

Interpreting the Founding
A Lecture by Alan R. Gibson
James Madison Seminar

The Progressive Interpretation (Dominant Interpretative Framework from the late 19th century to the beginning of the Cold War)

Central Scholars and Key Works

James Allen Smith, *The Spirit of American Government: A Study of the Constitution: Its Origin, Influence, and Relation to Democracy* (1907).

Charles Beard, *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution* (1913)

Merrill Jensen, *The Articles of Confederation: An Interpretation of the Social-Constitutional History of the American Revolution* (1940)

Woody Holton, “‘Divide et Impera’: Federalist 10 in a Wider Sphere,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 62 (2005): 175-212.

Robert McGuire, *To Form A More Perfect Union: A New Economic Interpretation of the United States Constitution* (2003).

Woody Holton, *Minds Afire: Angry Farmers and the Origins of the American Constitution* (In Progress).

Methodological assumptions (primarily true of the early Progressives).

* Economic interests are fundamental or primordial. Ideas are surface reflections or justifications for underlying economic motives. Scholars must penetrate the pageant of ideas to discover the reality of economic motives below the surface.

* American history is best understood as a series of struggles between agrarian and commercial classes.

Substantive Teachings

* The American Revolution was fought for economic reasons, not on the basis of principles such as “No taxation without representation.”

* The Revolution involved both an international struggle with Great Britain over home rule and a social struggle within the colonies for who should rule at home.

* The period in which the Articles of Confederation governed America was not a period of crisis or a “critical period.” It was a time of prosperity, growth, and many unrecognized accomplishments.

* The Framers of the Constitution were “immediately and directly interested in the outcome of their labors” at Philadelphia. They were creditors and members of the commercial classes who wrote and ratified the Constitution that they did to advance and protect their economic interests.

* The Constitution was an economic document. The positive powers in the Constitution, including the powers to lay and collect taxes, to regulate interstate and foreign commerce, to raise and support naval forces, and to dispose of western lands, were designed to benefit the interests of capitalists. The Constitution also explicitly forbade the state legislatures from emitting paper money as currency or passing laws impairing the obligation of contracts.

* The Constitution was an anti-democratic document. It featured a series of checks and balances that were meant to “breaking up the attacking forces of the majority” and prevent majority rule. In particular, separation of powers, bicameralism, extent of territory, and especially judicial review were designed to prevent the people from directly ruling.

Political Implications

* The Progressives sought to criticize the Framers and the Constitution to bring them down from their pedestal and to pave the way for constitutional reform. They viewed the Constitution as a cumbersome, aristocratic, anachronistic document that was not fit to govern a modern, democratic government.

The Liberal Interpretation (Dominant Interpretative Paradigm during the Cold War and Very Influential Today)

Central Scholars and Key Works

Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America: An Interpretation of American Political Thought* (1955)

Martin Diamond, *As Far As Republican Principles Will Admit: Essays by Martin Diamond* (1992). Diamond’s essays published in this volume were originally published in from 1959 to 1970.

Paul Rahe, *Republics: Ancient and Modern: Classical Republicanism and the American Revolution* (1992)

Micheal Zuckert. *The Natural Rights Republic: Studies in the Foundation of the American Political Tradition* (1996).

Methodological principles

Most proponents of the liberal interpretation argue that ideas matter. Unlike the Progressive interpretation, the liberal interpretation is an ideological interpretation – an interpretation of the American Founding based on the ideas that are said to have been dominant in it. Many proponents of the liberal interpretation believe that ideas serve as motives for behavior. Some proponents of the liberal interpretation also suggest that the liberal principles on which the American regime are founded are transhistorical, timeless truths. They are the true principles for governance.

Substantive Teachings

Proponents of the liberal interpretation believe that the American political system and American political culture are best understood as the realization of the ideas of the John Locke, especially as these ideas were embedded in the Declaration of Independence. These ideas, according to those who hold the Lockean or liberal interpretation, express the deepest commitments, the most firmly held convictions, of Americans.

* These ideas include the belief that all men are created equal. Equality, according to the proponents of this interpretation, meant political equality – the idea that everyone is equal in the state of nature. No one has dominion over another.

Thus,

* Legitimate governments are based upon the consent of the governed. Consent establishes a legitimate form of government. Conversely, neither force, nor reason, nor virtue, nor Divine ordination (“Divine Right of Kings”) is a source of legitimate rule.

* The protection of inalienable rights is the principle goal of government. The Framers established a “natural rights republic.” The American political system was not established to try to improve the souls of the people, to promote homogeneity of opinions, passions, and interests among the people, or to improve the excellences of the few.

* The Framers were “commercial republics” who praised commerce and the market model because they believed that, although men could not be expected to exercise virtue consistently or to faithfully pursue salvation, they could be expected to pursue systematically their physical and material desires. At a broader level, this was said to introduce constancy and predictability into society, to encourage an interdependent and peaceful world, and to provide a humane, prosperous, and stable polity.

* American commitments to the principles of the Declaration and to commercial republicanism have translated into the hegemony of liberal values such as the sanctity of private property, economic individualism, and democracy.

Political Implications

Many proponents of the Lockean or liberal interpretation of the American Founding hold to the idea of “American Exceptionalism” – the belief that the natural abundance and unique settlement of the United States has led to the ubiquity of liberalism and rendered Americans deaf to socialism and inoculated against totalitarianism.

The liberal interpretation has provided a powerful explanation for the non-revolutionary character of the American Revolution, for the United States’ early and lasting embrace of capitalism, for the absence of both socialist and Burkean traditions of political thought in the United States, and for the remarkable stability (with the exception of the Civil War) of American politics and society.

The Republican Interpretation (Developed in the late 1960s and dominant in the 1970s and 1980s)

Central Scholars and Key Works

Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (1967, 1992 Enlarged Edition)

Gordon Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787* (1969, 1998)

J.G.A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment—Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republic Tradition* (1975)

Lance Banning, *The Jeffersonian Persuasion: Evolution of a Party Ideology* (1978)

Methodological principles

Proponents of the republican interpretation also study the ideas of the Founders. Like proponents of the liberal interpretation, they therefore reject the Progressives’ argument that ideas are nothing more than surface justifications. Nevertheless, proponents of the republican interpretation have developed their own justification for the study of ideas and their own approach to the study history of political thought. This approach is first a rejection of a “Great Books” study of the American Founding. On this first point, proponents of the republican interpretation are students of American political culture, not American political theory. They are historians concerned with popular ideologies. Thus,

they do not necessarily give greater weight to a document like the Declaration of Independence than to any of the political pamphlets that were written to justify the American Revolution. Bernard Bailyn's study, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* – the seminal study of the republican interpretation – examined an array of sermons, popular orations, and pamphlets to ascertain the ideas that justified the American Revolution.

The republican interpretation is also an effort to steer between the economic “realism” of the Progressives and the “idealism” of many proponents of the liberal interpretation. Proponents of the republican interpretation agree with the Progressives that ideas cannot be said to be the motives to action and that we should not study the professed beliefs of individuals in order to establish why they did what they did. Still, contrary to what the Progressives suggest, however, this does not mean that ideas are unimportant. Ideas are important as they become public and collective – as they become ideologies or public matrixes of beliefs. Ideologies have two characteristic that demand the attention of scholars. First, they are the means by which we perceive and structure otherwise random ideas or thoughts. They have “conditioning” and “imprisoning” effects. Second, they affect behavior by setting the limits of acceptable behavior. If a culture has a public ideology committed to virtue understood as requiring self-sacrifice, then baldly self-interested acts will be condemned.

Substantive Teachings

Proponents of the Republican interpretation began by arguing that the liberal interpretation was elitist, anachronistic, and ahistorical. The liberal interpretation was elitist, proponents of the republican interpretation argued, because it examined only a few documents such as the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and *The Federalist Papers*. Other documents are equally good, if not better, expressions of the American mind. If these documents are examined, a different understanding of the American Founding emerges.

Furthermore, the liberal interpretation of the American Founding, according to proponents of the republican interpretation, described what America had become, not how it was founded. America was founded, J.G.A. Pocock wrote, in “dread of modernity.” America was founded on principles that drew back to the ancient republics of Greece, reemerged in English political thought in the 17th and 18th centuries, and then again reappeared in the American Revolution. This set of ideas – the republican ideology – included the following ideas.

* The Importance of Virtue and the Fear of Corruption – The American Revolutionaries, according to this account, believed that republics were fragile and required the constant exercise of virtue by the citizenry lest the republic perish. The American Revolution was born of a fear of corruption in the British ministry, not so much a concern with violations of the inalienable rights of the people.

* Positive Liberty through Participation in the Public Realm – The American Revolutionaries, according to the republican interpretation, were also concerned with promoting and protecting “liberty.” But they understood liberty not simply as the protection of rights. They also believed that liberty involved political participation which men required to become fully human.

* Advancement of the Public Good was a primary role of government. The public good was not simply the sum of all the particular interests of the people. It refers to the people understood as an organic body of people bound by common interests and a common fate.

* The Founders – especially the Jeffersonians – were opposed to commercial capitalism or at least the excesses of capitalism. Here, proponents of the republican interpretation stress the importance of Jefferson’s idea of the independent yeoman.

Political Implications

Proponents of the republican interpretation were historians who denied any explicit contemporary political motives. Their ideas were however taken up by a number of left wing scholars as a communitarian alternative to socialism that had genuine roots in the American political tradition.

Multi-Cultural History (Emerged in the 1960s and Has Become Increasingly Important Today)

Central Scholars and Key Works

Linda Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (1980)

Paul Finkelman, *Slavery and the Founders: Race and Liberty in the Age of Jefferson* (2001)

Woody Holton, *Forced Founders: Indians, Debtors, Slaves, and the Making of the American Revolution in Virginia*. 1999.

Gary Nash, *The Unknown American Revolution: The Unruly Birth of Democracy and the Struggle to Create America* (2005)

Henry Wiencek, *An Imperfect God: George Washington, His Slaves, and the Creation of America* (2003).

Methodological Principles

Much of the history of the early American republic written since the 1960s has concerned the lives of previously neglected groups in the early republic. At their deepest level, these studies are efforts to redefine who we think of as Founders. Many scholars – especially social historians – want to get away from studies of the “dead white men” of the Founding and political history in general and replace it with the study of slaves, women, and Native Americans. These scholars study the Founding “From the Ground Up.”

Methodologically, these scholars deny that a single, unified history of the American people can really be written. Instead, they focus upon “mosaic” stories that identify specific groups and tell their story. Again, these stories are “correctives to the white-oriented, male-dominated, hero-worshipping history.” Finally, these scholars are less likely to view the American Revolution as a crucible of liberty or the American Founding as the origin of a set of foundational principles on which the regime should rest.

Substantive Teachings (Examples from this line of scholarship)

* Coverture – Linda Kerber in particular has traced out the effects of the common law doctrine of coverture in the early republic. This doctrine held that the property of women and their legal identity of women and their property was absorbed by her husband. The husband became the spokesman for the family in public.

* “Domestic Sphere Ideology” and “Republican Motherhood” – This idea was that women were peculiarly qualified to raise children was politicized during the American Revolution to suggest that women had a special role in raising virtuous children.

* Parlor Politics – Other scholars have documented the political role that women had in hosting parties, arranging meetings, and conducting political ceremonies. Women had explicit political functions beyond republican motherhood even if they did not vote.

* Neo-Garrison Interpretation of the Constitution – This scholarship has set forth a new version of the interpretation that the Constitution was a pro-slavery document. Particular emphasis has been placed on the 3-5th clause and its effect.

* The Sally Hemings – Thomas Jefferson Debate – The debate over whether Thomas Jefferson fathered Sally Hemings children and even more the implications of Jefferson’s paternity have been important topics among scholars of this stripe.

Political Implications

Scholars of the American Founding entered the culture wars with this body of scholarship. Much of this scholarship serves as a kind of liberation historiography. It is designed to give voice and identity to the people previously excluded from view in studies of the American Founding. It also promises to transform how we think of the Founding, primarily redefining Founding principles or by denying that they some be given some special status. These contentious positions have naturally alienated many scholars and contemporary political commentators and led to contentious debates.

Some Questions for Discussion:

What are the contributions and weaknesses of each interpretative framework?

What direction should scholarship on the Founding turn?

Should we teach the American Founding with the assumption that it the key or defining moment in American history? Do the principles of the Founding deserve some kind of independent status as “first principles” of the American regime?

Should we focus more on documents such as the Declaration of Independence than on other documents such as pamphlets of the revolution? Are we trying to capture the “political culture” of the period or gain insight into the most sophisticated understanding that we can of its enduring principles?

Can we justify the study of the ideas of the Founding? If so, then how? Are they motives for action? Are we examining their truth or validity?

Who are the Founders? Does everyone get included equally or are the Founders really “the Founding Fathers” – the group of patriarchal leaders of the Revolution?

What set or sets of ideas were most important at the Founding? Do these ideas form our national character? Are we an exceptional people and if so in what sense? How democratic were the Framers and how democratic is the American Constitution? Does the Constitution advantage some interests and disadvantage others?

Today, scholarship on the American Founding is fractured, splintered. It is conducted by a diverse group of scholars from several disciplines, including all sorts of political scientists (theorists and rational choice theorists), historians (social historians, intellectual and political historians), lawyers and legal theorists, and popular biographers or at least historians looking for a larger audience such as David McCullough, Gore Vidal, David Hackett Fischer.

The division in scholarship does not mean that things are in disarray, only that they are complex. Indeed, we are experiencing a flourishing of excellent historical and theoretical writing on the American Founding. But that writing is informed by one single vision or grand framework of interpretation and a series of very important questions remain contested.

The unusual divisiveness of the American Founding is recent, really it seems to have begun in the 1970s and 1980s. Prior to that, three successive paradigms of interpretation about the American Founding sequentially replaced each other. The Progressive, Liberal, and then Republican Interpretations.