

# Afterword

GORDON S. WOOD

IT IS a great pleasure to be involved in a volume of papers honoring George Billias. For, in my opinion, George Billias epitomizes the working historian; he is the craftsman who represents the heart and soul of what we as a profession are about. He demonstrates why history is a discipline. He doesn't waste time wondering abstractly about truth and objectivity and musing about the possibilities of actually representing past reality. He just does history. Day in and day out he writes the books and articles that become the essential stuff of our cumulative effort to recover our past. Without the products of hardworking scholars like Billias, there would be no historical discipline and nothing of what we think of as history.

Billias has had a long and productive career, and it's not over yet by a long shot. He has written several important monographs and a splendid biography of Elbridge Gerry, and has edited several other books, including some influential readers for classroom use. All of these works, like his early piece on the Massachusetts land bankers of 1740, have affected our understanding of early American history and helped to stimulate new lines of inquiry.

Although Billias has never had his head in the clouds and has never been a fashion-monger, he has always been acutely aware of developments and trends in historical writing, as his several superb collections of historiographical pieces suggest. His intellectual antennae have always been sensitive to important issues emerging in the discipline and to new questions being raised by historians.

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GORDON S. WOOD is University professor and professor of history at Brown University.

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It is appropriate then that this volume dedicated to him deals with one of the most significant recent topics in the field of early American history—the relation of republicanism to liberalism.

No doubt those of us who helped initiate what Robert Shalhope has called the ‘republican synthesis’ had little sense of the lengths to which it would be carried. Over the past two decades or so this theme of republicanism has spilled out of the eighteenth century to affect the scholarly world in a variety of unanticipated ways. Not only have historians of nineteenth- and twentieth-century America extended the ‘republican synthesis’ into their own periods of study, but other scholars—political scientists, sociologists, philosophers, and legal thinkers of all sorts—have imaginatively exploited republicanism for their own particular purposes. Indeed, the use and abuse of republicanism in our contemporary thinking is an object lesson in the power of politics to influence scholarship. For surely much of the remarkable presence of republicanism in our scholarly writings comes from the peculiarities and frustrations of our contemporary politics. Republicanism has worked to meet the political agendas of people on both the left and the right.

On the left, republicanism has offered a respectable communitarian alternative to the excessive emphasis on private interests and individual rights of liberal, capitalistic America that Louis Hartz described nearly forty years ago—an alternative, moreover, that, unlike Marxism, was an authentic part of America’s heritage, indeed, central to its Revolutionary beginnings. Suddenly, the left had something in the American political tradition to appeal to other than the rapacious, individualistic, money-making justifications of liberal capitalism.

But the right also found something useful in republicanism. The republican tradition embodied a golden age—the age of the Founders—from which America has subsequently declined. The republican world was a world in which great men of talent and virtue ruled, a world of unabashed elitists who stood above democratic pandering and refused to kowtow to every scrambling ethnic and interest group. The Straussians are perhaps the best known of the

conservatives who use republicanism in this way. But there are many other scholars who also hold out a vision of a republican political world in which self-interested conflict and pluralistic log-rolling might give way to collective deliberation and a common concern for the public good.

Exploited so freely by a variety of scholars in these different ways, republicanism has become a monster that threatens to devour us all. It is not surprising, therefore, as the papers in this volume make clear, that we have become very busy trying to cage and tame this monster and bring it back to its eighteenth-century reality. For surely, as all the historians in this volume indicate, over the past twenty years we have made republicanism something more palpable and distinct than it was in fact. Classical republicanism in the eighteenth century was not a clearly discernible body of thought to which people self-consciously adhered. And what we call Lockean liberalism was even less manifest and less palpable. In our historiographical debates we have too often assumed a sharp dichotomy between two identifiable traditions that eighteenth-century reality will not support. None of the historical participants, including the Founders, ever had any sense that he had to choose between republicanism and liberalism, between Machiavelli and Locke. Jefferson 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. These boxlike categories of 'republicanism' and 'liberalism' are essentially our inventions, and as such they are necessarily dangerous distortions of past reality.

Most of the historians in this volume recognize the dangers of too easily imposing these invented categories on the past. Indeed, some of them are now agonizingly anxious to find nuances and subtleties in place of earlier exaggerated 'paradigms.' Still, the categories will not go away—they are obviously useful for making sense of the complicated reality of the eighteenth century—and thus it may be helpful to say something about their relationship to that complicated past reality.

Classical republicanism was not the besieged ideology of a few revolutionary intellectuals. It was not a body of thought exclusively identified with radical Whigs or Bolingbrokean Tories, with the extreme left or right, or with any fringe groups whatsoever in British and American politics. Republican values were not marginal; they spread everywhere in the culture of the Western world, not just among the English-speaking peoples but on the continent as well. For most educated elites in the eighteenth century, monarchical and republican values blended and blurred to the point where the two became virtually indistinguishable. To be sure, few persons talked openly of deposing kings and instituting elective republican governments. Such seditious thought was not only dangerous, it was beside the point. People, even good aristocrats, could be loyal monarchists and still ardently promote republican values. Few of those aristocrats who in 1786 applauded Mozart's *Marriage of Figaro*, with its celebration of humanistic and egalitarian values, believed that they were thereby undermining monarchy and their future existence.

Monarchical and republican values thus existed side by side in the culture, and many loyal monarchists adopted what were in substance if not in name classical republican principles without realizing the long-term political implications of their actions. As Franco Venturi has pointed out, republicanism in the eighteenth century could no longer be reduced to a form of government; it had become 'a form of life,' a set of ideals and beliefs entirely compatible with monarchy. Montesquieu and other enlightened thinkers praised the English constitution precisely for its liberal mixture of monarchy with a republican spirit. Although they seldom mentioned the term, good monarchical subjects nonetheless celebrated republicanism for its morality, its freedom, its sense of friendship and civic duty, and its vision of society. Republicanism as a form of life was too pervasive and too much involved with being liberal and enlightened to be seen as subversive or as anti-monarchical.

In essence republicanism was the ideology of the Enlighten-

ment. If the Enlightenment was, as Peter Gay has called it, 'the rise of modern paganism,' then classical republicanism was its creed. In the eighteenth century, to be enlightened was to be interested in antiquity, and to be interested in antiquity was to be interested in republicanism. Although the classical past could offer meaningful messages for monarchy, there is little doubt that most of what the ancient world had to say to the eighteenth century was latently and often manifestly republican.

Like so many South Sea tribes for twentieth-century anthropologists, classical republican Rome became the major means by which enlightened Britons could get some perspective on their society and criticize it. Thus Dr. Samuel Johnson found that the best way to condemn the corruption of eighteenth-century London was to imitate Juvenal's third satire on Nero's Rome. Most of the age's invocations of classical antiquity were covert and sometimes unwitting invocations of republicanism. As literary scholars have long been telling us, mid-eighteenth-century Britain did not celebrate the imperial age of Augustus. After 1688 and especially after 1714, most Britons, even aristocrats close to the court, criticized Augustus and looked to the Roman Republic for values and inspiration. Cicero and Cato, not Augustus, were the Romans to be admired, and Tacitus's anti-Augustan republican view of Roman history was the one most read and cited. Augustus became a code word for tyrant, and as such he was attacked by nearly everyone except royal absolutists. The Tories, thinking of George I, called Augustus a despot, but the court Whigs and defenders of the Hanoverian settlement, thinking of the Stuarts, did likewise. From 1688 on, the need for the government to defend the Whig settlement and to attack the Stuart pretensions to the crown meant that a quasi-republican, anti-royalist bias was necessarily built into the official center of English culture. During Walpole's era both court and country writers alike condemned Augustus as an imperial dictator, the murderer of Cicero, and the destroyer of the Republic. Everyone evoked republican values; even the Tories, said Hume, had been so long obliged to talk 'in the republican stile'

that they had at length 'embraced the sentiments as well as the language of their adversaries.'

All these appeals to republican antiquity made anything other than a classical conception of government and governmental leadership difficult if not impossible to justify. Who dared speak against the politically correct republican values of independence and virtue? Older monarchical practices and privileges lingered on, but their traditional justifications were overwhelmed by new republican principles. Charges of corruption now came easily to men's lips, as the assumptions that originally had legitimated the seemingly selfish behavior of officeholders faded from memory. Republicanism did not overthrow monarchy from without but eroded and transformed it from within.

And it often did this by coopting the values of monarchy itself. If politeness was crucial to monarchical court life, then republicanism helped to make it central to social life in general. By the middle of the eighteenth century, at least in the English-speaking world, republican values, especially virtue, had become more closely identified with politeness or civility. Republicanism offered new polite adhesives for holding people together in place of the older monarchical reliance on patriarchy, kinship, and patronage. People, it was said, ought to relate to one another in kinder, gentler ways—through affection, love, and 'friendship,' which became the ubiquitous euphemism to describe almost every relationship, including even the most severe and unequal dependencies. Sociability thus became the contemporary substitute for classical virtue. The antique virtue of self-sacrifice was now often seen as too austere, too forbidding, too harsh for the civilized eighteenth century. People now needed a virtue that demanded less in the way of service to the state and more in the way of getting along with others. Unlike the classical virtue of the past, which was martial and masculine, this new virtue was soft and feminized and capable of being expressed by women as well as men. It was much more Addisonian than Spartan, and much more social than political.

Classical virtue had flowed from the citizen's participation in

politics; government had been the source of his civic consciousness and public spiritedness. But eighteenth-century virtue flowed from the citizen's participation in society, not in government, which the enlightened increasingly saw as the source of the evils of the world. 'Society,' said Thomas Paine, 'is produced by our wants and government by our wickedness: the former promotes our happiness *positively* by uniting our affections, the latter *negatively* by restraining our vices. The one encourages intercourse, the other creates distinctions.' It was society, not politics, that bred the new domesticated virtue of politeness. Mingling in drawing rooms, clubs, coffeehouses, and even counting houses—partaking of the innumerable interchanges of the daily comings and goings of modern life, including those of the marketplace—created affection, fellow-feeling, credit, and trust that bound people together in the natural harmony of the social world that was as marvelous to the eighteenth century as the discovery of the force of gravity in the physical world.

As the ideology of the Enlightenment, this kind of modernized republicanism had to mean more than the restoration of a balanced constitution and the maintenance of a certain kind of political leadership and political citizenship. It was anything but nostalgic, pessimistic, and anti-commercial; far from dreading modernity, it helped to reconcile educated people in the English-speaking world to modernity. It prepared people, in other words, for the transition to what we call liberalism.

Just as monarchy was transformed rather than supplanted by republicanism, so too was republicanism transformed rather than supplanted by liberalism. To picture the republican Revolution of 1776 as something undertaken in a mood of classical anxiety over corruption and the loss of virtue misses all the optimism and exuberance of the period. Many ordinary Americans joined the Revolutionary movement not out of fear of the future but out of the desire to expand their rights and to pursue their happiness. At the outset of the Revolution, Americans saw nothing incompatible between republicanism and what they had referred to as the tra-

ditional rights and liberties of Englishmen; if anything, they saw the civic responsibilities and republican participation of the people in government as the guarantor of their rights and liberties. Only later, in post-Revolutionary America, when men came to doubt whether this republican participation of the people in government, especially in their state legislatures, was the best guarantor of their rights and liberties did an opposition between republicanism and what we label Lockean liberalism arise.

The story of the transformation of republicanism into liberalism is no doubt a complicated one, but the papers collected in this volume have begun to show us some of the varied ways in which it took place. People at the time had no sense that they were dealing with 'paradigms' or blocks of ideas they had to accept or reject totally. Instead, they confronted particular problems, argued about them, and often presented new ways of dealing with them; in the process they often inadvertently transformed something important in the classical republican tradition. It was not that there were simply new kinds of people and new social groups emerging that required new values and new justifications for their behavior, though this was certainly true enough; it was also that circumstances often compelled those who wished to remain loyal to republican values to challenge and to subvert those values.

Take, for example, the issue of whether public officials should be paid salaries. The classical republican tradition that went back to Aristotle and Cicero saw political office as an aristocratic obligation of those who had sufficient wealth, leisure, and talent to serve the commonwealth. Gentlemen, as Jefferson said, ought to undertake political office in accord with 'the Roman principle,' without substantial remuneration. The Founders were not modern politicians. They did not conceive of politics as a profession and officeholding as a career. Like Jefferson, they believed that 'in a virtuous government . . . public offices are what they should be, burthens to those appointed to them, which it would be wrong to decline, though foreseen to bring with them intense labor, and great private loss.' Yet at the same time many of them did not have

the wherewithal to live up to this aristocratic republican ideal. Despite Washington's refusal of his salary as commander-in-chief and Franklin's effort in the Constitutional Convention to abolish all salaries and fees for executive officers in the new federal government, most of the Founders were in too straitened circumstances and too dependent on their salaries to serve in government without pay. Their concession on this point undermined much of the classical republican conception of political leadership and led eventually to the emergence of the modern salaried politician—to what the Tory Jonathan Boucher contemptuously called 'a new species of public men, who . . . pursue politics merely as a gainful occupation.'

In the same way the classic republican devotion to leisure among a gentry elite was transformed by circumstances. If public officeholders simply worked for a living like everyone else, then the leisure that had enabled the aristocracy to justify its dominance of government in the Western world for two millennia lost its traditional meaning. Work acquired a new dignity befitting an egalitarian democratic society in which all adult males were now supposed to have occupations and work for a living.

Complicated struggles and debates over particular problems like these, without any of the participants realizing they were defending 'republicanism' or advancing 'liberalism,' were what cumulatively transformed the culture. Instead of continuing to argue about the transition of republicanism to liberalism in large abstract terms, as one 'paradigm' replacing another, perhaps we ought to investigate concrete issues like these and others, such as the consumption of luxuries by common people, and see what happened. By working in the hardheaded, empirical tradition of historical writing superbly exemplified by the work of George Billias, we may be able to move beyond our ever more precious historiographical debates and actually advance our understanding of how we Americans came to be what we are.

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