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Ideology and the
Origins of Liberal America

Gordon S. Wood

The current fashions of deconstruction and reception theory remind us that books or texts do not belong to their authors but to their readers. (Of course, we know from experience that they actually belong to the publishers.) It is true that readers do with books what they will and that no author can foresee how a book will be interpreted. I have been pleased, amused, and surprised by these different reactions to my book. I have to like Edward Countryman's best, for he has said what no one else has ever thought of saying: "The book could not have been one word shorter." Naturally, by this one remark Countryman has destroyed whatever credibility he had in the profession.

We tend to read books in different ways because we have different presuppositions about what we will find in them. As John Murrin shrewdly notes, I have lots of ammunition for a "conflict" interpretation of the Constitution. But I'll never be able to convince the "Wisconsin school" of that. Merrill Jensen reviewed the book and in his blunt, honest way was puzzled by "some remarkable generalizations" in it with which he found "no difficulty in agreeing." He had expected something other than what it was, and to satisfy his perplexity he later confronted me directly. "Just tell me," he asked, "are you with me or against me?" Such is the nature sometimes of our historiographical debates. Of course, I assured him that I was with him all the way, but I am sure that he never believed me.

It would be clumsy and difficult to deal one by one with all the numerous points raised by these commentators. Perhaps many of these points can be gathered together and subsumed under two major issues: (1) the relation between ideology and behavior, and (2) the relation between what have been called "classical republicanism" and "liberalism."

(1) The relation between ideology and behavior. Many of these essayists assume—some more flagrantly than others—that there is a sharp separation between beliefs and behavior, between ideas and actions, between culture and society. Such a presumed separation is perfectly comprehensible, for the division between mind and body, reason and the passions,

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1 Countryman, "Of Republicanism, Capitalism, and the 'American Mind'," p. 557, above.
superstructure and base has long been part of our Western heritage, and it affects the thinking of all the social sciences. One understandable but mistaken effect of such a division has been our tendency to treat ideas as discrete entities, almost as physical things, that "cause" people to act—unless of course these ideas are overpowered by deeper-lying material "causes." Probably none of these essayists sees ideas in this discrete, physical way more conspicuously than does Jackson Turner Main.

For Main, ideology, by which he seems to mean political ideas, is merely one of the "factors" or "forces" that influence behavior. Other such "forces" that influence human behavior during the Revolutionary era are social class, economic interests, residence, personal ambition, and so on. In order to explain the Constitution and the division over it, says Main, we "should investigate all possible factors, determine which acted independently of the others, and attempt to rank them according to their importance." Since for Main ideas are just one of the "factors" influencing behavior, then any work of intellectual history is bound to seem very partial and incomplete. In my book, says Main, I offered "an exclusively ideological explanation" of the Constitution and ignored "other well-known influences upon political behavior." In the end, he can only shake his head in bewilderment at how "placidly" we historians have "accepted a single explanation for a complex phenomenon."3

I am sure that I could tell Main until I am blue in the face that I was not offering an "ideological explanation" of the Constitution, but, given his assumptions about the nature of human action, he would not believe me. If I write about ideas, I must believe, according to Main, that ideas are the major causes of behavior. Ideas, however, are not "causes" of behavior, and they are not "factors" to be ranked with other social, economic, and psychological "factors" in order to find which was most important at any one moment. Ideas are a constant of human behavior; they may not cause us to behave as we do, but we do not behave without them.

It may be unfair to single out Main for separating ideas from behavior in this way, for other commentators—less obtrusively perhaps than Main but no less effectively—seem to hold similar assumptions about the role of ideas: that ideas are important and "cause" behavior sometimes but not at all times. John Howe seems to believe this. Even Jack Rakove, for all his subtlety and sophistication, holds an assumption about ideas and behavior not very different from Main's. Rakove argues that our experience and our actions are not always guided by ideas or ideology. All the recent emphasis on republican ideas in fact, says Rakove, runs the risk of making us forget "that republican politics itself is not primarily an exercise in semiotics but more fundamentally the process by which real historical actors" do things. Ideas may be important at times, but, suggests Rakove in the best Namierite manner, they are not hard and substantial—not like the behavior that goes on behind closed doors in Cook County. In the end, he

says, political ideas do not really explain much political behavior. The decisions and actions of Americans between 1776 and 1787 were “for the most part shaped far less by ideology than by the panoply of contingent circumstances.” In his own work Rakove has tried “to tie” the rather airy, insubstantial ideas of the era that I wrote about “more directly to . . . the real world of political life.” He hopes to offset what he thinks has become “an overly intellectual approach to the study of American politics” in the early Republic by concentrating on the history “not of ideology but of behavior, which is finally what historians must explain.”

Rakove may be right about his fear of “our overly intellectual approach” to the period. Certainly, many of these essayists would agree with him, but I think that this fear stems from a misapprehension about the role of ideas in history or human experience. When we write about ideas we are not saying, or at least we ought not to be saying, that ideas “caused” people to act and that they are to be weighed for their motivating importance against other causal agents such as economic interest, psychological drives, and so forth.

People’s professed principles do not “cause” them to act. Even if they did, we would never be able to prove it; all we could do is multiply our citations to the documents in which ideas or principles were expressed and stress our conviction that the historical participants were really sincere when they said they acted out of principles of republicanism or the public good. But hardnosed realists like Sir Lewis Namier or Jack Rakove will simply smile knowingly and tell those who would make ideas the cause of behavior that they are naive and don’t know much about the “real” world of human experience. Indeed, all that we have learned about the psychology and sociology of human behavior suggests that the realists are right and that such a simple-minded notion that people’s professed beliefs—“no taxation without representation” or “devotion to our country”—are the motives for their behavior will never be persuasive. The tough-minded realists will always tell us otherwise, will tell us, in Namier’s words, that “what matters most is the underlying emotions, the music, to which ideas are a mere libretto, often of a very inferior quality.”

Such realists or materialists may be right that ideas do not “cause” behavior, but it does not follow that ideas are unimportant and have little or no effect on behavior, or that they can be treated as just one “factor” that now and then comes into play in human experience. The fact of the matter is that while ideas may not be motives for our actions, they are constant accompaniments of our actions. There is no behavior without ideology. Ideas give meaning to our actions, and there is almost nothing that we humans do that we do not attribute meaning to. Even our simplest actions, a wink for example, have meaning for us, and these meanings are

part and parcel of our actions. These meanings constitute our ideas, our beliefs, our ideology, our culture.

Because human behavior is of a piece with the meanings or ideas we give to it, the view suggested by several of these essayists that ideas operate in some sort of spatial separation from social circumstances is false. Political ideas do not exist apart from some more “actual experience,” some more “real world of political life.” Ideas are essential to our experiences and our lives. They are the means by which we perceive, understand, judge, or manipulate our experiences and our lives. The meanings we give to our actions, what Durkheim called the “social facts,” form the very structure of our social world. They make social behavior not just comprehensible but possible. Despite what Rakove says at the end of his essay, all human behavior can only be understood and explained, indeed can only exist, in terms of the meanings it has. Ideology creates behavior.

We humans have to give meaning to nearly everything we do, but we are not free at any moment to give whatever meaning we wish to our behavior. The meanings we give are public ones, and they are defined and delimited by the conventions and language of the culture of the time. It is in this sense that culture or ideology creates behavior. It does so by forcing us to describe our behavior in its terms. The definitions and meanings that we seek to give to our behavior cannot be random or unconstrained. Our actions thus tend to be circumscribed by the ways we can make them meaningful, and they are meaningful only publicly, only with respect to an inherited system of conventions and values. What is “liberal” or “tyrannical,” “monarchical” or “republican,” democratic” or “aristocratic” is determined by this cultural structure of meanings. Our intellectual life is made up of struggles over getting people to accept different meanings of experience. The stakes are always high because what we cannot make meaningful—cannot conceive of, legitimate, or persuade other people to accept—in some sense we cannot do. What is permissible culturally affects what is permissible socially or politically, so that although ideas may not be the motives for behavior, they do affect and control it.⁷

In 1787-1788 Federalists and Antifederalists argued over the “aristocratic” and “democratic” nature of the Constitution. Each side tried to persuade Americans to accept its particular attribution of meaning to the document. The Federalists made a brilliant case for the view that the


Constitution was thoroughly republican and democratic, and they could do so because of the way republicanism and democracy had developed by 1787, because of the meanings available to them, so to speak. They made such a good case that some late twentieth-century historians like Ralph Ketcham and Pauline Maier are persuaded they were right. Indeed, in their essays Ketcham and Maier offer what are virtually briefs for the Federalist cause. Ketcham asks in just what ways the new Constitution was “less democratic than the Articles of Confederation or the state constitutions?”8 which was of course the very question the Federalists shrewdly asked of their opponents. Maier’s essay resembles nothing more than one of the Federalist papers. She is keen on showing how democratic the Federalists were, so keen in fact that she anachronistically suggests that their concern for minority rights makes them democratic because belief in the rights of minorities has become central to the meaning of “modern American democracy.”9 Concern for minority rights may be part of the meaning of “democratic” today, but it was not yet in 1787. Which is why Madison saw that he had a problem on his hands and had to spend so much time in the Federalist explaining how republican the new government was.

The trouble with such briefs for the Federalist cause is that they relegate the Antifederalists to the dustbin of history. There is no way that Ketcham and Maier can sympathetically describe and explain the different opinions the Antifederalists had about the Constitution and their efforts to attribute a different meaning to it. As far as Ketcham is concerned, Antifederalist opinions were just a lot of rubbish about “aristocrat-democrat polarities.”10 But the fact of the matter is that the Antifederalists thought that the Constitution was an aristocratic, undemocratic document designed to limit certain popular pressures on government. They, like the Federalists, had evidence supporting their position, and they too made a persuasive case.

When confronted with these contrasting meanings of the Constitution, historians, it seems to me, are not supposed to decide which was more “correct” or more “true.” Our task is rather to explain the reasons for these contrasting meanings and why each side should have given to the Constitution the meaning it did. There was not in 1787-1788—and today there is still not—one “correct” or “true” meaning of the Constitution. The Constitution means whatever we want it to mean. Of course, we cannot attribute any meaning we want and expect to get away with it. We have to convince others of our “true” interpretation, and if we can convince enough people that that is the “true” meaning, then so it becomes. That is how the culture changes. It may be a necessary fiction for lawyers and jurists to believe in a “correct” or “true” interpretation of the

Constitution in order to carry on their business, but we historians have different obligations and aims.11

There are times, of course, when the struggle over meanings is especially intense and vigorous, when society and politics are changing rapidly and people are hard put to find meanings to make sense of their behavior. But there is no time, even in the most placid of societies, when ideas, these meanings, are not important. So even if the 1780s in America had been a time when "passions cooled" and "ordinary life reasserted itself," ideas would still have been significant; we are never without ideas or ideology.12 But the 1780s were not a time of life as usual. They were rather a time of great economic, social, and political change, and consequently a time of great intellectual activity when human actions were occurring faster than meanings could be found to explain them.

Although Peter Onuf and Garry Wills in their essays very pointedly do not, most of us today tend to take the creation of a strong national government for granted, and thus we tend to miss the radicalness of the Constitution and the problematical character of the 1780s. From the vantage point of the late twentieth century, allegiance to the nation, to the union, seems a matter of course; we can scarcely conceive of the United States without a powerful central government. For us, it is the Articles of Confederation that cannot be taken seriously. But if we change our vantage point and stand in 1776, then a strong national government is not something we can take for granted. At the time of Independence no one, as far as I know, even conceived of America's having a strong central government resembling the one that emerged from the Constitutional Convention in 1787, not to mention the breathtaking government of the Virginia Plan that was the working model for the delegates in Philadelphia. Conventional political theory limiting the size of republics, together with the colonists' experience with the far-removed power of the British empire, precluded any whig in 1776 from suggesting such a strong central government operating directly on individuals. Some in 1776 wanted a stronger instrument of union than the Articles of Confederation, but no one in his wildest dreams imagined something similar to the Federal Constitution of 1787.

It is true that by 1786-1787 nearly every political leader wanted and expected something to be done to strengthen the Articles—adding taxing and commercial regulatory powers in particular. This nearly universal demand for some sort of reform of the union made possible the acceptance of the meeting in Philadelphia in May 1787. But very few


Americans expected what came out of the convention; indeed, if they had known about what was originally intended—that is, the Virginia Plan—they would have been even more startled than they were.

Something momentous happened between 1776 and 1787 to change some Americans’ minds about the kind of central government the United States ought to have. John Murrin is right when he says that “the Virginia Plan proposed, in effect, a sovereign parliament for America.” That some Americans, including Madison, should have sought to impose on Americans another sovereign parliament such a short time after getting rid of the first one suggests the magnitude of the crisis that at least some felt in the decade following the Declaration of Independence. Accounting for that crisis and the change of thinking about government that followed from it takes us into the second of the major issues these essays are concerned with.

(2) The relation between “classical republicanism” and “liberalism.” This is a hot topic among early American historians these days, and it has sparked a lot of polemics. Which in the late eighteenth century was the more dominant tradition, republicanism or liberalism? is often the way we pose the question. Not only is the question badly put, but it assumes a sharp dichotomy between two clearly identifiable traditions that eighteenth-century reality will not support. None of the Founding Fathers ever had any sense that he had to choose or was choosing between Machiavelli and Locke. Jefferson, for example, could believe simultaneously and without any sense of inconsistency in the likelihood of America’s becoming corrupt and in the need to protect individual rights from government. We ought to remember that these boxlike traditions into which the historical participants must be fitted are essentially our inventions, and as such are distortions of past reality. Although the Founding Fathers never self-consciously conceived of classical republicanism as the coherent tradition we’ve created, they at least talked about “republicanism” and invoked “republican principles” in their polemics. But none of them ever referred to “liberalism” as we now use the term. Which is why I did not, in Ruth Bloch’s words, “accord liberalism itself the status of an intellectual tradition” but instead treated it “as the voice of concrete reality (human competitiveness, self-interestedness, the absence of American social estates).”

14 When we realize that the first House of Representatives had only 65 representatives for a population of four million, the radicalism of the Constitution becomes even more startling. At the time of the Revolution radical whigs, from James Burgh to Thomas Paine, had criticized the British House of Commons because its 558 members could scarcely represent the eight or nine million British people. Paine in 1776 thought that the American Congress ought to have at least 390 members (Common Sense, in Philip S. Foner, ed., The Complete Writings of Thomas Paine [New York, 1945], I, 28, 37-38).
As Murrin points out, this liberal reality did eventually come to dominate American life. But, he asks, “who recognized the new reality and who was willing to accept it without regret”?16 The short answer to such questions is that most of the Founding Fathers recognized the reality of the self-interested pursuit of happiness by Americans but were unwilling to accept it without regret; indeed, most of them died deeply disillusioned with what they had wrought. Most ordinary Americans, however, simply reveled in the new liberal reality. Although few of them were willing or able to celebrate selfishness unashamedly, many came to recognize the promotion of interest as a necessary aspect of American politics, and many others endorsed the pursuit of self-interest obliquely or inadvertently. The ubiquitous talk of equal rights was just one such oblique endorsement, and the eventual appreciation of party competition and the applauding of local and pluralist representation in government were others.

How America moved into this liberal world of business, money-making, and the open promotion of interests is a question that concerns not only several of these essayists but many other historians as well. This liberal world was not something foisted on America by a few rich merchants and eastern aristocrats, nor was it something simply created by the Constitution. To be sure, the Founding Fathers favored commerce, by which they generally meant international trade, and many of them envisioned the United States becoming a great and wealthy commercial nation. But they hardly anticipated, let alone intentionally brought about, the scrambling, individualistic, acquisitive society that suddenly emerged in the early nineteenth century. That liberal world was made by—could only have been made by—the mass of ordinary Americans. This seems obvious, but we historians find it hard to accept. Being good American democrats, we seem unwilling to face the fact that “the enemy is us,” that the majority of ordinary Americans are the real source of the commercialism and materialism that we often find so distasteful.

Probably no one finds this harder to face or accept than does Gary Nash. Nash has devoted his career to writing about the weak and dispossessed in our past—blacks, native Americans, urban workers—and we are indebted to him for uncovering the experience of these neglected groups. But in his essay the objects of his compassion are “the mass of ordinary Americans” who believed in equality and the virtues of productive labor and struggled against exploitation by wealthy elites.17 Such a conception of social conflict in post-Revolutionary America raises questions that go to the heart of our debates over the origins of liberalism.

Nash believes that the second half of eighteenth-century American history was a time “of great wealth and unprecedented poverty” and that numerous Americans, maybe even “the mass of laboring Americans,” experienced real economic deprivation and real poverty. This deprivation

16 Murrin, “Search for Liberal America,” p. 600, above.
17 Nash, “Also There at the Creation: Going beyond Gordon S. Wood,” p. 609, above.
and poverty, says Nash, formed "an important part of the impetus for revolution," but the Revolution only made matters worse. By the 1780s the "majority of postwar Americans" were living in desperate straits, struggling "to keep their families afloat," and deploring "what was seen as a growing tendency of the rich to feed off the poor." It is a depressing picture of mass America that Nash paints, but from what we know of economic and demographic developments in the late eighteenth century it is not a very real one. Indeed, if we accept Nash's description of the bulk of ordinary Americans in the Revolutionary era, it is hard to understand how we ever got to the bustling, burgeoning, prosperous America of the early nineteenth century.

There is no doubt that there existed in America, especially in Philadelphia and other port towns, numbers of poor people and that pockets of poverty were scattered all over rural America. But there was nothing in eighteenth-century America remotely resembling the urban slums and the rural poor of Great Britain, where half the society is estimated to have been dependent on charity. By no stretch of the imagination did the American poor constitute a majority of the people. Nor were these poor the self-proclaimed "poor" in the Philadelphia militia or elsewhere who wrote broadsides, petitioned legislatures, and voiced the egalitarian rhetoric that Nash describes. Most of these people who called themselves "poor" were actually of the middling sort or at least wage-earners—journeymen artisans or even small-time masters, shopkeepers, distillers, schoolmasters, petty merchants. These people were certainly not great property holders and they were not rich, and when they looked upward at wealthy merchants like George Clymer or smooth-talking lawyers like James Wilson, they no doubt felt their relative poverty and deprivation. But these middling and lower sorts were not destitute, and they were not simply victims. Some of them were in fact closer in wealth to those above them than their language would suggest. When these people talked about their poverty in contrast to the wealth of those above them and called for greater economic justice and equality, they were no doubt expressing real social and psychological resentment, but their rhetoric of the poor versus the rich cannot be taken at quite the face value that Nash seems to take it.

Such popular attacks on overblown wealth, such cries for equality, were part of long-existing traditions in English history. What was different in America was not only that ordinary people were less poor and less destitute than the poor of England but also that the American aristocracy and the wealthy gentry whom ordinary people railed against were considerably weaker and less well established than the English aristocracy and gentry. In the end, this made all the difference. What is extraordinary

18 Ibid., 608-610.
about the American Revolution is not, as Nash suggests, the continual deprivation and repression of the mass of ordinary people but rather their release and liberation. Indeed, by the early nineteenth century the majority of ordinary Americans who Nash believes were struggling to cope were actually in command of American society and culture to a degree unprecedented in the history of the world. And as ordinary Americans, they brought their ordinary interests and tastes into play as never before, including not only a rather scrambling propensity for money-making but also their popular beliefs in evangelical Christianity.

The rise of evangelical Christianity at the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth was a measure of this democratic revolution. As several of these commentators suggest, religion was important to Americans, but mostly to ordinary people, not to the educated elite of Founding Fathers (although some of them did turn to Christianity out of despair late in their lives). Many of the founders were deists or what today we might call “secular humanists.” They disliked bigotry, prejudice, superstition and had a deep Enlightenment aversion to sectarian enthusiasm. Washington, for example, certainly believed in God but usually referred to him as “the Great Disposer of events”; in twenty volumes of his correspondence he never mentions Christ. When Hamilton was asked why the members of the Philadelphia convention had not recognized God in the Constitution, he allegedly replied, speaking for many of his enlightened colleagues, “we forgot.”

Thus when we talk about the great importance of Christianity at the time of the Revolution, we are talking for the most part about ordinary people. Religion was the way such people usually made meaningful the world around them. By 1800 these liberated and increasingly assertive common people were making it more and more difficult for the liberally educated elite to forget God. By the early nineteenth century Hamilton was very busy trying to wrap the mantle of Christianity around his cause. But he was not the only one. When Aaron Burr was criticized in 1801 for his neglect of religion, a close political associate reminded him of the Presbyterian vote and warned: “Had you not better go to church?”

Ordinary people now wanted their leaders to be more like them. Within several decades evangelical Christians, especially Baptists and Methodists, captured control of American culture to an extent no one in 1776 could have foreseen. By the early nineteenth century there were real moral majorities everywhere. Someone like Jefferson had little inkling of the character of the democratic upheaval that he himself was ostensibly

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leading. For Jefferson, the rise of the people ought to mean that the society would come to think more like him. As late as 1822 he was still predicting that there was not a young man now alive who would not die a Unitarian! 22 No wonder the Founding Fathers who lived on into the democratic, evangelical, and enterprising nineteenth century were bewildered by what had happened.

The 1780s were critically important because it was the first time this latent democratic future became clearly manifest. 23 Postwar America was certainly socially and economically confused, and Nash is probably correct when he says that the distribution of wealth was more unequal than before the Revolution. But when Nash describes the mass of ordinary Americans in the 1780s, including even the Shaysites, as premodern men, uninterested in making money and simply the victims of moneyed mercantile interests, he sentimentalizes the popular majorities of the period. It is true that there were many rural Americans who remained involved only in local markets and in a bookkeeping economy, and who continued to resist the development of commercialism well into the nineteenth century. But throughout the countryside there were also many other farmers who were eagerly selling their surpluses to ever wider markets and engaging their wives and children in putting out work. Perhaps they had no clear and consistent vision of maximizing profits, but they did want to buy an increasing array of consumer goods—everything from china dishes and braided straw hats to clocks and family portraits—and this desire to consume above all became the motor for their growing industrialness. And around these farmers there grew up a multiplying number of entrepreneurs of various sorts—millowners, sawyers, traders, shopkeepers, peddlers, itinerant artisans—who contributed further to the rapid commercialization of American life. 24

The incessant demands for easy money and legislative paper currency in the 1780s were not the demands of backward-looking husbandmen interested only in a “distinctly unmodern moral economy.” 25 Borrowing on the scale that ordinary Americans engaged in during the 1780s was a function of entrepreneurial-mindedness, not destitution and poverty. Most ordinary Americans were not disillusioned in the 1780s; otherwise we can never explain the prevailing popular spirit of expansion and exuberance. The disillusionment, the sense of crisis, was essentially

24 On the commercialization of the countryside see Steven Hahn and Jonathan Prude, eds., The Countryside in the Age of Capitalist Transformation: Essays in the Social History of Rural America (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1985).
confined to gentry elites (and to urban artisans hurt by inflation and competition from abroad). Most ordinary Americans were not fearful; indeed, they came out of the war committed more than ever before to the future and the pursuit of happiness. The 1780s were the fastest growing decade demographically in all of American history. Ordinary Americans were marrying earlier and having more children, just as they were borrowing money, because they thought that tomorrow was going to be better than today. If we don’t see this, then how can we explain the extraordinary explosion of energy that transformed America in the decades following the Revolution?

America did not become a prosperous, scrambling, money-making society because a few leaders like Hamilton created a bank or because a few rich merchants sent ships to China. America developed the way it did because hundreds of thousands of ordinary people began working harder than ever before to make money and “get ahead.” No constitution, no institution, could have created or restrained these popular energies. Article I, Section 10, of the Constitution prohibited the states from emitting bills of credit, but this scarcely mattered. The people wanted money, and so they pressed their state legislatures to charter banks, hundreds of them, which in turn emitted the paper money people wanted.

I agree with Nash that equality was central to “the postwar political awareness among the mass of ordinary Americans.” And I agree with him that most of these ordinary Americans were “small producers” who extolled “the virtuousness of productive labor.” But I cannot agree with him that this mass of egalitarian-minded small producers were simply traditionalists, opposed to commerce and clinging to an ancient moral economy. By the early nineteenth century the artisanal crafts were splitting apart, and in reaction many wage-earning employees nostalgically invoked an older egalitarian world of communal labor. But most other small producers—master craftsmen, enterprising farmers, and proto-businessmen—just as fervently extolled equality and the dignity of labor as did any wage-earning employee. And they did so because all small producers, all laboring Americans, even those who were employers of dozens of workers, had a common enemy: the age-old aristocratic contempt in which working for profit was held. Although this contempt was never as strong in America as in Europe, it was widely voiced, though in ever-weakening tones, by eighteenth-century American leisured gentry. In the generation following the Revolution, “the majority of Americans who toiled with their hands” effectively destroyed this leisured gentry

and their aristocratic contempt, at least in the North. Since a leisured gentry and an aristocratic disdain for direct market interests and working for profit were at the heart of classical republicanism, this destruction involved transforming republicanism into democracy.

The victory was overwhelming, at least outside of the South. By Tocqueville’s time, northern America was a place where “every man works to earn a living” and holds labor “in honor.” It was a place where everyone was alike in working, “never either high or low,” and no one was “humiliated by the notion of receiving pay.” No wonder would-be gentry like Edward Everett who wanted a political career had to plead with workingmen’s groups to believe that former gentlemen of leisure really were workingmen too. Aristocratic leisure and classical republican disinterestedness—claiming to be above the play of marketplace interests—lost their traditional significance as prerequisites for public service, and politicians became paid workers like everyone else. Northern America became an egalitarian working country unique in the western world. No doubt the distribution of wealth was grossly unequal, but to many Americans inequalities of wealth scarcely seemed to matter in the absence of the other age-old instruments of humiliation. Ordinary people now felt that no one, however rich, was better than they were: that was equality, psychological equality, as no other Western country has ever quite had it.

29 Nash, “There at the Creation,” p. 606, above.
30 Alexis de Tocqueville, Democracy in America (1835), ed. Phillips Bradley (New York, 1956), II, 152-153. Michael Chevalier also clearly saw what was happening. “The American,” he wrote, “can support a constant and unrelaxing devotion to labor. . . . Without this devotion to business, without this constant direction of the energies of the mind to useful enterprise, without this indifference to pleasure, without those political and religious notions which imperiously repress all passions but those whose objects are business, production, and gain, can anyone suppose that the Americans would ever have achieved their great industrial prowess?” (Society, Manners, and Politics in the United States: Letters on North America [1836], ed. John William Ward [Gloucester, Mass., 1967], 201-202).