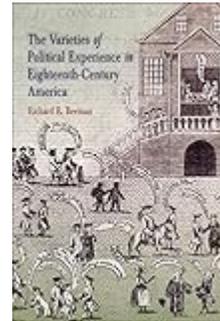




Richard R. Beeman. *The Varieties of Political Experience in Eighteenth-Century America*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004. viii + 366 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8122-3770-2.



Reviewed by Craig Yirush (Department of History, University of California at Los Angeles)

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Republicanism Redux

Richard Beeman has written an impressive and wide-ranging synthesis of politics in the major colonies and regions of eighteenth-century America. Focusing on what he calls “political experience,” Beeman defines his subject as “the relationship between citizens and political leaders in the realm of electoral politics, as well as that relationship as those political leaders went about the business of carrying out the responsibilities of governance” (p. 4).

Though not primarily a study of political ideas, Beeman’s book accords a central role to ideologies as normative frameworks which both shape and are shaped by political behavior. The central normative framework that Beeman employs will be familiar to all who have followed debates in early American history, political science, and law in the last generation: classical republicanism. For Beeman, the republican ideal of the good ruler is central to understanding political behavior in early modern Anglo-America. While acknowledging the many critics of the republican interpretation, Beeman insists that, “having spent much of my professional career reading the primary literature of eighteenth-century American politics, I am convinced that the persistence and ubiquity

of the language of republicanism—with its emphasis on virtue, disinterestedness, and the public good and their antitheses, self-interest and corruption—is simply too powerful to ignore” (p. 4). However, Beeman sees classical republicanism as “only a starting point,” noting that his book “is intended to test, not endorse, the power and efficacy of republican rhetoric in shaping the reality of eighteenth-century American political behavior” (p. 4). In addition to evaluating the utility of classical republicanism, Beeman’s goal is to explain the transformation of the American colonies from a classical republican political culture, with virtuous elites commanding the deference of the people, to a more democratic or popular political culture, where the people are deemed capable of governing themselves. According to Beeman, his book “is intended as a history of the political behavior that led to that democratic result” (p. 1).

In order to explain how colonial America made this transition to democracy, Beeman structures his narrative so as to bring out “the most important typologies of political behavior existing in eighteenth-century America” (p. 4). Instead of “an organizational structure that revolved

around each colony as a political unit” (p. 7), Beeman instead opts for an account of several of the most important colonies, alongside a discussion of the colonial backcountry and the cities of the northeast.[1] Beeman hopes this strategy will illuminate the “extraordinary diversity and lack of agreement within America on what politics were all about” (p. 30), while also conveying “a sense of the direction in which all of the pre-Revolutionary American polities, whatever their differences, were moving” (p. 4). He argues that these “sources of convergence ... would, by the time of the Revolution, shape a conception of politics different from that anywhere else in the modern world” (p. 30).

Beeman begins the book with a chapter on what he calls “the traditional order of politics in England and America,” in which he stresses the ubiquity of the classical republican “view of society as a corporate whole” (p. 10), in which there was an integral relationship “between social authority and political power” (p. 16). For Beeman, classical republicanism “led logically to the belief that superior wealth was conducive to nurturing a superior class of citizens—a ‘natural’ as opposed to ‘hereditary’ aristocracy” (p. 19). Only such leaders would have the requisite social status and economic independence to place the public good above their own private interests. However, Beeman also argues that classical republicanism had populist or egalitarian elements. As he puts it: “In the classical republican scheme of governance, the claims of the few to the support and obedience of the many were not simply asserted by the few, but, rather, were to be affirmed by the many” (p. 20). Since this deference had to be voluntarily given, republican rulers ultimately owed their authority to the people. As a result, classical republicanism was compatible with “the idea of vigorously contested popular elections” (p. 20).

Although he sees it as the dominant conception of political life on both sides of the Atlantic, Beeman argues that conditions in America gave the traditional elements of the classical republican paradigm less salience than in England. For Beeman, the “more egalitarian, open-ended, and geographically mobile character of the American social order tended to muddle traditional assumptions about the relationship between political leadership and social hierarchy” (p. 25). “This disjunction between the traditional expectations and the reality of American political life” would, he argues, “prove to be a source of both dynamism and instability in the politics of the various American colonies” (p. 25).

Having painted this picture of the normative frame-

work that structured political behavior on both sides of the Atlantic, and pointed out the ways in which conditions in America would work to undermine it, Beeman turns to a detailed discussion of several of the most important colonies and regions in British America. In successive chapters, Beeman attempts to outline the central elements of the political culture of each region or colony, supporting his conclusions with abundant statistical information, as well as with vignettes of key political actors. Throughout, his focus is on the relationship between the norms governing political life, and the nature of the actual political relationship between the rulers and the ruled.

Beeman begins his account of colonial politics with Virginia, a colony where, he argues, the classical republican ideal of rule by an educated elite came closest to realization. According to Beeman, Virginia’s political system was remarkable for its “outward stability and tranquility” (p.65), with powerful elites able to command deference from their social inferiors. However, Beeman notes that, even in Virginia, classical republican ideals of deference did not go unchallenged, with many politicians having to actively court voters, and even the most powerful of them (such as Landon Carter) sometimes failing to parlay their social status into political office. According to Beeman, this aspect of eighteenth-century Virginian politics was “a step away from classical notions of deference” and an example of the force of “popular impulses in American politics” (p. 42). For Beeman, then, classical republicanism in Virginia was “double-edged”: it celebrated deference to elites, but also, “in its emphasis on popular consent and on the role of the people as a bulwark against concentrations of power,” represented “a bridge to a more egalitarian future” (p. 66).

Beeman also offers an array of statistical information about political behavior in eighteenth-century Virginia. He argues that the franchise was “relatively open” (p. 53), and that the electorate had “a distinctly middling character” (p.49). Despite the fact that approximately 70 percent of white adult males could vote, the average turnout in elections between 1735 and 1774 was 43 percent, while only 6 percent of the elections to the burgesses between 1728 and 1775 were contested (p. 52). Beeman also stresses “the persistent localism” of the electorate in Virginia, noting that “petitions on general matters of public policy affecting the entire colony” were outweighed by those addressing private or local issues (p. 57).

Beeman’s chapter on eighteenth-century Massachusetts argues that the deferential and hierarchical

character of the original Puritan political ideal lasted well into the eighteenth century. Indeed, according to Beeman, New England as a whole was “remarkable for the consistency of its commitment to traditional notions of order and hierarchy” (p. 71). Though lacking Virginia’s high concentrations of wealth, the criteria for a good ruler were similar—propertied independence, piety, and education (p. 74). Beeman also notes the “persistent apathy of citizens” (p. 81) about most issues of provincial politics in eighteenth-century Massachusetts, with “almost a third of the towns” failing to send any representatives to the assembly at all (p. 78). Unlike in Virginia, however, local government and, in particular, the towns were the real locus of authority in Massachusetts (p. 74). At the local level, the selectmen were chosen “by a broadly based and active electorate,” with 75 percent of adult males being eligible to vote (p. 75). According to Beeman, “intense localism was what drove political behavior in colonial Massachusetts” (p. 79).

Beeman’s discussion of the politics of other parts of British North America focuses on similar themes. He sees New York’s political culture as both oligarchic and deferential, with many uncontested elections; as well, he argues that it was beset by endemic factionalism (both ethnic and religious), and a frank acknowledgment of the legitimacy of interests. Beeman depicts South Carolinian political culture as oligarchic and deferential, with the lower house of assembly largely dominated by wealthy slaveholders, and with all political power resting in Charleston at the expense of the backcountry. Despite having one of the most liberal property requirements for the franchise of all the colonies, turnout in elections was among the lowest. In the contested election of 1762, for example, it was under 10 percent (p. 143). Beeman argues that this combination of deference and voter apathy facilitated the concentration of power in a few hands.

After discussing the politics of four of the major colonies of British North America, Beeman turns to what he calls the “unsettling political cultures of the backcountry.” In two chapters focusing on the backcountry of both North and South Carolina, as well as on the northern frontier of Maine, Beeman argues that these regions constituted a discrete political culture within colonial America, having a more egalitarian wealth distribution, widespread landholding, and considerable ethnic and religious diversity. As a result, Beeman portrays the backcountry as a place where the traditional institutions of authority were weakened by the “transit across space” (p. 163), resulting in social instability, as settlers had little loyalty to the colony that they were nominally part of.

According to Beeman, the “rapidly expanding multiethnic society” of the backcountry made it very difficult to sustain a traditional deferential political culture (p. 168).

Following this discussion of the backcountry, Beeman turns to the perennial favorite in scholarly discussions of the origins of American democracy: Pennsylvania. Drawing on the important work of Alan Tully, Beeman argues that Quaker theology was “antiauthoritarian,” which meant that politicians in Pennsylvania could not rely “solely on traditional claims to deference; rather, they would increasingly need to demonstrate their affinity to the popular will” (p. 207).^[2] As Beeman puts it, although Quaker elites may have desired a more deferential electorate, “there was very little about the demographic character and social structure of eighteenth-century Pennsylvania that was likely to produce that response” (p. 224). However, as Beeman shows, the Quaker dominance of the assembly in the eighteenth century did lead to a form of oligarchy, which was facilitated by the fact that, despite a growing non-Quaker population, new counties were not created at a sufficient rate, and thus the population in the west was underrepresented in the assembly. As in the other chapters, Beeman offers an array of statistics to buttress these claims, arguing that one indicator of Quaker dominance was the fact that the Pennsylvania assembly had “one of the lowest rates of turnover among any of the American colonies” (p. 211).

Beeman’s penultimate chapter is on the politics of the three northeastern cities: Boston, New York, and Philadelphia. As in his discussion of the backcountry, Beeman incorporates a topic which, with the significant exceptions of Carl Bridenbaugh and Gary Nash, does not usually feature in accounts of early American politics.^[3] In many ways, this chapter is Beeman’s most important, for he sees these cities as incubators of a democratic, non-deferential, non-oligarchic politics. According to Beeman, “it was in those cities that the notion of society as an organic whole began to be seen more clearly as the fiction that it was” (p. 249). As a result, he argues, they gave birth to “a modern American conception of politics” (p. 247).

In his final chapter, Beeman argues that on the eve of the revolution an “American ethic” of politics was emerging (p. 278), more popular and democratic than the traditional, deferential norms which had guided colonial politics for most of the eighteenth century. As Beeman puts it: “somehow, out of the formlessness and disorder of the frontier, out of the contest of interests, ethnicities, and ideologies of America’s cities, and out of the diver-

sity of political behavior across the rest of rural America, egalitarian and democratic forms of social and political behavior would become everywhere so prevalent by the early nineteenth century that they came to define the very meaning of what it was to be an American” (p. 278).

There is much to commend in Beeman’s synthesis of early American politics. He has managed to bring together in one volume a significant amount of valuable information about colonial politics, information which, for the most part, had previously been available only in more specialized accounts of individual colonies. Beeman’s book is also innovative in its approach, examining political cultures of colonial America that do not often get attention, in particular the backcountry and the cities of the northeast. More crucially, he offers a large-scale argument about democratization that attempts to make sense of the often bewildering diversity of early American politics.

Beeman should also receive credit for trying to integrate both political ideas and political behavior into his analysis, showing how each of these factors is necessary to fully comprehend early American politics. On the ideological side, Beeman paints a convincing picture of classical republicanism as mainly a traditional or conservative political ideal. This is a valuable departure from the tenor of much of the liberalism-republicanism debate, in which classical republicanism became a communitarian panacea for the ills of an interest-based, rights-focused liberalism. By contrast, Beeman shows how classical republicanism was part of an elitist, hierarchical understanding of politics, where social standing, wealth, and virtue were the central criteria for political authority.

Beeman’s book is also commendable in its chronological scope. Unlike much of the recent work on the origins of American democracy—Gordon Wood and Sean Wilentz come to mind—Beeman takes the entirety of the eighteenth century seriously, instead of treating it simply as the colonial background to the democratizing impact of the revolution.^[4] Beeman’s narrative also nicely balances the particular with the general, offering valuable vignettes of individual colonial politicians, from the Virginians, John Robinson and Landon Carter, to the Pepperell family on the Maine frontier, alongside a wealth of statistical information on (among other things) the extent of the franchise, the average number of laws enacted by the colonial assemblies, and the rate of legislative turnover. This information is clearly conveyed in a series of statistical tables appended to the text. The book is also well illustrated with several good maps, as well as

portraits of important colonial politicians. As such, it will serve as an invaluable reference source for both scholars and teachers.

Notwithstanding its many virtues, however, Beeman’s analysis is open to several objections. Apart from the central theme of the emergence of a democratic political culture, Beeman makes little attempt to utilize the wealth of statistical information that he has painstakingly culled from the secondary literature to make telling generalizations. In each of the colonies or regions he discusses, Beeman provides data on most aspects of colonial politics, yet, he does not make any significant comparisons or contrasts between the colonies based on these numbers, and such generalizations as he does make are not related to the broad theme of the emergence of a democratic politics. For example, Beeman notes that there was a powerful localism at work in the American colonies, with institutions such as county courts, town meetings, and justices of the peace looming much larger in the lives of most colonists than the colonial assemblies. But the implications of this localism—as well as the oft-noted apathy of the colonial electorate—for his broader argument about the origins of colonial democracy are not drawn out.

Beeman also fails to offer a systematically Atlantic approach to colonial politics. Although he starts with a chapter on the English background, he quickly turns to a detailed analysis of politics in eighteenth-century America, an analysis which does not take into account any ongoing trans-Atlantic influences. In other words, early modern England provides the initial intellectual framework, but from then on colonial politics evolves in isolation, with no significant contact with the metropole, and no process of mutual interaction or influence. Given what we now know about the increasing integration of the British Atlantic world in the eighteenth century, this omission is a puzzling one. On a related note, Beeman does not engage with arguments about the growing Anglicization of colonial American society in the eighteenth century, adopting instead an older approach which sees, in colonial democratization, a widening gap between center and periphery in the century before the revolution.

His account of the major ideological frameworks shaping early American politics is also problematic in several respects. Perhaps most importantly, Beeman offers an equivocal account of republicanism. For a large part of the book, he argues that it was not only the dominant conception of politics in early modern Anglo-

America, but, in its embrace of “a natural social hierarchy” (p. 156) and its “exclusion of dependent people from active participation in the polis” (p.65), a highly conservative one. However, despite some discussion of the egalitarian aspects of classical republicanism, Beeman fails to explain exactly how this essentially conservative ideology was transformed into “more popular and, eventually, liberal democratic forms in America in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries” (p. 3). Given the centrality he accords to both classical republicanism and democracy as norms shaping political behavior, his argument requires a clearer account of how the latter came to supplant the former.[5]

Beeman could have explained this transformation by invoking the radical Whig tradition as a bridge between classical and modern understandings of republicanism. As a body of recent scholarship has shown, the radical Whigs were crucial agents in the creation of a new kind of liberal or individualistic republicanism, one much more congenial to the democratic, egalitarian ideas about politics that Beeman sees emerging in colonial and revolutionary America.[6] However, according to Beeman, the radical Whigs were classical republicans who believed that “virtue and liberty went hand in hand,” because liberty could only be secure when “leading citizens” had “virtue sufficient to put the good of the community over private gain” (p. 17). Although Beeman does give examples of colonists, such as Christopher Gadsden of South Carolina, combining newer ideas of natural rights and popular sovereignty with older ideas of virtue, he never clearly explains how these concepts were related, and, more importantly, what impact these new ideas had on traditional republican concerns about popular participation in politics (pp. 152-153).[7]

This confusion about the ideological origins of democracy is compounded by the fact that throughout the book Beeman refers to a series of other political ideas operative in early America, none of which are ever fully defined or related to the main thread of his narrative. In the first chapter, Beeman argues that colonial Americans not only “drew on classical republican ideology,” but also “on the more mainstream precepts of English constitutionalism in their defense of colonial prerogatives against both parliamentary and monarchical claims” (p. 25), yet, despite its centrality, he never fully explores the English legal roots of colonial political discourse. Beeman also notes the importance of what he calls a language of popular rights in colonial politics, but he never identifies the origins of this tradition of rights, nor explains its relationship to democratic ideology. Finally, Beeman argues

for the democratizing force of the “libertarian” and “egalitarian” ideas in the Declaration of Independence and the Pennsylvania Constitution of 1776 (pp. 279, 290), but he never clearly defines these terms, nor does he integrate them into his grand narrative of the erosion of a traditional political order and the rise of a modern, democratic one.

The unfortunate result of Beeman’s failure to explore the full range of political ideologies available to early American politics is that his central concept of democracy remains vaguely defined, as well as bereft of any intellectual origins. The lack of a substantive account of the nature of democratic ideas leaves unexplained the intellectual sources of the egalitarian reforms of the revolution which he discusses so eloquently at the end of the book. Instead, the reader is left to wonder how republicanism, depicted for most of the book as being a traditional ideology of deference and inequality, could become a transforming, egalitarian force, leading to attacks on entail, primogeniture, religious establishments, and even slavery.[8]

The causal connections in Beeman’s argument about the rise of democracy are also unclear. Did democracy originate in the cities of the northeast or in the backcountry? Was it primarily a cause or a consequence of revolution? Did it have intellectual roots, or was it mainly the result of the corrosive effect of New World conditions on traditional political norms? Although questions of historical causation are notoriously difficult, it would have been useful if Beeman had conveyed a clearer sense of the relative weight of these various explanations. On a related note, it is also not clear how Beeman can claim that “the provincial outposts of British Empire in America were not only moving apart from the metropolitan center that had guided their creation but were often frequently moving apart from one another as well” (p. 26), while simultaneously arguing that colonial politics contained “sources of convergence that would, by the time of the Revolution, shape a conception of politics different from that anywhere else in the modern world” (p. 30). Given the ongoing conflict over such questions as states’ rights, slavery, and patriarchy, it would be just as plausible to argue for the continuing existence of political diversity in post-revolutionary America. On this view, one could argue that the southern colonies remained more firmly attached to the traditional precepts of classical republicanism, in particular the idea of a society based on hierarchy, patriarchy, and dependence (of women and slaves, even if no longer of white males), while the backcountry developed a form of popular democracy inflected

with ethnocentrism, and the north embraced, at least to some extent, the egalitarian aspects of the new natural rights republicanism.

These criticisms aside, Beeman's book is a valuable addition to the scholarly literature on colonial politics. Indeed, this reviewer can only hope that its powerfully synthetic approach will lead to a resurgence of interest in the question of politics in eighteenth-century British America. Combined with new work on early modern political theory, empire, and state formation, such a resurgence could result in a much fuller, trans-Atlantic account of politics in colonial and revolutionary America. If such a development comes to pass, Beeman's analysis of colonial politics will surely be seen as an important catalyst.

Notes

[1]. Beeman acknowledges that his approach is not without its limitations, as the book offers no coverage of New Hampshire, Rhode Island, Connecticut, New Jersey, Delaware, Maryland, or Georgia. Other parts of British America, such as the Caribbean and the colonies north of New England (for example Nova Scotia) are also omitted.

[2]. Alan Tully, *Forming American Politics: Ideals, Interests and Institutions in Colonial New York and Pennsylvania* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994).

[3]. See Carl Bridenbaugh, *Cities in the Wilderness: The First Century of Urban Life in America, 1625-1742* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1938), and *Cities in Revolt: Urban Life in America, 1743-1776* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1955), as well as Gary Nash, *The Urban Crucible: The Northern Seaports and the Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986).

[4]. Gordon Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993); and Sean Wilentz, *The Rise of American Democracy: Jefferson to Lincoln* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2005).

[5]. To add to the confusion, Beeman never explains how classical republicanism could have had an "enor-

mously broad appeal across a wide range of class and cultural conditions" (p. 12), while, at the same time, existing only "on the fringes of political life in eighteenth-century England," being "used, largely ineffectively, by a disparate collection of conservative agrarian gentry men and urban radicals" (p. 25). It is also not clear how Beeman can argue that New World conditions acted as a solvent on classical republicanism's hierarchical tenets, while also claiming that classical republicanism in its radical Whig guise was peculiarly suited to New World conditions, as a result obtaining a ubiquity in America which it could not achieve in England.

[6]. For the best statement of this new, rights-based republicanism, see Michael Zuckert, *Natural Rights and the New Republicanism* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994). Lee Ward has also investigated the natural law roots of Whig thought in the late seventeenth century. See his *The Politics of Liberty in England and Revolutionary America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

[7]. In an article which formed the basis for this book, Beeman offered a clearer account of the strands of radical Whiggism. In particular, he argued that there was "a libertarian side of the republican tradition" which stressed individual rights as a means of combating royal power. However, he eventually concluded that "while few Americans were willing to invoke the libertarian side of republicanism as a positive justification for democracy, a good many political leaders—especially when they came out on the short end of an election—embraced the elitist, virtue-oriented side of republicanism in attacking populist politics at home." Richard Beeman, "Deference, Republicanism, and the Emergence of Popular Politics in Eighteenth-Century America," *William and Mary Quarterly* 49 (1992), p. 428.

[8]. As Beeman argues (quoting Jefferson): "Between 1776 and the mid-1780s every state in America abolished primogeniture and entail on the grounds that elimination of the practices would 'tend to promote that equality of property which is of the spirit and principle of a genuine republic'" (p. 283).

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