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1

Introduction

THE FREE INDIVIDUAL has long dominated the American political imagination. To this day, we often envision the sovereign individual standing proudly against an array of encroaching forces: big government, big corporations, intolerant majorities. In one leading version of this drama, these antagonists threaten our rights. They want to control our bodies or our sexuality, take away our guns, invade our property and our privacy, or push us to violate our conscience. Victory, in such struggles, is imagined as a defense of individual dignity and freedom against unwanted intrusion.

Another prominent variation pits individual merit and effort against unearned privilege. As a culture, we lionize the entrepreneur whose initiative and talent bring new value into the world and the modest self-starter who rises, through tireless effort, from poverty to the middle class. We celebrate these figures because of what they have individually accomplished, and we resent those who would lay claim to their hard-earned rewards. In the popular imagination, these claimants come in many guises: they include overzealous regulators imposing their own visions of the common good, wealthy oligarchs using political influence to absorb more than their rightful share, and the poor pressing collectively for state benefits. All are commonly presented as potential threats to the meritocratic order of American society, which is supposed to leave individuals free to make their own way.

We also imagine a perpetual social and political struggle against personal dependence. Our most treasured marker of independence is property: we celebrate home owners, small farmers, and small business owners—all masters of their own private domains—as archetypes of self-reliance. On the other hand, we are embarrassed by young adults who live with their parents, by welfare recipients, by unpaid debts, and by old age itself and the many forms

of dependence it augurs. Our debates over social policy are often framed around encouraging people to “stand on their own two feet.”

These narratives are more prominent on the political right than the left, but their prevalence there has long tilted the balance of public opinion. Surveys have shown that unlike our counterparts in Europe, Americans would rather enjoy the freedom “to pursue . . . life’s goals without interference from the state” than see their government take “an active role in society so as to guarantee that no one is in need.” These political views are reinforced by a scaffolding of other, related convictions. Americans are far more likely, for example, to reject the view that personal success is “determined by forces outside our control” and to affirm that people can rise out of poverty on their own.¹ Many American Christians, meanwhile, believe the Bible teaches that “God helps those who help themselves.”² Such notions have broad ramifications for the shape of American public policy, from health care and social welfare to taxation to speech and gun rights. They contribute to a libertarian tilt that distinguishes the United States from most other affluent democracies.

Even the center-left bears their mark. Leading Democratic politicians often speak of boundless opportunities and unparalleled personal freedom as the birthrights of all Americans. They may warn that these opportunities have lately been imperiled by corporate greed, stagnant wages, and yawning inequalities. They may denounce the long-standing racism and patriarchy that have curtailed many Americans’ freedoms. But they, too, exalt the autonomous, upwardly mobile individual earning his or her place in a meritocratic society.

How and why did these tendencies rise to dominance in America? How and why, in other words, did so many Americans come to think in these terms about their politics and society? In addressing these questions, this book advances three main arguments. First, it shows that these ideas took hold in the Jacksonian Era (1820–50). Historians of political thought tend to see Jacksonian America as a fairly barren landscape, sandwiched between the epochal events of the founding and the Civil War. This book contends, instead, that it should be regarded as a seminal time—in some ways *the* seminal time—in forming the popular political narratives that continue to permeate our political life. Second, rather than treating American individualism as a single dogma or creed, this book presents it as a set of three overlapping myths, each containing its own idea of personal freedom and its own distinctive story of American exceptionalism. These myths have served as potent sources of shared meaning and identity, and their variety and flexibility help explain why they have appealed to so many different constituencies over time. Third, this book argues

that American individualism harbors profoundly utopian aspirations that still influence our politics today. Historians have often described it as a fundamentally *practical* outlook, a preoccupation with moneymaking combined with a visceral intolerance of authority. In fact, the power of individualist rhetoric has derived, time and again, from long-standing utopian dreams embedded within. Let us consider each of these arguments in more detail.

The rise of individualism in Jacksonian America was precipitated by two great changes that convulsed Americans' lives and reshaped the way they thought about their society and politics. One of these was the advent of mass democracy. In the decades following Thomas Jefferson's election to the presidency in 1800, popular participation in state and federal elections rose dramatically and property qualifications for white male voters fell away. Modern political parties took shape, led by a new class of professional politicians, and rolled out campaigns designed to mobilize a mass electorate. As all white men came to feel entitled to a political voice, they shattered the deferential tone that had ruled American political life throughout the eighteenth century. *Democracy*, a term that had aroused suspicion among the nation's founders, became their political watchword.³

These same years also brought transformative economic change, fostered by a combination of new technologies, ambitious infrastructure projects, cheap and expanding credit, and booming demand for domestic products and services. Their cumulative effect was to link America's local and regional economies into an integrated system that reshaped the lives of millions of producers—both free and enslaved—who formed its backbone. In the North, small farmers produced surpluses designed for sale to distant markets and calibrated their decisions to the market's price signals. They sold more goods for cash, which they could then use to buy the consumer products—from fabrics and hats to furniture and musical instruments—that flooded into the American inland on canal barges, steamboats, and rail cars. Their economic lives were less and less governed by the interpersonal bonds that had anchored local economies for generations, and increasingly structured by impersonal competition and contract. Americans were becoming aware that they belonged to an economic *system* whose impersonal laws and norms affected everyone, for good or ill.⁴ In the South, these same forces accelerated cotton production for the global market and intensified the domestic slave trade, forcing a million Black men, women, and children further west into the southern heartland.⁵

These transformations changed the way white Americans thought about themselves and their country: between 1820 and 1850, both democracy and the

market were woven into the very idea of America. Increasingly, these were the institutions that Americans invoked to illustrate their society's remarkable progress and to demonstrate its superiority. The United States, they argued, was the only democracy in the world, an egalitarian political beacon that others were destined to follow. It was also, they alleged, home to a uniquely free, dynamic, and meritocratic market economy in which people reaped the rewards of their own work without unwanted political interference. Together, these two generalizations underwrote the widely shared conviction that Americans enjoyed liberties unknown and even unimagined in other parts of the world.

These changes also shifted the way Americans understood their freedoms. In an affluent and fluid society exploding with opportunity for young whites, freedom was increasingly understood as a feature of private life: it was associated more and more with the individual's control over his own work, his private enjoyment of rights against government, his ability to rise through the social ranks through effort and discipline. Many began to see the burgeoning market economy as freedom's natural domain. Moreover, in a far-flung, decentralized society long suspicious of government control, democracy was often imagined as a way of curtailing the power of political elites while empowering ordinary people to defend their rights. Both were increasingly seen as means of shielding the sovereign individual from unwanted interference.

Although these individualistic tendencies originated much earlier, the Jacksonian Era saw them coalesce into a set of powerful political myths that would shape American political thought and rhetoric for generations to come. If the founding was the formative period for America's constitutional structure, Jacksonian America—the so-called “Era of the Common Man”—was the crucible for American political myth.⁶ Beginning in the 1820s, a new class of political entrepreneurs successfully reformulated the founders' patrician political ideas for a more democratic age; in doing so, they infused them with the free-market optimism that had only gradually penetrated American consciousness in the early decades of the nineteenth century. The vast expansion of print culture that brought cheap newspapers into so many American homes ensured that these new ideas circulated widely to a mass electorate.⁷

As this book traces the sources of these intellectual shifts, it focuses substantially on the Jacksonian Democrats. In recent decades, Andrew Jackson and his political party have fallen out of favor, and for good reason. They built American democracy on a foundation of racial hierarchy and Native American genocide. They weaponized white supremacy as a populist, political cause in

ways that still infect our politics today. But their intellectual legacy does not end there: through their wide-ranging attitudes about the economy, the role of government, and the nature of democratic politics, they bequeathed a broad and varied set of political ideas. They were the period's most successful conceptual innovators and political myth-makers, and this book therefore pays particular attention to the ways in which Jacksonian Democrats interpreted the political ideas of the founding generation and reformulated them for a mass electorate.⁸

The book's second main argument is that American individualism has been expressed and transmitted, across nearly two hundred years, by three powerful political myths: the myth of the independent proprietor, the myth of the rights-bearer, and the myth of the self-made man. Each is best understood as an idealized story about *what America is*. Each assured its audience that America was, above all, an exceptional land of liberty, in which both people and institutions—and even the land itself—were uniquely suited for expansive personal freedom. Each offered a slightly different vision of both the free individual and the dangers that threatened to fetter him, and each drew on a different combination of intellectual traditions.⁹

Over the next ten chapters, we explore how each of these myths shaped American political debates and the ideas that animated them. The myths were not *owned* by any one side in the controversies that roiled Jacksonian politics—rather, they came to define a shared terrain on which anyone hoping for a broad audience was constrained to argue. They coursed through the political rhetoric of conservatives and reformers alike, and they even infused the self-consciously radical perspectives of abolitionists and early feminists. Their dominance ensured that all sides were competing to position themselves as the true defenders of individual liberty.

In discussing these myths, we pay particular attention to the themes of inclusion and exclusion. All three myths were variously used to fix the boundary between insiders and outsiders, between *us* and *them*. They defined a deeply felt sense of national identity and purpose, which set Americans apart, in their own eyes, from the Old World. They also shaped the content of both whiteness and masculinity: as historians have firmly established, individualist ideas were repeatedly used to construct archetypes of white male character and identity against which subordinate groups were defined and contrasted. White men insisted that women and people of color lacked the innate characteristics required to thrive as autonomous persons in a free society and a rugged, competitive economy. They were therefore destined for

subordination—or, in the case of Native Americans, for extinction. In this way, paradoxically, individualist ideas underwrote an expansionist politics of white male supremacy, premised on innate group superiority, that was anything but individualistic.

At the same time, those pressing for greater inclusion turned to the same myths to challenge racial and gender hierarchies. Abolitionists and feminists decried what they saw as a caste society that awarded privileges to white men regardless of their individual merits or attributes. Feminists insisted that women were amply qualified for independent property ownership and entitled to live autonomous lives. Abolitionists, meanwhile, deployed an inclusive ideal of individual rights to highlight both America's hypocrisy and its unrealized moral potential. Both mobilized America's individualist myths to try to relocate the boundary between citizens and subordinates and promote a more inclusive vision of the American nation. In the ensuing chapters, then, we explore how American individualism has been harnessed to both expand and contract the boundaries of moral and political community.

Finally, this book argues that America's individualistic myths have often conveyed a utopian vision of American society. All three have described America as the site of an emergent, harmonious order in which people are rewarded for hard work, self-discipline, and personal virtue. All three have also attributed this meritocratic order to God or nature. According to these myths, the United States is unique in escaping the profane and "artificial" hierarchies of the Old World. It is a nation in which autonomous individuals, directed by the hand of a benevolent God, produce their own fair and prosperous equilibria, so long as government lets them flourish unimpeded.

Although these utopian ideas have taken several different forms, they have found most consistent expression in the idea of the free market, which was widely popularized in the Jacksonian Era and which has deeply shaped the terms of American political debate ever since. For so many Americans, the inchoate sense that the market embodied a natural and providential order essentially removed it from the list of threats to human freedom. To suffer losses, defeats, or constraints because of the spontaneous agency of the market was a kind of misfortune, not a kind of oppression. On the other hand, to suffer setbacks at the hands of government regulators was to be deprived of liberty; it was a call to arms. This fundamental asymmetry, firmly grounded in utopian assumptions, has had profound implications for the trajectory of political ideas into the twentieth century and beyond.

There is nothing new, of course, in the suggestion that free-market ideology in America is laced with utopian dreams. This book helps us understand how

these dreams were born and how they acquired such a hold on the American imagination. It helps us excavate the origins of the ideological patterns that still hold so many of us in thrall. It shows, among other things, how they were facilitated by important transformations in American political and religious thought in the first half of the nineteenth century.

It should be clear, by now, that this book does not strictly withhold judgment of its subject matter. While parts 1 through 3 are devoted to a careful exploration of individualist ideas in the Jacksonian Era, part 4 offers a critical evaluation of the period's intellectual legacies. In so doing, it draws attention to both the pathologies and potentials of American individualism. The pathologies lie mostly in its exclusivity, its latent utopianism, and its nationalist triumphalism, all of which have helped rationalize or conceal exploitation and injustice. Its potentials, on the other hand, lie in the dissenting countercurrents that have opened paths for greater equality and inclusion.

In the mid-twentieth century, an influential group of historians argued that American political culture has been thoroughly individualistic since the Revolution, if not earlier. They argued, for example, that the Declaration of Independence and the catalog of rights enshrined in state and federal constitutions already placed the individual at the center of the political universe. They suggested that the framers' unapologetic commercialism, reflected for example in the *Federalist Papers* and the thriving export economies of the eastern seaboard, foreshadowed the nation's headlong embrace of competitive capitalism. They also pointed to several features of white male society in eighteenth-century America, including its wide-open economic opportunities, its cultural and religious fragmentation, and the relative absence of feudal or aristocratic institutions, as fertile ground for individualist assumptions. They maintained that American individualism—some preferred the term “liberalism”¹⁰—formed a fundamental consensus or creed that has defined and limited American political thought throughout the nation's history.¹¹

Six decades of sustained scholarly criticism have exposed this argument's shortcomings. In the 1960s, historians began challenging the “consensus” interpretation of American history by drawing attention to the powerful, anti-individualist narratives that still coursed through sermons, pamphlets, and speeches in late eighteenth-century America. They pointed, for example, to the ubiquitous Protestant drama of the sinful self whose unruly appetites and natural selfishness need constraining by the virtuous community. Or they highlighted an even older, neoclassical story that presents individual ambition

and self-interest as the leading threats to a free and stable republic. Both of these commonplace variants featured a central struggle between the corrupt or anarchic individual and a harmonious social order overseen by both church and state. Some of these revisionist historians also emphasized the vast powers that state and local governments routinely claimed over Americans' private lives well into the nineteenth century.¹²

In subsequent decades, intellectual historians broadened these criticisms by highlighting the diversity of American political ideas in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries too. They showed, for example, how the Protestant "politics of sin" has continually shaped mainstream American politics. From the antebellum Temperance movement to the Reagan-era War on Drugs and mass incarceration, political movements seeking moral reform and control have used the American state(s) to invade private life and restrict individual liberty.¹³ Historians have also spent the last forty years unearthing the powerful white supremacist and patriarchal ideas that have both influenced and circumscribed American individualism throughout the country's history. The systematic marginalization and oppression of women and people of color over the last two centuries reflect powerful and resiliently collectivist features of the national *ethos*. Each of these countertraditions—and others, including the social gospel that flourished in the late nineteenth century and helped shape the Progressive movement—has competed and intermingled with liberal individualism to create a far more complex and varied intellectual landscape than the midcentury historians allowed.¹⁴

This book does not attempt to resuscitate the consensus interpretation of American political or intellectual history. Rather, it suggests a different way of approaching the phenomenon that interested the consensus historians: the long-standing, preponderant influence of individualist ideas in American politics. It suggests that we approach this influence not by positing the existence of a timeless American creed but by studying three potent national myths that coalesced at a particular period in American history, that emerged gradually out of prior patterns of thought, and that shifted and adapted over time as they were appropriated by different political groups and applied to different policy controversies. It explores how these myths sometimes conflicted with one another, and how they interacted with—and sometimes infiltrated and intermingled with—the competing, anti-individualistic currents of thought that have also shaped American political culture since its inception. In pursuing this more modest strategy, it reaffirms some of the valuable insights of the midcentury historians without exaggerating their explanatory reach.

Several further clarifications are worth offering about what this book *is not*. It does not attempt a complete history of American political thought in the Jacksonian Era. It has little to say, for example, about the overtly aristocratic proslavery ideas that emanated from the deep South during this period; it does not explore the important constitutional debates over states' rights and the limits of federal authority; nor does it study the political ideas of utopian socialists or Transcendentalists. These exclusions are not arbitrary or accidental. They are guided by two broad criteria: first, since this book's subject is American individualism, its main goal is to explore those intellectual strains that have contributed directly to it. Second, with the exception of chapter 3, the ensuing chapters focus on *popular* currents of thought—that is, on political ideas that were widely shared. This is not a book mainly about intellectuals: the stories explored here are drawn largely from popular sources, including newspapers, public speeches, sermons, and magazines.¹⁵ They are also drawn, as much as possible, from representative sources: that is, from sources that either circulated widely or that reflected widespread ideological patterns. Since political parties were the dominant institutions shaping popular political ideas in the Jacksonian Era, they receive a great deal of attention throughout the book. Time and again, we look to partisan newspapers, election pamphlets, and political speeches to understand the dominant narratives that shaped the political outlooks of millions of voters, forged partisan identities, and brought citizens to the polls in record numbers.

The list of political myths explored in this book is not meant to be exhaustive. In fact, the three myths detailed here form part of a broader constellation of national myths that has shaped the American self-image across the centuries, including the democratic myth of Americans as a uniquely self-governing people, the Protestant myth of America as a community of saints dedicated to the moral and spiritual regeneration of humankind, and the ethnoracial myth of America as a white or Anglo-Saxon nation carrying the seeds of liberty in its ancestral heritage.¹⁶ This book maintains, however, that the individualist myths have occupied a dominant place in this constellation. Their dominance is evident not only in their ubiquitous appearance in American political rhetoric but also in the way they have influenced the content of these other, competing national stories. Over the course of the next ten chapters, we explore how individualistic ideas have shaped the prevailing conceptions of democracy (chapters 4 and 5) and race (chapters 4, 6, and 11), and how they have also suffused the idea of America as a Godly nation (chapters 7, 8, and 9).

Since this is a book about political myth, it is necessarily about idealization and misrepresentation. The individualist myths studied here have consistently described American society as a collection of autonomous and enterprising individuals making their own way in the world. In doing so, they have underemphasized the many forms of community that have in fact structured and enveloped so many American lives. They have sidelined families, kinship groups and ethnocultural identities, rich traditions of local and communal self-governance, as well as the churches, clans, unions, and fraternal groups to which Americans have consistently turned for fellowship, solidarity, and identity. In presenting stylized representations of the American nation and its politics, the myths have downplayed local diversity and variability.¹⁷ They have also continually deemphasized the role of state and federal governments in shaping American society and its economy. This book explores the powerful influence that these fictionalized narratives have exerted over American politics; it does not take them at face value.

Although political myth is the book's main subject matter, it is not *only* about political myth. It is also about the intellectual traditions out of which America's individualist myths were constructed. They were not invented out of whole cloth: popular political myths invariably borrow values, concepts, and narrative elements that already resonate widely among the national population. Over the course of the book, we explore how the three individualist myths absorbed ideas from a neoclassical republican tradition that circulated widely among transatlantic elites; from Protestant theology and its anti-authoritarian popularizations in the early nineteenth century; from the radical, egalitarian political culture that had long flourished among urban artisans in both England and its colonies; and from Scottish Enlightenment ideas that had reshaped the American view of God and human society alike. We trace the ways in which these and other diverse intellectual currents were combined and reworked into popular political narratives that were then deployed to shape public opinion and win elections. We pay close attention, in other words, to the intellectual contexts that allowed these particular myths to become popular and powerful.

This book does not present individualism as a uniquely American phenomenon. Comparable patterns of ideas can be found in Australian and Canadian political culture, for example (although they are somewhat less prominent there). Moreover, the ensuing chapters detail how American individualism has been shaped by transnational currents of thought, including British economic ideas, which were simplified, sacralized, and repurposed for the American

electorate during the Jacksonian Era. While this book does highlight the differences between American and European political cultures in the nineteenth century, and while it explores the particularity of American individualism in some detail, nowhere does it suggest that the United States is somehow categorically distinct from other human societies.

Finally, this book is about ideas, and as such it offers only partial explanations of American political history and development. While it does assume that ideas exert some independent influence on political behavior, it certainly does not assume that they *determine* behavior. In fact, as the following chapters repeatedly suggest, ideas are influenced by—and interact with—a host of other factors, including geography and demography, economic and technological forces, the dynamics of class and party formation, and other cultural and political institutions. Together, these factors shape political behavior and, subsequently, the course of political history.¹⁸ It follows that the content of American political ideas, and the myths in which they are encoded, tells only part of the story of why American politics developed the way it has.

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