

ners as friendliness: feigned or genuine but noticeable" between Reed's two sentences. John Shelton Reed is a fine stylist, and I am afraid it was bad manners for the editor to interrupt him in mid-thought. But the book without faults has yet to be written, and, when all is said and done, *Gentility Recalled* has more strengths than weaknesses. It deserves a wider audience than it is likely to attract in our increasingly ill-mannered age.

### ***Beyond the Liberal Myth***

BRIAN S. BROWN

**The Myth of American Individualism:  
The Protestant Origins of American  
Political Thought**, by Barry Alan  
Shain, Princeton: Princeton Univer-  
sity Press, 1995. 394 pp.

OF THE TWO DOMINANT interpretations of the political philosophy behind the American Revolution, liberalism and republicanism, liberalism has remained the most widespread—and enduring. Our high school students (those who still read of such obscurities as the connection between ideas and events) perennially hear the story of wild-eyed Revolutionaries throwing off the yoke of English tyranny on the road to individual freedom and autonomy. By implication, the American Revolution becomes the vindication of Enlightenment notions of natural rights, individual freedom, and autonomy; a *novus ordo saeculorum* was born and man was finally free. For much of America's history some form of this story held sway, and only in the early 1960s did one

group of scholars mount a serious, lasting challenge. What came to be termed "the Republican synthesis" pointed to the paeans of the founders to the Roman Republic, their concern for civic virtue, and the influence of such thinkers as James Harrington and Algernon Sidney as evidence of a conception of the good *polis* quite contrary to that of liberalism. Republicanism argued that Americans were not born "rich, free, and modern"; nor was their political philosophy. Bernard Bailyn's *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (1967) set the republican ball in motion. Bailyn argued that, far from seeking individual autonomy, most of America's founders looked to the example of ancient Rome, through the eyes of seventeenth century Whig "ideology"; and sought to give themselves up to the civic life of the new nation. A powerful attempt to refute liberalism, republicanism nevertheless suffered from a concentration on political elites and an unrealistic emphasis on the constraining and forming powers of "ideology," consequently, it left liberalism shaken, but still standing.

In *The Myth of American Individualism*, Barry Alan Shain, Professor of Political Science at Colgate University, takes such revisionism one step further: to Shain, both liberalism and republicanism fail as interpretations of the political philosophy of the Revolutionary period. By concentrating on members of rural communities in the late eighteenth century, a wholly different view emerges. Reformed Protestant, communal, and localist, Shain's colonists had little interest in either an interfering federal civic social order or Enlightenment notions of individual autonomy. They imbibed their political philosophy from the Good Book as expounded in fiery political sermons on the Sabbath; Enlightenment rationalism, even of the milder sort, left little imprint on their political makeup.

Through a massive amount of pri-

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mary research on political sermons, letters, and community documents, Shain shows that the colonists' conception of "freedom" was decidedly different from our own. *Corporate freedom*—the freedom of the religious denomination or sect from outside influence—was their goal. Within each community, it was understood that individuals would obey the responsibilities and constraints placed on them by their superiors. Freedom came by membership in such an ordered community rather than outside or opposed to it. Family, friends, and religion all served as the means of structuring daily existence. That one should be free from dictates of the local law, denominational elders, or even stigmatizing neighbors, was simply not a political good in the minds of these colonists. If one found oneself theologically or otherwise opposed to the clergy, civil government, or fellow members of the community, one freedom was guaranteed: freedom of exit. Although a drastic and unsettling experience, families and individuals did occasionally break away. Usually this occurred over matters of religious conscience. A move always meant to another existing community—to another set of rules and regulations on daily life, to another set of authorities, and, frequently, to another set of religious doctrines—or to the creation of a new one. In either case it was a move away from the familiar to the unknown, and remained rare.

The community had authority in keeping individual members' passions in check; and as paradoxical as it may sound, these constraints were themselves an aspect of freedom in the minds of the colonists. As one anonymous New Englander states, "absolutely to follow their own will and pleasures, what is it, in true sense, but to follow their corrupt inclinations, to give the reins to lust.... Are they whose character this is at liberty? So far from it, that instead of being

free, they are very slaves." The old Biblical notion of true freedom as slavery to Christ, and mastery over the passions, guided much of their rhetoric. How different this is from readings of the period that seek to posit a latent individualism in such statements. Indeed, as Shain points out, the modern misreading of colonial statements regarding liberty and freedom is part of what has perpetuated the myth of our individualistic origins. It was easy for historians and political scientists who knew what America was to become to read back this individualistic ethos on earlier periods. By failing to interpret carefully colonial statements on freedom and liberty with regard to context, "the myth of American individualism" became a central component of American self-understanding. Regardless of what followed the colonial and revolutionary periods, understanding the meanings of liberty in this period requires a solid commitment to understanding them on their own terms—not as necessary precursors to the America that followed. This Shain achieves grandly.

Shain's description of Protestant "communalism" as a political philosophy, with its emphasis on subsidiarity and localism, strikingly differs from the cosmopolitan communitarianism currently *en vogue*. The new communitarians seek community unbounded by locality. Exactly what the early colonists feared—constant intervention from outside of the community, stripping corporate rights—Amitai Etzioni, *et al.* cherish. In the last chapter, "The Concept of Slavery," Shain shows that the idea of men and women, having the ability to "compact" and erect their own community, bound by place, was central to the reformed Protestant view of freedom. The denial of this ability was equated with slavery. An unbounded federal community, with its accompanying enforced homogeneity, would have absolutely

appalled them. Animosity to an abstract “community” is readily seen in the feeling of most denominations toward the Quakers in this period. Shain argues, convincingly, that the Quaker transnational vision of egalitarian community made them the one denomination that had much in common with modern individualism—and for this very reason widely detested.

Shain’s model of communal Protestantism is undoubtedly accurate for large segments of the rural populations and smaller towns of the American colonies, but the question remains: What of the large cities and their inhabitants? (This is a category that includes many of those most involved with the Revolution.) It is obvious that individual rather than corporate freedom is paramount in the thought of Jefferson, Madison, and Jay (of the Revolutionary political thinkers only John Adams remains at all ambivalent on this question). Although at times “freedom,” “natural rights,” and “equality” took on various meanings in their writing, often the most obvious is Enlightenment individualism. Were the founders themselves ambivalent men with the competing values of liberalism, republicanism, and Shain’s Protestant communalism vying for authority in their thought? Or were there two interpretative schemes, Shain’s accurate for smaller communities, and liberalism or republicanism flourishing in the larger cities? Could all interpretations, at different decades and places, be held by the same people? Or was there a movement between these different explanations and justifications for different periods in the Colonial and Revolutionary periods? Shain’s study has opened the doors for further research and added complexity and nuance to the already complicated liberalism-republicanism debates.

The only real fault in the book seems to be the almost exclusive reliance on

Northern communities. This is, in part, understandable, owing to the dearth of primary materials and town records for the South and the more dispersed character of these communities (with a few exceptions). Though the first colonists of the South were less interested in community than making their profits and getting out, by the Revolutionary period communities consistent with Shain’s thesis were the norm. Although Southern communities were often far different in social structure and spatial organization, authority, perhaps even more than in the North, was vested in the hands of the leaders of the community.

This minor critique does little to tarnish the overall value of the book. *The Myth of American Individualism* is a work of tremendous importance in the best vein of historical revisionism. Whether we like it or not, like most studies of the revolutionary period, it has something to say to our present. Simply in revealing liberalism’s false picture of the past (which has remained a rallying cry for present political movements), Shain’s work will upset those devoted to the notion that America was, has been, and will always be a liberal-individualistic nation. Although historians have been investigating community and authority in early America since the 1950s, none have come forward with so comprehensive and convincing a picture. Indeed, if Robert Nisbet, in his *magnum opus*, *The Quest for Community* (1953), provided the theoretical basis for local community, with *The Myth of American Individualism* Barry Alan Shain gives us the historical foundation of community in America.