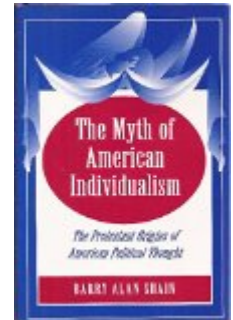


Barry Alan Shain. *The Myth of American Individualism: The Protestant Origins of American Political Thought.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994. xix + 394 \$65.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-691-03382-2.



Reviewed by David Thomas

Published on H-Review (September, 1997)

Recent scholarship on the American Revolution has been significantly shaped by the question of whether American values were influenced predominantly by liberalism or by classical republicanism. Those who conclude that American revolutionaries were burgeoning liberals tend to be of an older generation and emphasize the developing individualism and materialism of the eighteenth century. Those who favor the idea that the revolution was deeply influenced by classical republicanism have most often been trained during 1960s and 1970s, and emphasize republican sacrifice of personal gain and comfort for the sake of a secular state. Shain argues that both sides are flawed; he concludes that while elements of each were present, neither liberalism nor classical republicanism dominated. Instead, Americans during the Revolutionary era are best described as communal, localist, rural, and Protestant. "Most 18th-century Americans," he writes, "cannot be accurately characterized as predominantly individualistic, or for that matter, classically republican. The vast majority of Americans lived voluntarily in morally demanding agricultural communities shaped by reformed-Protestant social and

moral norms" (p. xvi). The author suggests that the exaggerated conclusions about liberalism and classical republicanism are primarily due to the search for a secular past, rather than to a valid understanding of the revolutionary era.

Shain divides the book into two parts, devoting the first to understanding the relationship between the individual and the community in pursuit of the public good. As proponents of classical republicanism have observed, Americans showed a striking lack of concern for the rights of the individual. Indeed, they often feared individual liberty, which they acquainted more with license than with personal fulfillment. Families within local communities were the center of American life during this period; both were, by our standards, quite intrusive. The family and the community together were necessary to control the innate sinfulness of the individual, which would destroy the community if allow to flourish. Much of this first section relies on the extensive historiography of colonial and revolutionary America. Shain is familiar with large swaths of this writing, moving easily between the colonial work of Gordon

Wood, the economic and legal histories of John Crowley and William Nelson, and the older work of political scientist Clinton Rossiter. The emphasis within this research and within his own research is towards New England and its numerous sources, and to some extent that is a limitation. Shain concludes Part One with a summary of the four views of the individual: republican, rational, Christian, and individualist, and some discussion of the movement from the communal orientation of the first three to the distinct approach of the more individualistic Romantics.

In the second part, Shain undertakes to describe liberty. He begins by explicating the various eighteenth-century definitions of liberty, eight in total, of which seven are communal and one is individualistic. Shain devotes a chapter to unpacking the most important of these, spiritual liberty. Spiritual liberty he defines as "a socially mediated, voluntary acceptance of a life of righteousness" (p. 154). Behavior which was legal but immoral, or which failed to serve something higher than the individual, was not freedom, but bondage to inclinations, lusts, or sinful desires. To prevent this bondage, communities adopted a strong, authoritative stance. Depending on the community, individuals were not allowed to live alone, needed permission from the community to move, or were restricted in their choice of clothing. They were forced to attend church, to pay taxes in support of a minister, to refrain from swearing, smoking, gambling, and dancing, and in other ways were restrained from breaking the communal sense of order and godliness (p. 210).

In the following chapter, Shain examines the two primary inheritances from English political tradition, political and civil liberty. Both of these developed their strongest voices locally. Local communities had to the right to determine the regulation of their members and the right to define their relationship with other communities. The Declaration of Independence was not a radical statement of individual rights, in the sense

that it has sometimes been used in this century, but rather a claim to collective sovereignty and corporate self-government.

In sum, for those who adopted reformed Christianity, individualism was limited by faith in God, which included commitment to the believing community. For those who were not content with reformed thought and adopted rationalism, individual liberty was restrained by reason, which again placed the good of the individual in communal context. One mid-18th century source may be taken to exemplify: "Perfect liberty is the Latitude of voluntary Conduct informed by Reason, and limited by Duty" (p. 161).

Shain closes Part Two with a discussion of the antithesis of liberty: slavery. This is one of the few areas in which Shain gives credence to strong classical roots. In the classical tradition, slavery, more broadly defined than chattel slavery, meant that the community or individual had lost political power. "What made one free rather than a slave," Shain writes, "was being 'entitled to take part in the political life of his city and to affect the workings of its legislative institutions' " (p. 296). If liberty was obedience to laws created by the community in which one resided and spoke forth, then slavery was obedience to laws over which one had no voice at all.

Occasionally, Shain moves away from his primary theme to address longer-term consequences of the revolution with a more sweeping vision. He treats the revolution with much less celebration than the advocates of the two dominant interpretations. In light of his thesis, the revolution failed in substantial ways; localist communities dissolved into a nation which adopted individualism (at least rhetorically), and while Protestantism is still the dominant faith, it has been sorely challenged on many fronts. The various eighteenth and nineteenth century attempts to serve God, obtain freedom from sin, and provide moral regeneration have, in Shain's judgement, largely failed. Scholars who have overlooked the core values

which Shain identifies do not get off any easier. Historians who look to the Revolution to find the roots of a successful individualism or a nationalist republicanism are contributing to a "widespread pattern of cultural prevarication" (p. xvii), for such developments emerge later in the eighteenth century, not during the revolution. Today's political individualism, then, is a result of failures and unplanned transformations, not the success of a dominant revolutionary vision.

My two criticisms are not with the content or thesis, but with the editing. I liked the book and found it a welcome addition to the dialogue over liberalism and republicanism. However, the two sections overlap so much that the author often repeats himself. If this book comes out in a second edition, I would suggest a more rigorous editing, to reduce the repetition. Secondly, I didn't care for the ending of the book. It is difficult to close a book well. The author closes as if trying to protect himself from critics who imagine that he wants to establish a Christian republic. Such defense is unnecessary, and it diverts attention from the main point.

This is a fine work. Shain's positioning with the historiographical argument is astute, his evidence is sound, and his argument well articulated. His book is likely to initiate new discussion over the place of Protestant communalism in American political development.

Copyright (c) 1997 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://www.h-net.org/reviews>

Citation: David Thomas. Review of Shain, Barry Alan. *The Myth of American Individualism: The Protestant Origins of American Political Thought*. H-Review, H-Net Reviews. September, 1997.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=1258>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.