mainstream of American ideology... the real work of freedom lies not in the waging of war, the unchecked depletion of resources, or the feeding of the treadmill's voracious appetite, but rather in combating these practices.<sup>62</sup>

This form of indictment follows a well-worn path of using freedom as a point of reference with which to subject a dominant or conventional construction of freedom to critique. The use of freedom in this setting becomes a way of throwing the internal tensions of a purportedly liberal society into high relief. As Eric Foner

<sup>58</sup> For example, see Desmond King, *Making Americans: Immigration, Race, and the Origins of the Diverse Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).

<sup>59</sup> Gary Gerstle, 'Liberty, Coercion and the Making of America', *Journal of American History*, vol. 84, no. 2 (September 1997), p. 557.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 558.

<sup>61</sup> Noam Chomsky, *Profit Over People: Neoliberalism and Global Order* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 1999).

<sup>62</sup> Andrew D. Van Alstyne, 'Freedom', in *Collateral Language: A User's Guide to America's New War* (New York: New York University Press, 2002), p. 91

points out, from the very beginning of American history 'freedom has been a central value for countless Americans and a cruel mockery for others'.<sup>63</sup>

Because freedom is raised to such elevated levels of national veneration, it allows dissidents of every persuasion to frame their positions in terms of the anomalies and contradictions implicit in the established configurations of liberty. Critics of American society defer to the foundational ideas of republican liberty in order to press for the emancipation of American citizens, and even global citizens, from the allegedly illiberal conduct of the United States. From this perspective, it is customary to declare that in contemporary America 'freedom exists in theory more than it gets exercised in practice'.<sup>64</sup> The corollary is one of confronting a notional freedom with substantive freedom: 'Our nation was born in revolution. It was dedicated to freedom and fairness. . . . That was a radical idea in 1776 and it remains a radical idea today—and one worth fighting for'.<sup>65</sup> In the same way as the United States becomes a Rorschach test of interpretive perception for the meaning and presence of freedom, the theme of liberty comes to represent a Rorschach test for the condition of American society.

The matrix of American political argument, therefore, is characterized by a diversity of competing claims to represent the real essence of American freedom. What further compounds the complexity is the salience of other political values that are not explicitly or conclusively reducible to the principles of freedom. The shaping of issues and policy in the United States is strongly influenced by the interplay between the central status of freedom in American culture on the one hand and those values and conditions that have a distinctive meaning and an alternative significance in the realm of political ideas on the other hand. It is now necessary to give consideration to these other elements and to their interpretive dynamics that can not only dispute the definition of freedom in the American context, but can also challenge its primacy as an organizing theme of American purpose.

<sup>63</sup> Foner, 'The Meaning of Freedom in the Age of Emancipation', p. 437.

<sup>64</sup> Mark Hertsgaard, *The Eagle's Shadow: Why America Fascinates and Infuriates the World* (London: Bloomsbury, 2003), p. 87.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 205.

## The Individual

### INTRODUCTION

American freedom has a protean and mercurial quality but that elusiveness is diminished when the scale shifts from the general to the particular. Freedom acquires a greater solidity as a claim upon society when the focus is tightened to include specific liberties and precise entities in possession of such liberties. Individual citizens satisfy both these requirements. They provide a point of convergence at which the subject and object of liberty seem to reach an optimum point.

American liberty is traditionally a property that acquires its meaning through the agency of individuals, rather than that of classes, social orders, or nationality. In American eyes, it is a matter of simple logic that a society dedicated to liberty should have as its hallmark the freedom of the most fundamental constituent unit of that society (i.e. the individual citizen). America is believed by its inhabitants to be free because of the way that American experience offers scope to the reach of human possibilities. The realization and maximization of individual potential is the currency of the American ethos. In American society, individuals are given 'the opportunity and encouraged to develop and to use their powers, to live their own lives and to participate in the renewal and development of the culture and in the development, reform and functioning of the social structure'.<sup>1</sup> It is accepted that in the tradition of the 'small republic' the principle of self-government is conditioned by the notion of communal liberty. The early state constitutions, for example, were structured upon the republican linkage of individual freedoms to a community of governance. This was the primary rationale of the inclusion of a bill of rights in these constitutions. Notwithstanding this element of republican traditionalism, it has to be conceded that the development of American political culture has generally given priority to the direct attribution of freedom to the individual.

In American conditions, the individual and liberty are invariably seen as being synonymous with one another. While freedom is only really comprehensible in terms of the actions and thoughts of self-governing individuals, individuality is seen as meaningless without the attribute of freedom by which a person can be emancipated into the fullness of his or her potential. The substance, imagery, and

<sup>1</sup> E. M. Adams, 'Introduction: the Idea of America', in E. M. Adams (ed.), *The Idea of America: A Reassessment of the American Experiment* (Cambridge, MA: Ballinger, 1977), p. 5.

symbolism of freedom in the United States carry a presumption of the individual as both the main source and the primary beneficiary of such a condition. The individual is accepted as the basic unit of resource and measurement—as the irreducible core of human freedom to which the American republic is formally dedicated.

This linkage between liberty and individualism has a long and complex set of origins. It includes the autonomous and voluntarist impulses of an immigrant culture; the individualized nature of divine contact and salvation in the Protestant tradition; the geographical dispersal of settlement over remote areas; and the decentralizing forces associated with the oceanic distance between America and centres of European hierarchy and imperial outreach. It can be argued that these and other strands, which stimulated and supported an individualistic outlook, receive their strongest expression in America's signature attachment to natural rights and, in particular, to the political logic of John Locke's theory of the state.

### THE LOCKIAN BEQUEST

The philosophy of John Locke remains embedded not only in the foundations of the republic and by extension in America's present-day conception of liberty. The resonance of Locke in the New World was first established in the eighteenth century. The American colonists valued the utility of Locke's thought in giving a different and altogether more pliable alternative dimension to the complex legalities that were entailed in the protracted constitutional dispute with Britain. The appeal of Lockian liberalism was further enhanced by its particular pertinence to the social milieu and political predicament of the emergent elites in Northern America. Locke's philosophy had been employed in practical politics a century earlier when his exposition of Whig principles had made a major contribution to the debates surrounding the Glorious Revolution in 1688. Now the self-appointed heirs of this past Whig ascendancy used Locke in their own campaign against the executive power of the British crown. Locke's appeal was immediate and far-reaching because it allowed the colonists to transcend the technical strictures of a constitutional dispute by reconfiguring the conflict into a complaint based upon a radical inquiry into the nature of government and the basis of political obligation.<sup>2</sup>

Significantly, Locke's point of departure lay not with the state but with the individual. According to Locke, each person was an individual creation of God's universe and, therefore, a unit of intrinsic moral worth. Locke reasoned that God-given natural rights were an organic part of each person's individuality. Individuals, therefore, exercised their own liberties through their own being and on their

<sup>2</sup> See Morton White, *The Philosophy of the American Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), pp. 23–35, 42–8, 64–78; Garry Wills, *Inventing America: Jefferson's Declaration of Independence* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1978), pp. 169–75, 181–5, 208–15, 240–5.

own authority—not on behalf of others or through an intermediary agency.<sup>3</sup> It was this central proposition of the individual ownership of rights which led, ultimately, to the modern ethos of individualism in which any individual is seen literally as being their own person.

In Locke's philosophy, the composite natural rights of life, liberty, and property were not objectives to be fulfilled, so much as a birthright from a pre-existing natural condition and one that invoked inviolable limits on the operation of any subsequent state. Locke's position was that while men and women were born free in a stateless condition, there was sufficient unpredictability and enough inconvenience for them to form civil societies, and thereupon states, to promote peace, safety, and the public good. In doing so, individuals would inevitably suffer some restriction in the operation of their personal discretion but they would not, and could not, relinquish their basic natural rights. To Locke, any assertion that they had done so would be both implausible and irrational. This is because the entire objective of governing arrangements was always to protect and preserve natural liberties of individuals. Far from being an end in itself or a device to ensure order and peace at any price, Locke's state was formed by the express consent and contract of free individuals in order to serve their interests and to promote their welfare. If a state were to fail in the obligations entrusted to it, then the citizenry would have a right of revolution to reformulate the structure of government, in order to make it a better medium for the exercise and enjoyment of individual liberties.

Locke's philosophy established the individual as the seat of moral worth. Individuals and their liberties were claimed to be in existence prior to the formation of the state and, as a consequence, they remained ethically superior to any subsequent civil organization. Accordingly, the authority and legitimacy of a state were made dependent upon the protection it afforded to individual liberties. The influence of Locke's fundamental theory of the state and of the citizen's relationship to it was clearly evident in the Declaration of Independence (1776).

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed. That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.<sup>4</sup>

The animating ideas of radical individual liberty, natural rights, and a contractually based government bore the hallmarks of Locke. These features also reflected the extent to which these kinds of ideas had become a prevailing creed that conformed so closely to general attitudes in society.

<sup>3</sup> John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, introduced by Peter J. Laslett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), p. 305.

<sup>4</sup> Declaration of Independence (1776).



During this pivotal period of inception, America was soaked in the pungent ideals and vocabulary of natural rights and personal freedoms. During the eighteenth century, the 'great common denominator of American social thinking was the ideal of social freedom—freedom to rise, that is—individualism, and social fluidity'.<sup>5</sup> America's attachment to the principle of individual liberty culminated in the Declaration of Independence.

There could be no clearer statement of the right of revolution or of the principle that government is the servant, not the master, of the people and that it serves at their pleasure. Fully as clear is the emphasis upon the individual human being as the basic unit of society and government, and the assumption that the foremost consideration is the basic right of each human being to live in freedom.<sup>6</sup>

These sentiments became America's guiding ideals and are as prevalent today as they were in the eighteenth century. The significance of the American Revolution, therefore, might be said to lie 'less in battles and martial triumphs than in the creative effort . . . of building constitutions and declaring systems of rights'.<sup>7</sup>

The emphasis upon natural individual rights was later reaffirmed both in the preamble to the US Constitution<sup>8</sup> and in the subsequent attachment of the Bill of Rights which stands today as the chief monument to American individualism. The Bill of Rights includes the personal rights of free speech, free assembly, the free exercise of religion, and the free access to a fair trial. This inventory of rights represents the clearest statement of the American belief that freedom preserved by the state must always be qualified by guarantees of freedom *from* the state. The act of inaugurating a central state, therefore, coincided with the equally significant act of ring-fencing it with prohibitions and constraints defined through individual freedoms. It was the currency of natural rights that would provide the anchorage of absolutism to keep the new government within its constitutional framework.

## THE SOCIAL FORMATION

The social currency of Lockian principles relating to individual rights is integrally connected to the impulses and promises of American life. In the same way that Locke himself speculated on the Americas' approximation to a state of nature, so immigrants to the New World have traditionally associated their journey with one of personal liberation. This has often taken the form of a movement motivated by individual dissent and opportunity. Whether the early settlers were motivated

<sup>5</sup> Max Savelle, *Seeds of American Liberty: The Genesis of the American Mind* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1948), p. 280.

<sup>6</sup> Max J. Skidmore, *American Political Thought* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1978), p. 46.

<sup>7</sup> Ernest Barker, 'Natural Law and the American Revolution', in Ernest Barker, *Traditions of Civility: Eight Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1948), p. 328.

<sup>8</sup> The preamble to the US Constitution asserts that 'we the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union . . . and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution'.

by the desire for religious toleration, or by the need to escape political persecution, or by the drive for economic security, their objectives were reducible to the prospect of liberation. This represented a form of freedom that could be sensed by the individual conscience and expressed through personal independence from previous states of social existence. The formation of communities reflected both the rapidity of accelerated settlement, and the fluidity of social conditions that accompanied the advancing aggregates of individuals in search of their own conceptions and enclaves of progress.

The low density of population and the easy availability of land permitted the widespread ownership of property. When these conditions were combined with the radicalism of the various dissenter traditions, the result was a developed enmity towards external forms of hierarchy that assigned individuals to fixed class positions on the basis of blood and rank. Most Americans reacted strongly against the notion of a static order within society. The hostility was based not only upon an objection to what was seen as an artificial imposition but also upon a conviction that such an order would stifle liberty and, in particular, the freedom of individuals to find their own level within society.

An open-textured society implied a social mobility that afforded individuals the opportunity of self-improvement and self-determination.

Americans never picked up the European concept of social station—which meant that you were born into your position in the world. For most Europeans of the 18th and 19th centuries, success meant maintaining your place in the fixed order. . . . In France, a shoemaker's son could become a shoemaker and inherit not only his father's business but his father's standing in the community. In the United States, the indentured immigrant who worked his way up to a prosperous shoemaking shop had met the standard of success. But to meet the same standard his son had to push on to something, or somewhere else.<sup>9</sup>

American society quickly became noted for its premise of social fluidity and for its absence of any established scheme of social stratification. At the end of the eighteenth century, 80 per cent of white men were self-employed as entrepreneurs, professionals, farmers, merchants, and craftsmen. This demographic profile was reflected in Hector St John de Crevecoeur's celebrated answer to the question: 'What is an American?' De Crevecoeur referred to the remarkable fact that in America there were 'no aristocratical families, no courts, no kings, no bishops, no ecclesiastical dominion, no invisible power giving to a few a very visible one'. Instead, there were simply individuals occupying open spaces and creating open-ended forms of human existence: 'We are a people of cultivators, scattered over an immense territory . . . united by the silken bands of mild government, all respecting the laws, without dreading their power, because they are equitable. We are all animated with the spirit of an industry which is unfettered and unrestrained, because each person works for himself'.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in J. W. Anderson, 'The Idea of Success,' *Washington Post* supplement published in the *Guardian Weekly*, 29 August 1976.

<sup>10</sup> Quoted in Henry N. Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (New York: Vintage, 1950), pp. 143–4.