O n b o t h e n d s of the political spectrum, it seems liberalism has become démodé. From the traditionalist right, R. R. Reno of First Things proclaims, “[w]e’re afflicted by a liberal monoculture” characterized by a “double-pronged project of cultural and economic deregulation” that has eroded the solidarity needed to hold society together. From the left, Jacobin’s Nicole Aschoff criticizes what she sees as the liberal policies of “globalization, deregulated financial markets, [and] massive tax giveaways to big business and the rich” for creating a great “chasm” of inequality between “elites” and “ordinary people.”

Central to liberalism is the notion of liberty as freedom from constraint: the freedom to act according to one’s own conception of the good without impinging on others’ freedom to do the same. Accordingly, liberalism understands politics in procedural terms—as the neutral weighing of competing private interests without tipping the scales in favor of any one particular ideal. It is thus no coincidence that such distinct contemporary alternatives to liberalism as nationalism and socialism seek to fill the substantive void by emphasizing, in differing ways and to varying degrees, the importance of social cohesion over freedom of choice, the implausibility or undesirability of a morally neutral state, and the need to denounce the corrupt bargain between political and corporate elites.

What one makes of all this will depend in part on how one understands the American political tradition. Many liberals view the rejection of liberalism as an alarming threat to “liberal democracy”—and American democracy, in particular—along with the institutions and values associated with it, which include representative government, the

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separation of powers, free markets, and religious liberty and tolerance. Their concerns are valid, insofar as some of liberalism’s most vocal critics on the right and left indict the American political project and its founding as both misbegotten and irredeemably liberal.

Curiously, the parties to this dispute all share an implicit premise: that liberalism is, for better or worse, the heart and soul of the American political tradition. Yet in fact, our political inheritance is not reducible to any one political ideology or tradition. Rather than a totalizing force for salvation or damnation, liberalism is one—albeit a powerful—strain of thought within our idiosyncratic political experiment. If Americans today tend to project liberalism back onto the entirety of our political history, it is in part because, during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, liberalism superseded other political traditions to become the dominant (though not the only) framework through which Americans understand themselves as citizens.

This is no mere academic dispute; how we construe our country’s political inheritance will determine whether and to what extent we must look beyond it to temper its worst impulses. Today, we face a political crisis not unlike the one Americans faced during the 19th century, when changing social and economic conditions raised probing questions about the basic viability of our political forms. We would do well—as 19th-century Americans would have done—not to let such concerns blind us to the virtues of our political traditions. Instead, we should remind ourselves that the American project is and always has been far richer than the liberal tradition alone, containing within it the moral resources to both embrace liberty and rein in the excesses of liberalism.

REPUBLICANISM AND THE AMERICAN FOUNDING
The claim that the American political tradition is essentially liberal was popularized during the mid-20th century by historians such as Louis Hartz, who praised the American political tradition’s enduring liberal—and specifically Lockean—consensus. Modern-day critics of liberalism who fault the American founding for its incorrigible liberalism merely flip Hartz on his head.

However influential it has been, the regnant liberal interpretation of the American founding is a controversial one. In fact, many of the most prominent American historians of the last half-century rejected the characterization.
In the 1960s and '70s, scholars like Bernard Bailyn and Gordon Wood began to expose significant weaknesses in its underlying claims. They argued that the evidence did not support the theory that the American political tradition — and the American founding, in particular — was monolithically liberal, cast in the mold of Lockean individualism. Rather, they posited that a distinctive form of republicanism served as the American Revolution’s true “ideology.”

Republicanism is a political tradition that traces its lineage to a classical view of citizenship embodied in certain Greek city-states and the Roman republic. Like liberalism, republicanism takes liberty to be essential for politics. And yet it diverges from liberalism in its understanding of freedom and the emphasis it places on equality.

To be a citizen in the republican tradition is to be both free and equal. Freedom here, above all, means not servile — not subject to domination or arbitrary coercion. At the same time, the republican notion of citizenship, which has roots in the ancient Greek notion of the *polis*, makes stringent demands upon the citizenry, since it considers the obligations of rulership to be jointly incumbent upon all citizens. Republicanism thus entails a “positive” concept of liberty as well as a negative one: The republican citizen is not just free from coercion; he is also free for civic life.

Republicanism also emphasizes the centrality of the common good in its notion of freedom. Rather than viewing man as a sovereign individual motivated by self-interest — a distinctly economic notion of man born of liberalism — republicanism conceives of man as a political animal, a citizen among citizens within a *polis* who strives to exercise the virtues needed to practice the politics of self-rule. As Wood observes, under republicanism, “[l]iberty [is] realized when the citizens [are] virtuous — that is, willing to sacrifice their private interests for the sake of the community.” Virtue in the republican tradition is understood primarily as public virtue.

This is not to say that republicanism sees man as utterly altruistic. On the contrary, as latter-day republican Hannah Arendt points out, republicanism understands ambition to be a motivating factor in civic participation: The Roman citizen, for instance, acted in the hope that his honor might be immortalized. Within this ambition, republicanism recognizes a concomitant danger of vainglory and corruption, which is why well-designed structures of government — those that incorporate the rule of law, the separation of powers, and regular elections, among
other safeguards—are deemed necessary to prevent any one citizen from acquiring or exercising too much power. Thus, like liberalism, republicanism is suspicious of government power, though not because it sees government as inherently evil. Rather, republicanism recognizes that man is liable to fail in virtue, especially in proportion to which he acquires power. Thus, republicanism insists that the institutions of government be carefully attended to and preserved from the corrupting influence of vice through the cultivation and exercise of civic virtue.

The republican principle of equality flows from this conception of citizenship. To be a republican citizen requires that there be no hierarchy of rulership: all are citizens, as opposed to subjects. And because all citizens are equal, they must all be free to assume the burdens of self-rulership—including the duty to participate in civic life. As historian J. G. A. Pocock put it, the republican citizen is “virtuous in his…engagement in relations of equality and ruling-and-being-ruled.”

Many republicans have held that such political equality presupposes a degree of economic equality, especially in the form of a widespread distribution of property—what Christopher Lasch calls a “rough equality of condition.” That’s not to say that republicanism rejects the notion of private property; on the contrary, republicanism shares liberalism’s concern for private property. But it does so not because it conceives of property as an end in itself—the protection of which is the raison d’être of the state. Rather, republicanism considers proprietorship a precondition for full participation in the polis. Public virtue, according to Wood, was thought to “be found only in a republic of equal, active, and independent citizens,” and proprietorship was believed necessary to provide the minimal degree of economic independence required for men to discharge the duties of citizenship. Hence proprietorship, like the obligations of self-rule, ought to be enjoyed by all citizens.

In the 1960s, Bernard Bailyn posited that, although most people at the time characterized the American Revolution “as an expression of [liberalism’s] natural rights philosophy,” a particular current of republicanism had also made its way across the Atlantic to influence the American colonists. This current was exemplified by 18th-century English writers, polemicists, and politicians associated with the “country” opposition to the dominant “court” politics. Such individuals “applied to the politics of the age of Walpole the peculiar strain of anti-authoritarianism bred in the upheaval of the English Civil War.”
Per Bailyn, Wood, and their followers, it was this republican vision of England’s country opposition, more so than liberalism, that inspired early Americans. It provided the American revolutionaries with a powerful framework through which to criticize the Crown and justify their quest for independence, all while affirming continuity with the English political tradition. This “Atlantic republicanism” would remain a vital tradition within American political thought up through the end of the 19th century, at which point its substance would begin to dissipate.

Critics of Bailyn’s and Wood’s interpretation of the American Revolution claim that it downplays the genuine influence liberalism had on the founding generation. This criticism is not without merit. Though republicanism played a distinct role in stirring the founders to separate from England, liberalism undeniably influenced them as well—even if that influence is sometimes exaggerated. After all, the founders’ affirmation of “Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness” as “unalienable Rights” in the Declaration of Independence had overt Lockean overtones.

As historian Lance Banning observes, “early Revolutionary thinking...was always an amalgam of republican and liberal ideas, and [these] traditions did not merely coexist or stand objectively as separate and competing choices.” Bailyn himself made much the same point: The “spokesmen of the Revolution,” as he put it, were “both ‘civic humanists’ and ‘liberals,’ though with different emphases at different times and in different circumstances” (emphasis added). Rather than mutually exclusive ideologies, then, republicanism and liberalism are best thought of as separate veins of political thought that are intertwined and marbled through our country’s history—from its revolutionary beginnings to today.

**LIBERALISM IN AMERICA**

The term “liberalism” originated in early-19th-century England as a term of opprobrium for political opponents of Toryism. The concept has much deeper roots, of course, claiming antecedents not only in Hobbes, Locke, Hume, Adam Smith, and Benjamin Constant, as well as the French philosophes, but also, as historian Dorothy Ross observed, in judicial modes of thought from classical Roman and medieval times. In her recent book *The Lost History of Liberalism*, Helena Rosenblatt traces liberalism all the way back to ancient Greece.
In formulating their vision for America, some founders drew especially heavily on the liberalism of theorists like Locke, Smith, and Hume—perhaps the most prominent among them being Alexander Hamilton. These founding-era liberals viewed commercial activity as a form of liberalization that not only increased wealth, but facilitated cooperative exchange, thereby engendering refinement and civility within the citizenry.

Other founders, like Thomas Jefferson, saw commercial activity as a source of potential corruption. As Wood points out, these early American republicans—like the “country” republicans of Walpole’s England—worried that the “rise of banks, trading companies, and stock markets, plus the emergence of the new moneyed men, [and] the increasing public debt” would change the culture of the nascent republic, allowing self-interest to displace public virtue as society’s chief animating principle.

Republican concerns would come to a head during the Industrial Revolution. Although this transformation of American economic and social life portended enormous benefits—from increased efficiency and technological innovation to higher standards of living and rising life expectancy—it also involved significant disturbances and dislocations. The agrarian and mercantilist ways of life of antebellum America—characterized by farming, craft labor, and small-scale commercial exchange—were either displaced or replaced by new, industrial ones characterized by manufacturing, large corporations, and financial speculation. Wealth was concentrated in the hands of a powerful new class of industrialists, while yeoman farmers and other small-scale producers of the founding era were gradually replaced by wage earners who owned nothing but their “labor power.” Given republicanism’s reliance on widespread proprietorship as a prerequisite of civic participation, many perceived these fundamental socio-economic changes as a threat to the tradition of self-government.

One need not be—nor need have been in the 19th century—a socialist to recognize the significance of this transformation for society. As Lasch observes, at the time of the Civil War, “it was generally agreed, across a broad spectrum of political opinion, that democracy had no future in a nation of hirelings.” As a result, the prospect of a “permanent class of wage earners…troubled commentators on American politics far more widely than we have realized.”
One such commentator was Abraham Lincoln, who spoke to this very issue in his 1861 address to Congress. Lincoln acknowledged that a great number of Americans had become hired laborers and thus beholden to those who “own capital.” But he pointed out that a “large majority belong to neither class—neither work for others nor have others working for them.” And in fact, most American workers (outside of slave states, at least) remained free: “Men, with their families—wives, sons, and daughters—work for themselves on their farms, in their houses, and in their shops, taking the whole product to themselves, and asking no favors of capital on the one hand nor of hired laborers or slaves on the other.” And what of those Americans who were hired laborers? Lincoln pointed out that they are not, or need not be, “fixed in that condition for life.”

In Lincoln’s estimation, a system of free labor could offer a pathway, open to all, to the kind of economic independence that had always been a precondition for self-government. His defense of free labor was, of course, intended as a response and alternative to the slave system of the South, but it was also a re-articulation of republican—even Jeffersonian—ideals within the context of the burgeoning transformation sparked by industrialization.

After the Civil War, however, industrialization would kick into higher gear, and a larger share of Americans would become wage earners than ever before. As economist Joshua Rosenbloom put it:

Outside of agriculture, at the beginning of the nineteenth century most manufacturing took place in small establishments. Hired labor might consist of a small number of apprentices, or, as in the early New England textile mills, a few child laborers hired from nearby farms….As a result labor market institutions remained small-scale and informal….With the growth of manufacturing, and the spread of factory methods of production, especially in the years after the end of the Civil War, an increasing number of people could expect to spend their working-lives as employees.

By the 1870s, this situation had become undeniable; Lincoln’s vision of free labor began to look more like an elusive aspiration than reality. It was increasingly unclear whether the American tradition of republicanism, with its high expectations of economic independence, civic
engagement, and public virtue, could survive industrialization and the rise of universal wage labor. Had the ideal of self-governing citizens, at home in an agrarian and mercantilist society, become anachronistic? While Lincoln had answered with an emphatic “no,” a new generation of Americans would offer a more qualified response.

LEFT AND RIGHT LIBERALISM

Liberalism offered a way for 19th-century Americans to reconcile the new socio-economic reality with the republican tradition of self-government. They did so through the concepts of liberty and progress, re-articulating them in light of the new industrial economy.

While the American political projects of the 18th century represented progress toward political freedom, liberals of the 19th century considered the market a force for economic freedom. In place of the widespread proprietorship that republicanism posited would provide the independence necessary for self-rule, 19th-century liberals asserted that the liberty to “sell one’s labor” would provide a new “basis of autonomy” in the industrialized world. Rather than a polis of free citizens motivated by a commitment to the common welfare, the new liberalism envisaged a world of autonomous individuals who, if left unmolested by the state, would together improve society’s material and even moral condition.

This laissez-faire approach to the economy — and the socio-economic effects with which it was associated — ultimately gave rise to a new offshoot of liberalism known as progressivism. Progressives in the late 19th and early 20th centuries observed that unbridled markets, whatever their benefits, also created externalities, including new forms of inequality, urban poverty, social instability, economic concentration, and an industrial class that, whatever its virtues, displayed many of the vices of the old silk-stockings elite (and new ones to boot). These concerns were inflamed by the economic depression of 1873 — the worst the country had yet known — and then another in 1893, in which the railroad industry and financial speculation were implicated, respectively. “[F]or the first time,” Rosenbloom explains, “cities throughout the country had to contend with large masses of industrial workers thrown out of work and unable to support themselves.” The close of the century saw the rise of massive unemployment, social unrest, and violent conflict, culminating in the political re-alignment of 1896.
The political debate sparked by these socio-economic changes was not simply a disagreement over whether to re-allocate resources or discipline market forces; at issue was the kind of politics that was needed to confront the economic realities of fin de siècle America. Whereas laissez-faire liberals found ways to reconcile industrialization with America’s republican political arrangement, progressives believed that a new kind of politics was needed to contend with and control the new economic and social forces. Stemming from a reformist rather than a revolutionary impulse, progressivism did not—to the chagrin of the radicals of the day—seek to overthrow the American economic order or the political ideals of representative government. But it did depart from laissez-faire liberalism by advocating government intervention in the market and new political structures to counterbalance those inherited from the 18th century. In particular, progressives believed administrative agencies—staffed by allegedly apolitical experts—could insulate the lawmaking process from the rough-and-tumble of democratic politics and the corrupting influence of private interests.

Progressivism of the late 19th and early 20th centuries did not diverge entirely with America’s republican tradition. Much as republicanism viewed the “rough equality of condition” as a prerequisite for civic participation, progressivism insisted that a minimum of economic and social equality was necessary for a democracy to function. Progressivism also drew on the language and philosophy of republicanism in its political rhetoric—most notably in the antitrust movement and its attacks on the new corporate interest’s corruption of electoral politics.

Progressivism, like laissez-faire liberalism, remained distinctly within the liberal tradition. A key difference, though, was that under laissez-faire liberalism, the market was to channel the individual’s less-than-virtuous inclinations toward the public good, while progressivism remained skeptical that the market, acting alone, could preserve the general welfare in an industrialized world. Instead, progressives insisted that a strong federal government was needed to cooperate with, or offer rational guidance to, the market in order to protect individuals from the depredations of industrialization while guaranteeing that its spoils were enjoyed by the greatest number of people.

Liberalism thus set the intellectual stage for 20th-century American domestic policy. Its progressive alternative found expression in Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal and later in Lyndon Johnson’s Great
Meanwhile, the laissez-faire variant came to be identified with American conservatism, which touted the economic and social value of individual freedom while recognizing both the need for some amount of government intervention and the dangers of too much centralization. The rhetoric of liberalism would become particularly powerful during the Cold War, when the live alternative to liberal-democratic capitalism was totalitarian communism. It is significant that the term “liberal democracy” increased in popularity during the post-war period and spiked during the 1980s and ’90s, overtaking republican idioms — the language of “common good” and “civic virtue” — that had remained typical of American political rhetoric up until the 20th century.

Today, the dominance of liberalism has become a central theme on the right and left, of a piece with a general “post-liberal” turn. On the left, the popularity of democratic socialism reflects a preference for social solidarity as opposed to individualism, along with a disenchantment with liberal economic policies. On the right, nationalism reflects, in a kind of mirror image of the left, a preference for social solidarity through national identity along with a disavowal of the politics and policies of social liberation. Both reject the liberal conception of man as an independent, rights-bearing individual in favor of an emphasis on man’s membership in a political community. And both take the state to be the primary locus of that community — in stark contrast to the liberal conception of the state as a neutral arbiter of private rights and competing conceptions of the good.

It is in this context that a revival of republicanism is both timely and attractive. Like socialism and nationalism, republicanism places a priority on political community and the common good, and recognizes that market forces can sometimes undermine them. At the same time, it insists on preserving liberty, protecting private property, and imposing limits on government. Moreover, unlike socialism or nationalism, republicanism is, in Wood’s words, “an authentic part of America’s heritage, indeed, central to its Revolutionary beginnings.”

It should be kept in mind that republicanism does not “simply mean…support for a republican form of government,” as Brink Lindsey has argued in these pages. As a matter of historical fact, republicanism has existed and even flourished in various political contexts and forms.
of government, from monarchical England and the oligarchic republics of the Italian city-states to democratic America. Rather than a form of government, republicanism is best described as a “form of life,” to use Italian writer Franco Venturi’s turn of phrase. In Wood’s framing, it provides a means by which citizens can “distance themselves from their own society and achieve the perspective from which to criticize it,” as did “enlightened eighteenth-century Englishmen,” first in England and later in colonial America.

Understood in this sense, republicanism offers today’s Americans a standpoint from within our political tradition to critique the prevailing liberal ethos without jettisoning the many laudable institutions and principles of liberal society. That is to say, republicanism provides not an alternative to liberalism, but an alternative form of life within it—a rival conception of politics and citizenship that can ground liberalism and temper its individualistic excesses.

As we have seen, modern liberalism construes politics primarily in administrative terms, as the neutral—even scientific—management of individuals’ competing private interests. As political philosopher Jürgen Habermas explained:

According to the “liberal” or Lockean view… the government is represented as an apparatus of public administration, and society as a market-structured network of interactions among private persons. Here politics… has the function of bundling together and pushing private interests against a government apparatus specializing in the administrative employment of political power for collective goals.

In other words, citizens in the liberal scheme are private individuals who may choose to band together to protect their shared interests through the mechanisms of the state. The republican view of politics, by contrast, cannot be merely administrative, since it requires at least minimal agreement about the public virtues needed to sustain the institutions of government.

For republicanism, it is not the neutral weighing of private interests, but the rational deliberation within and about such moral compacts, that is essential to political activity. Accordingly, civic life is not an evil necessary only to protect private interests, but a moral obligation
incumbent on all citizens, which requires subordinating private interest for the sake of the common welfare. Yet crucially, in its American guise at least, republicanism does not identify political activity exclusively with the state. Instead, the American system empowers free individuals and communities, acting through various levels of government and voluntary associations, to seek common goods together as citizens.

The protagonists of America’s revolutionary drama were neither “philosophers” nor members of “a detached intelligentsia,” as Bailyn notes. As such, they were not out to craft a philosophy or “to align their thought with that of major figures in the history of political philosophy whom modern scholars would declare to have been seminal.” Instead, they were “active politicians, merchants, lawyers, plantation owners, and preachers” who marshalled a wide range of intellectual sources and political and religious traditions to confront their unique challenges and opportunities. Their worldview was an idiosyncratic fusion of ideologies, ancient and modern, liberal and republican, developed in and adapted to a particular historical context.

Something similar could be said about modern American liberalism. It was not conceived in a philosophical vacuum—a fact that today’s post-liberals too often ignore. On the contrary, it arose in the latter half of the 19th century as an attempt to preserve the American tradition of self-government in the face of changing social and economic realities by re-articulating the republican ideals of liberty and equality in terms of autonomy and progress. Liberalism—in both its laissez-faire and progressive variants—offered a response, however imperfect, to a question posed in particularly acute form by industrialization: Can the American tradition survive? And it proved successful, in part, because in answering with a qualified “yes,” liberalism articulated an optimistic vision of the future, marked by economic freedom and social progress.

The rise of radical movements on both the right and the left today, like those of decades past, suggests that the dominant variants of liberalism no longer offer adequate responses to our present social realities. Rather than presenting a hopeful vision of the future, liberalism, in the eyes of many, seems to offer a dismal portrait of alienated man in the present—a society marked by freedom of choice and material abundance, perhaps, but also by social division, isolation, anomie and, increasingly, outright conflict. It appears that, by itself, liberalism is no longer enough.
Fortunately, our history reminds us that liberalism does not exclusively define the principles, values, and goals of the American political project. A recovery of our republican tradition is in order—one that sees liberty and equality as mutually supporting, rather than conflicting, ideals, and which recognizes economic independence as vital to their realization.

At the same time, any revival of republicanism must come to grips with what is distinctive about our liberal inheritance. Rather than simply abandoning liberalism and the institutions that have given rise to it, we should seek to re-invigorate them with the spirit of republicanism. This will require us to strengthen the diverse array of civil associations and local attachments that bind our nation together. It will demand that we criticize and reform many of our institutions and the civic habits they have inculcated or failed to inculcate. In the end, it will call upon us to embrace the pluralism of thought that lies at the heart of our republic.