

**TO RULE ONESELF
IN ANTEBELLUM AMERICA**

**THE CONCEPT OF SELF-GOVERNMENT
FROM REVOLUTION TO SECESSION**

IN THREE VOLUMES

ASSESSMENT (CONCLUSION):

**INDIVIDUALS AND SOCIETIES: THE AMERICAN
EXPERIENCE**

RICHARD L GARNER

Download from www.toruleoneself.com (without charge)

For printed copy, email richlygarner@gmail.com

All Rights Reserved, 2010

ASSESSMENT: INDIVIDUALS AND SOCIETIES

Assessment

INDIVIDUALS AND SOCIETIES: THE AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

After writing more pages than anyone should have to read about a long, increasingly intense and ultimately destructive spat about governance, I owe something more than a mere summary. Americans asked a fundamental question and in fact offered an ideal answer. Then came the hard part of trying to figure out the means by which to achieve the ideal.

If this were simply a historical problem, we could legitimately respond that Americans tried this and tried that, with a mixture of failure and success, choosing ultimately to change the system to try to make it work better, after which we could open a good Bordeaux red and toast the future. When it's our own historical problem and, further, when it's a historical problem that nags and provokes and causes us to deceive and lie about what that history was, we have not only a standard historical problem of how we got to where we think we are but a much more complicated problem about the historical record itself. Unfortunately, like all public records, ours is incomplete, filled with gaps that can never be filled in and subject to differing interpretations. The power of historical inquiry arises from successive generations rereading and rethinking what the record contains, and perhaps in a few rare instances of uncovering a new cache of documentation to add the extant record.

It takes little intelligence or imagination to state that no reading of the historical record is ever definitive. Any conversation about the origins of the Civil War starkly reveals that definitiveness does not and probably will never exist. I once had a conversation about that topic with a mechanic who was servicing my car. As has often happened to me, when I say I'm a professional historian (sometimes leaving professional out), I hear something to the effect that "I love history". Well meaning though such comments are, I gird myself for what that "love" might have in store. In this case I heard a well-known and well-worn argument that the economic incompatibility of the two systems, North and South, best illustrated in the protective tariff, brought the nation to its knees. And slavery, I dared to ask? Not an issue came the response. We dropped the Civil War at that point only I did learn he was southerner transplanted to northern California. As I drove home, this project not even on the drawing boards yet, I said to myself I know some distinguished historians who have pretty much removed slavery from the equation.

ASSESSMENT: INDIVIDUALS AND SOCIETIES

The title of this long essay might have contained the word Individualism, but it does not for a specific reason. Although de Tocqueville's famous insight arose from conversations he had with various Americans about the individual within the social order, the term itself seldom can be found in speeches or writings of the period. Numerous references to the self governing, ruling or acting and even to adverbial and adjectival forms of individual, but only rare instances when the term that was meant to embrace the totality of individual action at the most basic level and in relation to the larger society was ever employed. And yet the term is used by theorists and ideologues, as if it had existed for centuries. In its origin Individualism is a nineteenth-century term and may or may reflect whatever ideas about individual sentiments, behaviors or actions earlier theorists had in mind. In the 1960s, when the Canadian scholar and avowed socialist, C. B. Macpherson, wrote *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism, Hobbes to Locke*, in the opening pages he stated his thesis in language that made Individualism a part of seventeenth-century vocabulary. In an effort to address what he saw as a fundamental defect in contemporary liberal-democratic theory he declared that

the original seventeenth-century individualism contained the central difficulty, which lay in its possessive quality. Its possessive quality is found in its conception of the individual as essentially the proprietor of his own person or capacities, owing nothing to society for them. The individual was seen neither as a moral whole, nor as part of a larger social whole, but as an owner of himself. The relation of ownership, having become for more and more men the critically important relation determining their actual freedom and actual prospect of realizing their full potentialities, was read back into the nature of the individual.¹

I am dubious that many seventeenth- or eighteenth-century persons defined themselves in these terms or that the theorists cited by Macpherson could have readily written in his vocabulary. Political theorizing was moving in this direction, but the political slate had hardly been erased as neat and clean as Macpherson's characterization of the place of the individual in the social order. If the individual's inherent capacity was being woven more intricately into assumptions about shaping or reshaping the social order (for that was what English political theorists faced in the aftermath of the breakdown of the ruling order during their Civil War) the full realization of the individual's potential remained to be elaborated and

¹Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism, Hobbes to Locke* (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1962), 3.

ASSESSMENT: INDIVIDUALS AND SOCIETIES

tested. One might say the seeds had been planted for what will become an ideology of Individualism, but gestation required time and involved conflict. Macpherson's aim was not to pin down the origin and evolution of Individualism but to turn the tables on contemporary practitioners of Individualism, namely Milton Friedman, who had so closely linked economics and politics that any economic regulation was a potential threat to personal liberty. What Macpherson tried to do, not with singular success, I might add, was to counter the Libertarians with an interpretation of the founders of modern political theory that essentially argued that the more individuals accumulated the more likely governing rules were needed to prevent one's accumulations (the "possessive" component) from destroying or compromising another's attempt at accumulation. Macpherson reasoned, based on his reading of John Locke, that individuals were sufficiently rational and smart to rule themselves but also sufficiently contentious to need government to restrain their behavior. In an ironic way individualism led to collectivism in order to save individualism from itself. Since possession was so integral to achievement – that was what individuals relying upon their own capacities sought to do...to possess, to own, to control – the consequence had to be a system of rules and regulations that governed such actions. "Since freedom from the wills of others is what makes a man human, each individual's freedom can rightfully be limited only by obligations and rules as are necessary to secure the same freedom for others."²

I have made a modest (and incomplete) search of the appearance of the term Individualism in the texts of some prominent writers and thinkers in antebellum America. In Emerson's printed essays I found a half-dozen uses. In his well-known speech on New England Reformers [3 March 1844] before the New England Anti-Slavery Society, he sought to endorse the power of the union of individuals, not the political union of the United States but a union that organizes itself (without being organized) among individuals whose inner selves bring them together:

Men will live and communicate, and plough, and reap, and govern, as by added ethereal power, when once they are united; as in a celebrated experiment, by expiration and respiration exactly together, four persons lift a heavy man from the ground by the little finger only, and without sense of weight. But this union must be inward, and not one of covenants, and is to be reached by a reverse of the methods they use. The union is only perfect, when all the uniters are isolated. It is the union of friends who live in different streets or towns. Each man, if he attempts to join himself to others, is on all sides cramped and

²*Possessive Individualism*, 238-248, 255-256, 263-264.

ASSESSMENT: INDIVIDUALS AND SOCIETIES

diminished of his proportion; and the stricter the union, the smaller and the more pitiful he is. But leave him alone, to recognize in every hour and place the secret soul, he will go up and down doing the works of a true member, and, to the astonishment of all, the work will be done with concert, though no man spoke. Government will be adamantine without any governor. The union must be ideal in actual individualism.

No governments, no covenants, no recruitments. They unite because the need to unite arose from within the “soul”, if you will, of each individual. “Ideal individualism” because each individual acting on his own made it possible.³ Emerson made other references to Individualism, often in the context of institutional religion, which he thought chained rather than inspired the individual. He noted that some “individualists” were more appropriately described as egoists, a form of “individualism” There was a confluence between his sentiments on transcendentalism and individualism, but his individualism was not atomistic and materialistic. It was grounded in nature and in the natural. The individual who made that connection realized his power and potential, acting from within along with others acting in the same way. Plato, worthy of admiration, even reverence, tried to conceive of a theory for the world but he as have his disciples failed because by trying “to dispose of nature,...which will not be disposed of”, they actually missed the world as it presented itself and should be seen. Emerson’s “actual ideal” Individualism had a special quality that separated it from the world in which American Individualism was being defined.⁴

With another prominent thinker, an Emerson protégé, David Henry Thoreau, I found no reference to Individualism in any of his printed works. The absence of the term Individualism did not mean that Thoreau was not an “individualist”. Indeed, Thoreau carried through on the presumption in de Tocqueville that withdrawal from the larger society instilled within the individual strength and resolve. The German emigré, Francis Lieber, who wrote on law, self-government and civil liberty, did, however, employ the term Individualism. Among his *Miscellaneous Writings*, specially on history and political science, he made note of the bipolar nature of the existence of the individual: “the pregnant fact that each man is an individual and a social being,” and that existence must “revolve between the two

³Lecture, Armory Hall, Boston, 3 March 1844, unpaginated, available on-line at <http://www.emersoncentral.com/newengland.htm>. This was also the speech in which he made his famous allusion to individuals being more conservative after meals in the luxury and quiet of the evening and more radical in the morning.

⁴Go to <http://www.emersoncentral.com/search.htm> and type in the box “individualism” to see seven instances in which Emerson used “individualism.”

ASSESSMENT: INDIVIDUALS AND SOCIETIES

poles of individualism and socialism....” His treatment of Individualism and Socialism (sometimes combined with Communism) aimed to show that each was an extreme. Individualism denied the obvious existence of a society and Socialism of the equally obvious existence of the individual. Much of the dispute between individualism and socialism was about property, and yet both sides misrepresented the case for property. Both the individualist and the socialist made “radical” errors because they forgot that the very idea of the state implied individualistic and socialistic principles:

a state is a society, and a society consists of individuals who never lose their individual character, but are united by common bonds, interests, organizations, and a common continuity. A society is not represented by a mass of iron in which the original particles of the ore have lost all separate existence by refinement and smelting; nor is it represented by a crowd of of unit accidentally huddled together.⁵

Citing a few examples of social actions with which he was engaged as an individual, such as public education of which he approved and war of which he did not approve, he declared that “the principle of socialism is interwoven with our whole existence; for, it is a social existence.” Socialism, however, was limited and bounded by the rights held by individuals. “All taxation is founded on socialism, inasmuch as society takes by force, actual or threatened, part of my own, and on individualism, because it is proportioned according to the capacity of the individual to pay, and takes a lawful portion only....The principle of individualism is everywhere, for our existence is, also, an individual one. We shudder instinctively at the idea of losing our individuality.” The “two principles of humanity”, according to Lieber, existed side by side, but will change over time. Each will become more distinct and acquire legitimately greater and greater spheres of influence. Individualism would always be more distinct in terms of the rights of individuals, in particular the rights of property, and socialism will always be more distinct in terms of the common interests of education, defense, social improvements and judicial practices. What were once regarded as private interests have become public interests, and that trend will probably continue, not only to be protected by municipal law but by international law. “Act on individualism alone, and existence will be reduced to a “mere crowd of egotistical units; act on socialism alone, and existence will be reduce to “loathsome despotism.”⁶

⁵“History and Political Science Necessary Studies in Free Countries” [Inaugural Address upon appointment to Chair of History and Political Science, Columbia College, 17 February 1858] in *Reminiscences, Addresses, and Essays*, in *The Miscellaneous Writings of Francis Lieber*, 2 volumes (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott & Co, 1881), 1:363.

⁶“History and Political Science,” *Miscellaneous Writings*, 1:364-365.

ASSESSMENT: INDIVIDUALS AND SOCIETIES

Whether or not antebellum Americans widely used the term Individualism, the idea behind it was probably well enough understood. Individuals possessed rights, and societies and their governments should be designed for two purposes: to protect the rights against invasion by those “loathsome despots” and to allow individuals to exercise their rights in pursuit of “happiness”. Beyond this simple rendering of individual rights being possessed, protected and exercised were many complications. Nowhere were the rights possessed spelled out in any detail, nor how they should be protected or exercised. Some basic rights, all could agree upon, but how long was the list and where did it end? The Declaration of Independence referred to “inalienable rights” without defining them beyond some general assertions whereas the French Declaration of the Rights of Man (1789) directly proposed to “set forth in a solemn declaration the natural, unalienable, and sacred rights of man...” What were those rights so set forth? Let me list a few for the sake of illustrating the problem as much as how the list might be composed:

1. Men are born and remain free and equal in rights. Social distinctions may be founded only upon the general good; or

2. The aim of all political association is the preservation of the natural and imprescriptible rights of man. These rights are liberty, property, security, and resistance to oppression; or

4. Liberty consists in the freedom to do everything which injures no one else; hence the exercise of the natural rights of each man has no limits except those which assure to the other members of the society the enjoyment of the same rights. These limits can only be determined by law; or

6. Law is the expression of the general will. Every citizen has a right to participate personally, or through his representative, in its foundation. It must be the same for all, whether it protects or punishes. All citizens, being equal in the eyes of the law, are equally eligible to all dignities and to all public positions and occupations, according to their abilities, and without distinction except that of their virtues and talents; or

10. No one shall be disquieted on account of his opinions, including his religious views, provided their manifestation does not disturb the public order established by law; or

ASSESSMENT: INDIVIDUALS AND SOCIETIES

11. The free communication of ideas and opinions is one of the most precious of the rights of man. Every citizen may, accordingly, speak, write, and print with freedom, but shall be responsible for such abuses of this freedom as shall be defined by law.

There were a total of 17 rights “of man and the citizen.” These were the “objects and purposes of all political institutions” and must be respected and maintained in order for “happiness” to redound to all.⁷ The Declaration of the Rights of Man was not a constitution (just as the Declaration of Independence was not a constitution), but whatever constitution was written or whatever government was conceived, its performance would be “constantly” measured against the “simple and incontestable principles” contained in the Declaration of the Rights of Man. Following a different tack, of course, Americans endorsed a Declaration that highlighted grievances over rights, subsequently wrote and approved of a constitution devoid of lists or discussions of basic rights and yet amended the basic charter immediately with 10 amendments known as the Bill of Rights, in which were stated certain basic individual rights that were protected against incursion not by any and all governing entities but solely by the national government. (The exemption of state or municipal governments continued until the 14th Amendment was added after the Civil War.) Herein lay a crucial distinction between how Americans declared for independence and instituted a civil society and how the French did. The 3rd Right in the The Declaration of the Rights of Man stated: “The principle of all sovereignty resides essentially in the nation. No body nor individual may exercise any authority which does not proceed directly from the nation.” This was the opposite of how Americans interpreted sovereignty. In America “all sovereignty” rested with individuals, and none derived from any association or society that individual might want to create. Indeed, so contentious was the question of sovereignty in America that Americans themselves in their capacity as sovereign individuals will argue passionately, if not violently at times, over how it should work until the abyss that they had fostered was unbridgeable.

The distinction was not lost on de Tocqueville. Time and time again during his interviews with various Americans he heard warnings about the centripetal effect of the American experience. Casting off rather than pulling in was what some Americans feared. It was not only evident in the obvious geographic mobility that drew Americans out of settled communities into the untamed and unstructured – wild, if you will – social milieux in which stability was sacrificed for acquisition and opportunity. When one reads the interviews conducted and recorded by de

⁷Declaration of the Rights of Man (1789), available on-line at http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/rightsof.asp.

ASSESSMENT: INDIVIDUALS AND SOCIETIES

Tocqueville, one can detect a hectic, kinetic disposition in the words and the forebodings of the interviewees, and yet de Tocqueville was inclined to portray it otherwise: Individualism arose from “a mature and calm feeling” among individuals, even as they were effectively dissolving as many bonds by which societies function as they could in order to reduce their relationships to what was intimate and immediate, readily or willingly leaving society at large to itself.⁸ (The French is “il abandonne volontiers la grand société à elle-même” and somehow to abandon rather than to leave conveys a somewhat more powerful action, as if society was not needed. But I will defer to the experts.) What he heard people describe and what he saw happening during his travels had persuaded him that Americans had a preferred tendency to look inward to themselves or their close circles to accomplish their goals rather than outward or upward toward some external agency to which they might link their efforts along with others having similar pursuits. De Tocqueville recognized this was not necessarily illustrative of the atomistic egoism that European had railed against as the outcome of elevating individual rights above societal rights. By the same token he recognized that Americans had determined contrary to the French experience (as expressed in the Declaration of the Right of Man) that sovereignty flowed from the individual to the state and not the other way around and this led to a leveling of the society and from his point-of-view a weakening of the society that could serve to promote, bolster or enhance actions of individuals. By cutting themselves off, reasoned de Tocqueville, Americans dismissing the value of a dynamic social order in which engagement among citizens would advance intellectual and material wellbeing. Without that spark Americans, he feared, would fall into a rut of conformity where the societal energies would be channeled into maintaining a private world as opposed to a public world.

Let it be said that de Tocqueville’s insight was sound but not absolute. To be sure, the French version of sovereignty (shared by many other societies) had little traction in America. Even the elevation and the idealization of the sovereign individual did not, however, erase society in America. The American Revolution had sped up the development of an “American” society in lieu of different colonial societies, all which practiced a degree of deference to the elite classes and to the colonial authorities. Independence encouraged an American ideology among the newly independent states that took the eighteenth-century ideal of self-government seriously. Constructing a society in which sovereign authority originated with the individual proved to be more difficult than the theorists and idealists had presumed. Once the Constitution was ratified and the nation was legitimized,

⁸Thomas Bender, editor, *Democracy in America* (New York: The Modern Library/Random House, 1980), 395. See Volume 2, *Growth and Governance*, for a discussion of these and related passages in *De la démocratie en Amérique*.

ASSESSMENT: INDIVIDUALS AND SOCIETIES

however, these individuals had in fact created a political society that was armed with certain sovereign powers. But being a system built from the individual up rather than from the society down, the tendency of the individual to look inward rather than outward can be understood. Some thought the system that had been created was nothing more than a New World version of the British system – no other European system came close to the encapsulating the experiences of American – but others thought that a new system for arranging authority and dispersing power had been created independently of and bore little direct resemblance to the British system with its hereditary monarchy, its arranged social orders and its disadvantaged citizenry. The fundamental important distinction, however, was that emerging American ideology allowed for individuals to rule themselves and to be ruled under very prescribed conditions. To the majority of Americans, England had made contributions but America had chosen for itself. Hence, the society that evolved was more beholden to its sovereign individuals than it was to its national existence.

As valuable and insightful as Alexis de Tocqueville's observations were, Americans had decades earlier began to assemble the framework within which their political ideology would evolve. If Individualism was a term not often used, self-government was a term repeatedly used. Turn to any political speech or treatise, and the chances are high that you'll run into it or a cousin like – self-rule. One of those delightful moments in a graduate seminar under Professor Shaw Livermore, I was encouraged to hunt down the origin of the term and, in what proved to be less interesting than I had hoped, I tried to figure out if the presence or absence of hyphenation made a difference. In my mind I could envision a writer choosing between "self government" and "self-government" for emphasis, the first solely with reference to the individual governing himself and the second with reference to citizens governing themselves. It was a dream and had no basis in the real world of usage. What became apparent, however, after a while was that self-government had a dual meaning that has been pretty much lost in our contemporary political vocabulary. I described the search in Volume 1, *Who Shall Rule*, and will not repeat it here except to say that the definition of self-government was enlarged over time from ruling oneself to include ruling collectively ones selves. And then came the discovery for me, at least, of the 1790 memorandum, requested by President George Washington, of Thomas Jefferson's views on the constitutionality of the Bank of the United States in which Jefferson drew a distinction between the two versions of self-government cited above (several years before the Oxford English Dictionary's designation of its first official usage). From

ASSESSMENT: INDIVIDUALS AND SOCIETIES

that point forward I had found a linguistic lens, hyphenated or unhyphenated, through which I could try to understand the politics and the battles that ensued in antebellum America. It would seem – I kept no statistics – that no matter the issue or the disagreement or the conflict the term self-government found its way into the dispute. Opposing speeches in Congress could disingenuously cite the term, as if the opponent didn't have a clue as to what it meant or how it should be used. It was a term all could gather around to celebrate a commonality, and yet it came to represent both the essence of the American experience and the dynamite to blow it apart.

Individualism as proposed by de Tocqueville had a powerful simplicity to it – individuals pulling themselves out of the large into the small to act upon their ambitions and pursuits – but in fact self-governing individuals in a self-governing society became a multi-layered phenomenon. Americans could live in geographic remoteness and they could act within their own narrow confines that defined their daily routines independently of societal agencies and intrusions, and yet, almost paradoxically, as the nation expanded its border, spreading itself across the continent, the articulation of the ideal of self-governing individuals within a self-governing society became ever more complicated. The ideal of individuals ruling themselves within a social order that Jefferson declared required at most a frugal and limited government was never lost, was often repeated and drove both the policies of the unionists and the secessionists. Nonetheless, self-action – the hallmark of a society of the self-governing – entailed unexpected and not always harmonious choices and outcomes.

The Jeffersonians shaped the context within which individuals could best exert their wills for the benefit of themselves and the larger society. It was land-based, market-oriented and citizen-dominated. If citizens were vigilant in their practice of virtuous principles (part and parcel of their nature) the need to be governed would fade and the reward from exercising their individual wills would be amplified. We can sneer, as many historians and commentators have done in print, at their *naiveté* at how the world worked, how untrustworthy the individual was, how some great minds and great ideas were ignored because of the appeal of a more simple-minded, self-serving ideology. But the sneer is undeserved. If there is any meaning to the phrase, The American Way of Life, it is grounded in the Jeffersonian *naiveté*. Without knowing the intricacies of the ideological battles that Americans fought between the Revolutionary War and the Civil War, the public refrain will sound more like Jefferson than his adversaries. It will be the intricacies of the vision of a society of self-governing individuals, however, that will engage antebellum Americans to the point of the ultimate choice.

ASSESSMENT: INDIVIDUALS AND SOCIETIES

Growth became both a prospect and peril. America exited the Revolutionary War with an abundance of land. And during the nineteenth century that abundance grew ever larger. Exploiting that resource meant Americans had to move and resettle, and this they did, as they were expected to do. After the United States and Great Britain ended the War of 1812 and settled certain boundary and territorial issues, the western movement accelerated. The Constitution was virtually silent on how the nation should manage new territories and add them as new states. Certain precedents had been established during the Confederacy, and they were reconfigured in light of what it was thought met rather vague constitutional standards. In 1790 the nation was nestled between the Atlantic Ocean and the Appalachians, a few hundred miles wide and more than a thousand miles long. By 1860 the width had grown to several thousand miles, and 13 states had nearly tripled. Vast regions remained unsettled, but thanks to a young, vigorous and healthy population plus the inflowing of millions of immigrants the nation of several million had grown nearly ten-fold. In purely statistical terms, as the nation grew in size, it also grew in wealth, both in aggregate and *per-capita* wealth, to the extent that the data allows us to estimate. The nation was rich in both natural and human resources that the space itself had made possible.

The perils were omnipresent and would eventually shake the nation at its very foundations. From the very outset of its physical expansion dissents could be heard. Even the most individualistic in their outlook had worries. How could accessibility in a society that vaunted individual initiative and independence pose risks. On one side, the institutional bonds, already frighteningly weak in their view, would be further frayed; on the other side, a society built around the virtuous citizen, capable of making sounder judgments than any instituted government, required a stable social order to avoid the temptations that would temper his virtuous nature and excite his vicious nature. This was an honest reflection of how colonial society situated between the ocean and the mountains had matured and how it could not be easily maintained. Americans had little time or inclination to debate the perils against the prospects, and some forward-looking disciples of the American Experiment understood the dynamic at work and became proponents of the self-made within a benignly-orchestrated social order and political system. This was Francis Lieber's "socialism" that was counterpoised to his "individualism". Being European in background and education, he had less trouble accommodating the two counterposes than most Americans did. At every turn, where the state came up against the individual, Americans launched a battle.

ASSESSMENT: INDIVIDUALS AND SOCIETIES

It is worth invoking de Tocqueville once again. The act of abandoning or withdrawing or leave-taking was agnostic. It was not a particular class or rank or vocation or occupation in exit, but rather it was an American's action. Much of *De la démocratie en Amérique* was about encounters, interactions, arrangements or dispositions in a societal context that was less anchored and more fluid than more traditional societies with which de Tocqueville was familiar. Americans were not society-less – they had governments, laws, institutions, customs, practices, in fact, they had a wide array of them, layer upon layer, agency upon agency – but they accorded them little permanence and even less authority against the preferred life to which de Tocqueville's individualist gravitated. I grew up in a mid-twentieth-century version of that de Tocquevillian construct.

Americans on the move and on the make was not a single narrative and had many different and often contradictory subtexts. How to weave these subtexts into a coherent rendering of a developing society that shared a common ideal, which in and of itself defied common action, defines the historian's dilemma. Words were written or spoken, a behavior was assumed and actions were proposed or demanded within a context. Individual action could derive from as many sources as there were individual to act. To create a simple, stable and selective social order that implied an unanimity of expectations and behaviors (social scientist distinguish between behavior and action) would provide the crucible within which the nobility of the individual and the virtue toward which the individual was naturally inclined to flower. A society of self-ruling individuals would best work, perhaps only work, if they could first create a commonality of purpose and aspiration. That did not happen in nineteenth-century America. Thus, the task of establishing some basic common boundaries by which individual behavior and action could be restrained and redirected in such a fashion and to such a degree that individual action would be suffused within a larger context. In the private world of individuals interacting among themselves, according to de Tocqueville and others, it was illustrated in "voluntary associations" that arose for a specific purpose and then disbanded. That was insufficient, in fact was inoperative, in the act of trying to build a nation.

Read John C Calhoun's 1816 House speech on why the the nation, having just emerged from war and having boundaries that enclosed hundreds of thousands of acres, would benefit from a "national program of internal improvements" that was specific but modest: build some roads connecting east and west, north and south, over long distances that would allow for commerce and communication with money not raised by taxes or fees but from dividends owed to the federal government because of its ownership of stock in the Second Bank of the United

ASSESSMENT: INDIVIDUALS AND SOCIETIES

States. When Calhoun explained this as a national asset that neither states nor individuals could create or finance or justify, he was also implying that the American people, twice in two wars, having shed their blood, had cemented their commitment to liberty and independence and were on the threshold for the next stage. He went so far as to dismiss as tedious and unbecoming of a great people to spend hours parsing the Constitution. The people knew what the Constitution contained and would prefer that the government it created work in their behalf to smooth the way toward realizing their goals and ambitions. Ignoring the fact that this was not the Calhoun that is better known, we can still admire the simplicity and straightforwardness of the intent of the bill. To many modern ears, such improvements expressed a common-sense approach to a “national” problem. Instead, the bill set off a firestorm driven largely by a fear of what would happen. The bill that the Congress passed but the President vetoed was a mishmash and shared little in common with Calhoun’s national legislative approach. The debate and veto laid down a marker that would come to define the gulf between individual behavior and national accord that Americans would wrestle with for decades.

Would it not be much simpler if we could quantify how governance was allotted. The extremes are an individual totally free, unencumbered as Robinson Crusoe might have felt on a desert island, and a system so totally dominant the individual had no choice, no independence, virtually no personality. In post-Revolutionary America governance leaned more in the direction of the former than the latter. Even Americans accepted, whether or not they understood, that individuals absolutely on their own, would become destructive and that surrendering some liberty for the sake of collective governance could be beneficial. But how much, at what level and under what terms? The battle over governance in antebellum America was not strictly between individual liberty and collective rule because the collective was a complicated structure.

Americans are familiar with the tri-layered formal structure: local (municipal or county), state and national. The heart of the structure was the state, which had evolved from from a colonial entity that over the 150 years of rule under the English had amassed significant authority over domestic affairs. Even though it was not uncommon for groups of colonists to set off to found a new town and to set up the necessary local governmental apparatus to allow the settlement to function, numerous conflicts erupted between local founders and colonial authorities. Over time, local settlements deferred to colonial authorities. Local governments had a sphere of influence that local citizens largely managed (outside of port towns and governmental headquarters, few royal officials were evident, unlike the Spanish-American system in which the crown appointed many local

ASSESSMENT: INDIVIDUALS AND SOCIETIES

administrators), but the “legitimacy” of a settlement and the actions its citizens endorsed depended upon acquiescence to the mandates of legislatures and governors. On other words, individual citizens exercised certain political prerogatives within a context of deference toward established colonial and royal authority. When the insufferable expansion or reassertion of royal authority began to disturb the ruling patterns that colonists had come to accept, the entity by which they expressed their displeasure and eventually declared their independence was not through local government, municipal or county, that was closest to the citizen but through colonial government that was assumed to be the principal guardian of the individual citizen. Local uprisings and citizen rebellions were important episodes in the march toward a showdown, but when the showdown came, it came by way of the constituted authority represented by the former colonial government. In the absence of royal government to which American colonists had submitted for a century and a half in conjunction with “accidental”, home-grown, colonial governments, citizens within newly-independent states began to reshape the colonial structure they had inherited into governments that fit their versions how they wished to be ruled. In accord with evolving constitutional theory, all the new states wrote constitutions, and while they shared a uniformity in terms of the delegation of powers as well as the separation of powers, they were not carbon-copies of each other. When America began its existence, independent of England, it did so with 13 sovereign states with 13 different constitutions (a few of which were being continually revised) that the citizens of the states independently had approved with an expectation that the 13 sovereign states would formalize and expand the “Continental-Congress” system to allow for sovereign states to determine how a union or a confederacy or an alliance would serves their interests. That the states were at the heart of the creation of the nation needs no further testimony than to repeat that when other states began to join the Union they were said to join as if they had existed at the time that the 13 original states had finally agreed on a national structure and therefore enjoyed all the rights and privileges that the original states had entered the Union with. In short, even though future states were carved out of public land under the control of the federal government, they were accorded a “specialness” because they were a state.

The Articles of Confederation were specific to the point that discussions or debates about inherent powers were useless. The framers, although making en effort to link their charter with the charter it was replacing, were generally of one mind that the Constitution should contain language that allowed for flexibility and adaptability, as the times and circumstances might require. While it was specific about procedures and agencies by which the government would function with some powers spelled out in detail, as it predecessor had declared, it also departed in two

ASSESSMENT: INDIVIDUALS AND SOCIETIES

significant ways: implied powers could be called upon to advance the national interest and transfer of sovereignty from the people to the government was an act that did not require the approval of the states and thereby set the national government apart from and, in the areas where it was granted prerogatives, transcendent to state government. What was omitted, what was implied and what was assumed became fodder for attacks on the Constitution during ratification and then during the Federalists' administrations. To allay fears the framers agreed to a set of amendments that would define those individual rights that the government could not override. The government, as I noted earlier, was the national government, and although state governments could be just as prone to intrude, many state constitutions had similar protective clauses. Besides, the dispute was with the new central government, not the state governments. A segment of the population was prepared to renounce and replace the new charter, and anti-constitutionalists were only emboldened by Thomas Jefferson's Kentucky resolutions and James Madison's Virginia Resolution, although Jefferson's was far bolder in intent and language. Were they just warning shots? Could be, but for the next fifty years they were alluded to repeatedly as what must happen when a part of the Union felt unjustifiably punished.

In time, however, as the nation overcame early jitters on how to assess the new governing structure, the Jeffersonian model proved triumphant. There should be no mistaking what this model entailed. Citizens had recognized two formal sovereignties, each with different responsibilities. The greater risk to personal liberty derived from the central government, not from the state governments. The presumption for this was that central governments by their very overarching nature will seek to expand their powers at the expense of individuals and states. Hence, to maintain a limited and frugal central government, the Constitution must be read strictly and the states, which were more likely to protect individuals from assaults on their liberties, both what they had surrendered and what they had retained, must be allowed to exercise, as was intended, authority over domestic affairs. The more the central government was allowed to intrude on the domestic side, the more individual liberty came under threat and the more vigilant states and their government must be in combating such incursions. Not all Americans agreed with this interpretation of how the nation should be governed, and not even all Jeffersonians bought into such republican orthodoxy. Criticisms of the Constitution continued, but the central government in the hands of Jeffersonians seemingly posed fewer threats to a political formulation based on a tripartite sovereignty – individual, state and federal. To be sure, the Jeffersonians did not always read the Constitution strictly, if it served their purposes not to, but overall downsizing the federal government while upgrading the state governments with the aim of

ASSESSMENT: INDIVIDUALS AND SOCIETIES

allowing individuals a wide berth in which to exercise their options shaped the vision that Americans had about society and government.

The nationalistic outburst during and after the War of 1812, set off by an unanticipated mobility geographically and economically, attempted to revise the formulation without destroying the ideal. It ran up against the prevailing sentiment, strongly held by Southerners but also embraced by Northerners and Westerners, that the Constitution must be read as restricting rather than expanding federal authority. The founder of the Jeffersonian model himself, in more than one letter expressed dismay and fear that the effort to enlarge the national government was dangerous because it would shift the management of domestic affairs from where it was properly located in the hands of the people in their states. In prior years Jefferson and his allies recognized the possibility that with constitutional amendments that would provide necessary safeguards the central government might assume authority over certain internal matters in lieu of state governments. The likelihood that such amendments would ever be introduced was never strong, and except two technical amendments, the 11th that prohibited citizens of the United States or of foreign countries to bring suit in federal court against a state in which they did not reside and the 12th that eliminated the Election College malfunction that had marked the presidential elections of 1796 and 1800, no further amendments were added until after the Civil War. Even though the Supreme Court remained in the hands of Federalist/National justices like John Marshall and was still scorned by those who wanted its independence reduced by legislative or constitutional remedies, the Court tended to operate in the background except for the public skirmishes early in Jefferson's first term and much later over the Second Bank of the United States and Indian Removal policies. The appointment by Jackson of Roger B Taney to succeed Marshall more or less completed the dismantling of a national perspective based upon a less than strict reading of the Federal Constitution. A national perspective on how self-government both at the individual and institutional levels could work without undermining the ideal of Americans governing themselves was not lost by any means, but even when reformulated in positive terms of advancing individual opportunity and progress, it lost ground against the Jeffersonian model. Indeed, the Jeffersonian model itself underwent a further modification that not only must the Constitution be read strictly but it must also be read as if the national government and the state governments were equal partners in the formal governance that citizens had established with distinct spheres of authority whose boundaries could not be traversed. The Union will survive in all its strength and glory only if these spheres were recognized and maintained. The more doctrinaire stance, of course, was that political authority had flowed from the individual to the state and from the state to

ASSESSMENT: INDIVIDUALS AND SOCIETIES

the nation. But even if one rejected that interpretation – and it did not fit with what the framers themselves intended, although their deliberations, known to us, were unknown at the time of these intense debates – one could still accept an interpretation that divided the authority surrendered by individuals between one entity responsible for largely foreign and military affairs and another for domestic and internal affairs. The gray area was large and controversial, but the dual sovereignists generally took the position that the language of the Constitution, read strictly, could reduce the gray areas without endangering the nation. Under such an arrangement the liberty preserved to the individual would be best protected. That was the position that the post-War-of-1812 nationalists tried to sell with only moderate if not modest success. Not that they opposed the preservation of individual liberty, but that they advocated a more opportunistic way to enjoy liberty and progress. Their victories, even when they controlled the national government, were few and far between. It was the harder message to sell because the outcomes for individuals was uncertain. Let me add a personal observation. Even a cursory reading of the documentation from the Constitutional Convention cannot support this point of view on the equality between the central government and the state governments. The intent for the majority – those who disagreed either left the Convention or voted against the charter – was to create a supreme national government that would not erase state governments but would reduce their autonomy. Since the Constitution left much unsaid and undefined, the vacuum in a sense had to be filled, and it was filled in ways some of the prominent framers may not have anticipated.

It did not end there, however. What the framers had not included specifically in the Constitution was by “gentlemen’s agreement” outside the purview of the federal government. If the citizens had delegated powers to the states in areas that were not specified in the Federal Constitution, then the framers’ lack of action meant exactly that – off limits for the federal government. This could apply to an array of issues – chartered corporation, internal improvements, territorial acquisitions – that had landed on the federal plate but should not have. If the framers were to be honored for this endeavors, rewriting the Constitutions in ways they (purposely, I might add) agreed not to was hardly a fitting tribute. This line of reasoning became especially useful, as the slavery debates heated up, because since slavery existed in half the states at the time of the Constitutional Convention and yet the word was omitted from the document, the framers’ intent could be said to be clear, their stance solid, that slavery had no national significance. It should be left to the people of the states to decide how it should be managed and directed. The question got prickly over the extension of slavery. Slavery was viewed as property, and under the 5th Amendment the refusal to allow a slaveholder to transfer his property

ASSESSMENT: INDIVIDUALS AND SOCIETIES

wherever he chose to live and work could be interpreted as an act of depriving a person his property and his liberty by restricting what he could do with his property. Such action would deny due process, which, defined legally, meant unfair treatment. For most of the early national period slaveholders did not attempt to move slaves into states where slavery was outlawed so long as the institution of slavery itself was not interfered with. Over time, the “presumed” arrangement favored by the founding fathers fell apart, and not surprisingly the argument over slavery turned on what was said, what was omitted, but was intended. In fact, the framers said precious little about slavery and left out a great deal, although some members of the constitutional convention expressed their opposition to slavery. The lack of information, however, was sufficient grounds to assume that they fully intended to leave it alone, an easier case to make than broadly reading a document in which the word slavery never appeared. I am reminded of a passage from the late John Updike’s last collection of stories: “The dead are so easy to misquote.”⁹

Andrew Jackson pointedly reminded John C Calhoun that he would not countenance any threat to disrupt the Union. As President, however, he pretty much held to the Jeffersonian view that the states were the best guardians of individual rights and the national government in all its grandeur that must be defended had a limited role in governance. The idea of Union, despite differences over how the Union should be comprised, was to be preserved at any cost. America, having won two wars and having implanted a form of self-government that the world had come to envy (that was repeatedly proclaimed), could not retreat in the defense of the Union, even as Americans argued publicly about what it meant. Moreover, America faced an enveloping contradiction: slavery had to be accommodated even though it stood in direct opposition to the “democratic” ideals Americans espoused and claimed to practice. The unleashing of the individual, in the economic arena especially, had some unintended ramifications. What some prominent Americans, northern and southern, thought would happen to slavery was that it would wither away, and specific action would not have to be taken. It did not wither away because the plantation economy to which it was linked began to thrive. Southern planters could make money with slave labor, and the more productive and profitable their plantations became, the more dependent they were on slave labor. If the opportunity had ever existed for slavery to be ended, it evaporated in the first quarter of the nineteenth century.

Not only did slavery not wither away, but it was no longer confined to the original slave-holding states. As American moved West, without any clear guidance on how

⁹Updike, “My Father’s Tears,” *My Father’s Tears, and Other Stories* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 2009), 206.

ASSESSMENT: INDIVIDUALS AND SOCIETIES

slavery and territorial expansion should be treated from either a constitutional or a legislative approach, the nation more or less fell back on the earlier precedents set by the Northwest Ordinances and vague assumptions about climate and geography. The territory between the Appalachians and the Mississippi was claimed by some of the original colonies, then states, which had agreed to relinquish authority to the federal government. They were settled, though, as if they were extensions of the existing states: slavery permitted below the Ohio River but excluded above it. Once the settlements crossed the Mississippi River, new forces came into play. These lands had former owners who had had different views about slavery. More importantly, the federal government had acquired these lands with public moneys and presumably had the power to decide how they should be admitted to the Union. If slaveowners wanted to exercise their rights to acquire and transfer property, which under prevailing slave laws was how slaves were defined, could they be prevented from settling in these lands irrespective of what prior owners thought about slavery without violating the 5th Amendment? The Missouri controversy over the admission of a territory whose people approved of slavery presented an issue that the nation had been able to avoid up to now. And constitutional muscle was flexed on both sides of the controversy: the federal government as the holder of the land could set the rules or the federal government was obligated to abide by the framers's acquiescence to the existence of slavery and the absence of any national constitutional provisions regulating slavery. The standoff was compromised in a way that established a questionable legislative remedy: slavery forbidden above a line and slavery to be decided on below the line by the settlers. It was assumed, of course, that territories below the line would endorse slavery. Some argued that there was no constitutional authority to permit such an intrusion and other the opposite that the federal government had not exercised its full authority that could mean the exclusion of slavery. The nation lived with and came to accept as a workable solution the Missouri Line, irrespective of the constitutional criticisms.

We may underestimate the significance of the act by Congress to prohibit slavery from a part of the United States. That the federal government without specific constitutional authority could regulate under what conditions a person could move and relocate with family and property was not uniformly approved of. The federal government had enacted other legislation without specific authority since Washington's first term and including Jefferson's Presidency (Louisiana Purchase, for example), but the Missouri Compromise had breached what some, perhaps many, had assumed was the wish of the framers not to interfere with slavery. How the Missouri Compromise would have fared if other territories carved out of the Louisiana Purchase had also applied for statehood never moved to the front burner

ASSESSMENT: INDIVIDUALS AND SOCIETIES

because after the admission of Missouri and Maine another 15 years would pass before another territory applied for statehood. Other issues that also derived from what government should or should not do dominated the stage. Except for a protective tariff to help encourage domestic manufacturing that had support in the north where the economic landscape was under going some dynamic changes, any effort to push the federal government into an increasing role in developing the economy or reordering the society was met with resistance on the same grounds as legislating on slavery had. Many states assumed a more active promotion of economic development or social change with mixed results. Despite the fact that the national government's coffers grew markedly from a combination of land sales and import duties, which exceeded what was needed to reduce the national debt, the US Treasury was reporting annual surpluses (since only a portion of the federal debt could be paid off each year) while the state-governments, underwriting what the federal government refused to finance saw their debt obligations balloon. That states were better suited to undertake such projects had been long preached and was now heartily practiced. Nationalists continued to press for more federal involvement, a broader federal presence, but the dichotomous relationship that began under Jefferson and intensified under Jackson of what belonged to central government and to state government allowed for at best a few specific victories. Many of the economic reforms proposed to remove the distortions or overcome the obstacles that caused citizens to organize and to protest were meant not to advance the idea of the power of government to remedy and benefit but to reduce the role of government in behalf of the restoration of the individual to his entitled place. Banking, the most controversial of the economic issues, was portrayed in the same terms as a retailer or an artisan. Individuals could decide if they wanted to be bankers, to accept deposits and to make loans, and they would arrange their business affairs much as the grocer or the shoemaker or the hauler. Special charters and privileges were not needed if individuals could be free from state-imposed restraints to pursuit their interests. Even social and political reforms including the anti-slavery movement shunned institutional strategies. Make the individual see the light and the reform would accomplish it goal. Even if seeing the light under the most radical propositions might mean the destruction of the society, that would pave the way for a new, more morally-grounded social order to emerge and flourish. Concern for the indigent, the stricken, the dispossessed was not lacking, but it was to be dealt with locally and personally. That it did not get done was not the fault of the system but of the individual. It was said then and is still repeated that government intercession would only make matters worse. Self-governing individuals meant what it said, and for better or for worse, vast numbers of antebellum Americans were left largely to their own devices and dependent upon their own wits. Some triumphed spectacularly, although to triumph was no

ASSESSMENT: INDIVIDUALS AND SOCIETIES

guarantee of permanent success; most made do, although the idea of grasping opportunities had become a permanent condition. Individual advancement can be argued from available statistics, but quality of that advancement was uneven. What did happen in American life was that amenities improved through new technologies and processes at manageable costs so that while individual advancement might be modest, individual wellbeing was on the rise.

In antebellum America an individual was the noble creation and the social, political and economic apparatus that was constructed around him was open to suspicion and distrust. Individuals were not totally exempt from personal derelictions, but in searching for causes Americans tended to blame the system rather than the individual. Strip away the institutions, bureaucracies, agencies, etc., and allow as much free reign as possible and the results will be better. But stripping away was idealistic goal because the social order had a place and a function. Thus, for some reformers and advocates calling forth and counting upon the inner strength and personal capacity of the individual to help to eradicate the evil that insinuated itself into a life could leave the individual as defenseless as ever. Whether the individual or the system what Americans could not miss was that people were poor, malnourished and living a beggarly rather than productive life. Private charity plus some municipally-funded welfare provided relief but hardly on the scale that was required. In a recent study by Gavin Jones entitled *American Hungers* he offers an literary analysis of the depth and extent of poverty from the 1840s to the present. What American writers said about poverty provides an non-quantifiable treatment of how Americans existed and behaved within a society where poverty was supposed to be minimized. Jones makes an interesting observation at the outset:

poverty seems to fit more naturally in other national situations....The peculiar pressures on the term *poverty* in the United States, pressures that make cultural and personal explanation dominate public policy, have also yielded a sophisticated literary strain in which the ideological subversiveness of persistent want translate into epistemological and formal dilemmas of a textual kind.

Jones's aim is to make use of the literary aesthetic to comment on a social disorder. In our contemporary world some critics of and commentators on America's economic malaise of "super-rich" along side of rising poverty rates and declining indicators of healthy and prosperous lives threatens the core of our democracy and

ASSESSMENT: INDIVIDUALS AND SOCIETIES

our idealism of individual progress and achievement.¹⁰ The idea of poverty itself is controversial. Americans prefer not to talk or think about classes, although classes surely do exist. A class of poor seems unsuited to the American ideology, and when Americans take up the discussion of poverty – what forces were at work to “marginalize” and impoverish some Americans – they turn to cultural backgrounds and other non-class attributes. Jones cited the late-nineteenth-century writer, William Dean Howells, who noted that in the United States, which came to stand for equality if it came to stand for anything, poverty was treated as if it were unreal, nonexistent or impossible and that attitude resulted in an indifference to how the poor lived. And yet some American writers took on poorness directly within the American context.¹¹

American antebellum writers like Herman Melville and Nathaniel Hawthorne treated poorness as a chronic societal condition, not a temporary one. It demanded attention. Some antebellum writers linked poverty firmly to mounting racial tensions, but in the few studies that have tried to quantify poorness, culture rather than race may be more significant. Native-born poor (white and non-white) populated the countryside as well as the city, and those in the city lived along side immigrant poor representing several different national backgrounds. Poverty posed an enigma in that America was a land of “opportunity” “enjoying” a scarcity of labor and an availability of land. Joseph Tuckerman, a Boston social worker, wrote, according to Jones, that poverty was such a “very dark and difficult subject”, a feeling shared by others among whom were writers who tried to find a different language to express what they could clearly observe in lieu of trying to analyze poverty.¹² American capitalism had by general consensus produced periods of financial and economic instability but was hardly on the chopping block simply because of the presence of the poor. Invariably one runs up against David Henry Thoreau who seemed in his effort to deny the value of the materialist, so deeply embedded in the capitalist (and bourgeois) vision of achievement, to embrace a nobleness identified with the “humble log huts and cottages of the poor” in which the lives of inhabitants – the poor – were “in agreeable to the imagination.” But, then, Thoreau had to deal with the spiritual and moral degeneracy of not only the rich but also the poor. Admiration for the humble life had its limits.¹³

¹⁰*American Hungers: The Problem of Poverty in U. S. Literature, 1840-1945* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), Preface, xv.

¹¹*American Hungers*, 19. In the Introduction, “The Problem of Poverty in Literary Criticism”, Gavin reviews a range of criticisms on how American writers have treated poorness in America.

¹²*American Hungers*, 26.

¹³*American Hungers*, 32-33. Quotes from Thoreau cited in Gavin.

ASSESSMENT: INDIVIDUALS AND SOCIETIES

Antebellum literature under Jones's guidance reveals a rich and affecting portrayal of the underbelly of American life. Something was amiss, and how it came about – loss of agrarian values, rise of manufacturing, immigration, slavery, too little religion, too much materialism – and what to do about it was baffling. Commitment to a society of self-governing individuals did not offer ready solutions. Collective action in the form of state intervention was proposed by some but ran afoul of a deep-seated, limited-government political ethos. Though awakened to the crisis, Americans and later historians who wrote about the crisis had no idea of the numbers of the poor or the impoverished. Thousands upon thousands, to be sure, but no accurate figures have been assembled, if they ever could be. Even though rural poverty existed and could be severe (based on diaries and letters) the crisis was often identified with urban America. That was where the slums with their overcrowded and unsanitary tenements and the poverty that Americans heard or read about were on clear view. Out of this social urban cauldron emerged at least one plausible approach to a problem that antebellum America was baffled by. It belongs to the post-Civil War period, although it drew on pre-Civil War experiences.¹⁴ Horatio Alger (jr) wrote a series of popular fictional stories about various urban characters, all poor, who overcame their poverty, usually with the help of a well-to-do wealthy American who lent a hand or a dollar or a sentiment that opened a redemptive path. Alger himself was a minister and a son of a minister but was accused of child molestation, left the ministry and ended up working with some private charities in New York City. From those experiences he fashioned his stories that refurbished his name and made him rich. He remade his life, and that was what his stories featured. Boys, down and out, by luck or puck, combined with a strong moral sense, could remake their lives. They didn't necessarily become wealthy in the stories, but they changed their lives in ways that might bring them eventual wealth. A second chance had always been part of the American experience – in the mundane world American bankruptcy laws – and these stories restored robustness to that theme.¹⁵ Apparently, Americans loved these stories of success against adversity, adversity not always the fault of the victim. At times it was an accident or misfortune, but at other times it was quite clearly the unvirtuous behavior of another individual. Indeed, in many circumstances painted by Alger, the ideal of self-governing individuals and the system that such an ideal had spawned seemed deeply flawed. A few rules and regulations plus stricter enforcement – a greater public presence – might have

¹⁴David Ward, *Poverty, Ethnicity, and the American City, 1840-1925, Changing Conceptions of the Slum and the Ghetto* (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), an indispensable analysis of how these urban phenomena evolved.

¹⁵Many of the stories are available on-line at various sites.

ASSESSMENT: INDIVIDUALS AND SOCIETIES

reduced the source of the adversity afflicting so many. The stories celebrated individual puck, but the puck was needed because the social order had evolved in such a way as to allow the vile and vicious to harm the innocent and the potentially good. I need not remind anyone that from the outset of this experiment in self-governance, the critics had stressed that individuals needed to be governed (in varying degrees) because on their own without the restraints their conduct would turn mean, greedy and selfish. If one reads enough of the stories about *Ragged Dick* or the young men who ate and slept at Newsboys' Lodging in New York City, one cannot avoid thinking about the sources of evil as well as the examples of triumph.

The Horatio Alger stories have had great durability. I'm not sure how many read them, but many Americans down through the years have endorsed the ideal that with a little bit of luck and a little bit of puck individuals can move themselves up the economic ladder. These stories do not document that Americans portrayed in the stories ever overcame adversity in the manner that Alger described, although surely some did. Statistics shows that upward mobility was a part of the American experience before the Civil War and certainly afterwards, and yet poverty remained a distinct feature of the American social landscape. Few ever think about the context for Alger's stories. Most of his stories were published after the Civil War, but they were based in part on what he witnessed during his ministry before the War. In a society that praised and prized the capacity of the individual, what had gone wrong? Industrialization, immigration, slavery, intemperance, materialism and, of course, government. Any and all of these phenomena (and some not listed) could contribute. The last item occupied a curious position because for some there was too little – government could serve as a vehicle for assisting and protecting the individual *à la* Clay, Quincy Adams, Webster and others nationalists – and for others, whether there was too little or too much, government, especially the central government, must remain bounded and restricted. Perfecting the individual was the goal of reform in antebellum America, but how perfecting the individual would neutralize the forces that seemed to be making life so difficult and degraded was never spelled out. Poverty had always been in evidence in America, both pre- and post-Revolutionary, but its severity and its spread in the first half of the nineteenth century caused soul-searching about how to combat it and eradicate it. Some American thinkers and writers understood how Europeans with less of a focus on protecting individual liberty could attempt to mobilize social and political institutions in behalf of relief and how Americans lacked not only the means but also the convictions. Horatio Alger offered in simple and straightforward prose a way out of poverty without much interest in the relationship between the “way in” and the “way out”.

ASSESSMENT: INDIVIDUALS AND SOCIETIES

At the heart of American's dilemma was slavery. Managing the debate over slavery proved to be harder and harder in the aftermath of the declaration of war with Mexico. Wilmot's Proviso exploded any consensus by acquiescence or agreement on how slavery should be controlled. It is not mysterious how popular sovereignty assumed such "popularity" in the United States. In the abstract popular sovereignty simply the people acting to express their will. But the term "popular sovereignty" came to have a special meaning as the slavery debates heated up. It is not known when the term was first used in public debate. It was used interchangeably with "squatter's sovereignty", but Lewis Cass who was among the earliest to use popular sovereignty disavowed any connection. Cass believed and stated as much in many public speeches that the establishment of a government was the act of people without any authorization or instruction from any formal body. That was in his view how the United States was created and relative to the territories that was how they organized. The federal might be the technical owner of the land (by purchase or cession), but until the people, that is, the settlers, decided to organize a government, no one else, not even the federal government, could set up a government. Before the people acted, the federal government's only role was to maintain law and order and not more. Once the people initiated the process their actions were final and beyond review except that because the nation had embraced "republican principles" the government the people created must reflect those principles. By Cass's reasoning, the federal government had virtually no power to interfere. Since the Constitution said very little, the power to organize a government for a territory must rest with the settlers. Once the territory had reached, the people would determine the nature and structure of the government that might be different from the territorial government. With special reference to slavery, it could be voted in during the territorial phase and out during the statehood phase, and *vis-a-versa*. Part of the appeal of popular sovereignty was not only its consistency with Americans' understanding of how governments were formed and to whom they were responsible but its "apparent" simplicity. People came together, made decisions, and what they decided was to be recognized as the will of the people. After years of preaching the virtues of popular sovereignty and gaining adherents like Stephen A. Douglas, one of the most powerful members of the Congress, the demise of the Missouri Compromise after the Congress agreed to the Compromise of 1850, popular sovereignty emerged as the *modus operandi* for the organization of territories without the Missouri line. It proved to be anything but simple. It provoked a quasi-war that once begun could not be contained. Without knowing how many Americans actually favored or opposed popular sovereignty (election returns can serve as an indirect proxy), the idea of letting people decide an issue that ran counter to what a substantial number if not a

ASSESSMENT: INDIVIDUALS AND SOCIETIES

majority thought was inconsistent with the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution and America's basic ideals. As it turned out settlers were not willing to let a majority rule. For one thing, it was not clear how to get a majority vote or to conduct an election to determine a majority. Popular sovereignty was the epitome of letting individuals rule, but it was also capable of disavowing what might be the popular will. As popular sovereignty push Kansas deeper into armed combat, Cass and Douglas continued to defend it as a basic American principle that was sacrificed to public agitation and incompetent administration. But popular sovereignty like other strategies that favored individuals acting without guidance or guidelines mistakenly assumed self-acting individuals could reach a consensus. They couldn't and they wouldn't with tragic consequences. The other side of the Individualism coin was Majoritarianism. The conflict had originated with the Declaration itself, was in full evidence during the Constitutional Convention and was played out repeatedly in the antebellum period until "a majority" finally said NO.

More than half century ago, when I was beginning my graduate studies, I was introduced to Louis Hartz. The argument that Hartz presented was fairly straightforward. It was first broached in *Economic Policy and Democratic Thought: Pennsylvania 1776-1860* (1948) and later greatly elaborated in *The Liberal Tradition in America: An Interpretation of American Political Thought* (1955). These two books were followed by perhaps his most intriguing study – *The Founding of New Societies* (1964) – on how diverse colonial societies evolved into nation-states, what they brought along from the Mother Country and what they did with what they brought along. With respect to the last book, which I find the most fascinating of any of Hartz's published works, I had the pleasure of watching him perform in a seminar toward the end of my dissertation research on eighteenth-century Mexico. Even though I began my graduate studies in Jacksonian America and ended them in colonial Latin America, Louis Hartz has been part of the intellectual baggage I've carried around with me. I have argued both sides, that he was seminal and that he was fashionable. The brief few hours I watched him perform he was friendly and open and generous but only answered questions with his own question to the querier. The late Richard Morse, a specialist in Latin American urban history, wrote the chapter on the unfolding of the Hispanic fragment with somewhat less enthusiasm for the construct than Hartz revealed in his Introduction and chapter on the unfolding of the English fragment. The interplay within the patriarchal system that Morse favored to describe the Mother Countries and their colonies made the fragment thesis less compelling. I belonged

ASSESSMENT: INDIVIDUALS AND SOCIETIES

to a relatively new school of Latin American economic historians who put more emphasis on measuring and modeling than had previously been undertaken. The unfolding of a Hispanic or in Hartz's own words a feudal fragment was not easily accommodated. The fragment thesis, however, proved to be a useful pedagogical tool, and students in both my Latin American history classes and my US History classes learned about Hartz, fragments, the dynamics of societal development and change.

I am an admirer but not a fan of Hartz's interpretation of American history. I have made reference to his ideas in several places in the preceding volumes. I do not consider myself a student of Hartz, having over the years read only a few of the critical studies of the Hartzian model. I have always thought that his study of Pennsylvania's economic development within a liberal framework was more solidly grounded in historical material than his later studies. Hartz was not a political historian; he was a political theorist, or perhaps interpreter, and while he may be criticized for the way he used or misused history, as we all can be, he must be recognized for what he intended to do – not to write or rewrite the political history of the United States, but to offer a theoretical framework within which to try to understand that history, as other have written it. To abstract was more important to Hartz than to document.

In consulting my notes taken decades ago from *The Liberal Tradition* for this study, I was surprised to find I still had a small collection of 3x5 “note cards” with material from his more famous book. The note cards were not enough, and I soon returned to rereading large sections of both *Economic Development and Democratic Thought* and *The Liberal Tradition*. I am not persuaded that I have ever gotten Hartz quite right, but what I have written in these three volumes and what Hartz wrote crossover in curious ways. Let me cite a few examples. Because of its inherited liberal fragment America did not have the conditions for a social revolution. Feudalism did not come to America, nor did Marxism. A social order derived mainly from a liberal, bourgeois tradition limited the political conflicts that Americans could have. In an interesting passage on James Madison and Charles Pinckney at the Constitutional Convention within a larger context of whether or not America's Revolution was a “revolution”, Hartz credited Pinckney (who was from South Carolina and not Virginia as Hartz stated) with insights about history and America that distinguished him from Madison. Madison like many of his peers, writes Hartz, spoke of experience all the way from Greece through the Middle Ages into his own contemporary world, a way of thinking about America that Hartz called “aprioristic”. The result of such thinking was to talk about a “generic” man:

ASSESSMENT: INDIVIDUALS AND SOCIETIES

“Experience” for Madison seems to be exhausted by the human propensity to fight, and whether he is discussing the patrician-plebeian struggles of “Ancient Greece,” the “feudal licentiousness of the middle ages,” or...the “existing condition of the America savages,” he is always discussing “man”: the same man...who farms in Vermont or runs a printing shop in Philadelphia.

Hartz then contrasted remarks made by Pinckney in which he drew a contrast with how America was different from other nations both of the classical age and of the modern period. “Can the military habits and manners of Sparta be resembled to our habits and manners? Are the distinctions of patrician and plebeian known among us? Can Helvetic or Belgic confederacies, or can the unwieldy, unmeaning body called the Germanic Empire, can they be said to possess either the same or a situation like ours?” Pinckney asked these questions after having noted that “We have considered ourselves as the inhabitants of an old instead of a new country.” For Hartz’s purposes the specialness of the American experience was integral to allowing Whig liberal principles (the fragment, if you will) to develop within the new nation.

Hartz employs some poetic license by juxtaposing Madison’s remarks with Pinckney’s. They occur on different days and during different debates. This is not the place to analyze in detail the context for their remarks except to say that Pinckney’s concerned eligibility for officeholding that eventually turned to a frequent topic on corruptibility of public officials and Madison’s concerned the fear of small states losing out to large states in a national system where the latter would have more votes. Both men were in fact citing past history to explain how the United States was different, but the alleged contrast was crucial to Hartz’s interpretation.¹⁶

The only social revolution that could happen in America was that it would disassociate itself from the other, older, established world because it could not be replicated in our new, younger, experimental world. American lacked history. (Native societal forms surrounding English settlers were admired by some but ignored by most.) Accept us for what we are or are trying to be, was Pinckney’s

¹⁶Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition: An Interpretation of American Political Thought Since the Revolution* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1955), 82-83. Hartz’s footnote for Pinckney cites Max Farrand, *The Record of the Federal Convention of 1787*, 3 volumes (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1911), 1:400 (25 June 1787) although the correct page is 401. His footnote for Madison also cites Farrand, 1:448 (28 June 1787). Available online at <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/amlaw/lwfr.html>. Hartz reversed the order in which Pinckney spoke these lines according to Notes made by James Madison. Apparently, no record of Pinckney’s speech existed.

ASSESSMENT: INDIVIDUALS AND SOCIETIES

plea, and avoid trying to fit us into some preconceived idea of how a society ought to be erected. In typical Hartz language, the American experience revealed “a capacity to combine rock-ribbed traditionalism with high inventiveness, ancestor worship with ardent optimism....”¹⁷ How can these two coexist, asks Hartz. The implication is that they should not coexist or other societies have found it hard to make them coexist. It is the right question to ask. Looking back over 400 years – America now has history – we can appreciate a quote from Gunnar Myrdal (polyglot scholar and Nobel Laureate), that Hartz abbreviated. The full quote says even more: “America is, as we shall point out, conservative in fundamental principles, and in much more than that, though hopefully experimentalistic in regard to much of the practical arrangements on society [ca 1940s]. But *the principles conserved are liberal* [sic] and some, indeed, are radical.”¹⁸ Hartz then adds that “Radicalism and conservatism [ingredients of Europe’s social revolutions] have been twisted entirely out of shape by the liberal flow of American history.”¹⁹ European liberalism, argued Hartz, was “twice cursed”. It was cursed with feudalism out which it had to create the mentality of socialism. “American liberalism was freed of one [feudalism] was freed of the other [socialism] , and hence was twice blessed.” Hartz then observed that when the Massachusetts radical “frightened the nation they did so in the mood of unhappy kindred spirits, not in the mood of wholesale antagonists. They were inside, rather than outside, the liberal process of American politics.” In line with Pinckney’s observation Americans because of who they were and where they were had a commonality, a mutuality in which the difference could be accommodated.²⁰

Hartz like many other scholars saw the rule of law as having an important role. In the liberal tradition law both prescribed and proscribed behavior. The arbitrariness of traditional legal institutions was not inherited, and, therefore, the enactment of legal codes to undo those traditions and to reshape societal norms was unnecessary. In a nation in which individuals felt a “mutual dependence” [derived from Pinckney’s comment] a legal structure as embodied in the Federal Constitution could operate effectively. Hartz doubted that the American charter could ever have survived in any other nation because that sense of agreement bound up in the liberal tradition was lacking elsewhere. In a sentence I find almost incredulous as I read my notes now, Hartz declared that a “complicated system of checks and

¹⁷*Liberal Tradition*, 50.

¹⁸*An American Dilemma, The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*, 2 volumes (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1999/New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1944), 1:7. [1999 publication appeared in 2 volumes.]

¹⁹*Liberal Tradition*, 50.

²⁰*Liberal Tradition*, 78.

ASSESSMENT: INDIVIDUALS AND SOCIETIES

balances” could only work in a “highly united” nation in which there was a commitment to a certain liberal principle. “The Founding Father devised a scheme to deal with conflict that could only survive in a land of solidarity.”²¹ Much of what I have written in the preceding pages concerns an enduring political conflict engendered in part by the defects of the charter itself. The elitism of Whiggery, contained in the English fragment, showed up in Hamiltonianism and its offshoots. In Hartz’s mind, Jackson Democracy exposed it for what it was and was “able to destroy it,” but the Whiggery that replaced it seemed less committed to a basic tenet of the English Whiggery, i. e., the capitalist model. The result according to Hartz was confusion for Americans on how a Whiggery that tried to incorporate the Common Man was different from the democratic liberal state emerging under the Jeffersonians and Jacksonians. Hartz was not impressed with the results. Whiggery had little in common with the American Democrat, and while this might be read as a “species of political heroism” Hartz did not think so: it might if it were “not associated with such massive empirical blindness.”²² Where does this leave Whiggery, which was the crucial or the fragment out of which the liberal tradition was born? A side-step is required. As Whiggery unfolded in America, it was driven by an American logic in which it was suffused to embrace or espouse democratic ideals. Thus, liberal became attached to democracy. The American Whigs (Hamilton vintage) gave up on the Whiggery they had known for something different beginning, according to Hartz, in the William Henry Harrison era.

For if they gave up Hamilton’s hatred of the people , they retained his grandiose capitalist dream, and this they combined with the Jeffersonian concept of equal opportunity. The result was to electrify the democratic individual with a passion for great achievement and to produce a personality type that was neither Hamiltonian nor Jeffersonian but a strange mixture of them both: the hero of Horatio Alger.²³

Hartz then proceeds to describe the results as an American who “is a liberal of the small propertied type, vastly expanded in size and character by a set of incongruous strains: the peasant who has become a capitalist farmer; the

²¹*Liberal Tradition*, 85-86.

²²*Liberal Tradition*, 94-95.

²³*Liberal Tradition*, 111-112.

ASSESSMENT: INDIVIDUALS AND SOCIETIES

proletarian who has become an incipient entrepreneur; and in the time of Jefferson, even the Southern ‘aristocrat’ who emerges to lead them both.”²⁴

It is clever, intriguing and even smart and is composed without much evidence. At times the narrative and the logic seem tortured in an attempt to explain how a liberal, capitalist Whiggery unfolds into a liberal, democratic Whiggery, which differed little from its adversary whom it had to try to emulate to survive. Recall that Hartz began with Charles Pinckney’s “mutual dependence”, which hardly seems an apt description of Americans duking it out over governance. It is not incorrect to say that Hartz believed all of America became “liberal” because he more or less says they didn’t: “Americans isolated Whiggery by making the entire nation as liberal as it was...”²⁵ But the liberal that America became was not the liberal that American might have become had the Whiggery it inherited not succumbed to the democratic spirit that absorbed Whiggery. If the fragment had survived, how would things be different? Would Americans have avoided a Civil War? Probably not, says Hartz, since the “idea of a fixed Southern minority and a fixed Northern majority amounts to civil war...” John C Calhoun’s concurrent majority was described as a compromise but “was nothing short of idyllic.”²⁶

As Hartz moved through the Civil War into late nineteenth-century America and finally into and through the twentieth century until reaching the Cold War, the scheme, so promising at the outset, grows increasingly wobbly. American liberalism has appeared in two forms: the first was the Jeffersonian “liberated” individual, and that usage appeared in texts favoring the society that it implied and in texts criticizing said society; the second was post-Civil-War construction with a tip of the hat to both Jefferson (liberation) and Jackson (opportunity) defined by Progressives and other reformers as intervention (some argued only temporarily) to clear the channels to allow the individual to resume unhindered his pursuit of opportunity. Whiggery had a role in shaping how Americans approached the question of the level of governance, but it carried far less influence and weight than how Americans defined themselves under the rubric of self-government.

I would make note of an interesting bibliographic essay – “Locke, Alger, and Atomistic Individualism...” – by Carol Nackenoff who assesses the place of Louis Hartz a half century after the publication of *The Liberal Tradition*. She examines several important theoretical and historical studies that have rendered the Hartzian

²⁴*Liberal Tradition*, 114.

²⁵*Liberal Tradition*, 139-140.

²⁶*Liberal Tradition*, 160.

ASSESSMENT: INDIVIDUALS AND SOCIETIES

interpretation (not only Hartz's original version but also the revisions of his followers, and there were many) less powerful and persuasive than it once was. She herself finds Hartz's view restrictive and narrow, promoting an "inevitability or near-inevitability" in how the idea develops. That, of course, is to be expected if a packet of liberal/capitalist Whiggery were unleashed on America. More to the point – one which I am in agreement with – "A consensus approach yields an impoverished understanding of political change and political conflict." In her own mind she believes that resurrecting Hartz to engage once again the idea of a liberal tradition given the current political climate both at home and abroad has value, and with that I would also agree. Some hard thinking about Hartz and the Liberal Tradition in the twenty-first century will also require some hard work in re-examining the historical record from which Hartz and others have claimed to draw their insights.²⁷

Individualism appears infrequently in Louis Hartz's major works, and, as noted earlier, it was not a term that appeared widely in treatises or speeches from the antebellum period. It was closely allied however with more common expressions such as self-ruling or self-acting individuals. If individuals were not being governed, then they were logically governing themselves. The term had greater currency in post-Civil-War America, and a widely-read book called *American Individualism* and later a widely-admired speech entitled "Rugged Individualism" by Herbert Hoover helped to make the term a staple in the political vocabulary.²⁸ Individualism is in common usage today, but in a curious, almost ironic, twist it has long fascinated European theorists and polemicists, even though Europeans had no encounter with Individualism, as defined by Alex de Tocqueville, in their own history. It serves as an ideal, but modern or contemporary European nations never embraced the atomistic social order that gave rise to the definition in the first place. In 1957 J W N Watkins, a student of Karl Popper, the Austrian philosopher and theorist, who among others had advanced the idea of "methodological individualism", wrote that by the principle of methodological individualism

²⁷"Locke, Alger, and Atomistic Individualism Fifty Years Later: Revisiting Louis Hartz's Liberal Tradition in America," *Studies in American Political Development*, 19 (2005), 215.

²⁸The book (more like a pamphlet) was published in 1922 and is available through the Herbert Hoover Foundation, although excerpts can be found on numerous web sites, and the speech was given at the close of his presidential campaign on 22 October 1928 and can be downloaded from <http://www.h-net.org/~hst203/documents/HOOVER.html>. I do not find Hoover's definition of Individualism or its "rugged" form, which is more a post-Civil War formulation, particularly enlightening in that he broke any new ground in order to try to fit the idea into a twentieth century that seemed to belie the world that gave rise to the idea in the first place. His discussion of Individualism is rather standard, prosaic, as if the world had not changed or was not changing.

ASSESSMENT: INDIVIDUALS AND SOCIETIES

the ultimate constituents of the social world are individual people who act more or less appropriately in light of their dispositions and understanding of their situation....[W]e shall not have arrived at rock-bottom explanations of such large-scale [social] phenomena until we have deduced an account of them from statements about the dispositions, beliefs, resources and inter-relations of individuals....The central assumption of the individualistic position – an assumption which is admittedly counter-factual and metaphysical – is that no social tendency exists which could not be altered if the individuals concerned both wanted to alter it and possessed the appropriate information....This assumption could also be expressed by saying that no social tendency is somehow imposed on human beings “from above” (or “from below”) – social tendencies are the product (usually undesigned) of human characteristics as well as of their knowledge and ambition.²⁹

Social theorists and philosophers have worked mightily to explain the relationship of the individual to the larger context – society – in which he or she must, outside of a archetypical desert island, operate. Individuals behave in certain ways, sometimes uniformly so, based on dispositions, sentiments, ambitions or convictions, from which certain decisions and actions flow, not only for the individual themselves for others who are essentially engaged in the same process. What are the implications and ramifications of reaching decisions and taking actions as individuals for the collectivity of individuals? The above citation on methodological individualism, which came to the fore in the first half of the twentieth century, was and is an attempt to develop a formula for how social tendencies – the rules and agencies by which societies organize and function – are ultimately dependent upon individual reckonings, which can be changed. Not all would agree that a straightforward method can be devised to accomplish this.

It should be noted that an economist, not a philosopher, invented methodological individualism. Joseph Schumpeter, a student of Max Weber, who suggested a similar idea in his *Economy and Society* (1921).³⁰ The term, which Schumpeter failed to explain in any detail had little traction until the aforementioned Watkins, although two leading economists, Friedrich Hayek and Ludwig von Mises, of the Austrian School made reference to it in developing their own methodologies.

²⁹J W N Watkins, “Historical Explanation in the Social Sciences,” *British Journal of the Philosophy of Science*, 8 (1957), 105-106.

³⁰Geoffrey Hodgson, “Meanings of Methodological Individualism,” *Journal of Economic Methodology*, 14:2 (2007), 211-212.

ASSESSMENT: INDIVIDUALS AND SOCIETIES

Watkins's elaboration of methodological individualism, although controversial, pushed it into the sociological literature and thereby broadened its scope. Geoffrey Hodgson concludes that despite its appeal, no agreed-upon definition has yet emerged. Schumpeter used the term to define an economic relationship of individuals wanting things and other individuals willing to produce and sell what was demanded. Why individuals changed their minds was not what "pure" theoretical economists studied. Rather, it was accepted that was what individuals did. Schumpeter stated that the term had no political meaning.³¹ To further confuse matters, Schumpeter also invented "sociological individualism", by which he meant that, to quote Hodgson, "the self-governing individual constitutes the ultimate unit of the social sciences; and that all social phenomena resolves themselves into decisions and actions of individuals that need not or cannot be further analyzed in terms of superindividual factors." When commentators tried to link the individualisms as similar behavior, Schumpeter resisted but offered no further explication.³²

Hodgson remarks that while Schumpeter treated both individualisms as having limited analytical value in trying to explain anything, methodological individualism has only grown in prominence. The demand that Hodgson and others have brought to the debate over methodological individualism is the need for clarity concerning a world that consists of just individuals and a world in which individuals are bound together through interactive processes. There are efforts by proponents of methodological individualism is "reduce" all social behavior and interaction – what we do daily in going to a job or buying groceries or meeting with a committee – or the collective side of an individual life to nothing more than individuals acting in some form of "social solitude". How this is done varies from proponent to proponent, but few would disagree that such behavior and interaction has to be actions of individuals for it can't be the action of something inanimate, and yet to contend such makes a definition so broad that its useless. With such a broad definition we cannot say if social phenomena are properties of the individuals who are acting as a collectivity or arise out of the creating of the collectivity. By reducing everything to the individual an individual in a social setting is no different from an individual alone. The result is ambiguity and confusion.

³¹Hodgson, "Methodological Individualism," *JEM*, 14, 212. Joseph Schumpeter, *History of Economic Analysis* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1954), Part IV, Chapter 6 ("General Economics: Its Character and Content"), 853-917 concerns this and related topics.

³²Hodgson, "Methodological Individualism," *JEM*, 14, 212-213.

ASSESSMENT: INDIVIDUALS AND SOCIETIES

Sveinbjorn Thordarson makes a further distinction that has relevance to the analysis I have followed in the previous volumes. He writes that methodological individualism “has an immediate intuitive appeal: social phenomena are quite obviously composed out of the actions of people.” He makes an important distinction. One aspect of methodological individualism “consists of the claim that all references to social entities can be linguistically reduced to references to individuals, in the same way that positivists believed that biology was reducible to chemistry, and chemistry to physics.” Reductionism in its fullest expression. The second claim is “that any explanation of a given social phenomenon is only final if it is provided in language which refers solely to individuals and their actions”, the case for “explanation”. Thordarson then explores both reduction and explanation, both of which he found wanting. Neither reduction nor explanation in assessing individual behavior allows for the emergence of a theory. In an ironic fashion individualism when reduced or explained always leads to the stance that the proof rests with the critic, not the proponent. Individualism is alluring and misleading.³³

The debate boils down to whether there are such social phenomena as interactive relations that exist and function independent of individuals. Individuals are involved, but by interacting do individuals affect their individuality. From another angle, if social relations among individuals do modify individual behaviors, what is missed when they are reduced strictly to individual goals and sentiments? Social relations had occupied the minds of the Jeffersonians because without all the modern-day social-scientific research they knew intuitively that in advancing a different societal model than the agrarianism that they espoused more laws and agencies were needed to govern all the interactions that would come with other models. What was happening and had happened in England told them that. Despite their warnings Americans abandoned agrarianism, although they kept the ideals associated with it. Horatio Alger and “rugged individual”, notwithstanding, complex interactions surrounded, engaged and buffeted individuals, even in the antebellum period. In fact, argues Hodgson, individual choice is impossible without social and economic institutions and interactions. “Weighty” rules and social norms serve to make it possible for individuals to “play the game”. Without them there would be no game.³⁴ Although a theorem to counter methodological individualism remained elusive, what Hodgson calls the “folk theorem” can be devastating:

³³ Thordarson, “On Methodological Individualism,” 4 October 2006, on-line at <http://www.sveinbjorn.org/writings>.

³⁴Hodgson, “Methodological Individualism,” *JEM*, 14, 218-219.

ASSESSMENT: INDIVIDUALS AND SOCIETIES

The philosophical literature on emergent properties establishes that novel properties may emerge when entities interact, properties that are not possessed by the entities taken in isolation. Hence water has properties that are not possessed by hydrogen and oxygen. Hence the admission of ‘interactive relations between individuals’ in the definition of methodological individualism opens the door to properties that are emergent, and not the properties of individuals, taken severally.³⁵

Since the methodological individualist are not careful about how they define the individual acting alone or the individual acting in concert, the debate remains endless. The aim has to be to try to define the individual within the framework of methodological individualism and, to add some new vocabulary, “methodological institutionalism” or “structuralism”, something that focuses on the “collective” action or behavior of individuals and the ramifications thereof. To paraphrase Hodgson, interacting individuals are different from isolated individuals.³⁶ To explain the behavior of an individual and the relationship of behaviors among individuals as one and the same theorem misses the obvious, that a social order is different from an individual existence. Both cannot be methodological individualism.

Antebellum Americans had never heard of methodological individualism or any of its variants. Even though the term Individualism seldom showed up in the speeches and writings of the early modern period, even after Alexis de Tocqueville had made it central to his portrayal of how democracy came to work in America. Post-revolutionary and antebellum America, however, had been engaged in a long and increasingly intense debate about relationship between the individual and the society and the conduct of each, not unlike what social scientists and social

³⁵Hodgson, “Methodological Individualism,” *JEM*, 14, 220-221.

³⁶Hodgson, “Methodological Individualism,” *JEM*, 14, 222. J W N Watkins repeatedly defended and reformulated the principles that underlay methodological individualism. He protested that his critics were equally guilty of erecting metaphysical conundrums. They accused him of ignoring what was commonsense: individuals under divine or secular plans act upon their own but through a sort of “cunning” arrangement of religious or social forces through which the individual, acting on his own volition, cannot help but find fulfillment by “fulfilling his function within the whole system.” Watkins simply stepped back from the more complicated social order in which all individuals interact with others, presumably at some cost to their own sentiments and ambitions, to the original ground of the individual whether alone or in unison deciding to act. For Watkins that decision to act without trying to figure out how the decision came about because that was impossible and unnecessary to do so reflected a fundamental and “methodological” choice. An early but representative defense by Watkins in “Discussion: Methodological Individualism: A Reply,” *Philosophy of Science*, 22:1 (1955), 58-62.

ASSESSMENT: INDIVIDUALS AND SOCIETIES

theorists have been arguing over for the last century.³⁷ The individual was certainly not ignored nor was a capacity for self-acting, self-governing or self-ruling. Self-government was a mainstay of the political vocabulary and could be used with equal force by both sides in any verbal joust. The dual nature of self-government – its individual and collective – had not escaped Americans, for the founding document, The Declaration of Independence, had made clear that inalienable rights belonged to people, not to societies or governments or agencies, which people may have created but may also destroy, as needed, and may be recreated in a new form in order to protect life, liberty and pursuit of happiness. The wellspring for these dispositions and actions could only be the individual. It could not be any other source, nor could it be replaced or superseded by any other source. All the sentiments and arrangements by which individuals conducted their lives came from within that inherited capacity to govern oneself. And what de Tocqueville observed was because of the powerfulness of the idea that individuals could, should and must govern themselves as much as possible to protect their inalienable rights, Americans withdrew from the larger society, i. e., the the formal society with its boundaries, restraints, laws and institutions, all of which could potentially compromise individual liberty. Distance from that civil society, even those designed to provide the “safeties” that Thomas Jefferson referred to in the Declaration, was in theory meant to limit the normal, historic tendencies of societies of individuals to intrude or trample upon an individual’s natural rights.

As Americans struggled with how to arrange their civil society, the most consistent warning was too much governance put the liberty of the individual at risk. There was a general consensus even among the staunchest of the institutionalists and the formalists that a portion of that natural liberty that must be preserved to its possessor. How much and in what form led to a fractious and uncompromising dispute. This was not simply a debate between political parties because within the parties themselves there were sharp differences. But the built-in flaw for a society of self-governing individuals was how to reach any consensus, agreement, concord when the threat to the collectivity by which a nation is defined cannot bridge the varying stances on how best to protect and enhance liberty. Much of the fear and distrust was directed toward the central government because central government had long been viewed as the greatest threat to an individual’s natural rights. Other governmental entities like states were not immune from such criticisms, but because their constitutions were written in a different form, often with more precise language and procedures, and because they singly lacked the consolidating

³⁷In Volume 2 *Growth and Governance*, I discuss the origin of the term Individualism. For a brief but useful history of Individualism including disputes over methodological individualism, see Steven Lukes, *Individualism* (Colchester, UK:ECPR Press, 2006 [reissue of 1973 edition]).

ASSESSMENT: INDIVIDUALS AND SOCIETIES

power of a central government and operated within narrower confines as well, they were treated differently. All governments from local through state to federal were capable of corruption, missteps and failure, but the consequences of such actions at the highest level were thought to represent more peril and danger for the citizen than at the other levels that theoretically were closer to the people and therefore more directly manageable. In any event, the ambivalent relationship between the individual who assumed, whether or not in de Tocquevillian terms, his natural right to govern himself in order to protect his own liberty, and the governmental entities that surrounded him offered little clarity on how to resolve the issues that effectively transcended what individuals could or should do within their own private realms. The common usage of “Let Them Be” and its variations became a part of the public speech, even though it only added to the confusion. Like the reforms that were directed at individual redemption, one by one, soul by soul, if individuals were left alone, somehow the problem would be resolved. On their own in the safe confines of a theoretically self-directed world individuals would make of their lives what they wanted without inducing harm for others – that being the great conundrum that James Madison tried to resolve when his opponents argued that counting on individual self-interest to be corrective rather corrosive of the social harmony that every society or nation needed. Self-interest or self-love proved fractious. Letting Them Be implied withdrawal from rather than engagement in the society that was being challenged at many points and on many levels to find a consensus. In the end, the nation, the most direct application of what individuals were willing to erect outside their own private worlds, Americans had to choose to save collective self-government against a more visceral and fundamental individual self-government, the polar political dilemma that Thomas Jefferson laid out for George Washington early in his first term and that became the “scriptural text” for this study.

Why should Americans in 1861 accept the obvious and precarious challenge to save the Union? In a curious way it is easier to explain how we got to that point than it is to explain the concurrence with Abraham Lincoln’s decision to save the Union. He did so on strictly constitutional grounds that by his oath he was required to defend the nation, and the nation meant all the states and all the people, even those who sought to secede. There was nothing in the Constitution or even in the debates over the charter and its ratification's that detailed what a nation, duly constituted, should do when a segment wanted out. That was situation in 1860 and 1861. For decades Americans had to confront this question in one form or another. The effort to dismiss the Kentucky and Virginia Resolutions as a minor squabble hardly matches up with the resilience of the issues raised in those Resolutions for the next 60 years that this Union could be dissolved. As America moved closer to

ASSESSMENT: INDIVIDUALS AND SOCIETIES

separation, there were contingents of the population both in the North and South, especially in the South, ready to dissolve the Union. Why not let it dissolve? Lincoln stated his decision to save the Union against the force of separation was mandated, and, as such, had nothing to do with the issue of slavery that brought the nation to its knees. In retrospect, it is inconceivable that Americans went to war, even if they could not anticipate the tragic loss of life and property without also assuming that slavery would be ended, for it was that “peculiar institution” that had rocked their political and social lives for decades. And as events turned out, it could not be ignored. And, if saving the Union also meant ending the most despicable of human conditions, and that was what Americans expected, then the effort and the cost should be honored. I shall leave it to others more skilled than I to argue that. Ending the extension or at the very least restricting the extension of slavery was a part of the debate in the decades leading up to the war; extinguishing slavery played a peripheral role, although in the hands of some the extinction of slavery meant also the extinction of the nation because the nation itself was so badly corrupted it should not survive. Let the nation separate without regard to slavery; defend the nation without regard to slavery; or save the Union and extinguish slavery. All of these choices had important, if not fundamental, implications for a society of self-governing (individual and collective) individuals.

In his Second Inaugural, only five hand-written pages in length, after four years of war, hundreds of thousands of lives lost, Lincoln refused to predict a victory that was almost assuredly at hand. Reflecting back on his First Inaugural, Lincoln said that he was then devoted “to *saving* the Union without war” but was confronted with “insurgent agents...seeking to *destroy* it without war, seeking to dissolve the Union and divide effects by negotiation. Both parties deprecated war, but one...would *make* war rather than let the nation survive, and the other would *accept* war rather than let it perish....” And war came. Lincoln then declared that one-eighth of the population mostly in the South consisted of “colored slaves” and “All knew that this interest was somehow the cause of the war.” How did Lincoln view the cause, which was not at issue in his First Inaugural. The insurgents were prepared to “rend” the Union in order to achieve their objectives, whereas “the Government claimed no right to do more than restrict the territorial enlargement of it.” No one could have predicted the magnitude of the war, and both sides anticipated an easy victory. Invoking the Almighty to explain how two sides that read the same Bible and shared similar values could end up as they did, Lincoln asserted that “It may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just God’s assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men’s faces, but let us judge not, that we be not judged.” American slavery was an offense against God, but only now had He willed to remove it. And in that willing, if He should decide

ASSESSMENT: INDIVIDUALS AND SOCIETIES

to let the war continue until all the wealth “by the bondsman’s two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with a sword,” that must be accepted as a divine outcome. And once the judgment had been rendered, presumably in a northern victory, the nation must come to terms with binding the wounds, caring for “the widow and the orphan” and cherishing a “just and lasting peace”.³⁸

The dual proposition contained within the concept of American self-government generated circumstances that challenged the concept itself. One point most all are agreed on is that the Civil War established the supremacy of the national government to degree that was never achieved in the antebellum period. There was still disagreement about its proper role but not any longer that it could and should act when necessity required. Individualism, however, remained a powerful force that challenged the new-found authority bestowed upon the national government. The expression of our individualistic past appeared in different ways, some that seemed to reaffirm the dignity and nobility of the individual and some that defiled them. The scope of the federal government continued to grow and to rehabilitate the nation after the tragedy of the Great Depression it exploded. More and more was demanded of the national government, at considerable cost to individual liberty, according to the critics, as it joined its allies to defeat the German and Japanese war machines. A new line was drawn in the onset of a Cold War because America’s individualistic moorings, despite many changes since the antebellum period, were now being challenged by allies and foes alike over whether societies that organized themselves around socialistic principles could outperform societies who embraced individualistic principles. In some cases the competition was relativistic because twentieth-century, post-World-War-II America had a less atomistic individualism than a century before and other countries with socialistic governments did not push the principles to their limits. The most intense competition, however, came from the less developed who scorned the American ideal as producing inequality, greed and inefficiency. Nikita Khrushchev’s famous dictum “We Will Bury You” (1956) epitomized at least the depth of the intellectual contest. In the midst of a contentious Cold War among former allies, David Riesman published a series of essays under the title of *Individualism Reconsidered*. This was a fat book that ranged across the social, political and economic landscape on how America must adapt to an environment that requires a re-embrace of

³⁸Hand-written copy available to view on-line at <http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mal&fileName=mal3/436/4361300/malpage.db&recNum=0> and printed version at http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/abraham_lincoln.php.

ASSESSMENT: INDIVIDUALS AND SOCIETIES

certain individualistic traits that have been lost.³⁹ It did not achieve the notoriety of the slimmer *Lonely Crowd* that he co-authored with Nathan Glazer and Reuel Denney in 1950, but it extended the discussion about issues raised in *The Lonely Crowd*.⁴⁰ *The Lonely Crowd* was famous for the tripartite “inner-directed”, “outer-directed” and “other-directed” model for defining American social behaviors. It left its mark on the behavioral sciences to a degree that *Individualism Reconsidered* did not.

The basic ideas put forth in *The Lonely Crowd* show up in *Individualism Reconsidered* on a much larger and a somewhat less manageable canvas. Rereading the titled essay, “Individualism Reconsidered”, I find it a bit of a mishmash. It opens with a typical Riesmanian stance that post-World-War-II America had moved too far away from the inner-directed to the other-directed, and the result was that it had lost those individualistic traits that had been formerly idealized. Individualism had been replaced by “groupism”. He understood the failings of America’s more individualistic era but he also accentuated the triumphs.

Today...we can admit that the hardy men who pioneered on the frontiers of production, exploration, and colonization in the last three hundred years were usually men who acted according to a code, and who...were more likely to subscribe to high moral principles....These men are bound by a character orientation I have termed “inner-direction”; they were guided by internalized goals and ideals which made them appear to be more more individualistic than they actually were. Often they were men who walked in the imagined footsteps of idealized parents – and this gave them their seven-league boots, and their feeling of having a personal destiny. And since the ideals that were internalized included many vestiges of older traditions, they were frequently paternalistic men, who, despite nominal belief in free enterprise, helped ameliorate the worst abuses brought about by their innovations....In sum, it proved possible in the West [broadly speaking] in early modern times to carry individualism to its limits of usefulness – and, in some cases, far beyond these limits – because a fair amount of social cohesion was taken for granted....[sic]

³⁹I will note but not discuss other pertinent publications that belong to the same genre of Riesman’s book: William Whyte, *The Organization Man* (New York: Simon and Schuster, Inc, 1956), Sloan Wilson, *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (New York: Simon and Schuster, Inc, 1955), C Wright Mills, *White Collar: The American Middle Classes* (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1951) and the worse novel I’ve never finished, Ayn Rand, *Atlas Shrugged* (New York: Random House, 1957).

⁴⁰*The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1950).

ASSESSMENT: INDIVIDUALS AND SOCIETIES

Moreover, the same sort of moral compulsions which many of these “freedmen” carried within themselves, as a result of their socialization in the patriarchal family, were also turned loose upon the society at large. Individualistic “promoters” turned up not only in business and colonization, but in the many zealous reform movements of the last several hundred years. These movements fastened new restraints on a society that was shaking loose from old ones....⁴¹

Riesman’s history is not to be taken literally, but it does set the stage for rest of the essay. It is not meant to be historical; it is meant to be a contemporaneous assessment of the plight that America faced in a world that had become infatuated with the collective as opposed to the individual. Riesman acknowledged the criticisms of the collectivists, some more opposed to individualism than others, on the grounds that greed, acquisitiveness, domination became the guiding principles of individualist.⁴² Americans were confronting an intellectual crisis as well as political and economic crises, although the depth of the crises has been questioned in recent years. I, as a young man, remember how college dormitory “bull sessions” could turn into handwringing about the future. In the background was the existence of The Bomb, but more urgent was the competition over ideas on whose system would survive or thrive. I recall a lecture to our college audience by India’s Foreign Minister, Krishna Menon, in which he condemned not only the path that America had followed but also the attempt by American leaders to make this the path that others should follow. Riesman had taken a firm stand, although not without qualification, about why there was a lack of confidence. Americans had succumbed too thoroughly to the “go along to get along” ideology. Taking cues from other individuals to the degree that one judged oneself by how others saw one was the dynamic behind “groupism”. In his essay, and in fact in the remainder of the book, it is not always easy to follow his logic or even to discern clearly why a certain event or trend had any relevance to “reconsidering individualism.” The short answer was, by Riesman’s reckoning, too much “other-directedness” and not enough inner-directedness had come to dominate our twentieth-century our outlook and behavior, and that flew in face of what our history (as interpreted by Riesman) and the driving force behind the development of not just the United States but the western world. At the same time he regretted that to the degree that “capitalist individualism has fostered an ethic of callousness, the results have been to undermine all forms of individualism, good and bad.” Mid-nineteenth-century

⁴¹*Individualism Reconsidered and Other Essays* (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1954), 26-28.

⁴²*Individualism Reconsidered*, 28.

ASSESSMENT: INDIVIDUALS AND SOCIETIES

Americans had engineered their own black box that rendered a basic and vital historical ideal as dismissible.⁴³ Despite some confusing juxtapositions and unclear examples he steadfastly defends individualism, describing it as “the Adam Smith style, group-survival arguments to justify the “selfish” living of an individual life....I am insisting that no ideology, however noble [read Socialism/Communism] can justify the sacrifice of an individual to the needs of the group. Whenever this occurs, it is the starkest tragedy, hardly less so if the individual consents (because he accepts the ideology) to the instrumental use of himself.” He further delineated the the problem for the individual and his culture: Social science has helped us become more aware of the extent to which individuals, great and small are the creatures of their cultural conditioning...” Sometimes, though, social science misleads us into a fallacy: “since all men have their being in culture and as a result of the culture, they owe a debt to that culture which even a lifetime of altruism could not repay.” Pushed to its limits this notion can mean “the virtual denial of individuality: since we arise in society, it is assumed with a ferocious determinism that we can never transcend it.” The risk is that “conformity with society is not only a necessity but also a duty,” and to argue for that is to open the way to destroy “that margin of freedom which gives life its savor and its endless possibility for advance.”⁴⁴

I suspect antebellum Americans could applaud those words, even as they faltered in the execution of the ideal behind the words.

⁴³*Individualism Reconsidered*, 28. De Tocqueville is cited three or four times in 500 pages. De Tocqueville also worried about conformity but from a different angle, although a linkage could be asserted. Riesman does acknowledge in one instance, a foot note, that de Tocqueville might be the “profounder guide” to follow but that was where it ended. (p. 284, footnote 12.)

⁴⁴*Individualism Reconsidered*, 38