How citizens interact with one another and respond collectively to world events is shaped by a public philosophy, the importance of which should never be underestimated. Yet rank and file Americans are remarkably averse to philosophical considerations. Alexis de Tocqueville wrote with characteristic insight, “I know of no country in which, speaking generally, there is less independence of mind and true freedom of discussion than in America.”1 Philosophy, of course, at its best, requires both conditions. In their absence, a clearly defined system of ideas, which explains a nation’s political and social outlook, can never without difficulty surface to consciousness and receive rigorous evaluation. Tocqueville’s observation is as vibrant today as it was nearly two centuries ago.

But there is, as Louis Hartz put it, a reality known as “the American Way of Life,” which is imbued with the basic precepts of a philosophy. These are individualism, liberty, equality, and democracy. All are rather commonplace today among America’s intelligentsia as well as the nation’s most influential social and political figures. Pervading most, if not all, currents of their thought is the understanding that human beings are equal before the law, endowed with particular rights, and free to espouse and to pursue private and public causes and interests without fear of government intrusion. In this broad sense, “liberalism,”2 as informed by democracy, is America’s public philosophy. The term, however, suffers from multiple ambiguities. Nevertheless, it can be illuminated by an explanation and analysis of the meanings it has assumed at key moments during its historical development and thereby evaluated in terms of its usefulness as the nation’s public philosophy.

The roots of American liberalism reach back into the Reformation, with its emphasis upon individual salvation, an egalitarian vision of the priesthood of all believers, and a democratic ordering of congregational life. Variations on these themes were, as Michael Oakeshott observes, also apparent in views of the state that were set

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forth in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries by men like Bodin, Hobbes, and Locke. Similar views were carried forward into the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by such diverse figures as Kant, Fichte, Hegel, Hume, and Mill.3

Subdued reflections of liberalism appeared in Calvinist New England during the seventeenth century, but the philosophy entered upon the American scene with immense momentum in the following century, during the revolutionary period of the country’s history. Thomas Jefferson drew heavily upon Locke’s thought in drafting the Declaration of Independence, grounded as it was in the idea of natural rights and the causes for dissolving government, all found in the Second Treatise of Government. Both Jefferson and his contemporaries were also influenced by the English master’s emphasis upon reason, the formation of society, the protection of property, and the necessity of government.

Lockean liberalism stresses individualism with only the slightest nod to community and insists also upon limited government. Society, according to Locke, is an association of rational human beings formally related and bound to one another by a set of rules, the primary purpose of which is the preservation of property. The society forms and puts into place a government to accomplish this purpose. When the legislature or executive fails in their respective functions, then government may be rightfully dissolved.4

Society, it should be underscored, is a realm distinct from that of government. In the society that Locke envisioned, people are free to carry on their own pursuits and to satisfy their own particular interests, goals, and desires without fear of intrusion from government. These individual “enterprises,” as Oakeshott called them, are never to be confused with the work of government, which has no authority to pronounce upon “the good life” or to impose any conception of it upon the citizenry. To do so would constitute an abridgement of individual liberty and amount to tyranny.

Locke’s “individual” is of course free to pursue his own economic self-interest. But as expansive as the philosopher conceived personal freedom to be, there is ample evidence that he never intended it as the basis of an argument for laissez-faire capitalism,6 although his work is often interpreted in that way. Jefferson, for example, as Locke’s disciple, had no reservations about looking to Adam Smith as the authoritative word on economics.7 Liberalism and laissez-faire capitalism seemed to many, including the celebrated Virginian, to imply each other.

There is therefore in Lockean liberalism a wide domain of privacy for the individual to do precisely as he or she pleases. “The separation of state from society and the subordination of the former to the latter are,” as James P. Young notes, “the core of liberal constitutional theory.”8 This observation is particularly true for Locke. As a corollary to this considerable grant of liberty, individual differences—religious, moral, and aesthetic—are to be expected, and citizens in a Lockean society must confront them with the virtue of toleration.9

The Achilles’ heel of Lockean liberalism is its less-than-robust sense of community. Society, for Locke, was little more than an atomic association of individuals, held together loosely by a body of law. There were no other ties in his theory of society necessarily binding citizens one to another.

This fact meant that countless factions might exist in Lockean society, pulling in diametrical directions. Madison, in Federalist No. 10, was aware of this tendency but did not fear it, because he believed that factions would neutralize one another. In fact, he correctly concluded, but in rather anti-Lockean
fashion, the longevity of a large centralized government would actually benefit from a factionalized society. He was correct in his analysis, but what he did not foresee was that government might eventually be paralyzed by a disunited society. As Hartz astutely observed, “only a highly united nation” could make “a complicated scheme of checks and balances” work at all. “The Founding Fathers,” he pointed out, “devised a scheme to deal with conflict that could only survive in a land of solidarity.”

The stark truth of the matter is that the practical success of American government never had much to do with Lockean liberalism at all. That the system actually functioned as smoothly as it did from the birth of the nation to the Civil War and even thereafter had, instead, virtually everything to do with communal solidarity, which enabled the American people to reach ready consensus, especially on vitally important issues. Locke’s ideas no doubt pervaded and helped to shape the American ideology of government, but the decisive, though unspoken, ingredient ensuring the success of the Founding Fathers’ experiment was precisely those things the populace held in common. These commonalties, or “habits of the heart” as Tocqueville called them, were a largely homogeneous culture, bound together by race and religion. As John Jay exulted in Federalist No. 2,

I have as often taken notice that Providence has been pleased to give this one connected country to one united people—a people descended from the same ancestors, speaking the same language, professing the same religion, attached to the same principles of government, very similar in their manners and customs, and who, by their joint counsels, arms, and efforts, fighting side by side throughout a long and bloody war, have nobly established their general liberty and independence.

Anglo-Christianity held sway throughout the nation. Although there was surely no cultural “uniformity,” there was a remarkable cultural unity and symmetry that coursed through the country and trussed it together. It was this solidarity in American society that allowed it to sidestep the harsh effects of atomic individualism inherent in Locke’s philosophy.

Despite his heavy emphasis upon toleration, it is interesting that Locke believed atheists, along with those whose doctrine is not peaceable, should not be tolerated by civil society. The virtue of toleration, for him, had its limitations.

Under the power of laissez-faire capitalism, America fast became a land of profiteers. Success was, in William James’s words, America’s “bitch goddess.” Young maintains that human beings were defined by the economy; democracy by capitalism; liberty by property; equality by opportunity; and progress by economic change. A Hobbesian selfishness, he notes, was elevated to an absolute good.

It was not long before giant trusts were formed, and vast fortunes were made. Herbert Spencer and his gaggle of followers, such as William Graham Sumner and Stephen J. Field, defended big business against its small competitors and viewed the victorious outcome in Darwinian terms as a natural ordering of society. Huge concentrations of wealth combined with its commensurate excesses were viewed as exploiting everyday working-class Americans who labored long hours for few rewards.
By the 1880s, laissez-faire liberalism was under vehement attack. A movement to reform it was underway. The protagonists were populist thinkers, such as Lester Ward and Charles Horton Cooley, who argued that cutthroat competition actually prevented the fit from surviving. Populists demanded that government be a help to the small, primarily agrarian, producer. To that end, the free coinage of silver, government subsidization of low-interest loans, and adoption of a graduated income tax were proposed, along with other measures, to reform government. These Populists basically favored a two-tiered economy, composed first of a simple market economy for small independent businessmen, and, second, an economy consisting of the public ownership of large financial interests controlled by the captains of industry. Although the Populist movement managed to effect some changes, it eventually fizzled in 1896 after the Democratic Party co-opted many of its initiatives and went down to defeat with William Jennings Bryan as its standard-bearer.

The body of Populism was dead and buried, but its spirit lived on in the Progressive movement. Notables of this movement were men like Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr., and John Dewey. Progressives, unlike Populists, were mostly middle-class urbanites. They lashed out against monopolies and unfair business practices, and supported causes such as women’s suffrage, the prohibition of child labor, and safe and healthy working conditions, especially for women. But their fundamental accent, as David E. Price suggests, was upon community and control. They sought to alter the Lockean emphasis upon the solitary individual by empowering and revitalizing the community and providing for its management. Progressives understood themselves as liberals, but of a social and reform character.

If there was a poster child for Progressive liberalism, it was the philosopher John Dewey. He believed that liberalism had ignored the social perspective. To this end, he proposed a “common faith” by which to reinterpret America’s “outdated” religious outlook. “God” was not a transcendent being of realized value but instead a religious term signifying the active relation between ideals and their practical realization. As the professor himself stated the matter, “It is this active relation between ideal and actual to which I would give the name ‘God.’” Another way of putting it is to say that deity is defined as the actualization of progressive social value. The quest for certainty and for eternal verities was, he believed, futile.

Dewey’s plan was ambitious. He favored and sought relentlessly to implement “the development of a shared culture,” conceived as democratic in character and experimental in method. His view of culture abjured of course traditional Christianity and its values. They could not be reconciled, he thought, with the spirit of science and the nature of knowledge. Real intelligence concerned only the meaning of actions judged by empirically quantifiable consequences. The way of science and of human progress involved the principle of trial and error, which always operates to practical effect.

It would come as no surprise that Dewey regarded giant business corporations as the very embodiment of science, exemplifying the “collective art of technology” and a “socially organized intelligence.” As R. Jeffrey Lustig explains, “Corporations…but would be the de facto churches of the new religion.” Dewey envisioned. Corporate leaders and political elites would be its priests.

Reform liberals, whether of the Populist or Progressive variety, understood that laissez-faire liberalism amounted to a recipe for self-centeredness, greed, and exploitation.
of others. Both types of reformed liberals might well have echoed Tocqueville’s sentiment of “self-interest properly understood.” The Frenchman’s point was that a faith was necessary to moderate the pursuit of self-interest; otherwise, it would become demonic, dehumanizing, and destructive. It is a credit to reform liberals that they comprehended and acknowledged the wreckage that can be occasioned to society by conceiving it as an assemblage of solitary individuals without a shared culture.

In Tocqueville’s time, America’s faith and its values were indisputably Christian. Yet, by 1890, traditional religious faith had fallen under suspicion and was widely regarded as retrograde and an obstacle to social and scientific progress. Henry Steele Commager may have phrased it best when he wrote that “during the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth, [organized] religion prospered while theology went slowly bankrupt.” Reform liberals showed no interest in reinterpreting or attempting to breathe new life into Christian faith and culture, but instead donned a revolutionary cap, convincing themselves and others that Americans needed a new (secular) faith and set of values consonant with the instrumental advance of knowledge. So reform liberals advanced and sought to implement an agenda, which essentially usurped the role of Christianity and its age-old principles, in order to reinvent American society and government in accordance with secular, scientific modes of thought.

Progressives, such as Dewey, undertook this radical project with no consideration for the rich heritage of Christian thought and the countless ways in which it had inspired human beings to become morally disciplined, socially productive, and knowledgeable citizens. Never mind the fact that the university system itself, in which Dewey and other Progressives were privileged to work, was established in both Europe and America by the church. If Max Weber is to be believed, there also existed a correlation between the Protestant work ethic and educational achievement. One might infer from this that the American educational system was primarily a product of the work ethic of Protestants, who generated the wealth to fund it. Progressives appeared either to overlook these considerations or to reduce them to triviality.

Seemingly unbeknownst to Dewey and his disciples, Christianity had throughout the centuries laid the foundation for the development of modern science with its concept of a logical, mathematically quantifiable, ordered universe. Many historians of science during the last sixty years have expressed its weighty indebtedness to the Christian faith. J. L. Heilbron, Stanley Jaki, and Thomas Goldstein are but a few who have recognized this fact. Alfred North Whitehead, a Renaissance man in his own right, may have been one of the first to have acknowledged Christianity’s influence upon science, when he matter-of-factly maintained in 1925 that “faith in the possibility of science, generated antecedently to the development of modern scientific theory, is an unconscious derivative from medieval theology.” Also, not to be ignored, is the fact that there were clergymen, like Roger Bacon, Albert the Great, Nicolaus Steno, and Roger Boscovich, as well as numerous others, who were stellar scientists.

What may be proclaimed of Christianity’s positive effect upon science may also be said of the religion’s role in the development of Western law. As Harold Berman has written, “It was the church that first taught Western man what a modern legal system is like.” Similar accolades pass to Christianity for its contributions to economics. Joseph Schumpeter wrote of the late Scholastics,
“It is they who come nearer than does any other group to having been the ‘founders of scientific economics.’” The list of positive Christian contributions to Western civilization is similarly extended throughout most areas of human knowledge.

Yet reform liberals were content to war against this rich heritage and to try to recreate the world anew. It was their attempt to impose upon American society a culture of naturalism and of moral “trial and error” that was particularly brazen and misguided. In what sense, one wonders, could this imposition ever have been deemed moral? Countless people believed then, as others do now, that moral values are uniquely unsuited for experimental derivation and that religion is the wellspring of culture, and culture the fabric of social well-being. Reform liberals, seized by a temper of intolerance, dismissed Christianity as passé, but many of their “reforms,” especially in the field of education, amounted to serious, far-reaching intrusions upon American society.

A critic may, at this point, take umbrage with my analysis and object that Christianity embodied then, as well as now, regressive modes of thought, and suggest that it was the commendable intention of reform liberals to replace it with a culture that was scientifically enlightened and humane. In answer to this objection, it should be understood that the social utility of Christianity had already been demonstrated for centuries. The fact that it contained ritual and symbolism uncongenial to pragmatic naturalism was hardly a reason to discount or, even worse, to discard it.

Dewey’s epistemological theory, positing that what could not be verified operationally could not be known, assumed a narrow and myopic view of history and experience, and seemed an arbitrary standard. Insofar as Progressivism adopted or acceded to this theory, the movement represented a radical disconnect with the country’s religious and culture heritage, which undergirded America’s social and political life. Dewey and his followers thought themselves unbound by the past and as essentially cofounders of the nation. As their spirit of Progressivism began to spread, the citizenry gradually experienced a crisis of authority. This was the kind of crisis that unabated would eventually undermine a nation’s institutions. Indeed, today’s lack of public confidence in American institutions may be traced back, as if by vector, to Progressivism. Lustig was perhaps making somewhat the same point, when he commented that Progressivism lacked “authority quite literally—because although it would have ‘ends,’ it would lack origins…. [and] would be intrinsically illegitimate.”

In further response to my critic’s objection, it may be pointed out that reform liberals’ “humane” agenda represented, in Oakeshott’s sparkling terminology, the “politics of faith,” which undertakes by force of government the duty to save people not only from others but also from themselves. This is a politics wherein government leaders tend to become “pan overseers” and the society a “panopticon.” It is safe to say that reform liberalism, embodying the thoroughgoing secular faith it did, entailed what classical liberalism never did—a governmental perspective on “the good life,” thus blurring liberalism’s proud but beleaguered distinction between the public and private spheres. While Christianity was the primary faith that had pervaded American society since its inception, reform liberalism was by contrast nothing short of a revolutionary ideology bent upon imposing a secular faith by force of law. The Progressive agenda was an arrogant infringement upon social liberty and a fundamental interpretive reversal of Locke’s view of vast freedom and restricted government.
The Populist and Progressive eras succeeded in regulating some of the flagrant abuses perpetrated by large business combinations, and should be credited with this and other achievements. Yet Theodore Roosevelt was a trust regulator, not a “trust buster,” and, likewise, Woodrow Wilson affirmed that, while he opposed trusts, he favored big business. Indeed, corporations had been making giant strides in America since the early decades of the nineteenth century. By the time of the Civil War, courts had fictively declared them individuals, with the rights to contract, to hold property, and to sue. Intellectuals with philosophies vastly different from one another viewed these huge aggressive business interests in an overwhelmingly positive light. Sumner interpreted the massive concentration of corporate wealth as the natural evolutionary result of big business’s conquering intelligence, whereas Dewey construed corporate organization as the embodiment of scientific efficiency. It was Henry Adams who would observe that politics was no longer a struggle between men, but of forces.

Progressive thinkers, like Herbert Croly and Walter Weyl, understood the wisdom of Adams’s insight. They strove to reconcile corporate growth with traditional liberal-democratic ideals, while rejecting rugged individualism and the unregulated pursuit of corporate gain. They favored a powerful centralized government that could and would regulate corporate endeavor and provide a just distribution of corporate reward.

Major changes were witnessed in American political and economic life by the end of World War I. In order to regulate corporate endeavor, the federal government had become more powerfully centralized than ever. As impressive as this growth was, it only presaged the political and economic explosion that resulted following World War II. America’s political and economic fortunes rose on the world stage, as the nation became not only a prominent political power but also an economic force second to none.

An intimate alliance had by this time been struck between government and industry. “The intersecting of public and private functions,” as Scott R. Bowman maintains, “constitutes the dominant tendency of corporate liberalism in the twentieth century.” This intersection laid the foundation for a “pervasive and comprehensive form of corporate domination,” aptly called “corporate liberalism,” a system in which government and big business work together, hand in glove. This alliance constitutes an inversion of the priorities of classical liberalism, in which people’s voices were heard by government and their concerns came first. By contrast, in corporate liberalism, as Frederick Winslow Taylor observed, not the people but “the system must be first.”

The Vietnam War brought in its wake a public distrust of both government and corporations. Corporations were subjected to a torrent of federal legislation aimed primarily at protecting the environment from their ravages. Accordingly, the ironclad grip of political parties upon members of Congress was loosened by democratically revised rules governing its administrative machinery. These rules, fragmenting the power of political parties, left each member of Congress essentially facing the electorate alone, without a party to run interference on his or her behalf. Ironically enough, this well-intentioned democratization of Congress resulted in a vacuum of power, into which corporations happily entered. As “individuals” they had access to members of Congress as never before, and were free to lobby them, to engage in massive campaigns to shape public opinion, and to contribute to political
action committees in order to defeat those members who refused to do their bidding.

The Business Roundtable was formed in 1972–73 and was composed of the CEOs of the nation’s top two hundred industrial, financial, and service corporations. The corporations that were represented employed more than ten million workers and represented annual sales equaling half the gross national product. The Business Roundtable had a single function: to influence public policy in a manner favorable to big business. Former Arkansas senator Dale Bumpers described the brand of lobbying that the revised rules of Congress made possible.

[These lobbyists] developed very harsh methods of dealing with those who crossed them. Suddenly every vote began to have political consequences. Congress began to finesse the tough issues and tended to straddle every fence it couldn’t burrow under….It isn’t that these groups don’t have a legitimate interest but they distort the process of wrangling over the smallest issues, leaving Congress paralyzed, the public disgusted, and the outcome a crapshoot.39

In a political atmosphere where financially formidable organizations have intimate access to and influence over elected representatives, not only will there be many who are intimidated by these organizations and seek to hide, especially on issues of gravest public concern, but, most significantly, there will also be many who attempt to perpetuate their tenure in office by enacting laws that favor such organizations.

Sheldon S. Wolin has addressed this alliance of public and private power with vitriolic language. He calls the system “inverted totalitarianism,” the most salient characteristic of which is a discounted, passive, politically demobilized society, in which citizens are lulled into lethargy by their sense of powerlessness and anesthetized by trivial consumer pleasures. While citizens recline passively, a major corporation involved in the manufacture and sale of automobiles may dismantle a public transportation system; a formidable chemical company may pollute the air over a town or the aquifers beneath it; and a coal company may strip-mine a town to death and think nothing of leaving its people destitute.

The so-called corporate state is little more than a logical extension of the program begun by reform liberals. Progressives sought to regulate corporate endeavor in terms of the “good” they themselves recognized and espoused. In doing so they created a well-traversed pathway between government and corporate industry, such that there is now an intimate working relationship between the two, with only “a revolving door” separating the highest offices of government from positions of enormous corporate wealth. Progressives enacted antitrust, labor, and administrative reform; created commissions and quasi-legal agencies by which to regulate industry, finance, and labor; established the Federal Reserve Board; and endowed presidents with the power and responsibility to make national economic policy. So-called corporativism is merely the next chapter in the story of the tragically failed legacy of reform liberalism.

Congress now finds itself in the grip of elite corporate power. Congressional paralysis should come as no surprise. Its members respect corporate money and fear the effect it can have upon their future election prospects. Even when confronted by a monstrous national debt, congressional representatives are too hopelessly compromised to pass an annual budget. Social consensus has become an impossible goal in the new multicultural,
multireligious society ushered in by Progressives. In place of consensual solutions to problems, there is tribal quarreling over government entitlements. The absence of consensus allows this dysfunctional system of largess to grow without limitation. Never mind the fact that a large portion of the American populace is without employment and pays no federal income tax, and regards food, clothing, shelter, and health insurance as “rights” owed to them by government, not “privileges” achieved through work.

In this real-life Land of Oz, there is, ironically, the perception of a dire new feudalism where “haves” subjugate “have-nots.” The perception is not altogether unfounded in the corporate state of America. Safe, luxurious gated communities, with sumptuous golf courses and swimming pools owned by America’s elite exist in close, but uneasy, proximity to impoverished, crime-ridden neighborhoods. The middle class is fast eroding.

Government is seen by most citizens, whatever their lot, as a dismal failure. Their approval of public institutions is appallingly faint. Estrangement between the citizenry and these institutions is revealed in widespread apathy crippling the democratic process, particularly in the abysmally low voter turnout on election days. This malaise in turn props a vicious cycle of increased government unaccountability.

“Moral outrage” is written large across the administration of government. Assurances by elected officials that they will “get to the bottom” of political scandals, like those involving Benghazi and the Internal Revenue Service, are made to a dispirited public and are soon deprioritized by the mass media. Political promises eventually lose what little credibility they have and lapse into a forgotten, amorphous past.

The lack of government responsiveness, combined with a slumbering citizenry, characterizes an out-of-control state, or in less benevolent terms perhaps a “rogue nation,” in which a president may unilaterally initiate war and use citizens as pawns to support, fund, and wage it. The spoils of such wars, without surprise, belong to large corporate concerns like Halliburton, DynCorp, and Washington Group International.

This saturnine description of the American situation highlights a sobering social and political wreckage, which can in large measure, but not entirely, be interpreted as the inevitable outcome of reform liberalism. Confronted by a sprawling, unmanageable, and godless centralized government, which allies itself with, enhances the wealth of, and stands ready, if necessary, to bail out corporate interests, the citizenry’s sense of demoralization deepens. People intuit their own disempowerment, as even the unified culture from which their strength, moral indignation, and consensus once originated has all but ceased to exist.

Liberalism has stressed liberty, equality, and democracy and should receive a fair amount of credit for the constructive changes it has helped to encourage in American public life. Yet, on balance, the philosophy has proved problematic and, without the solidarity of traditional Anglo-Christian culture, a failure. When first tried in this country, the liberal experiment worked because the society was a largely homogeneous one, united in religion and culture.

Liberalism subsequently evolved from a philosophy of small government and expansive liberty to an all-encompassing project of reform, administered by a large centralized government, which in turn relegated Christian faith to little more than an irrelevancy. The philosophy became synonymous with a debilitating secular faith and an unabashed...
tendency to infuse the same into both public and private sectors.

Because of this intrusive tendency, there is presently an unholy alliance between government and corporate America that amounts, in the perspective of many, to soft tyranny. Votes are actively solicited, but people are thereafter forgotten. They constitute an electorate, as Wolin argues, but hardly a citizenry. Their telephone conversations and e-mail correspondence are monitored. The rules of political correctness restrict what they can say and do. These political severities are mollified only by the banalities of television, sport, and consumerism, all a financial bonanza to wealthy corporations.

How to reverse these disastrous trends without adopting the reform liberal mentality of forceful imposition that gave birth to them is a crucial and perhaps the most imperative issue confronting America today.

The nation’s future depends upon this issue of public philosophy being critically addressed.

The late Samuel P. Huntington took a vital step in meeting this challenge. He recommended “a commitment to America as a deeply religious and primarily Christian country . . . adhering to Anglo-Protestant values, speaking English, maintaining its European cultural heritage, and committed to the principles of the [American] Creed.” It is not so much reform but restoration that he sought. If and when this restoration project is initiated, a profound spiritual renaissance will be underway in American life. This regeneration will, like a phoenix, ascend from what now appears to be the political and social ashes of a public philosophy that is in shambles. At that kairos moment, the nation may again begin to experience redemption.

8. Young, Reconsidering American Liberalism, 33.
12. Tocqueville, Democracy in America, 287.
15. Locke, A Letter Concerning Toleration, 52, 56.
25. Lustig, Corporate Liberalism, 234.
26. Tocqueville, Democracy in America, 528 (italics added).


41. Samuel P. Huntington, *Who Are We?* (New York: Simon and Schuster Paperbacks, 2005), 20. The “Creed” to which the author refers includes the liberal principles of liberty, equality, individualism, representative government, and private property. Ibid., 41.