Preface

Enduring Liberalism: American Political Thought Since the 1960s has two inevitably intertwined objectives. One is to explore the political thought of both American public intellectuals and the general public since the 1960s. The other is to consider the major interpretations of American political thought. As a result, the book grapples with a significant part of the intellectual history of the United States, while also plunging into the treacherous waters of interpretation.

My argument is straightforward, but its structure is more complicated, and my interpretation is controversial. One part of my story describes how the consensus view in post–World War II American political thought collapsed among public intellectuals in the tumult of the 1960s. The consensus view held that there was wide agreement among Americans on such liberal values as individualism, individual liberty, political equality, economic opportunity, and consent of the governed.

Another part is my claim that the general public continues to be largely consensual in its political values. I maintain that there has not been a collapse of consensus among the general public since the 1960s. While the common wisdom here is just the opposite, such a view flies in the face of the substantial information we have on public attitudes about basic values.

Moreover, I contend that at the level of cultural practices since the 1960s there is more substantiation of the continuing sway of liberal norms. Indeed, American cultural practices provide plentiful evidence of an accelerating triumph of liberal values. This is notably true in much of civil society, especially the home and church,
where liberal norms were rarely central in the 1950s or before. In short, the announcement of the death of liberal consensus in the United States is premature.

I insist, however, that we recognize that everything depends on the level of analysis. In the thought of public intellectuals, there is no doubt that a liberal consensus—if, indeed, there ever was one—is long gone. By “public intellectuals” I mean a certain kind of reflective participant in American public life. The most obvious examples are those whose names are familiar in the major intellectual journals of the day—people such as Robert Bellah, William Bennett, Jean Bethke Elshtain, Seymour Martin Lipset, Michael Walzer—people whose ideas, theories, and arguments are the common currency of intellectual discourse in this era. Their very publicness, their active participation on the public intellectual stage, defines them.

My compass for public intellectuals in this study, however, goes beyond the familiar names. I include many others who, while they may be less well known, are important public participants in political discourses relevant to this book, such as green political thought or the explanation of problems in the African-American family. These individuals write and sometimes speak about issues in the public realm. While not all are influential, together they have played a significant part in the broader intellectual debates this book considers.

In this world of public intellectuals, one frequently walks on shaky terrain, given the many fissures over values that open in it. There is no consensus here and no prospect of it. Pluralism is the reality in American intellectual thought. Yet in considering contemporary intellectual thinking here, I concentrate on three particular themes that attract many public intellectuals today as possible redirections for the United States. All receive close attention to give a sense of what order there is within the diverse political thought of present-day public intellectuals.

One theme is the tremendous concern for community; engagement with the environment is another; and the now fashionable interest in civil society is a third. Each reflects the considerable (if hardly universal) dissatisfaction with liberalism in theory and/or in practice among contemporary intellectuals. Each also represents a possible alternative. Each has its own varieties, often sharply contested, which in turn underscore the pluralism of intellectual thought today.
Yet all three participate in one, somewhat murky drift, which is a search for "community." This drift, however, is still unfocused, and it is complicated by fierce contests over multiple versions of the good community. Moreover, the community focus is sometimes self-conscious, sometimes not, sometimes proposed as an alternative to liberalism, sometimes as a companion of liberal values. Perhaps the most interesting political thought in the United States today comes from thinkers such as Jean Bethke Elshtain and Michael Walzer, who want us to become, if you will, communitarian liberals or liberal communitarians.

Recognition of this often inchoate concern with what I call community, however, should not for a moment obscure the fractious (and perhaps wonderful) reality of contemporary intellectual political thought. There are, for example, a host of intellectuals who are fearful of community, however conceived. Concern with community is important, but there is no sign of a firm consensus on this direction, much less on what it might mean.

In the end, I attempt to draw the evidence and the analyses together and present a view of intellectual and public thought about political values that itself is an interpretation. And, somewhat reluctantly, I offer a few of my own reactions to the world I see or, as postmoderns would have me say, the world I have created.

In chapter 1 I delineate classic interpretations of American political thought. I argue that these interpretations, which may be grand and even beautiful, are increasingly relics, artifacts of other times and other intellects. They make often-grandiose claims to explain the pattern of American political thought, but they are not really able to sustain them. Put more bluntly, the classic interpretations simply do not work anymore—if they ever did—to explain the history of American political thought. Moreover, it is often hard to tell just what they meant to explain. Most are vague about what realms of thought they consider: the views of intellectuals, the sentiments of the public, or the cultural practices of the United States.

I explore a number of past interpretations, including the analyses of Alexis de Tocqueville, Charles Beard, V. L. Parrington, Louis Hartz, and Daniel Boorstin. The consensus theories of the 1950s, especially those of Hartz and Boorstin, remain a key background against which contemporary interpretations proceed. They are routinely rejected, indeed often denounced, by advocates of the plethora
of alternative conceptions of U.S. political thought that have unfolded since. Perhaps unintentionally, their critics reaffirm their continuing importance.

In chapter 2 I focus directly on consensus theory and the criticisms of it. Consensus theory was the focal point of the debates over how to interpret American political thought that raged during the later 1960s and well into the 1970s—and it continues decades later. Central to the attack on the adequacy of consensus views is the claim that such a consensus was a myth; it just didn’t exist, and it certainly doesn’t now.

In chapter 2 I also describe the great explosion of political pluralism among intellectuals since the 1960s. I briefly chronicle such developments as contemporary feminism, postmodernism, and conservatism. I also note the renewed vitality of liberal thinking in several forms. By this means, I underline the hollowness of any claims for a consensus in the political thought of American public intellectuals.

I caution, however, that popular opinion is quite another story. The American public is not similarly pluralist in its basic political ideas. Public opinion surveys make clear that U.S. citizens mostly hold liberal values, a situation that has not changed since the 1960s. I contend that what change there has been suggests that the public has grown even more committed to liberal values, while diversity has occurred among American intellectuals. Always I insist we must be clear about whose political thinking one is discussing and be wary of vague claims about something named American political thought.

Much of the past discourse about consensus interpretations has concentrated on the accuracy of their portrayals of American history. I consider this matter in some detail in assessing the consensus interpretation. I recognize that scholars proceeding from many points of view and employing diverse methodologies conclude that the story of our history is not a consensus story, and I agree.

Critics’ main complaint is that conflict, brushed by in consensus versions of American history, has been a crucial factor in American life. They emphasize religious, ethnic and racial, or economic conflicts, among others. The larger point is that conflict has been important in American values and history, and critics often argue that a conflict interpretation of one form or another is the correct one.

Chapter 3 looks at other interpretations that seek to understand the American political tradition and American political thought.
Some softer dissents from the consensus view suggest that value conflicts that take place within a broad consensus may represent the most accurate picture. Others propose that one consensus has followed another over time, each different. Still others like to describe American political thinking in terms of dialectical engagement, often between impulses toward individualism and community.

Today's leading interpretation is the multiple-strands view, whose proponents contend that the narrative of American history is far from any consensus. Rather, the story of our political thinking concerns several strands of thought, often clashing, each reflecting a particular strand of American life and culture. Chapter 3 also explores postmodern perspectives on American political thought and culture.

Another way to consider and evaluate competing interpretations of American political thought, past and present, is to test their worth in a modest case study that assesses their effectiveness in understanding the thought of one period in some depth. I do this in chapter 3, which examines approaches to the Founding of the United States. This intensely contested arena proves a good setting for observing the elaborate diversity of interpretations of the American tradition(s) of political thought. The case study of the American Founding and its modern-day interpretations leave little doubt that nothing remotely like a consensus exists on how to read American political thought.

To get a sense of the adequacy of current interpretations, one must confront American political thinking of the past. Yet the issue of political thought in the United States must also be engaged in a contemporary context. Chapter 4 begins that task, arguing that liberal values have in fact gained dramatically in the public sphere in the current age. From one perspective, I report that many cultural commentators acknowledge this reality when they bemoan the liberal acid they see as contributing to the decay of American society and institutions. From another angle, I concentrate on two institutions and developments within them: American political parties and the American educational system. In both, I maintain, there is bountiful evidence that the march of liberalism has proceeded apace.

Studies of public opinion find the same. Liberal attitudes such as pluralism and greater emphasis on the individual have made substantial headway in the public, which the classic theorists of the
1950s had already declared to be attitudinally "liberal." Indeed, there is a far better case to be made today for the claim that present-day Americans are more firmly a part of a liberal tradition than were Americans in the past.

Moreover, I contend that even among American intellectuals, who are more diverse than the public in their political thinking, liberalism is more evident than one might suspect. Through a case study of so-called conservative intellectuals in the United States—thinkers who are, in fact, more and more "liberal" and "libertarian"—chapter 4 questions how different from the mainstream this significant "alternative" ideology within American political thought is. "Conservatism" may have grown as a political and intellectual force since the 1960s, but this does not mean it has grown as a significant alternative to liberalism. In fact, it has not, which may explain much of its growth.

It is, however, in the more personal and less public aspects of American life, those areas once called private, that the most dramatic changes have taken place since the 1960s. Here is where a revolution has occurred, in which liberal attitudes steadily erase the famous public and private distinction first identified by Tocqueville. It was always in the home, in the church, and among women that liberal values were less secure and far less triumphant than elsewhere in American life. And it is in these areas that liberalism has wrought distinct, quite remarkable, changes in the last half century. Chapter 5 examines case studies that illustrate this change. One, for example, explores women's roles today, addressing the status of the family, relevant government policies, and the perspectives of feminist thought. All reveal the influence of liberal values.

Overall, my argument is that the record of American practice and general public opinion is not a narrative about the retreat of liberalism. The reality is liberalism's increasing momentum in public and so-called private life and in public opinion, despite many interpreters' insistence to the contrary.

With this in mind, I turn next to consider the themes that many intellectuals now engage as their uneasiness rises in often unspoken acknowledgement of the growth of liberalism in American culture. In chapter 6 I discuss the most popular topic—"community." The widespread intellectual engagement with community is evident everywhere, as many intellectuals invoke it as the cure for ailments
they discern in liberalism as well as assorted liberal practices and institutions.

Of course, community is a capacious term. When intellectual thought turns from general complaints about liberalism in the name of "community" to proposing ideas about community—which happens less often than one might wish—one meets the vast variety of conceptions of community. Chapter 6 considers some of the models of community. Each has its able public intellectual advocates, and each demonstrates the extent to which community is a contested concept in the diverse world of contemporary public intellectuals.

Chapter 6 also investigates some other dimensions of the community phenomenon. These include evidence from public opinion data and cultural practices in the United States that suggests that there is a far wider interest in community than just among intellectuals. It also looks at the considerable intellectual resistance to some of the community enthusiasms of this day, including reservations by some feminists and advocates of group identity.

I give attention to environmentalism as a growing dynamic in contemporary intellectual thought in chapter 7. There is no question about the tremendous popularity of environmentalism among most Americans. While the public rarely interprets environmentalism as an ideological alternative to liberalism, a growing number of intellectuals do. Chapter 7 notes the widespread criticism of liberalism and traditional Western religions that green intellectual thought presents. It observes the emerging foundations for a green political ethic, including natural rights, intrinsic natural values, religious claims, and pragmatism. I also reflect on several green images of the good society and their intellectual advocates. These images include holistic and communitarian societies that are in accord with nature, tough-minded authoritarian orders, godly creation societies, and libertarian models.

Finally, in chapters 8 and 9, I move to the much discussed topic of civil society in American thought. Today there is great interest among many public intellectuals in the human relations and institutions apart from the state—family, church, and innumerable other "private" associations. Thinkers who represent many points of view suggest that a revival of the nation's weakening civil society is integral to the resuscitation of the United States.

Chapter 8 enters the intense discourse and debate over civil society and its revival. It investigates key thinkers in the discussion
such as Jean Bethke Elshtain and Alan Wolfe. It also addresses the reluctance some intellectuals, especially on the Left, have regarding civil society as the best place to make efforts to revive American society. They fear that a focus on civil society will leave society vulnerable to capture by uncontrolled capitalism.

Most public intellectual and social science discussion on how to strengthen civil society addresses the "battle over the family." So does my consideration, therefore, and I look at the discourse on marriage and divorce, two-parent and one-parent families, and the burgeoning social science literature on children from a variety of family backgrounds. In this context chapter 8 studies the family revival movement and its critics.

In chapter 9 I continue the subject of the revival of civil society as a proposed redirection in the United States. I concentrate first, and at some length, on the controversial and sensitive discussions of the African-American family. No area is more contested within African-American thought, yet none is more intimately connected with civil society concerns and debates.

In chapter 9 I also shift to another major aspect of civil society, religion and religious institutions. Both intellectual and popular attitudes toward religion reveal that many Americans place considerable hope in religion and/or religious institutions to help the United States. Yet liberal beliefs and behaviors have triumphed in much of American religion, just as they have in the family. This is just more evidence that liberalism's victory in American culture is real.

In chapter 10 I sum up my overall interpretation and gingerly offer a few reflections of my own. Intellectual thought about politics and society in the United States has indeed left consensus behind. It is now pluralistic in ways and to degrees that consensus interpreters of the 1950s could not have imagined. At the same time, I temper this conclusion by noting that there is more support for basic liberal norms among public intellectuals than many commentators realize.

Moreover, there are signs that some public intellectuals are struggling toward expressing a shared aspiration for community or, in many cases, some intersection of community and liberalism. There is no consensus on this direction, much less on a specific vision of community. Yet one sees and feels the winds of this movement, es-
especially in the discourse today on how to revive America through civil society, environmentalism, and, most obviously, through building community itself. Only in the twenty-first century, however, will we discover whether these inclinations had any lasting force. My own hope, quiet but unashamed, is that they will.

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