



Introduction

Twenty-five years ago, the study of American political thought seemed virtually dead, with nothing new to say. But since then, four developments have made it a remarkable lively field. First, scholars began to argue that American political thought had long centered not on individual rights and liberties, as many scholars argued, as much as on community, civic virtue, and republican self-governance - traditions many thought modern America needed to revive. Second, more scholars began to pay attention to the ways African-Americans, women, and other long-disfranchised groups had contributed to American political thinking as thinkers, not just as objects of thought. Third, scholars in several disciplines began to contend that the Progressive era saw far greater transformations in American thought than previously acknowledged, with pragmatist reform outlooks stressing scientific expertise and social democracy successfully challenging much in America's founding heritage. Some have celebrated these changes, others lament them. Finally, scholars like myself have argued we can no longer ignore the now often embarrassing American thinkers who defended the exclusions and subordinations that women, blacks, and other ethnic minorities experienced, exclusions and subordinations that even many Progressives defended, though in new ways.

In this seminar we read primary texts in American political thought from Tom Paine's *Common Sense* in 1776 through very recent writings on the economy, race, gender and religion by figures like Charles Murray, Robert Reich, Shelby Steele and Ralph Reed. We examined well-known works like the Federalist Papers, the Lincoln-Douglas debates, William Graham Sumner's Social Darwinist writings and Martin Luther King, Jr.'s *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, but also sometimes forgotten writings like the public correspondence between Catherine Beecher and Angelina Grimke, 19th century women activists with very different views; the defenses of white supremacy by figures like Henry Grady and Josiah Strong; and the black nationalism of Malcolm X. We concentrated on three themes: Why have America at all? Who should be a full member? How should its basic economic and political institutions be organized?

The units here, shaped by lively discussions and much outside research, adapt these themes for students at levels ranging from kindergarten through high school and for classes in drama and mathematics as well as history and social studies. All are rich in historical information about the variety of experiences people have had in America, the leaders who helped create and transform those experiences, and the ideas they had. Kindergartners are taught about people who made change democratically, then encouraged to undertake democratic change themselves, and then encouraged further to reflect on those experiences. In two units, students not only learn from classic films and plays dramatizing America's political and racial conflicts but also use primary materials to explore those issues through dramas they write themselves.

Historic debates over whether the government should intervene in the economy and who, if so, it should

benefit are studied against the backdrop of the Great Depression, and the recurring American urge to find a better way, especially through technology, is critically examined in a unit on inventing. Mathematical skills are developed by using census data to calculate information on the collective stories of different immigrant groups. Other innovative units invite students to picture themselves in the position of a variety of participants when the Revolution was fought, when the Constitution was adopted, when the Civil War raged, when African-Americans contemplated going "Back to Africa" and when many instead fought for their civil rights here. Doing so should make vivid for students what was at stake and why there could be profound differences about the nation's best course. Many of the units provide moving depictions of the lives of the men and women, rich and poor, black, white, Native American, Latino, and of other ancestries, who have all contributed (sometimes positively, sometimes negatively) to the still imperfect realization of the promise of America to provide economic opportunities, political self-governance, and personal liberties for as wide a variety of humanity as possible.

Together these units illustrate the basic issues in American political thought can be brought to life for a wide range of students at all levels through creative uses of historical materials, computer resources, drama, speeches, and above all, through the students' own reflective imaginations, once they are informed by substantial factual knowledge. The units show how America's teachers can not only keep the heritage of American political thought alive for our students but also provide them with intellectual and moral resources needed to think and do yet better things in the future.

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