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Reconstituting a Classical Heritage: The Civic Culture of the United States

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Abstract

The paper argues for the continued validity and strength of the concept of a classical heritage in modern life by exploring a particular example, its role in shaping--and finding new form in--the civic culture of the United States. It examines the challenges that modernity and its cult of revolutionary change have posed to the age-old equation of legitimacy with antiquity. Nowhere has this been more evident than in America's short and exceptionally dynamic history. An educational curriculum rooted in the heritage of the ancient world--Greek, Roman, and Christian--has been supplanted as "useful knowledge" by the practical demands and moral ambiguities of scientific and economic development. Yet the strong and enduring civic culture of the United States, rooted in a heroic past that reformulated the concept of classical republicanism, reminds us that the authority derived from tradition can be reconstituted in ways that sustain and heighten its power to educate and inform. As we seek ways to reinvigorate traditional learning, therefore, we should avoid assuming too sharp a divide between old and new lest we overlook the creative adaptations that have continued to give the classical heritage its enduring appeal and value.

Let me begin with the United States one-dollar bill. At first sight it may seem a long way from the classical curriculum or indeed any kind of classical past except in the sense of the dollar's longstanding renown as a symbol of arrogant modernity and materialism. But within the material can often be found the moral, and the dollar bill displays a potent and mysterious image, a human eye surmounting a pyramid of stone blocks and a Latin text drawn from the poet Virgil, annuit coeptum, novus ordo seclorum (it gives favor to these beginnings, a new order of the ages).[1]

The apparent paradox of proudly proclaiming a decisive break with the past with words taken from an ancient text is the first theme--the sustaining and validation of the modern by means of the respect and value accorded to the ancient--that I want to pursue in this paper.

A second is drawn from that image of the eye surmounting the pyramid, for it serves to symbolize the ways in which our capacity to see can be literally heightened by the advantage we draw from transmitted experience and wisdom, the legacy of what our own particular modern culture can be brought to see as its traditional roots.

My third and final theme suggests that the American experience, if more derivative and short-lived than that of some others (such as the Chinese), may in fact have some suggestions to offer as to how a classical heritage can be reinvigorated through transmission and redefinition, and can become a fundamental and enduring component of what people see as shaping their continued human identity and their potential for future growth.

To turn back to the first theme, the sometimes paradoxical interplay of old and new, let me introduce this by way of some broad comments about the challenges that it has presented to the maintenance of the classical legacy in recent times. There have been bursts of startling creativity and originality throughout human history, but for much of the past two thousand years, human beings have helped themselves to move forward by looking back to experience as their best guide. Far more than in Chinese history, the transmission of past cultures has been rendered difficult in Europe and the Middle East by invasion, disruption, and conquest. Yet

culture has often been preserved by the very forces that were imposing new forms of authority: Rome famously conquered Greece only to be captured in its turn by Greek learning and philosophy. Invaders of the Roman empire embraced romanitas just as many Mongols would become sinicized. Celtic monks received, preserved, and then passed back to continental Europe a heritage of earlier learning. Arab invaders conveyed classical scholarship back to a Europe forcibly severed from Byzantium.

This repeated process of transmission and acculturation gained momentum from the value perceived in the learning of past not only for its humanistic insights but for the practical instruction it gave in such fields as medicine, geography, agriculture, astronomy, and technology. The past could be "useful" for both spirit and body. But it also stemmed from a profound and widely held conviction that not only looked back to the past times for guidance but equated antiquity with legitimacy. Thus the medieval world referred to Aristotle in biology, to Ptolemy in geography, and to the Bible as a source of morality and law. Political leaders proclaimed their intent to restore the empire of the Romans and the unity of early Christendom. With their subjects, they conceptualized change in terms of a recovery, a renaissance that was a rebirth not a new creation. Their best hope, as a famous medieval phrase put it, was to be as dwarfs atop the shoulders of giants.

Yet this seeming humility also embodied a conceit, for sitting on those shoulders, the dwarf could hope, like the eye atop the pyramid cited as my second theme, to see a little further than the giant frame below. Gradually, and with the increasing speed in the last several centuries, that confidence in a greater vision has outgrown the need to look back to the past for reference. For Europeans, that change was surely accentuated by the discovery, invasion, and colonization of lands that lay outside the ancients' knowledge and experience, especially the Americas. These could only be New and not recovered Worlds. The sense of severance from the past was heightened by the technological development that helped facilitate that exploration, exploration in turn followed by exploitation that furnished much of the capital by which the western world embarked upon its unprecedented scientific and industrial development.

By the eighteenth century, within western society, there are unmistakable signs of a belief that such a greater vision could serve, in the words of John Adams, to make the world anew. For an historian of the Atlantic world, nothing better symbolizes the conscious break with the past than three famous publications of a single year, 1776: Tom Paine's blistering denunciation of the hitherto sacrosanct verities of monarchy, British constitutionalism, and the imperial connection in his best-selling pamphlet, Common Sense; Thomas Jefferson's eloquent exposition of how governments need not be inherited but could be made anew by each generation in the United States' Declaration of Independence; and Adam Smith's argument for unfettered economic enterprise in his Wealth of Nations. These writings helped to touch off a series of political cataclysms in the Western World--the Age of Revolution--in which the very word, revolution, once signifying the hope of return to a better past, was recast to signify (and to legitimate) the wholesale restructuring of government and, by the present century, of society itself. With these changes came a reworking of the purposes of education: "useful knowledge", once defined in terms of a grounding in classical learning, now looked toward a training in the skills of science, business, and technology that would promote the advancement of society. The state itself became envisioned less as a moral community united by law and more as an enterprise association responsible for bettering its members' physical well-being. Society as a whole suffered a collective loss of memory--of traditional values, of the precariousness of lives cut short by crises of subsistence, of events more than a generation old.

So much is familiar, and the western world's recent economic and political predominance--its moment in world history, now on the wane--has pressed something of the same pattern of change down on other areas of the globe.

Yet, and turning now from the western experience as lesson to its humbler value as example, a closer examination of the history of the recent leader of that western hegemony--the United States--does lead us to my third theme. For it reveals ways in which even that modern leviathan, the United States, still looks for its educational values and configuring sociopolitical structure to a past defined in classical terms. What follows, I should make plain from the start, is not a classical legacy in terms of encapsulating and transmitting the textual purity of the writings

of such sages as Aristotle, Cicero, or Confucius, save at several stages of remove. Rather, and perhaps heretically in the context of this conference, it consists of a transmission and reformulation of belief systems and patterns of behavior, elements in the formation of a distinctive civic culture.

To see this in its unfolding context, we must look back to the settlement of that world that seemed decisively new. From the time of the first establishment of the British colonies that grew to become the United States, the settlers worked hard to educate their children in the values that would give meaning to their new societies. Without exception, they looked back to the cultures from which they had just departed. The New England Puritans founded schools and then a college--Harvard--with a curriculum designed to furnish students with a training in ancient languages that would enable them to read and study the Protestant Bible. The Christian and the classical past interwove to provide a blueprint for shaping society and the moral values it would uphold. Even at this early date there were signs of tension in this relationship, as some feared that studying "heathen" writers such as Homer or Cicero would inculcate pantheistic values. In the nineteenth century, such evangelistic colleges as Kenyon and Oberlin would move away from classical studies except as "they were subservient to the truths of the gospel" and students at the latter school at one point built a bonfire of their Latin texts.[2] Throughout the colonial period, however, a grounding in the classical authors remained an integral part of early American education, the more so as it was seen as the necessary accompaniment of a genteel life. A Virginian such as William Byrd looked to classical literature to provide him with a means of comprehending his inherited responsibilities as planter and slaveholder, one that would set his mode of life within a tradition reflecting honor. upon those who shared in it. Many followed his example in building tidewater mansions that literally placed their owners atop a classical pedestal, testimony to their acceptance of the dictum of President John Witherspoon of the college at Princeton, that "the remains of the ancients are the standards of taste."[3]

Living in the New World, therefore, was configured in several ways by a heritage drawn from the Old. Yet we should also note the degree to which these classical and biblical traditions were already being filtered and reconfigured

through translation and selective commentary. The history of the ancient world was scanned for the moral lessons it taught concerning the causes of the rise and fall of societies and the threat posed by tyrants to the cause of liberty. From the Bible, in turn, came instruction on the duties of just rulers and the sanctity of individual conscience. These in turn strengthened civic identity: the colonists' loyalty to the mother country's rule derived depth and meaning from the British constitution's reputed embodiment of the balanced government praised by Aristotle and Polybius as well from knowledge of Britain's role as a bulwark of Protestant Christendom.

The first stages of American Revolution did not break with this past. The colonists resisted British policy, it has been pointed out, largely because London would not continue to let them live as Englishmen. Leading patriots such as John Adams and John Dickinson remained fervent admirers of the English system of government. It was only after Britain had, in effect, declared the colonies independent by proclaiming them to be a state of rebellion, that Americans were left alone with America and forced to conceive and implement new forms of government. This they did by looking as much back as forward. Already the oft cited parallels evident in Rome and England's decline into luxury and imperial oppression had eased the psychological strain of defying English authority. The growing number of appeals by writers such as Sam Adams and John Dickinson to a law higher than that expressed in parliamentary statute or royal command now found authority in the ancient and classically sanctioned concept of a supreme law rooted in the natural order and the dictates of human reason. As England proved to be an abusive parent, so Americans looked to a higher court and to the long history of the human family as the bases for their rights as men.

And when resistance finally became rebellion, the classical heritage helped to provide, in the concept and practice of republicanism, what can be termed an alternative legitimacy, one that helped Americans to establish an ideological as well as institutional autonomy from England. The events of 1776 touched off a prolonged debate concerning the lessons the past could contribute to shaping the new governments that independence would require. The fortunes of past Greek and Roman republics were dissected in search of those elements that had produced strength without tyranny, prosperity without luxury, and longevity without senility.

Out of a successful diagnosis, it was hoped, could come a prescription for forms of government capable of escaping from that hitherto relentless cycle of youth, maturity, and decline that had overtaken all earlier republics, a political order that would be immune to the ravages of time and human ambition. Moreover--and here the concept of classical republicanism again played an important intellectually enabling role--these would be states capable of engaging the moral allegiance of their citizens without the support of an officially recognized religious system. American Protestantism, for its all that it remained--and remains--a powerful force in American society, would lose its role as a prerequisite of civic identity.

From this debate, and the extraordinary burst of constitution-making that took place in America between 1776 and 1790, emerged governments containing much that had been previously known and practised--senates, bicameral legislatures, executives with limited vetoes, frequent elections, and bills of rights, all defended by reference to their tried and tested legitimacy. "Experience must be our only guide," contended John Dickinson at the Philadelphia convention of 1787, "reason may mislead us."[4] But these governments, it must be acknowledged, also embodied new principles and procedures that had only tenuous roots in the past. For the first time, constitutions were being created not inherited; they were being recorded in written form; and they were being solemnized as fundamental law by the evolution of formal procedures for drafting, popular ratification, and future amendment. These innovations rested, in turn, upon a now sanctified belief in the people as sovereign and as the constituent power of government (though a people, it might be noted, as yet still largely defined as the country's white male Protestant freeholders). At once expressing and restraining this belief in popular sovereignty was the equally fervent conviction that no one group, even a majority, should be entrusted with unlimited power. The people might empower but that power must be divided, checked, and balanced. From this line of thought sprang the theme that more than any other lies at the heart of American political practice--that it is better to bring as many interests as possible within goverrunent to contend for power than to allow any one group to become so dominant as to excite a hostility to government among other, excluded groups. In place of a choice between efficient autocracy and ineffective pluralism, there emerged the possibility of governments that were both

potent and inclusive, the first because of the second. Out of deep reflection about the fate of governments ancient and modern came an incisive new synthesis of the lessons of history—"a republican remedy," in James Madison's famous phrase, "for the diseases most incident in republican government."[5]

The vigorous debate that accompanied the drafting and ratification of the United States constitution of 1787 showed that Americans of the revolutionary generation did not immediately resolve their views on government, particularly as it related to the relationship between authority at the state and national levels. In the years that followed, too, the potential for amendment built into the constitution-making process allowed the individual American states to rework elements of their mechanisms of government so as to embody a more direct expression of popular will. But these changes only served to reinforce allegiance to the constitutional structure as a whole. Indeed, within a decade of 1787, and despite the growing factionalism of party strife, the Revolution's constitutional settlement had become what it has since remained: the venerated benchmark and configurative structure of American political life, and the product of revolution seen as making further revolutions unnecessary. Henceforth, Americans might disagree on the finer points of the national constitution's interpretation, but with very rare exceptions (William Lloyd Garrison, a fierce opponent of the Constitution's tolerance of slavery, was one) they did not challenge its sanctity. Even during the crisis that led up to the Civil War--the greatest failure of American constitutionalism--neither side repudiated the country's basic framework of government: to the contrary, the South's attempted secession was accompanied by its enactment of a constitution virtually identical to that of the Union it sought to leave.

What had emerged, as observers since Tocqueville have noted, was a civic culture that uniquely centered national identity and obligation around a body of political institutions and a tradition of widespread participation in civic affairs. Americans did not immediately give up traditional beliefs that citizenship should in some fashion be linked in some fashion to whiteness, masculinity, landholding, or Protestantism. But they gave way in the face of a stronger and more universal creed. To be an American, it was established, was not a matter of blood, color,

class, or religious affiliation but of loyalty to accepted political procedures and principles; to be designated "un-American"--that adjective coined in the nineteenth century which became notorious in the twentieth--was to be suspected of repudiating these habits and ideals. Groups seeking inclusion in the political nation--ethnic immigrants, non-Protestants, African-Americans, women--did so by proclaiming their wholehearted adherence to the nation's ideals and by branding their exclusion as contrary to these ideals' more perfect expression.[6] The continued strength of the revolutionary era as the formative period of national culture and identity can be measured in the determination of each of the many groupings within the American polity to identify their particular real or imagined contribution--be it hero, heroine, battlefield, or cultural contribution--to the story of the founding of the Republic. One of the ironic philosophical burdens borne by Americans, it has been aptly remarked, is that they are a people who conceive of themselves as having begun with a perfect past, as defined by the Revolution, and yet still aspire to progress.

Put in terms of the themes we are pursuing, a new and distinctively political formulation of "a classical heritage" had taken shape, cast out of elements of the old. Many trappings taken from an older republicanism remained as validation and celebration of the new: a national senate set on Capitol Hill around which flowed a River Tiber, state houses modeled after Greek temples or Rome's Pantheon, college fraternity systems, the Society of the Cincinnati, George Washington's style-setting classical facade added to Mount Vernon, and the hero himself sculpted for posterity clad in an antique toga.[7]

But these elements proved more facade than fundamental, more decorative than determinative. For they accompanied--and served to heighten--a growing conviction that America was indeed novus ordo seclorum, a new order superior to, and hence no longer dependent upon, the past. Critics questioned traditional methods of classical education on the grounds that they no longer provided "useful knowledge" or, worse, perpetuated outdated and elitist values rather than those appropriate to a truly American republicanism. How shall we ever exceed the ancient world, asked Benjamin Rush, if we remain tied to the teaching of its "dead" languages?[8] Moral reformers bridled not only at the suspected pagan values of

classicism but also at southern slaveholders' citation of classical precedents to justify the institution of chattel slavery. The very popularity--and vulgarization--of Greek and Roman motifs in contemporary architecture, art, and literature worked to diminish classicism's special relationship with the nation's birth. The way was prepared for Americans to feel that they had more to offer back to the old world in the way of civic instruction. When, in the 1820s, Americans responded with enthusiasm--and shiploads of supplies and parties of military volunteers and missionaries--to the news of the Greek revolt against Turkish rule, it was in the spirit that Greece could now take heart from America's revolutionary experience and democratic achievements, and tread the path offered by America's past. Just as the ancients had gained inspiration from envisioning their own perfect commonwealth, concluded Samuel Cox of Ohio, "may we not hope that an analogous influence, as real as it is potent, shall emanate from our own Hesperus, to mould anew the dynasties of corrupt power in the eastern world?" Later in the century, a noted American classicist would argue that "the Greek of today recognizes in the Americanism of today, the traits of an ideal Hellenism."[9] Half a century more, and Cox's question would have its most striking answer as aid provided by the Marshall Plan in the wake of the Second World War flowed to recapture Greece for values now defined as quintessentially American. Having drawn upon the legacy of the old world to shape their emancipation from it, American stood poised, mentally as well as materially, to deliver back a message of their own.

We have followed the historical example that illustrates the third theme of this paper--an outline of the ways in which Americans reworked their old world heritage into an enduring civic culture that remains a central component of their national identity. But it remains to draw the lessons from this analysis that would tie it more closely to the work of our conference. Let me do so by expanding upon some earlier admissions in ways that lead to some concluding contentions.

To begin, I would again acknowledge that I am here defining the transmission and deployment of the classical heritage in a manner less rigorous and more evolutionary than one positing a more direct, unfiltered encounter with texts deemed worthy to be called classic. I believe that my approach accords well with

the more disparate and pluralistic tradition of cultural transmission prevalent in western and European societies, but it may seem dangerously imprecise when viewed from within traditions that insist upon a more uncompromising respect for texts seen as fundamental or sacred. In addition, the heritage I have described is plainly one that, while it derived much of its legitimacy and acceptance from the reverence accorded to the past, has by no means necessarily preached obedience to the fruits of that past: to the contrary, Americans looked to antiquity to facilitate their rejection of existing authority and then came to believe that they had effectively emancipated themselves from service to other nations' accomplishments. Finally, as a last admission, I recognize that the American experience is uniquely the product of a particular culture, environment, and moment in time. It is not my purpose here to preach that it can or should be imitated.

Instead, and in the manner of earlier Americans who looked to the past not for dictation but for guidance, I believe that the example of the evolution of the United States' civic culture can be instructive for our purpose. It points to a field of study common to all civilizations--the origins of political society and the formation of patterns of civic responsibility--as a worthy and well attested subject through which to demonstrate the value of studying the unfolding legacy of a classical heritage. Other societies possess the equivalent of the texts--those matching, in the American example, Aristotle, Polybius, Magna Carta and the Agreement of the People, the Declaration of Independence, the Federalist Papers, the processes of state and federal constitutionmaking, and Supreme Court decisions--that likewise reveal the continual interplay between past and present in the search to define and implement the processes of political obligation. A curriculum directed toward their study introduces students to themes that are surely of fundamental significance--the relationship, at once symbiotic and antagonistic, between individual and the state, the search for an ordered liberty, and the parts played by individual genius and societal forces. The assessment of such themes nourishes the rational and discriminating assessment of evidence, and reminds us of aspects of our existence that are indisputably derived from experience, bridging the gulf between past and present endemic in the modern world, and redressing the blinkered absorption with the new fostered by our passion for technology.

Methodologically, too, I would suggest that to study this interplay, and to acknowledge what amounts to the continual reassessment and reinscription of what we find to be our classical heritage, is a more realistic and, in curricular terms, more intellectually rewarding exercise than one that confronts students with classical texts without considering how these have been received and reconceived over time, and how they seem to have contributed to the formation of the modern. It will not escape your notice that I am thereby celebrating the curricular value of my own discipline of historical study; but I would justify it by insisting that historians can and must assume the responsibility of presenting their own work, in the words of Dionysius of Halicarnassus recast and made part of the modern classical heritage by Thomas Carlyle, as "philosophy teaching by example".[10]

Notes

1. Virgil, *Georgics*, I, 40, and *Eclogues* IV, 5.

2. Richard R. Johnson, "Hellas in Hesperia: Ancient Greece and Early America," in Carol G. Thomas, ed., *Paths from Ancient Greece* (Leiden, 1988), 145, 165.

3. Witherspoon, *The Works of the Reverend John Witherspoon*, IX (second edition, Philadelphia, 1804), 20.

4. James Madison, *Notes of Debates in the Federal Convention of 1787*, ed. Adrienne Koch (New York, 1987), 447.

5. Madison, Alexander Hamilton, and John Jay, *The Federalist Papers*, ed. Isaac Kramnick (London, 1987), 128; and, generally, for the emergence of "a new Science of politics," Gordon S. Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787* (Chapel Hill, 1969), *passim*.

6. The concept of an American civic culture has been studied by, among others, Gabriel A. Almond and Sidney Verba, *The Civic Culture* (Princeton, N.J., 1963), and, as relating to the comprehension of ethnic diversity, Lawrence H. Fuchs, *American Kaleidoscope: Race, Ethnicity, and the Civic Culture* (Hanover, N.H., 1990).

7. Howard Mumford Jones, *O Strange New World: American Culture: The Formative Years* (New York, 1964), 227-234. Gary Wills, *Cincinnatus: George Washington and the Enlightenment* (New York, 1984), *passim*.

8. *Letters of Benjamin Rush*, ed. L. H. Butterfield (2 vols., Philadelphia, 1951), I, 524, II, 166.

9. Stephen A. Larrabee, *Hellas Observed: The American Experience of Greece, 1775-1865* (New York, 1957), 260-261; Basil Lanneau Gildersleeve, *Hellas and Hesperia: or, the Vitality of Greek Studies in America* (New York, 1909), 87.

10. Dionysius, *Ars Rhetorica*, II, section 2; Carlyle, "On History," *in Critical and Miscellaneous Essays*, II (London, 1899), 85.

重新建構古典傳統：美國的城都文化

Richard R. Johnson*

摘　要

本文透過探討一特殊案例，闡述現代生活中古典傳統理念的持續力量，以及它在建立美國城都文化與尋找新形式時所扮演的角色。

現代化的改革風潮曾對古文物的適切性提出質疑，本文對此將作檢討。美國短而充滿活力的歷史在這方面最爲明顯不過。以古希臘、羅馬及基督教傳統與根基的教育課程：作爲「有用知識」，已被實際需求及科學經濟發展的道德意涵所取代。但美國茁壯持久的城都文化是以曾經重建古代共和理念的光榮歷史爲基礎，這使我們體會到，透過維護以提升教化的途徑，源自傳統的根基可以重新建構。因此，我們在尋求重新恢復傳統學識的途徑時，應該避免將新與舊作太明顯的劃分，以免忽略了曾不斷使古典傳統歷久長新的變通力量。

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