
IN SEARCH OF ‘CIVIC VIRTUE’: ON THE USE OF THE ‘FOUNDERS’ IN POLITICAL DISCOURSE

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This essay examines three competing interpretations of the ‘Founding Fathers’ that were made in the contested political climate of the 1980s. The first is Marc Plattner’s neoclassical economic interpretation that stresses “Madisonian” principles of law, property rights, and the danger of majoritarian rule to justify a minimal rule-based government and free market capitalism. The second is Robert Bellah’s communitarian-democratic interpretation, which appeals to the Founders and our republican traditions to critique excessive individualism and advance a more democratic politics governed by the norms of civic virtue. The third approach considered is the anti-Federalist critique of the Founders by Sheldon Wolin, who sees in the Constitution the beginnings of a system of national capitalism and state power that undermined localized and democratic political culture. Each approach will be assessed for its contribution toward a more participatory notion of public life.

In times of upheaval, our search for security often takes us back to sacred traditions. The decades of the 1960s and 1970s were periods of social, economic, and political turmoil in the U.S. By the 1980s, a number of responses were put forward to address the “malaise” of American society.¹ Many of these purported to build on basic American values and traditions. The appeal of Ronald Reagan was not just his free market economic program, but his symbolic image as a representative of America’s past (and his promise of a return to greatness).

This essay examines some competing appeals to the ‘Founding Fathers’ that were made in the contested political climate of the 1980s. Historical scholarship has demonstrated repeatedly that the “facts” of the past never speak for themselves when it comes to interpreting our traditions and icons. Over the last two hundred years, interpretations of the Founders have reflected the intellectual currents of the times in which they were written and the political agendas of their authors (see Kloppenberg 1987). In the following discussion, I compare three ideological images of the Founding philosophy and early American political traditions. The first is a neoclassical economic interpretation that stresses the “Madisonian” principles of law, property rights, and the danger of majoritarian rule to justify a minimal, rule-based government and free-market capitalism. This is exemplified here in the work of Marc Plattner (1982). The second approach I consider is a communitarian-democratic usage which appeals to the Founders and our “republican” traditions to justify a *critique* of excessive individualism in contemporary society, a call for a more participatory public sphere, and a politics based on norms of ‘civic virtue.’ This second approach is represented by the work of Robert Bellah and his colleagues (1985; 1992). For Bellah, civic virtue was a normative institutional principle that was central to the political thought of the Founders; for Plattner, there *was* no ‘civic virtue’ other than the equilibrium of competing interests. A third approach that will be considered here represents a more radically democratic, “anti-Federalist” *critique* of the Founders and the system they established, which sees in their initiatives the beginning of a bureaucratic national system that undermined a more localized and democratic political culture. Here Sheldon Wolin (1989) will serve as my example.

Each of these interpretations will be shown to be partial, reflecting the political presuppositions of their supporters and the contradictory aspects of our own political traditions and institutions. These contradictions—between capitalism, state bureaucracy, and democracy—are part of the historical reality of

the contemporary U.S. that must be acknowledged when discussing any alternative political formation.

THREE PERSPECTIVES ON OUR CONSTITUTIONAL TRADITIONS

The three positions profiled here can be said to roughly represent a “conservative,” “liberal,” and “radical” political stance respectively, in the contemporary U.S. usage of these terms. The neoclassical or classical liberal interpretation of the Federalist tradition has a long history and is represented in the well-known work of Louis Hartz (1955) and Richard Hofstadter (1949) among others. It was strongly reasserted, with a less critical slant, in the early 1980s in response to the social and economic crises of the previous decades, and it was used to condemn the “excesses” of the interventionist welfare state (Akard 1995). Proponents of this view called for a return to “Madisonian” principles of law, markets, checks-and-balances, and protection of private property as a defense against the dangers of “majoritarian” democracy (see for example Wagner 1982).

There were numerous examples of this position in the political debates of the early 1980s. My exemplar here is Marc Plattner, in particular his essay “American Democracy and the Acquisitive Spirit” (1982) that was published in an influential collection sponsored by the American Enterprise Institute titled *How Capitalistic Is the Constitution?*² Plattner rejected the idea that the Founders held a classical conception of ‘civic virtue’ (as in the work of Montesquieu, for example) as the basis for social cohesion. The system they established, he argued, did not require a social or communitarian interest that transcended the self-interest of individuals. Rather, the checks and balances of the federalist system and the philosophy on which it was established assumed the “acquisitive spirit” (1982). For Plattner, a “public sphere” in the sense of a region of free democratic political discourse existed, if at all, only among the founding elite, who wisely (in his view)

constructed an apparatus for balancing private interests and let it go. For Plattner (1982: 17-18):

The economical aspects of the framers' political theory may be summarized... in the following four points: (1) Industry and the pursuit of gain should be encouraged. (2) Superior industry and skill justly merit the greater material rewards they naturally tend to reap. (3) The rights of private property must be secured, both on grounds of justice and as a necessary condition for promoting industry. (4) The laws should favor the free and rapid circulation of property, so that all may have a chance to become rich and so that distinct and permanent classes of either the very rich or the very poor are unlikely to form.

In comparison with the classical republican ideal,³ the Madisonian version can be said to foster a far-reaching depoliticization of human society. Government no longer need closely supervise the morals, religion, and opinions of the people, for extraordinary public-spiritedness is neither demanded nor needed. The calculating pursuit of economic advantage and the habits of industry provide a check on people's most dangerous and politically destructive passions.

This neoclassical vision of Madisonian democracy has been popular on and off throughout our history; for obvious reasons it was widely disseminated in the early 1980s during the "Reagan Revolution."⁴

A much different usage of and appeal to the Founders was made throughout the 1980s by Robert Bellah and his colleagues, particularly in their best-selling book *Habits of the Heart* (1985; see also Bellah et al. 1987; 1991). Bellah et al. appealed to America's political traditions and institutions to justify their call for a more *democratic* public sphere and a politics normatively grounded in a sense of civic morality. They opposed the excessive

individualism of contemporary American society produced by capitalism, bureaucratic organization, managerialism, and other features of the modern industrial order. They advocated a more integrative “social ecology” grounded in our “biblical,” “republican,” and communitarian traditions. Their perspective was a reaction not only to tendencies in modern culture but also to the prominence in the 1980s of the neoclassical worldview represented by Plattner.⁵

Bellah and his co-authors chose to emphasize the democratic side of the Founders and, unlike Plattner, saw them as proponents of civic morality or ‘civic virtue.’ While Jefferson was often cited as the central figure, they claimed that *all* of the major leaders of the new republic, in different ways, shared this view. In spite of the differences in the views of Adams, Hamilton, Jefferson, Madison, and others,

All were agreed that a republic needed a government that was more than an arena within which various interests could compete, protected by a set of procedural rules. Republican government, they insisted, could survive only if animated by a spirit of virtue and concern for the public good (1985: 253).

From this perspective, Bellah and his colleagues were critical of the exclusively liberal interpretation of Hartz and others (1985: 36). The most important source in their analysis was Tocqueville, whom they used as a starting point in their elaboration of the integrative mechanisms in early American society; the “means of association”—law, local democracy, religion, community—that had been weakened by the late 20th century.

Associations, along with decentralized, local administration, mediated between the individual and the centralized state, providing forums in which opinion can be publicly and intelligently shaped and the subtle habits

of public initiative and responsibility learned and passed on. Associational life, in Tocqueville's thinking, is the best bulwark against the condition he feared most: the mass society of mutually antagonistic individuals, easy prey to despotism (1985: 38).

In this communitarian passage, we see the ideal of the social presented as a "bulwark" against the twin dangers of late 20th century society: big government and capitalism.

A third interpretation of the Constitutional tradition that is useful for comparative purposes is the view that the Founders—at least the prominent Federalists who shaped the new Constitution—were *anti*-democratic. This position parallels the neoclassical viewpoint in many ways, but it *favours* participatory democracy, which is seen to have been undermined in the system established by the Founders. This perspective is often accompanied by a sympathetic reading of the anti-Federalist tradition in American political history. A contemporary exemplar of this general orientation is Sheldon Wolin (see especially his 1989 book of essays on the Constitution, *The Presence of the Past*). For Wolin, the Founders overcame an existing localized, democratic political culture and replaced it with a more formal national system based on a "new discourse of organization" (1989: 93) and an Enlightenment-based "science of politics" (1989: 95-6). In Wolin's view, this new system reflected the Federalist fear of difference, localism, and participation which contrasted to the discourse of participation and rebellion that was emphasized in the Revolutionary period (1989: 88, 92).

The primary tension in Wolin's critique was that between democracy and an increasingly *bureaucratic* order. Not surprisingly, Alexander Hamilton and his centralized system was singled out for special criticism, but all of the Federalists were held culpable. Even Jefferson was at least complicit, if not a central shaper of the new system. For Wolin, the "Tocquevillian" institutions stressed by Bellah represent the *first* system of localized

practices and associations in early America. Although these persisted in the 1830s, they were already being threatened by bureaucratic *political* development and capitalist *economic* development fostered by the Constitutional system by the time Tocqueville made his famous visit. In Wolin's view, Bellah's "managerial" type⁶ and administrative logic were already inherent in the system of the Founders, and eventually this logic undermined the localized public spheres that were the real bases for civic virtue.

ASSESSING THREE DIVERGENT VIEWS OF THE FOUNDERS

What are we to make of these three quite different interpretations of the Founding Fathers and the Constitution? Each is obviously simplified and one-sided. In many ways Plattner's characterization of the philosophy and system of the Founders is the closest to the dominant academic view, at least for the Madisonian Federalists (Jefferson and the "Jeffersonian" tradition is a more complex case).⁷ However, he distorts their 18th century views in his extensions of the Federalist protection of liberty and property into a complete defense of free-market capitalism and the "virtues" of self-interest. Like most of the neoclassical "Madisonians" of the Reagan era, he is consistent in his opposition to "excessive" democracy. The disruptive or problematic effects of capitalism are ignored (which distinguishes Plattner's position from the others). The problems of state bureaucracy and democracy—especially as they threaten the market system and individual liberty—are emphasized. The solution to the social upheavals that America had experienced in the 1960s and 1970s was to return to law, the constitution, and the market. At the end of his 1982 essay, Plattner does mention favorably the "Tocquevillian" factors of religion, local government, civic association, and so on. But he immediately qualifies this by stating (1982: 20) that

Tocqueville constantly stresses ... the need to adapt these supports to the worldly and commercial spirit of a liberal

capitalist society. For he perceived that self-interest—“rightly understood”—was the only reliable basis for political freedom in the modern world.

This reading of Tocqueville contrasts greatly with that of Bellah et al., but it squares with Plattner’s general interpretation of our political history and fundamental institutions (for a similar reading of Tocqueville see Diggins 1985: 628; 636-37).

The selective portrayal of the Founding philosophy by Bellah and his colleagues takes it in the opposite direction. Unlike either Plattner or Wolin, Bellah downplays the contradictions between capitalism and democracy that were clearly central to the Federalist project (expressed famously in Madison’s Federalist Paper No. 10). The authors of *Habits of the Heart* certainly recognize this tension, but they do not take the logic to its conclusion in analyzing the possibilities for democracy in *contemporary* society. Following the “Jeffersonian” tradition in political discourse, they favor localized political communities but are ambiguously attracted to the Constitutional tradition. In contrast to Wolin, they do not seem to grasp the depth to which administrative logic and economic development undermine the basis for “Tocquevillian” institutions. They do discuss how industrialization and the rise of the modern corporation led to the decline of the economic and social life of the town (e.g. 1985: 42). But again, they fail to draw the obvious lessons for their own political conclusions. To frame it in terms of the sociological classics, Bellah and his co-authors posit a “Durkheimian” liberalism and general understanding of modernity,⁸ versus a “Weberian” or “Marxian” analysis of power, domination, class, and economic development. Like Durkheim, their political solutions are above all moral and intellectual (or “cultural” in a broad sense). While this dimension is certainly needed if our goal is to create a new public sphere of civic discourse, their analysis tends to remain at this level. There is a fuzziness in their depiction of the *systemic* political and economic obstacles to a more communitarian politics today.⁹ While both Plattner and Wolin are

more one-sided in their interpretations, they are each in their own way clearer about the *contradictions* between capitalism and democracy.

The primary problem with Wolin's position is his failure to deal with the problems of participatory democracy. His hard-nosed critique of the Federalist tradition contrasts greatly with his romantic assumptions about a localized democratic politics. This can be compared to both Plattner and Bellah. Plattner follows the lead of the Federalists themselves, who sought to control the "tyranny of the majority" with a political structure of fragmentation, checks and balances, and rational law. Wolin certainly recognizes this aspect of the Federalist project, but he does not take seriously enough the difficulties of decentralized democracy that led to such a plan. Bellah is less open to this type of charge. While advocating a more democratic politics, he envisions it as integrated through networks of association and guided by the norms of a new civic morality.

Each of these political theorists makes observations on the social and political movements of the 1960s, which provides an interesting point for comparison. For Plattner, the 1960s are best forgotten. It was an era of rampant "majoritarianism" and excessive democracy, which led to increasing demands on the state for interventionist and redistributive policies. This, in turn, generated the economic problems of the 1970s that were only overcome by the restoration of market discipline (1982:19-20). Wolin takes the opposite perspective. For him the 1960s represented a brief spark of citizen mobilization for a more authentic democratic politics. The social movements of the period attempted to create a more democratic public sphere, grounded in a new moral sensibility by which existing systems of domination and material self-interest were challenged (e.g. 1989: 99). Both Plattner and Wolin, from their opposite vantage points, see these as fundamental conflicts between two contrasting visions of society.

Bellah and his colleagues are mainly supportive of the 1960s social movements as well. They point to the civil rights movement as a prime example of the type of civic activism they are advocating. They also have generally positive comments about environmentalism, the women's rights movement, and other social movements of the period. But again, in some places they exhibit the fuzziness of their communitarian aspirations by downplaying structural conflicts of interest. For example, in their quest to ground their own politics in American political traditions, they pay insufficient attention to the main theme of this paper: that *competing* groups with different and even contradictory agendas claim to be upholding these traditions. This multiple usage of the *language* of our past suggests underlying conflicts of interest that must be uncovered and analyzed if we are to understand the barriers to a more inclusive politics.

CONCLUSION: TOWARD A MORE DEMOCRATIC PUBLIC SPHERE?

Among the three perspectives profiled here, Bellah and his co-authors provide us with the most extensive blueprint for a more adequate system of political participation and civic discourse. Their work is charged with moral passion and humanity. Unfortunately, they do not provide us with an adequate analysis of the *obstacles* to a more democratic politics in contemporary society. They cite Habermas and are influenced by his conception of a public sphere of relatively undistorted communication and democratic political participation.¹⁰ However, they do not provide us with enough information about what Habermas calls the “system” level—systems of political power and economic exchange—that have come to “colonize” the “lifeworld” in modern societies like our own (Habermas 1987).¹¹

As stated at the beginning of this essay, each of the above interpretations is partial and incomplete. That such contradictory usages of our past political traditions can exist together is in part a

reflection of the contradictory elements of American political life. Over the last 20 years, Plattner's neoclassical economic viewpoint has dominated public discourse in the U.S. This is in part what Bellah and his colleagues were reacting to. As they and Wolin each point out, there are institutional traditions in America that can be drawn on to inspire a more democratic politics and a more associative conception of civic virtue and civil society. However, as Plattner and Wolin recognize from opposite ends of the political spectrum, in the U.S. capitalism, the state, and democracy are often at odds.

It is not good form to introduce a new topic in a conclusion. But I would like to close by noting another work from the same period that grapples with similar issues. *Democracy and Capitalism* (1982), by Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, integrates these three competing perspectives in an interesting way while also advocating an enhanced sphere of authentic public discourse and participatory democracy. They take seriously *each* level of relevant analysis and their corresponding ideological debates—capitalism and neoclassical economics; bureaucracy and the analysis of bureaucratic power; and liberal democracy and classical liberal political philosophy. Drawing on the emancipatory side of the liberal tradition that emphasizes political participation and citizen rights, they examine the prerequisites for a more representative political process. However, I cite this work because it does not impose either a false “synthesis” or a one-sided solution, but rather stresses the contradictory and problematic relationship between capitalism, bureaucracy, and democracy in contemporary society. Recognition of this historical reality is the necessary starting point for any realistic discussion of political alternatives.

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NOTES

¹ This is a reference to a speech given by President Carter in 1979 at the height of this turmoil marked by a major energy crisis, the Iranian Revolution, Communist insurgence in Central America, rapid inflation, and the stagnation of the economy. Under these conditions, Carter's acknowledgement of a "crisis in confidence" in America, his realistic assessment of "limits," and his call for sacrifice did not play well against the vision of a triumphant return to American greatness that would be championed by Ronald Reagan.

² This is a very useful collection of a variety of different perspectives on the Constitution. Contributors besides Plattner include Edward S. Greenberg, Forrest McDonald, Walter Dean Burnham, Bernard H. Siegan, Robert Lekachman, and Stephen Miller.

³ "Classical republicanism" has been defined in various ways. Kloppenberg (1987:14) notes its ambiguous usage, but says this: "Classical republicans called for independent citizens to protect fragile civic virtue against the threat of corruption represented by the extension of executive power. Their ideal of a community, in which individuals define their interests in terms of the common good, figured prominently in the political literature produced in America..." Shalhope (1982: 334-35) provides this definition: "Preserving a republican polity meant protecting liberty from the ceaseless aggression of power. In addition,

Americans believed that what made republics great or ultimately destroyed them was not the force of arms but the character and spirit of the people. Public virtue, as the essential prerequisite for good government, was all-important. . . . Thus republicanism meant maintaining public and private virtue, internal unity, social solidarity, and vigilance against the corruptions of power.” This tradition will play a much greater role in the perspective of Bellah and his colleagues. For useful overviews of the debates over this concept and its application to U.S. history see Appleby (1986); Rogers (1992).

⁴ For a more nuanced view of the liberal tradition, see Kloppenberg (1987); see also Appleby (1976). For a reassertion of the neoclassical interpretation against appeals to ‘republican virtue’—and also against neo-Marxian assertions of a communitarian, anti-liberal working class consciousness in the U.S.—see Diggins (1985).

⁵ In this regard the competing interpretations of Plattner and Bellah mirror the long-running debate among historians and political theorists over “liberal” vs. “republican” readings of the Founders. See Kloppenberg (1987) for an excellent overview.

⁶ Bellah et al. develop several ideal character types that are used to mark the historical development of American society and culture; e.g. the Independent Citizen, the Entrepreneur, the Manager, and the Therapist (1985: chapter two). The ‘Manager’ developed with the emergence of the modern corporation and the separation of public and private life. “The essence of the manager’s task is to organize the human and non-human resources available to the organization that employs him so as to improve its position in the marketplace. His role is to persuade, inspire, manipulate, cajole, and intimidate those he manages so that his organization measures up to criteria of effectiveness shaped ultimately by the market but specifically by the expectations of those in control of his organization—finally, its owners” (1985: 45). For Wolin, this logic is inherent in the system constructed by the Federalists.

⁷ On the various interpretations of Jefferson, see Kloppenberg (1987); Banning (1986); Ashworth (1984).

⁸ While Tocqueville is the theoretical champion cited by Bellah et al. the sociological inspiration is clearly Durkheim.

⁹ There are striking similarities between the type of democratic public sphere advocated by Bellah and the concept of ‘publics’ that C. Wright Mills advocates against the increasing domination of “mass society” in *The Power Elite* (1956: chapter 10). Why is Mills not cited? Perhaps because his “left-Weberian” analysis of economic and organizational

power as an obstacle to democracy does not quite square with the “Durkheimian” moral/cultural starting point favored by Bellah and his colleagues.

¹⁰ See Habermas (1989). For a very useful analysis of Habermas’ concept of the public sphere see the contributions in Calhoun (1996).

¹¹ This was a conscious decision on the authors’ part, and their rationale seems to verify my earlier assessment: “As our work progressed, we developed our ideas with constant reference to the writings of Jurgen Habermas, whose notion of economic and political “systems” invading and colonizing the “life-world” significantly influenced us. In the end we decided not to use his terminology, which seemed to imply a sharper dichotomy between systems and life-world than we intended. In particular, Habermas’s language made it difficult for us to argue for the institutional humanization of the economy and the administrative state, even though we know he shares our hope for that possibility” (1991: 291). While this may be true, Habermas’s language might have made it easier to depict the *obstacles* to this “humanization.”