Chapter 4

The Use of History in American Political Theory

To focus on the Bill of Rights in an attempt to build a complete text illustrates the importance of historical perspective for textual analysis in American political theory, but at the same time it demonstrates the limits of historical analysis. On the one hand the search for a complete text requires that we study historical antecedents as well as the historical and symbolic context surrounding a piece of writing; on the other hand, even when we have constructed a reasonably complete text, history cannot help us much in deciding what we should do with that text. The latter task would seem to require a turn to philosophy, but professional philosophy over the past five decades has increasingly tended to avoid normative discourse of the kind that is useful to political theory. To the extent that philosophy has dealt with political philosophy, historically grounded discourse has given way to an abstract, logical analysis with limited application to the texts that might be assembled on American political theory. Further, when philosophers discuss normative issues today they either tend toward an analysis of the possible meanings of words like “good” or else focus narrowly only on an analysis of single issues, such as abortion or capital punishment. Even discussions of rights tend to be reduced to analyses of the possible meanings of “rights claims.” Such discussions studiously avoid any language that might imply that rights are actual entities with an existence grounded in human experience.

Thus, at the very time that historians and political scientists working in American political theory have started to create, if not a convergence in perspective, at least a parallel discourse in which there is agreement upon the major questions, philosophy offers no
help in dealing with these questions because the intellectual tools and categories increasingly used by academic philosophers prevent mutual discourse. Historians and political theorists still feel comfortable speaking to each other because both sides continue to have an interest in politics. Philosophers, however, persist in adopting methods and categories that are not only apolitical but increasingly antipolitical.

American history has become increasingly empirical, working from facts rather than from grand theory, and this trend has made American historians more interested in politics and more adept at analyzing politics than their European counterparts. Philosophy, however, has become more and more "Europeanized" in its methods and aims, with the result that the problems and issues that students of American political theory must confront are not explored. Politics looks too "messy," too contingent, and too imperfect for American academic philosophers. It has now reached the point that anyone who studies political philosophy in American philosophy departments is looked down upon—as engaged in a not altogether savory enterprise. Graduate students interested in political philosophy in general, and American political theory in particular, now either move to political science departments or find a different interest to pursue in philosophy.

American history, on the other hand, has become increasingly interesting and helpful to students of American political theory. Perhaps because American political theory has been so obviously and continuously connected to ongoing political processes and discourse, not out of accident but by its very nature, theoretical discourse about American politics seems to have become inherently inseparable from the study of American history; in contrast, the study of European political philosophy, centered on great texts more often than not written by men outside the political process, can more easily proceed in splendid isolation from history. As those scholars in political science departments work to advance American political theory, those who are writing in American history will become more rather than less important to them; therefore, the story of the study of American history over the past half century is an important part of the preface for understanding the nature and limitations of the questions that currently dominate American political theory.
An Evolving View of the American Founding

Traditional political theory is built upon a close analysis of texts, which provides its students with the intellectual discipline, insight, and perspective needed to develop a comprehensive, integrated view of politics. Historians, on the other hand, use texts more as examples of broader intellectual trends and view them as providing only part of the information required to describe and explain historical events and developments. One branch of history, the history of ideas, comes closest to traditional political theory in its approach, but the history of ideas still emphasizes the origin, elaboration, and diffusion of ideas; political theory focuses upon the content and implications of the ideas themselves.

American political theory is the one area in which historians and political theorists still plow common ground and speak regularly to one another. Each discipline brings its own tools and preoccupations, and discussions sometimes produce bewilderment or irritation, but historians and political scientists regularly read and review each others' work in American political theory. This connectedness is of interest because since World War II both historians and political scientists have engaged in a sustained, evolutionary reevaluation of American political thought that has moved both sides to a new set of questions that both unites and divides them.

The 1940s found those working on American political thought in political science departments essentially to reflect the viewpoints of historians, and historians for the most part were using a curiously nonhistorical framework for discussing the Constitution. Despite the seminal prewar work by men like Andrew C. McLaughlin and Charles M. Andrews, which illustrated the manner and extent to which the Constitution was beholden to colonial developments, the standard post-war discussion of the Constitution treated it almost as a free-floating phenomenon resulting from events beginning, at best, around 1763.3

The literature of the 1940s was dominated by two assumptions or theses, one of which had been advanced by the progressive historians, who were more interested in explaining the present than the past. They viewed politics as a process in which legal and philosophical abstractions masked the real forces underlying history and believed that ideas were secondary to, and the result of, eco-
nomic and geographical circumstances. Frederick Jackson Turner, Charles A. Beard, and Vernon L. Parrington were most prominent in this group. Charles Beard advanced this first thesis most forcefully when he argued that the founders were motivated primarily by economic considerations, and Parrington softened but generalized Beard's view to cover all of American political thought. The dominance of the economic interpretation made analysis of colonial contributions seem unnecessary, and historians made slow progress until the extreme version of Beard's thesis was discredited in the 1950s. Ironically, with the demise of naive economic determinism, analyses of economic and social influences in American political history flowered and became richer, more concise, and more convincing.

The second thesis or assumption maintained that American political thought was essentially derived from the philosophy of John Locke. Carl Becker and Louis Hartz were most prominent in popularizing the position. Becker was positive in his assessment of Locke's influence when he argued that Jefferson simply copied Locke in the Declaration of Independence, but Hartz decried Locke's domination of American political thought since it resulted in America's being hopelessly individualistic, materialistic, and capitalistic. Agreement on Locke's influence was so widespread that it crossed ideological lines and became for a time one of the strongest orthodoxies in American intellectual history. A few, like Vernon Parrington, discussed the possible influence of other European thinkers; but by and large the U.S. Constitution was viewed either as an economically grounded document that did not flow from an existing theory or as the result of a wholesale transfer of Locke's ideas—with Locke used as ideological window dressing or as a remedy for the lack of any coherent American political thought.

In addition to the works of Beard, Parrington, Becker, and Hartz, courses in American political thought in the late 1940s were also likely to use in some combination the writings of Charles McIlwain, Arthur M. Schlesinger, C. Edward Merriam, Max Farrand, Allan Nevins, and Merrill Jensen. Otherwise, courses in American political thought worked from several collections of primary documents—mainly those of Max Farrand, Jonathan Elliott, Paul Leicester Ford, and Francis N. Thorpe. If any feature distin-
guished the teaching of American political thought by political scientists as opposed to historians it was the greater inclination by the former to introduce a strong dose of legalism, usually through the use of Edward S. Corwin's many books and articles as well as through a case book of Supreme Court decisions.

The peculiarity in this literature and in the use made of primary documents lay in an almost grim determination to avoid discussion of American political theory as defined in chapter 1. Instead, American political thought, often viewed as ideology, was surveyed as part of American culture; Vernon L. Parrington's widely used *Main Currents in American Thought* was utterly typical. Note the absence of "political" in its title and the use of "thought" rather than "theory." Parrington was a professor of English, and his dedication to American thought rather than to American political theory is illustrated by his encyclopedic survey's having little discussion of James Madison yet including passages on the satires of John Trumbull, Francis Hopkinson, and Jonathan Odell as well as a long final section in Book 3 on "The War of Belles Lettres." Parrington does have a section on Alexander Hamilton drawn from original documents including *The Federalist*, but a quotation from that section will illustrate how he used such material.

In elaborating a system of checks and balances the members of the convention were influenced by the practical considerations of economic determinism more than by the theories of Montesquieu. They were realists who followed the teachings of the greatest political thinkers from Aristotle to Locke in asserting that the problem of government lay in arranging a stable balance between the economic interests of the major classes. The revolutionary conception of equalitarianism, that asserted the rights of man apart from property and superior to property, did not enter into their thinking as a workable hypothesis.10

Parrington goes on to cite Madison at some length in a passage in which Madison presents a series of theoretical propositions giving part of a theory for checks and balances. But Parrington misconstrues Madison's theory as merely an ideologically grounded attempt to protect the wealthy, ignores the part of the theory that does not fit an economic or elitist interpretation, and then pro-
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claims that such a "conception of the natural sovereignty of the landed interest with its stake-in-society theory of political rights America inherited from England." Edmund S. Morgan is only one of many scholars who have shown Parrington to be wrong in this last respect. Morgan convincingly argues that the way in which Americans view sovereignty, and the way sovereignty is codified in our constitutions, is one of the fundamental differences between American and English political thought.\(^{11}\) Still, in the 1940s it was assumed that if Americans had a thought during their political history it originated in England. The centerpiece of American political theory—*The Federalist* by Hamilton, Madison, and Jay—was typically used in piecemeal fashion to buttress ideological debate instead of as a text in political theory.\(^{12}\)

The 1950s saw a move toward a new perspective. Caroline Robbins, Clinton Rossiter, and Douglass Adair were prominent in dissenting from the orthodox view and in pointing out the non-Lockean roots of the American political tradition.\(^{13}\) Robbins published a 1947 article in the *William and Mary Quarterly* that in hindsight was the opening shot.\(^{14}\) In her later book, *The Eighteenth Century Commonwealthman*, Robbins persuasively argued for the importance of the English libertarian heritage to colonial and revolutionary Americans. Men such as Harrington, Milton, Sidney, Neville, Molesworth, and Trenchard and Gordon, she argued, had a central and continuing influence on early American political thought. Douglass Adair documented the impact of David Hume on James Madison's theory of the extended republic, and Clinton Rossiter took a more sympathetic look at the American founders as theorists as well as edging away from Locke's dominance.

Simultaneously, the simple economic determinism that underlay discussions of American political thought in the 1940s was being discredited by both Robert E. Brown and Forrest McDonald.\(^{15}\) Beard's death in 1948 perhaps symbolized the end of the dominance of progressive historians, but it did not immediately result in a more political and theoretical discussion. Instead, there developed another dominant view that is now termed neoconservative or "consensus" history; Richard Hofstadter, Daniel J. Boorstin, and Louis Hartz were prominent figures in this 1950s' development.\(^{16}\)

Hofstadter saw a strong continuity in American political
thought but argued that it began in 1787 since the founders in his eyes designed original institutions without reference to earlier events, and this continuity was based on the wholesale adoption of Locke's political principles. Boorstin did not see continuity in American political thought as grounded in Locke but in American circumstance and experience. This "genius of American politics" explains the continuity, the relative lack of conflict, and the absence of ideology in American political history; it also suggests that there is no American political theory, or very little, and even that turns out to be neither significant nor original. Louis Hartz, of course, continued to inject the dominance-of-Locke perspective despite the growing doubts about this thesis.

Political scientists went through a similar evolution but for reasons related to changes in their own discipline, not as a result of reading historians. American political science had begun its development toward an empirically oriented social science with the publication of Arthur F. Bentley's *The Process of Government* in 1908. Like the historians, Bentley and the political scientists of his era were deeply influenced by progressivism; indeed Charles Beard and Arthur Bentley were the most prominent members of the "realist school." Unlike Beard, however, Bentley continued to support American exceptionalism insofar as he viewed the United States as an essentially classless society that had escaped the economic stratification of Europe because of its republican government and its wide economic opportunity. His interest-group analysis was the harbinger of contemporary mainstream political science, with its emphasis on political processes rather than on institutions, its pluralist stance as opposed to Beard's class analysis, and its emphasis on the empirical study of contemporary political phenomena divorced from any analysis of values or of the normative, which he termed "ghosts." If he went back to the founding period at all it was to find pluralist political theory in the Madisonian model rather than a design with a theoretical grounding and purpose. For Bentley, American political theory consisted in the development of empirical theory to explain behavioral regularities in the present.

Bentley's pluralist approach was pushed to the center of the discipline by Charles E. Merriam; his *History of American Political Theories* published in 1903 did not shrink from reviewing the entire
history of American political theory from the Puritans onward and seeing in it the continuous march of democratic progress. In this sense Merriam, like the progressive historians, saw the past mainly in terms of explaining the present instead of as an era that had to be recaptured in its own different terms. In 1921 Merriam published an influential article that, like Turner’s famous lecture on the role of the frontier, defined an emerging research agenda for the future. Merriam argued for a political science that would emphasize method, that would be oriented toward the discovery of political laws that could be used to control public policy, and that would be sustained by organized professional structures to promote research.¹⁹

As political scientists pursued an increasingly empirical agenda, their findings undercut the progressive assumption of American exceptionalism, and the increasing tension between these two legacies finally reached a breaking point by the late 1940s, most notably in Joseph A. Schumpeter’s widely read *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy.*²⁰ Schumpeter still defended the pluralist approach begun by Bentley but argued for the concept that has come to be known as plural elitism. America was not an exception in human history, but because of its democratic institutions the United States had managed to fragment the elite into competing factions and thus avoid the worst effects of elitist dominance. In effect, the pluralist approach was used to overlay a class analysis. Schumpeter’s analysis and categories became part of the core theory assumed by mainstream political science. His work was a contribution to American political theory in its own right, but typical of modern political science it was free-floating and did not require, indeed it eschewed, an examination of earlier American political theory since that earlier theory was not “realistic.” It is interesting, therefore, that Robert A. Dahl, the most famous and influential exponent of both pluralism and the application of empirical methods to the study of politics, should in 1956 write perhaps the most widely and persistently read book ever written by a political scientist, *A Preface to Democratic Theory,* in which he begins by returning to an analysis of the Madisonian model.²¹

Robert Dahl also published a famous empirical study of New Haven politics, in which he essentially confirmed and refined Schumpeter’s model of democratic elitism. Dahl wrote many
books and articles in defense of pluralist analysis and was one of the most prominent exponents for a behaviorally oriented discipline. Yet in 1956 he developed a propositional analysis of Madison's theory in *The Federalist* that had an unexpected effect; even though Dahl dismissed Madison's theory as flawed, Dahl's analysis showed to a wide audience the possibility of pursuing American political theory as theory and not simply as ideology. Martin Diamond in 1959 published a rejoinder to Dahl's analysis that was itself widely read and highly influential and that also emphasized the theoretical content of *The Federalist*.Robert Dahl inadvertently set off renewed interest in American political theory from the founding era, and Martin Diamond ensured that *The Federalist* would continue to be taken seriously as theory. Dissertations on the Madisonian model and on political thinkers of eighteenth-century America became a growth industry during the 1960s and 1970s, and the Bicentennial guaranteed that this renewed interest in American political theory would continue into the 1980s.

Another consequence of Dahl's book, especially juxtaposed with Diamond's critique of Dahl, a critique that many scholars think was successful if not devastating, was to separate this renewed interest in American political theory from empirical analysis. Mainstream political science was given a prominent model showing that American political theory could be taken seriously while American political theory focused overwhelmingly on the founding period that Dahl said rested upon a flawed theory. At the very least the protopluralist theory that he found had been superseded by more recent thinking and research and thus could be largely ignored. That the renewed interest in American political theory of the founding period was grounded at least in part upon an effective critique of Dahl's analysis served only to deepen the split between American political theory and mainstream political science. Yet, as I have argued, this split is based upon a misapprehension, one that we now see grows from an intramural battle of the 1950s. Further, American political theory is inherently empirical since it rests upon the analysis of experience. In any case, the end of the 1950s saw political scientists reengaging in political theory but in a way that initially separated it from the mainstream of the discipline.

Meanwhile, the historians were in the process of undergoing
their own drastic revisions. First, the "consensus" school in history was beginning to give way to an emphasis upon discontinuities in American history or else to a more evolutionary view that stressed change. Second, the perspective that saw Locke as dominant was replaced by the view that one version or another of republicanism was dominant during the founding era; J.G.A. Pocock, Bernard Bailyn, and Gordon S. Wood were major figures in this shift. Po­
cock argued that American political thought was an eighteenth­
century extension of classical republican theory, with its emphasis on virtue and the common good. Machiavelli and a host of Renais­
sance thinkers, it was argued, codified classical republicanism into "civic humanism"; these classical ideals, in their Renaissance syn­thesis, were passed on to the Americans, said Pocock, through the republican writings of Milton, Harrington, Nedham, Bolingbroke, and Trenchard and Gordon. Pocock decisively broke the tendency to view Locke as dominant, but he still viewed American political thought as essentially ideological rather than theoretical and as de­

rivative of English thought, although now a different version of English ideology, one that in Pocock’s view was born in a dread of modernity.

Bernard Bailyn identified five major sources from which colo­
nists drew their political thinking—the writings of classical antiq­
uity, the writings of Enlightenment rationalism, the English com­
mon-law tradition, the political and social theories of New England Puritanism (especially covenant theory), and the writers earlier identified by Caroline Robbins as being associated with the English Civil War and the Commonwealth. According to Bailyn, this last group, the radical English Whigs, generated the perspective that brought order and synthesis to the other strands of writing and more than any other source shaped the mind of the American rev­
olutionary generation. Thanks to Bailyn we now had an inclusive, sophisticated synthesis; Pocock’s classical writers, Robbins’s Com­
monwealthmen, and some indigenous American Puritan thought were all part of the mix. Locke was also in the mix, although the irony of his position in the blend went unremarked by reviewers of Bailyn’s book. Bailyn places Locke among Enlightenment thinkers, but this is surely anachronistic. Members of the founding generation were much more likely to link John Locke with the great En­
glish Whig thinker Algernon Sidney, to use their names together
in a mantra of equivalence, which makes Locke a prominent member of the very group, the radical English Whigs, that Bailyn says shaped the mind of the Revolutionary War generation.

The new "orthodoxy" defined by Bailyn's synthesis is a slippery paradigm to apply. First, those men who wrote the Declaration of Independence and who ran the Revolution had different needs from those who wrote and adopted the Constitution; a simple citation count has already established that different European writers in different combinations were used during the 1770s, compared with the 1780s. Nor is it always clear where to place individual thinkers: The contemporary scholar Garry Wills places David Hume within the Scottish Enlightenment, Lundberg and May consider him a member of the more radical second Enlightenment, Bailyn does not place him clearly in any category, and many of the founding generation considered Hume a Tory. Without agreement on a stable set of categories and the secure placement of major writers such as Locke and Hume within them, analysis of the relative influence of such traditions remains problematic.

Criticism of Bailyn's republican school has led to a modest resurgence of the theory of Locke's dominance, mostly by those trained in political philosophy, but the single-theorist approach to American political theory is no longer sustainable after Bailyn's analysis, regardless of which category is most suitable for Locke or Hume and no matter which category of thinkers was most influential on the American founding generation. Still, although the theses of Locke's dominance and of economic determinism of the 1940s have finally been discarded by most historians and political scientists, the tendency prevails to look to Europe for an American political theory that seems not to be found in America and to view the appropriated European thought as an ideology rather than as a theory. It is in the context of this tendency that Gordon Wood's work is especially interesting.

The Rediscovery of the Political Class

The impact of Gordon Wood's book, The Creation of the American Republic, was immediate and lasting; published more than twenty years ago, it remains fresh and convincing. Still, historians have
tended to misperceive Wood's book as simply one of the key works that established the central importance of republican theory for American political thought. A more careful reading shows that Wood's work develops a picture of the American founding that is quite at odds with the classical republican school represented by Pocock, and the difference is crucial for American political theory.

Pocock sees Americans as the ultimate beneficiaries of a classical republicanism recodified by Machiavelli, but Wood carefully reconstructs the evolution of American political thinking that resulted in a distinctively American republican theory—one that was not simply appropriated from European origins. Perhaps even more important, Wood's book brought to fruition a new approach to the study of American political thought, an approach that had quietly emerged in the work of historians and mainstream political scientists but had been largely missed by students of the American founding in political science departments. Gordon Wood showed us how to analyze American political theory by using the works of those writers in the political class rather than the works of those relatively few writers among the elite. To illustrate the importance of Wood's book, we need to return briefly to a discussion of assembled texts.

We can identify three broad tendencies in the assemblage of texts in American political theory. The first and oldest tendency is to examine the writings of the elite; under a presumption that history is guided by and results from the actions of great men, any attempt to explain historical events would seem to require that we look at their writings. The collected papers of Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, George Washington, John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Alexander Hamilton, and maybe a dozen others would appear to constitute the prime assembled text in American political theory. A further presumption that these men operated within a symbolic environment defined and dominated by other great minds leads to our first assembled text including the works of major European thinkers, those writers with even greater minds, in the context of whose work American elites thought and created. The elitist assumption thus tends to lead us back to one or a few European thinkers such as Locke, Hobbes, Machiavelli, Montesquieu, Hume, or Rousseau.

A concomitant feature of the elitist approach is that we assume
the major public documents in American political theory, the Decla-
ration of Independence, the U.S. Constitution, and the U.S. Bill of Rights, were the products of this elite. Those using this method-
ology openly resist suggestions that Jefferson was merely summa-
izing the generally held ideas of Americans in the Declaration; or that James Madison, far from being the father of the Constitution, was on the losing side of a majority of the votes taken at the Constitu-
tional Convention and on almost all of the votes that were most important to him; or that the Bill of Rights simply summa-
rized the least common denominator found in state bills of rights written by large numbers of nonelites. These claims may or may not be correct, but those using the elitist approach to assembling texts in American political theory are often uninterested in the ac-
tual historical record. The strengths of the elitist position lie in its emphasis on the meaning of history as opposed to a mere recita-
tion of facts, its capacity to generate theories of history that are im-
portant and interesting, and its power to remind us that ideas do have consequences. On the negative side, the elitist approach is not, strictly speaking, historical, it is subject to ideological distor-
tion, and it can too often lead to the kind of sterile debate that in-
clines people to put its practitioners, such as historians of ideas and political philosophers, on the margins of intellectual discourse.

A second and more recent historical development relevant to American political theory is the rise of social history. Essentially, social history attempts to reconstruct the lives of the many people who are without an explicit historical voice, and one could safely characterize such history as democratic in its perspective. Earlier historians were not so much antidemocratic as they were limited by the lack of data, the expense of collecting needed information, and the lack of relevant methodologies. An old observation in the social sciences holds that research tends to use the most readily available information. Social historians have been extremely inven-
tive in their search for surrogate measures of everyday life in earlier historical eras, and they have worked diligently to gather, organize, and analyze their data. The information they have used includes probate-court records, voting data, newspaper circulation patterns, census figures, financial and economic data, mortality statistics, court records, minutes of town meetings, county health records,
oral histories, autobiographies, diaries, newspaper ads, political campaign material, and just about any material that can be systematically analyzed. That is, the assembled text used by social historians includes far more than political writings, as these researchers attempt to give a voice to the many. We have learned much and undoubtedly will learn a great deal more about how various nonelite ethnic, racial, occupational, gender, religious, and regional groups lived and what they contributed culturally, socially, and economically; but social history has thus far had relatively little to tell us about American political theory.

Primarily, because of the nature of the data we usually cannot discern the actual thoughts of the people, and when we can the thinking we encounter is at best ideological and not theoretical. We can find patterns in the political behavior of the many, but if no one can tell us the thinking behind the nonvoting of today with any certainty, how are we to recover the theoretical thinking that underlay the voting behavior in the 1700s, assuming the behavior was so informed? In effect, social historians must proceed as other social scientists do; they must theorize about the implications of the information they have systematically uncovered.

A third approach to the history of the American founding has been to examine the writing of those people in what might be termed the political class, and this approach has begun to revolutionize the study of American political theory. The development has gone almost unnoticed by scholars in history and political science alike, but the potential significance for future research is so great that we must take the time to consider the implications and to understand clearly the meaning of the "political class."

Using a variety of methodologies and research settings, mainstream political science has for many years consistently discovered the presence of a subset within the population that disproportionately affects public policy and political outcomes. In nondemocratic systems this subset does not include many people beyond the narrow class of elites, but in systems using elections and other participatory means of popular control this subset, the politically active class, typically includes between 15 and 20 percent of the adult population.28

From this political class are drawn most of those people who consistently vote in every election, almost all of those who contrib-
ute to election campaigns, and virtually all of those who work for political parties, run for office, work for candidates whether partisan or nonpartisan, organize and work for political-interest groups, write letters to newspapers and government officials, testify before governmental bodies, and write political essays for public consumption. These are the opinion leaders who immerse themselves in information about issues, candidates, and policies, and therefore the rest of the population looks to them for cues when deciding how to think about political matters, what opinions to hold, and how to vote.

These opinion leaders do not control the political opinions and actions of those people in the less active political orders but rather process the information for them, present the alternatives, and provide important cues. In fact, many or most people not in the political class use certain members of the political class as negative cue givers. That is, most people learn to identify those leaders with whom they do not agree as well as those with whom they agree and use cues provided by both types of opinion makers in sorting out their own views. For instance, a citizen who harbors negative attitudes toward those individuals who oppose the war in Vietnam might see a number of bumper stickers against the war paired with bumper stickers opposed to nuclear power. Finding cues in favor of nuclear power from those opinion makers among the political class this citizen admires, the person might significantly alter his or her attitude toward nuclear power to a positive one.

Those scholars who use rationality models to analyze human behavior would point to this division of labor between the cue-giving politically active class and those people who are less active as an example of cost-minimizing rationality, whereby the less aware and active citizens get a relatively free ride upon the hard work and information-gathering of the political class.

In the context of the American founding, the political class would express itself most clearly either through popularly approved documents of political foundation such as the Declaration of Independence, the various state constitutions, and the U.S. Constitution or through public political statements such as petitions to legislators, newspaper essays, books, and published pamphlets. Other forms of political participation, such as demonstrations, speeches, and informal political discussions, would not
survive to the present, although speeches were often reprinted in pamphlet form. In sum, these public documents would have been written by members of the active political class and would together allow us to study the intentions, motivations, and theoretical reasoning of this political class. Before such an approach to American political theory could be used, however, these materials first had to be made available for study, and then their use had to be sanctioned as appropriate in place of or in addition to the writings of the political elite.

In the middle 1960s just such material began to be published, almost simultaneously, by a number of scholars in both history and political science. Prominent among the former, Bernard Bailyn published his collection of political pamphlets in 1965 and immediately caught the attention of both disciplines. In the same year Morton Borden published an edited version of the Antifederalist papers, and the following year Cecelia Kenyon published her collection of Antifederalist pamphlets. The definitive edition of *The Federalist*, which was originally a series of newspaper essays, had been published by Jacob E. Cooke in 1961. Also in 1965 Frederick Rudolph published his collection of pamphlets and essays from the founding era on theories of education. In 1966 Oscar and Mary Handlin published a large collection of materials, including pamphlets, essays, town convention records, and referenda returns surrounding the rejected Massachusetts constitution of 1778. Also in 1966, Leonard Levy published a large collection of eighteenth-century public documents and essays relating to freedom of the press in America.30

Nor were the historians alone, although political scientists came late to the task. In 1967 Charles S. Hyneman and George W. Carey reprinted portions of the debates from the first session of the U.S. Congress, and Herbert J. Storing published an article in 1976 that provided a complete list of pamphlets written in support of the proposed U.S. Constitution. Then Herbert Storing, with the assistance of Murray Dry, published a seven-volume collection of pamphlets, *The Complete Antifederalist*, in 1981; and Charles Hyneman and Donald S. Lutz published their two volume *American Political Writing during the Founding Era: 1760–1805* in 1983. Together these two collections doubled the number of easily accessible political pamphlets from the founding era. Finally, in 1986 Philip B.
Kurland and Ralph Lerner published their five-volume collection, *The Founders' Constitution*, which contained pamphlets, newspaper articles, and letters and public documents, among other writings. By this time more than five hundred political pamphlets and hundreds of other documents or essays had been reprinted, and hundreds more had been identified for easy access by scholars.  

This outpouring of reprinted materials from the founding era has had a profound effect on the study of American political theory. First, these collections provided texts, assembled texts, that allowed us to approach the political theory of the founding more systematically and more comprehensively. Second, this material changed our view of the intellectual currents at work during the American founding, broadened our perspective, and led to a reading of a much wider range of European political thinkers. Third, the availability of this material refocused our attention on political theory as it existed on this side of the Atlantic, including colonial antecedents. Fourth, we began to take our own political documents seriously again as texts that could be analyzed for theoretical content, including state documents. Fifth, the material led to the rediscovery of a political class that included but spread well beyond the relatively few well-known men of the late eighteenth century.  

Early in this process of rediscovery Gordon Wood published a book embodying these changes in our view of the founding that represented a synthesis of considerable importance. Wood's magisterial work, published in 1969, was grounded squarely in the writings of the political class of the founding era. Not only did he draw upon the writings of the political class, he quoted generously from their contents so that fully one-fifth of his six-hundred-page book is composed of passages from these writings. Wood apparently worked assiduously to find precisely the right quote that conveyed either the typical sentiment or a nuance in some variant opinion. More important, perhaps, is the unstated use of these writings as equivalent to a social science data base upon which to securely ground his analysis; his use of the pamphlet literature constituted a claim that anyone who examined the same literature would reach the same or similar conclusions. In effect, Wood carefully sampled a data base upon which to rest his analysis and conclusions. The list of ninety-six pamphlets at the end of Wood's *Creation of the American Republic* and the state and national
constitutional documents around which they were written were to­
gether an assembled text, a carefully constructed sampling of a
broader data base comprising all documents and publications gen­
erated by the political class. Gordon Wood’s work indicated clearly
the direction for future historical research on American political
theory.

A focus on the political class is an improvement in several re­
spects; for one thing, it allows us to place the writings by political
elites within a realistic, political context that helps us understand
those writings. Since its original settling, America has encouraged
people of genius to compete as members of a broadly defined po­
litical class, a class that absorbs, considers, argues about, modifies,
and then transmits to other portions of the public a refined, re­
duced, yet still competitive set of reasons for acting together in one
fashion or another. That is, the political class includes the elites but
forces the elites to operate within a much broader set of the popu­
lation than was the case before the United States initiated its “new
order for the ages.” The relationship of the elites to the broader po­
litical class is complex and bilateral. We study the writings of the
political class to discover the manner and extent to which elite
ideas penetrate and are accepted as well as not accepted. For exam­
ple, we may find that some individuals among the elite, such as
Hamilton, wanted an elective monarchy but that this idea had no
chance of being accepted by the broad political class that domi­
nated the constitution-making process. We also study the writings
of the political class to discover the extent to which members of the
elite summarize and synthesize the ideas widely held within the
political class. The genius of a great political leader, after all, often
lies not in the creation of new ideas but in the capture and dramatic
codification of widely held but still pretheoretical ideas, for exam­
ple, Thomas Jefferson’s brilliant summary and codification of what
he called “the American mind” in the Declaration of Indepen­
dence. In sum, studying the writings of the broader political class
not only includes the writings of the elite but puts those elite writ­
ings in context and greatly helps us to understand their meaning.

Also, a focus upon the political class helps us understand the
behavior, and to a certain extent the thinking, of those people in
the broader, nonactivist population. The political class in a political
system based upon popular consent serves on the one hand as the
cue-giver for mass political behavior—as the part of the population that defines issues, works up competing responses to problems, and argues about the reasons for taking one course of action over another. To the extent that the political class performs the function of downward transmission, its ideas structure more general public opinion and political behavior.

On the other hand, many or most people in the political class, dependent upon support from the nonactivist population to carry out their political agendas, seek to understand and project upward the opinions, needs, interests, and ideas of the various members of the nonactivist population. To the extent that the political class performs the function of upward transmission, it becomes our best window into the general population and the best way to understand broader political phenomena. Thus, the material that the social historians uncover—as well as the findings of political scientists focusing on mass behavior like electoral politics, public opinion, and political culture—becomes more accessible through the study of the political class. This insight becomes not so much grounds for dismissing mass behavior as manipulated by the political class but grounds for asking how successful the political class has been in its bidirectional function of transmission and for questioning the extent to which the political class may be engaged in manipulating the broader population rather than in interpreting their views.

A focus on the political class also results in an improvement in methodology. Consider the tendency in the past to base the study of American political theory on the writings of a relatively few elites. The elitist approach, regardless of its intention, can be viewed as a solution to a sampling problem raised by an attempted causal analysis. Using the U.S. Constitution as an example, the elitists were proposing a cause that would explain the content of the Constitution, the significance or meaning of that content for its readers, and the structured political activity that would result from that meaning. The content, meaning, and resulting behavior are, in effect, the dependent variables in the causal analysis. As the independent variable the elitists propose human intention codified in a theory. In other words, ideas have consequences, and one possible consequence is the structuring of human political behavior through a constitution that embodies a deductively linked set of
ideas called a theory. The theory describes the expected pattern of behavior, explains why it is to be expected, why it is to be preferred, and how the provisions of the Constitution function to produce these results. To this point we have rehearsed the assumptions underlying any constitutional theory.

The difficulty with the elitist approach is that it oversimplifies the causal analysis by giving a privileged status to the writings of a very few individuals. That is, the elitists both undersample and skew their sample; they undersample those writers relevant for producing political outcomes and skew their sample by using enduring reputation or fame as the basis for inclusion in the sample. This practice of undersampling requires a bit of elaboration. If the theory underlying a constitution is to produce the intended pattern of human activity, those people who read the document must basically agree on its requirements. Even assuming that a few individuals created the theory on their own, a position that cannot be empirically sustained, unless those people who read the document understand its intentions and the reasoning that justifies the pattern of behavior the constitution is designed to produce, the people who are to be bound by the constitution must either be forced to live by its contents, which is contrary to the rule of consent upon which constitutionalism rests, or else the people must be manipulated or hoodwinked into accepting the document, which is also contrary to that rule.

In the ancient world a constitution was handed to a people by a Solon, a Draco, or a Hammurabi; in modern constitutionalism, under an assumption of popular sovereignty, the people are not "handed" anything. The intentions of the few do not constitute the independent variable. Rather, the independent variable, the political theory and ideas behind a constitution, is the result of a self-conscious, reflexive, complicated political process that involves enough people so that the intent of the constitution can be transmitted downward, just as the preferences of the people can be transmitted upward. Without the political process, and the political class that is at its center, the elite would lack both the information and the resources to force, hoodwink, persuade, or mollify anyone. The political class is too large to be represented by a sample of writing from five or six or even ten people, and naturally there will never be enough famous people to constitute any kind of
reasonable sample of a political class. Nor is fame necessarily a good basis for selecting a sample of people relevant to political theory. George Washington was, and continues to be, the most famous person from the founding era, but few people will argue that Washington has a special importance for the creation of American political theory.

Why, then, has there been a tendency to use the writings of a few elites as the basis for American political theory? The best reason may be that until recently their writings were readily available because of their fame; the writings of the nonfamous were not. With the availability of a much larger sample of writing from the political class, the elite can now be read in a broader context, and because of the nature of constitutionalism and the position of the political class in a constitutional system, the writings of the elite must be placed within that broader context.

A further methodological advantage derived from focusing upon the political class is that in doing so we are pushed away from the "exchange of paradigms" approach that distorts more than it illuminates American political theory. As Gordon S. Wood has suggested in a recent review, historians often construct categories for use in organizing a complicated reality, but the debate over whether the founders were Lockean liberals, classical republicans, or children of the Enlightenment results from asking the wrong question.

The question of which tradition in the late eighteenth century was more dominant—republicanism or liberalism—is badly posed. It assumes a sharp dichotomy between two clearly identifiable traditions that eighteenth century reality will not support. None of the historical participants, including the Founding Fathers, ever had any sense that he had to choose between republicanism and liberalism, between Machiavelli and Locke.33

The founders could hold simultaneously and without any sense of inconsistency principles from several theoretical traditions. Although these principles might appear contradictory from the viewpoint of European political theory, the political reality inhabited by Americans made the principles perfectly compatible.
For example, at the Constitutional Convention the competing views of the English constitution represented by Montesquieu's separation-of-powers perspective, Blackstone's mixed-government approach, and Hume's balanced-faction analysis, though mutually incompatible in the English context, were included in the Constitution that emerged from the convention's deliberations.34

Contrary to the tendency of recent scholars of either the "liberal" or the "republican" schools anachronistically to invent paradigms into which political writings of the founding era are forced, American political theory needs to be studied in terms of the categories used by those engaged in developing it.35 Nor is this approach simply a methodological nicety. American political theory is distinguished from European political theory precisely because it rests upon the work of the political class and not on the writings of an intellectual elite. Any attempt to derive American political theory primarily from the writings of European intellectuals or to describe American political theory as dominated by an intellectual tradition is fundamentally to misconstrue the enterprise. The entire point of American political theory from the beginning was to replace elite dominance with popular control, to ground politics directly in human experience rather than in philosophical utopias, and to codify theoretically the ideas and behavior patterns that emerged from the political process rather than to force the political process into conformity with an abstraction. The rediscovery of the political class is a recovery of American political theory as it was created. As Gordon Wood points out when discussing the emergence of the doctrine of popular sovereignty:

These were revolutionary ideas that had unfolded rapidly in the decade after Independence, but not deliberately or evenly. Men were always only half aware of where their thought was going, for these new ideas about politics were not the products of extended reasoned analysis but were rather numerous responses of different Americans to a swiftly changing reality, of men involved in endless polemics compelled to contort and draw out from the prevailing assumptions the latent logic few had foreseen. Rarely before 1787 were these new thoughts comprehended by anyone as a whole. They were bits and pieces thrown up by the necessities of argument and condi-
tion, without broad design or significance. But if crystalized by sufficient pressures they could result in a mosaic of an entirely new conception of politics to those who would attempt to describe it.  

European political theory is codified in books written by men who essentially stood outside the political process, observed it, and then developed theories for explaining what they saw and what they wanted; American political theory has proceeded differently. Until recently, and certainly during the founding era, political theory was not written by detached, philosophical observers or by academic political theorists but by those engaged more immediately in politics. Under conditions of liberty that permitted anyone who wished to enter the politically active class, the widely shared assumptions of those people in the political class led to behavior, hopes, and conflicts that required more explicit codification if the political class was to be mobilized in a coherent and effective manner. The codification emerged from the evolving reasoned analysis used to mobilize this class and at some point became widely accepted theory. That is, theory in America followed evolving practice in a manner analogous to the way in which anthropologists tell us that myth follows ritual. Some members of the political class saw further and more quickly and thus had a much greater impact on the codification of theory as well as on extending its implications. These great minds had to work within the shared assumptions and accepted institutional practices of the political class, and any theoretical innovations they produced eventually had to be ratified and supported by the political class, but there was considerable room for leadership. Nor were these political leaders devoid of theoretical ideas outside of the political process to draw upon; they could use any ideas or explanations from European political theory as long as these fit within the envelope of possibilities defined by the assumptions and practices shared by the political class. But the political class would not tolerate a wholesale imposition of a political theory from abroad that did not fit into their presuppositions and that was not based upon their consent. Thus, an understanding of American political theory, as long as it continues to emerge from and is ratified by the political class, will require us to use history, especially that of the political class.
Gordon Wood calls this dynamic relationship between political leaders and the broader political class “an elitist theory of democracy” and attributes it to the Federalists as distinguished from the American Whigs of the revolutionary years. But his general analysis of American politics during the 1770s and 1780s is consistent with a model in which a political class mediates between the elites and the general population with both an upward and a downward function of communication; in which elections are used to choose among policy options, candidates, and theoretical codifications that are worked out in the political class; and in which a fractured or plural elite competes for the support of the political class and thus ultimately for the support of the broader population. With the rediscovery of the political class by historians comes a fundamental convergence between historical analysis and empirical political science.

Although it is true that Americans are not now and never were intellectual stand-ins for European political thinkers, it is also true that Americans have used and greatly benefited from European political philosophy. To say that no one European can be credited with a decisive or a dominant influence on American political theory does not imply the absence of important influences. The point I am arguing here is threefold. First, no one European thinker dominated because Americans read and drew upon many European thinkers. Second, no European intellectual tradition dominated because those philosophers to whom Americans turned were spread over several “traditions,” and the supposed traditions were themselves mixed, interpenetrating each other, so that individual thinkers can often be simultaneously assigned to several traditions. Third, it is still an open question as to where Americans found many of the ideas they borrowed to help in the construction of the melange called American political theory. It is necessary for those in the discipline to “sample” the European literature more carefully, and before sampling can occur we need to identify the intellectual universe, a task to which we now turn.