

Republican Institutionalism for a “Government of Laws”: The Polybian Political Science of John Adams

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ABSTRACT

John Adams’s political thought, notably in the influential first volume to his *Defence of the Constitutions of Government of the United States* (1787), expressed what may justly be termed a Polybian political science. His Polybian political science formed the basis for a republican institutionalism, an emphasis on well-ordered constitutions to balance competing social orders in society and guard against excessive influence of the “natural aristocracy.” Adams’s contributions to the American constitutional tradition reveal that the debate over the structure of the legislature in the American state and national constitutions was a debate about the foundations of human nature and the lessons of history. Further, his republican institutionalism challenges the assertion that the American founding was essentially liberal in the Lockean sense, suggesting instead a rich synthesis of classical, medieval, and modern ideas.

I wish to assemble together the opinions and reasonings of philosophers, politicians, and historians, who have taken the most extensive views of men and societies, whose characters are deservedly revered, and whose writings were in the contemplation of those who framed the American constitutions. It will not be contested that all these characters are united in Polybius. (Adams 1851, 4:435)

John Adams (1735–1826) has gained scholarly and popular recognition over the past 20 years as an influential contributor to the cause of American inde-

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pendence and to the crafting of the state and federal constitutions in the United States, an erudite constitutional theorist, and a perceptive scholar of the nature of government. A great achievement of recent scholarship on Adams's political thought has been to demonstrate that, far from revealing closet monarchism or oligarchism, his defense of independent executive authority and the senate as an aristocratic body, each with full veto power, was based on a fear that a natural aristocracy would dominate a single legislative assembly. Aristocratic domination of the legislature would tip the balance of powers into oligarchy, which would descend into tyranny, and from tyranny to anarchy (Thompson 1998, 179; Mayville 2016, 7–9; Ryerson 2016, 221–22). Drawing on deep reading of Greek and Roman historians, along with contemporary admirers of the British constitution, Adams (1814) concluded that simple democracies—like all simple governments—are prone to corruption and degeneration, famously opining that “democracy never lasts long. . . . There was never a Democracy Yet that did not commit suicide.” In crucial respects, Adams propounded what may justly be termed a Polybian political science. In contrast to contemporary arguments for a unicameral legislature designed to approximate pure democracy, which would seem the most straightforward implication of a principle of legitimacy based on equal natural rights, Adams defended a complex legislative structure for the American constitutions.

Polybius's influence has not gone unnoticed (Thompson 1998, 136–38; Mayville 2016, 29–30; Ryerson 2016, 295–96); even so, the degree to which Adams's “divine science of politics” (Adams 1851, 4:193) is Polybian in its essential premise, method, and conclusion has been insufficiently recognized in recent scholarship, which instead emphasizes the influence of early modern republicans such as Niccolò Machiavelli (1469–1527) and John Harrington (1561–1612), along with social contract theorist John Locke (1632–1704). An overemphasis on the influence of these thinkers obscures the degree to which Adams grounded his constitutional theory in an ancient republican tradition proclaiming the necessity of a balanced constitution for stability and liberty, one of the forefathers of which was Polybius. This tradition can be termed “republican institutionalism,” a mode of thought preoccupied with the typical republican fear of corruption and decay, but emphasizing the necessity of a robust system of laws as the solution, rather than reliance on civic virtue.

Adams's republican institutionalism, influential if not adopted without modification among the American Federalists, undermines the assertion that the American founding was essentially liberal in the Lockean sense, resting on the foundation of a social contract between autonomous individuals. In the excellent monograph *John Adams and the Spirit of Liberty*, which makes the case for Adams's originality as a political theorist and his position as “arguably

the leading constitutionalist of the founding era,” C. Bradley Thompson (1998, 277) especially strives to reconcile Adams’s views with Lockean liberalism. Both Lockean liberals like Thompson and conservative critics—most recently Patrick Deneen (2018, 3–4, 28, 46) in his penetrating argument that the liberal experiment has “failed because it has succeeded”—argue for the liberal, contractarian, rights-based understanding of the American founding.

Locke was more important for the rhetorical defense of American independence than for the development of American constitutional theory, as Donald Lutz (1992, 137–38) has documented. American constitutionalists in the late eighteenth century drew, in both practice and theory, from a variety of intellectual and experiential sources, including a biblical covenanting tradition, classical republicanism, and the English Whig tradition (Lutz 1988; Wood 1993). As Ellis Sandoz (1990) argued, the American founders incurred wide intellectual debts in what is best understood as a synthesis of classical Greco-Roman, medieval Christian, and Enlightenment ideas.¹ Among these, one major debt is to the tradition of republican institutionalism Adams articulated and championed, notably through his appeal to Polybius. A Polybian political science, attuned to the tendency of political societies to decay over time and the need for the balancing forces of a mixed constitution to provide stability and preserve a democratic element in the legislature, undergirded Adams’s contention for a complex and balanced government, a constitutional “government of laws, and not of men” (1851, 4:404).

MOUNTING THE DEFENCE

Adams wrote his three-volume *Defence* in response to the French physiocrat Anne Robert Jacques Turgot’s (1727–81) criticisms of the bicameral legislatures in Massachusetts and other state constitutions of the newly independent American Republic. Adams leads off with a portion of a March 1778 letter from Turgot to Richard Price (1723–91) in which the Frenchman bemoans the attempt to “balance . . . different authorities, as if the same equilibrium of powers which has been thought necessary to balance the . . . preponderance of royalty, could be of any use in republics, formed upon the equality of all the citizens” (Turgot, quoted in Adams 1851, 4:279). Adams, who penned the original draft of the 1780 Massachusetts Constitution, which provided a model for other state con-

1. “They were quite capable of reconciling Locke, the Italian republic tradition, Montesquieu’s interpretation of constitutionalism, and the teachings of Aristotle, Polybius, and Cicero in devising their plan of government. Any doctrinaire interpretation of their thought and work that narrows it to one or another controlling factor is almost certainly misleading if not distorted” (Sandoz 1990, 22–23).

stitutions, bristled at Turgot's and the French reformers' criticisms.² Against Turgot's (quoted in Adams 1851, 4:301) idea of "collecting all authority into one centre, the nation," Adams marshals "a variety of authorities" (302). Adams claims no originality; his rhetorical strategy is to emphasize the ancient roots of his claim for mixed constitutions as superior to all others. In the preface, he acknowledges that mankind has achieved scientific progress, yet "knowledge of the principles and construction of free governments" has strangely remained at a "full stand for two or three thousand years." The only three "discoveries" since the time of Sparta are representation, the separation of powers, and balance in the legislature (284). Adams is specific regarding the constitutional features necessary for preserving the balance, and therefore liberty: the possession by each "power" represented in the legislature of "an absolute *veto*, or negative, to every law" (483; emphasis in the original).

Turgot's argument for a simply constructed legislature, reflecting the natural equality of the citizenry, had its adherents among constitution makers and theorists in the American states. While adoption of the mixed regime and bicameralism was the norm for the emerging American constitutions, Thomas Paine (1737–1809) explicitly rejected the mixed constitution, along with the general complexity of the English constitution, advocating a "simple" republican form for the legislature in *Common Sense* (Paine 1776; Wood 1993, 225). The Pennsylvania Constitution of the same year adopted a unicameral structure for its legislature (Lutz 1988, 56). While standard practice for the American constitutions remained bicameralism, with reference to the idea of the mixed constitution, a theoretical debate about the degree to which bicameralism was consistent with the principles of natural equality and republican government ensued (Wood 1993, 226–36). Adams's defense of the mixed constitution and bicameralism was thus not only a response to French developments but also relevant to debates regarding the new constitutions of the young American states.³

THE TESTIMONY OF POLYBIUS

Thompson (1998, 240) states that the *Defence* can be fruitfully read as a "manual" for lawgivers and constitution makers; perhaps an even more illuminating reading is as a courtroom defense of the mixed constitution. In lawyerly fashion, Adams lays out a defense of the "kind of reading and reasoning which produced the American constitutions" (Adams 1851, 4:294). Adams

2. Adams met with Turgot and other French Reformers personally in Paris during his tenure as the US ambassador to Great Britain. He came away from the conversation convinced that they were fundamentally "Ignorant" of history and government (Thompson 1998, 93–106).

3. Conner (2018, 7) makes the case that Adams's *Thoughts on Government* was a direct response to Paine's "wildly popular pamphlet" *Common Sense*.

appeals to the combined force of “reason, experience, the constitution of human nature,” and “the uniform testimony of the greatest statesmen, legislators, and philosophers of all enlightened nations, ancient and modern” (299).

Adams builds his argument on historical case studies, barraging the reader with analysis of numerous modern republics—the lawyer presenting forensic evidence for his case. He highlights the origins of each regime and the processes by which its institutions changed over time—inevitably succumbing to eventual decay, excepting England. Next, between discussions of modern and ancient republics, Adams (1851, 4:299) calls to the witness stand philosophers (three), writers on government (four), and historians (six), both contemporary and ancient. Their “uniform testimony” is to preserve a “balance” in the legislature between the natural orders of society—the many, the few, and the one—and between the legislative and executive branches of government.

As Adams (1851, 4:435) notes, this wisdom is encapsulated in Polybius’s writings. Adams calls the Greek historian as a key witness in his case for the mixed constitution, preserving an independent executive and a balance in the legislature between what Adams understood as the naturally unequal orders of society. A Greek historian of Rome’s rise to imperial dominance in the Mediterranean region in the second century BCE and its experiment in republicanism, Polybius (ca. 200–118 BCE) applied a synthesized Platonic-Aristotelian typology of regimes and their cyclical degeneration to an empirical, historical analysis of the Roman constitution, which he argued was the key to Roman military success, particularly the defeat of Carthage in the First Punic War (Walbank 1972, 155; von Fritz 1975, 60–95; Trompf 1979, 23). He did not originate the idea of mixed government, but he applied it to the Roman constitution, attributing the Roman republic’s military success and longevity to its constitutional balance, thereby securing a prominent position in the pantheon of republican theorists (Millar 2002, 23–36; McGing 2010, 169; Nederman and Sullivan 2012, 872–75).

The fragmentary book 6 of Polybius’s *The Histories*, wherein he theorizes a natural “cycle of political revolution,” has received the greatest attention (Polybius 1922–27, 3:289). According to Polybius, all simple forms of government are susceptible to the inevitable cycle of degeneration, by which each transmutes into its “vicious allied form”—monarchy to tyranny, aristocracy to oligarchy, and democracy to mob rule (275–76). Experience has proven that constitutions incorporating a “combination” of each simple form, notably Sparta’s constitution designed by Lycurgus (ca. 900–800 BCE) and Rome’s organically evolved version, best counteract the inevitable cycle of degeneration and recurrence (274). Polybius is at once the architect of a complete theory of *anacyclosis*, the notion of “historical recurrence” (Trompf 1979, 5) prevalent in ancient Greek political thought, and a champion of the mixed or balanced constitution,

which alone has the potential to obstruct the cycle and preserve political stability (Walbank 1972, 140; 2002, 279; von Fritz 1975; Straumann 2016, 151–61). Polybius was central to the republican revival that began in sixteenth-century Italy and followed in the English-speaking world in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Pocock 1975, 77; Millar 2002, 36).

Quoting from Edward Spelman's (d. 1767) laudatory 1758 translation of Polybius's book 6 of *The Histories*, Adams adds the Greek historian's voice to the chorus of praise for mixed constitutions: "It is customary, with those who professedly treat this subject, to establish three sorts of government,—kingly government, aristocracy, and democracy . . . it is manifest that the best form of government is that which is *compounded of all three*. This is founded not only in reason, but also in experience" (Polybius, quoted in Adams 1851, 4:435).⁴ Adams continues with Polybius's description of the Spartan and Roman constitutions:

Lycurgus concluded that every form of government that is simple, by soon degenerating into that vice that is allied to it, must be unstable. . . . Lycurgus . . . united in one all the advantages and properties of the best governments; to the end that no branch of it, by swelling beyond its due bounds, might degenerate into the vice which is congenial to it; and that, while each of them were mutually acted upon by *opposite powers*, no one part might incline any way, or *outweigh* the rest; but that the commonwealth being equally *poised and balanced*. . . . This system preserved the Lacedæmonians in liberty longer than any other people we have heard of ever enjoyed it. (Polybius, quoted in Adams 1851, 4:435–36)

The Romans wisely emulated the Spartan example, to the extent that identifying the Roman constitution as aristocratic, democratic, or monarchic was impossible (436).⁵ Adams affirms the historian's conclusion that Rome's mixed constitution, which balanced the distinct orders of society through representa-

4. See also Cumming (1969, 132–33, n. 69).

5. At one point, Adams (1851, 4:403) misquotes Spelman's translation to the effect that the Romans arrived at the "same end" as Lycurgus by the "same means." Spelman (1758, 417) and the more recent translation by William Roger Paton record Polybius (1922–27, 6:293) as emphasizing that the Romans arrived at the mixed constitution not by way of reason, but through an organic process of applying practical wisdom to meet specific challenges. While this misquote may reflect an emphasis on Lycurgus's direct application of reason—thus directly applying to the American constitution makers—the "end" Adams refers to seems to be the stable equilibrium in which no single "branch" of the government can exercise unchecked power; the "same means" refers to uniting the advantages of each simple form of government into a single government, providing a balance. The author wishes to thank the reviewer that made the observation of Adams's misquotation.

tion in the consuls, the senate, and the tribunes, was responsible for its longevity, liberty, and greatness.⁶

Adams proceeds to quote the entire “rotation of governments” passage, according to which kingly government degenerates to monarchical tyranny, the subsequent aristocracy into oligarchy, and the proceeding democracy into mob rule, which then returns to kingship (Adams 1851, 4:441–44). Only the mixed constitution offers a means of slowing the cycle of degeneration: “Polybius thinks it manifest, both from reason and experience, that the best form of government is not simple, but compounded, because of the tendency of each of the simple forms to degenerate” (440–41).

After recounting the “opinions of historians,” Adams proceeds to survey 11 “ancient democratical republics,” followed by three “aristocratical” and three “monarchical” republics (1851, 4:435, 469–579).⁷ Adams’s analysis of Rome in this portion is drawn from Scottish philosopher and historian Adam Ferguson (1723–1816), whose *History of the Progress and Termination of the Roman Republic* (1783) “follows very accurately Dionysius of Halicarnassus, Livy, and Polybius” and provides “a good account of the steps by which the Roman people proceeded to augment their own power, and diminish that of the senate, until they obtained the whole” (521). Although the Roman constitution divided power between the natural orders of society, justly earning Polybius’s praise and Adams’s designation as the world’s “most signal example, excepting England, of the wisdom and utility of a mixture of the three powers in a commonwealth,” the balance was “very imperfect.” Hence, Rome was vulnerable to successive usurpations by the different orders in the course of time, first by the patricians who ousted the kings and ruled as oligarchs, and then by the plebeians whose demands exceeded parity with the patricians, absorbing increasingly more power and abolishing the distinctions between the orders, leaving the

6. “Thus, my dear sir, you see that Polybius’s opinion of different orders, checks, and balances, in a commonwealth, is very different from that of M. Turgot. The Roman constitution formed the noblest people and the greatest power that has ever existed. But if all the powers of the consuls, senate, and people had been centred in a single assembly of the people, collectively or representatively, will any man pretend to believe that they would have been long free, or ever great?” (Adams 1851, 4:439–40). See also the following passage: “Dionysius Halicarnassensis, in the speech which he puts into the mouth of Valerius, has not only given us his own judgment, that the most perfect form of government is that which consists of an equal mixture of monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy, but he has repeated the same sentiment, in his own name, in other parts of his work. . . . This is a mixture of monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy, extolled by Polybius; and is nearly the same with that of Lycurgus, instituted at Sparta about a hundred years before. As the constitutions of Rome and Sparta lasted so many centuries longer than others of Greece and Italy, and produced effects so amazing upon the human character, we may rationally ascribe that duration and those effects to this composition, although the balance was very imperfect in both” (542).

7. Rome appears as both a democratic and an aristocratic republic.

commonwealth prostrate before Caesar. The “rotation of governments” was complete (541–42, 548–49).

A POLYBIAN POLITICAL SCIENCE

Adams’s appeals to Polybius and other writers on government, philosophy, and history demonstrate that the seemingly surface-level debate between proponents of unicameral and bicameral legislatures actually involved a debate over the premises regarding human nature and history from which political analysis and constitutional design ought to proceed.

Adams saw his *Defence*, as well as the American constitutions, as grounded in the principles of a political science derived from the principles of the natural order.⁸ Thompson (1998, 107–25) has highlighted Adams’s construction of an inductive, empiricist method of studying politics, a method that sharply contrasted with the abstract, rationalist approach of René Descartes (1596–1650) and the eighteenth-century French *philosophes*, such as the Marquis de Condorcet (1743–94). Adams charged that the deductive method was grounded not in human experience, the only source of true knowledge, but in “Imagination, Hypothesis, [and] Conjecture” (Adams, quoted in Thompson 1998, 113). Adams sought to apply Francis Bacon’s (1561–1626) and Isaac Newton’s (1642–1727) experimental methods, or their nearest approximation, to the study of politics. Thus, the study of history and historical examples was integral to Adams’s science of politics.⁹ The science of politics cannot be conducted through laboratory experiments; it rather consists of knowledge gleaned from the results of lawgivers’ “experiments . . . on human life and manners, society and government” (Adams 1851, 4:297). Recent scholarship has emphasized the “Enlightenment” (Ryerson 2016, 92) elements of Adams’s empiricist political science, particularly its Lockean features (Thompson 1998, 15, 112); however, Adams himself emphasizes its ancient roots (Thompson 1995, 394–95) with Hippocrates (ca. 460–ca. 375 BCE), Democritus (ca. 460–370 BCE), and Aristotle (384–322 BCE).¹⁰

In the wake of other eighteenth-century political theorists, Adams constructed an empirically grounded political science that would merge ancient and modern wisdom (Burrow 2007, 79; Mayville 2016, 14). Following Henry

8. He intended only to defend those constitutions that “separated and balanced in the legislature three orders” (Thompson 1998, 98).

9. “A science certainly comprehends all the principles in nature which belong to the subject. The principles in nature which relate to government cannot all be known, without a knowledge of the history of mankind” (Adams 1851, 6:118).

10. See also John Paynter’s (1976) discussion of the principles underlying Adams’s political science.

St. John, 1st Viscount Bolingbroke (1678–1751), his “first political mentor,” whose “endorsement of the study of history as the teaching of political philosophy by example” became part of Adams’s modus operandi, Adams assumes that human nature is constant (Thompson 1995, 403; Ryerson 2016, 32). The study of past behavior is, therefore, a useful guide for predicting the future.¹¹ Polybius’s “universal history,” intended to be of “pragmatic” use,¹² is just the sort of history Adams finds essential to the science of politics. Universal history lays bare the essence of human nature and the effects of legislative experiments over time.¹³

PILLAR ONE: THE CONSTITUTION OF HUMAN NATURE

The first pillar on which Adams’s political science rests is a rather grim assessment of human nature akin to that of Machiavelli, English philosopher Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679), and Thucydides before them (ca. 460–ca. 300 BCE). Lawgivers, Adams argues, would be unwise to design systems of law based on an overly optimistic conception of human nature. Rather, they should recognize that unbounded passions, especially love of “gold,” desire for “praise,” and insatiable “ambition”—the “aristocratical passions”—are ever-present forces in human society (Adams 1851, 4:406–7). These features of human nature motivate great achievement, but, in combination with inequalities of “birth, fortune, and fame,” they guarantee the emergence of a “natural aristocracy” in every society and present a grave threat to the “commonwealth” (Adams 1851, 4:397; Porter and Farnell 1976, 22).¹⁴ Managing and restraining the natural aristoc-

11. Along these lines, see also Adams’s reference to Thucydides’s discussion of the account of the factions and confusions of Greece in the preface of the *Defence*: “‘Such things ever will be,’ says Thucydides, ‘so long as human nature continues the same.’ But if this nervous historian had known a balance of three powers, he would not have pronounced the distemper so incurable, but would have added—so long as parties in cities remain unbalanced” (Adams 1851, 4:286). Walbank (1972, 58) discusses Polybius’s continuance of the Thucydidean approach: “Polybius regards the study of the past as essentially a way to attain practical ends by learning lessons. . . . Broadly, this means that in human affairs a good deal is calculable even if a residuum is not; the whole programme of learning through the study of history implies a rational world in which—by and large—comparable causes produce comparable results and comparable efforts give comparable rewards.”

12. Walbank (1972, 26) notes that the work was specifically intended for Greek statesmen navigating relations with Rome.

13. Cumming (1969, 31, 35, n. 22) is interested in “the history of the acceptance of historical evidence as relevant” to political theory. As he points out, referring to historical evidence to support theoretical assertions has a long history, but this approach differs in quality from the historicist turn in nineteenth-century political theory.

14. “These sources of inequality, which are common to every people, and can never be altered by any, because they are founded in the constitution of nature; this natural aristocracy among mankind, has been dilated on, because it is a fact essential to be considered in the institution of a government. It forms a body of men which contains the greatest collection of

racy is a primary purpose of the constitution; concentrating all legislative powers into a single assembly essentially hands the legislative power to this element of society wholesale (Adams 1851, 4:399–401). “In all events,” Adams concludes, “human nature is not fit to be trusted with M. Turgot’s system, of all authority in a single assembly” (410).

PILLAR TWO: ADAMS’S (NON)PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY

The study of history is the second foundational pillar of Adams’s political science. Human nature, constant in all historical periods, is revealed in history to be such that society is perpetually vulnerable to degeneration into oligarchy, tyranny, and anarchy “in process of time” (Polybius, quoted in Adams 1851, 4:435). Yet, contrary to historian Joyce Appleby’s (1992, 200) conclusion, Adams’s understanding of history is not essentially cyclical, though it clearly diverges from the progressive understanding of history. Adams’s philosophy, or antiphilosophy, of history includes both a linear element and a cyclical element, charting a middle way between the pagan and the Christian views of history. Especially critical of the post-Christian, progressive view of history, he offers a reframing of the relationship between history, republican government, and political institutions.

Ancient and early modern republicanism imbibed an acute awareness of disintegrative forces buffeting the *polis*, forces of corruption and decay. The civic virtue necessary for the maintenance of the *polis* is always subject to these forces; the cyclical theory of history is thus integral to the idea of civic republicanism (Pocock 1975, 80–84, 526–27). Nederman and Sullivan (2012, 869, 878) argue that Machiavelli’s incorporation of the Polybian cycle of constitutional change represented a rejection of the Christian, providential view of history as a linear progression toward a final apocalypse, a fundamental reshaping of republican historical consciousness.

Adams’s own incorporation of the Polybian rotation of governments further reconceptualizes the role of history. Adams subscribes to no philosophy of history, or at least a philosophy that entails no inevitable directionality.¹⁵ His references to the “opinions of historians,” including the Polybian rotation, serve to counter the French reformers’ progressive philosophy of history. Astonished at their “Ignorance” of government and history, he instead attempted to “place

virtues and abilities in a free government, is the brightest ornament and glory of the nation, and may always be made the greatest blessing of society, if it be judiciously managed in the constitution. But if this be not done, it is always the most dangerous; nay, it may be added, it never fails to be the destruction of the commonwealth” (Adams 1851, 4:397).

15. According to Karl Löwith (1949, 1, 104), the term was coined by Voltaire and denoted a conscious departure from Augustinian theology of history.

Government upon the only Philosophy which can ever support it, the real constitution of human nature, not upon any wild Visions of its perfectibility” (Adams, quoted in Thompson 1998, 93, 119). Turgot’s argument for a unicameral system, providing for maximum centralization and the nearest approximation of democracy, is based on the post-Christian, but still linear, view of historical development.¹⁶ Adams challenges this underlying philosophy of history by counterposing the universal history of Polybius, supporting his more tempered view of human nature and historical development. Adams’s historians seek to identify the causes of discord and dissolution that perennially beset societies—causes that, due to the enduring passions constitutive of human nature, remain perennial threats to democratic societies (Adams 1851, 4:440).

Though he emphasizes the degenerative tendencies of human nature and society, Adams expresses no belief in the inevitability of cyclical recurrence. While Adams (1851, 4:443–44) argues that Polybius is too optimistic about human nature, underplaying the power of its passions, he also remarks that the Greek historian discounts the possibility of improvement on the Roman model.¹⁷ Indeed, despite the omnipresence of human passions that corrupt all simple forms of government, the possibility of improvement is central to the entire purpose of the *Defence* (440–41). Like Polybius, Adams hopes that examining the results of past experimentation can lead to improvement.¹⁸ The hope that the cycle could be “suspended” for a time by maintaining a balanced constitution was precisely the idea toward which English political theorists in the seventeenth and eighteenth century gravitated (Burrow 2007, 77).

For Adams, societies do not inevitably relapse into the cyclical pattern, but neither do they inevitably progress toward a final end. In contrast with both the “Prophets of Progress” like Turgot and Condorcet (Haraszi 1952, 17), whose naive belief in the perfectibility of mankind he denied, and the ancient

16. Turgot (2011, 349) outlines his progressive view in his own essay *On Universal History* (1751), which “encompasses a consideration of the successive advances of the human race”: “The passions, tumultuous and dangerous as they are, became a mainspring of action and consequently of progress; everything which draws men away from their present condition, and everything which puts varied scenes before their eyes, extends the scope of their ideas, enlightens them, stimulates them, and in the long run leads them to the good and the true, toward which they are drawn by their natural bent.” Turgot’s works inspired Condorcet’s *Outlines of an Historical View of the Progress of the Human Mind* (1795), upon which Adams read and commented (Haraszi 1952, 235–58; Lange 2011).

17. Interestingly, Walbank (2002, 183) detects a distinct idea of cumulative progress in Polybius.

18. “As we advance, we may see cause to differ widely from the judgment of Polybius, ‘that it is impossible to invent a more perfect system of government.’ We may be convinced that the constitution of England . . . is a system much more perfect. The constitutions of several of the United States, it is hoped, will prove themselves improvements both upon the Roman, the Spartan, and the English commonwealths” (Adams 1851, 4:440).

proponents of perpetual recurrence,¹⁹ Adams believed that careful constitutional design, based on a firm understanding of human nature as revealed in history, discerned through reason and experience, can guide lawgivers and statesmen toward gradual “improvement” in matters of society and government. Improvement is possible through “gentle means and by gradual advances, by improvements in general education, and by informing the public mind,” not through revolutionary breaks or drastic alterations in the forms of government (Adams 1851, 4:297).²⁰ Providence plays a role in human improvement, chiefly through placing opportunities before certain peoples at certain times—opportunities that can easily be squandered. The new American states faced this sort of historical moment. The “inscrutable” (22) role of providence is present but superseded by the imperative of applying sound reason based on experience;²¹ it could be compared to the complex role of “fortune” in Polybius’s history (Walbank 1972, 60–64; 2002, 181–82).²²

REPUBLICAN INSTITUTIONALISM

As demonstrated above, the major premise of Adams’s political science and its core conclusion align with those of Polybius’s universal history. The premise is institutionalist: human nature is constant, and so political institutions and constitutional design represent the primary causal variables that forge the destinies of nations.²³ Laws, particularly constitutional laws, powerfully determine the course of history. Constitutional design—the work of the “lawgiver” Thompson (1998, 32–35, 231–38) describes as Adams’s great theoretical and practical achievement—holds profound implications for the durability and “felicity” of human societies (Adams, quoted in Thompson 1998, 231). “The blessings of society,” Adams (1851, 4:190) states in his essay *Thoughts on Government* (1776), “depend entirely on the constitutions of government.”²⁴ Well-balanced

19. Adams’s view of history closely resembles that of Edmund Burke (1729–97) (Weston 1961; Lilla 2016, xi).

20. This is just the way Polybius described the development of the Roman constitution, which emerged through a process of trial and error; Adams sees a parallel in the emergence of the English constitution, which he names “the most stupendous fabric of human invention” (Adams 1851, 4:358; McGing 2010, 174).

21. This quotation is from Adams’s *Novanglus* (1775).

22. O’Neill (2007, 454) is thus not quite accurate when he says, “For Adams, human nature proved the constant, uniform, and universal cause of constitutional change.” Human nature is indeed constant, but the structures of political institutions, namely, the degree to which they allow for balance between competing orders in society, are the causes of change.

23. See also Cumming (1969, 93).

24. Republican institutionalism might be fruitfully contrasted not only with Machiavelli’s emphasis on civic virtue but also with the view of John Witherspoon, and later Alexis de Tocqueville, that “manners” (Witherspoon 2009, 289) or “mores” (Tocqueville 2012, 499), as opposed to laws and institutions, most powerfully determine the character and

constitutions counter the otherwise overwhelming tendency toward degeneration, preserving liberty for generations, if not indefinitely.

The institutionalist premise directly aligns with Polybius's in recounting the history of Rome's rise: that "the chief cause of success or the reverse in all matters is the form of a state's constitution (Polybius 1922–27, 3:269–71).²⁵ Likewise, the core teaching of Adams's political science is Polybian in essence: the mixed government, which combines elements from each simple form, is most suited to human nature and proven through experience to be the most durable. Adams is adamant that the American constitutions incorporating the wisdom of Lycurgus, as interpreted by Polybius, stand the best chance of improving even further on the Spartan, Roman, and English models of mixed government.

"A GOVERNMENT OF LAWS"

The core thread connecting Adams's most important contributions to American constitutional theory and practice—his essay *Thoughts on Government*, the "Report of a Massachusetts Constitution," and the *Defence*—is his adoption of the republican institutionalist mantra defining a republic as an "empire of laws and not of men" (Adams 1851, 4:194).²⁶ The republic is the "best of governments" because it rests on "standing laws" (193–94). The republican mantra is the interpretive key through which to understand Adams's defense

course of a nation's history. This emphasis on manners is a core element of Tocqueville's thought: "I am persuaded that the most fortunate situation and the best laws cannot maintain a constitution in spite of mores, while the latter still turn to good account the most unfavorable positions and the worst laws. The importance of mores is a common truth to which study and experience constantly lead."

25. The degree to which Polybius thought the cycle of degeneration could be prevented, and specifically to which Rome was subject to inevitable decay given its adoption of the mixed constitution, is disputed (Millar 2002, 29–30). The historian's praise of the Lycurgan constitution and Rome's balance of social orders, combined with the claim that historical examples hold practical utility, suggests that Polybius's theory of history is not entirely cyclical. Ryerson (2016, 295) has also reached this conclusion. On the other hand, Walbank (2002, 206–8) points out that in several passages Polybius states that the Spartan and Roman constitutions can only hold out for a "limited duration."

26. Adams (1851, 4:106) relays his preferred definition of the republic as a "government of laws, and not of men," which he attributes to "Aristotle, Livy, and Harrington," as early as *Novanglus VII* (1775). Chapter 2 of the "report" for the Massachusetts Constitution of September 1779 bases the idea of separation of powers on the republican mantra: "In the government of this commonwealth, the legislative department shall never exercise the executive and judicial powers, or either of them: the executive shall never exercise the legislative and judicial powers, or either of them: the judicial shall never exercise the legislative and executive powers, or either of them: to the end it may be a government of laws and not of men" (Adams 1851, 4:230). This statement appears in Article XXX of the final constitution, still in effect, as a sort of preface to the section on the Frame of Government (Massachusetts Constitution 1780).

of constitutions that balance the orders in society instead of concentrating all political authority in a single assembly.

Having established that the republican form of government is best, the law-giver's task is only beginning. Even in a republic, "possible combinations of the powers of society are capable of innumerable variations" (Adams 1851, 4:194). Adams's starting point, which he assumes Turgot shares, is that "a simple and perfect democracy never yet existed among men" (301).²⁷ The question, then, is how to construct and maintain a government in which a representative assembly preserves the democratic element. The representative element of the legislature should be as democratic as possible, but vesting all governmental, particularly all legislative, powers into such a simply constructed assembly has historically proven fatal to republics (285).²⁸

Preserving a democratic element in the mixture requires acknowledging and institutionalizing undemocratic realities of human nature and society. Beginning with his 1772 "Oration at Braintree," Adams consistently argues that the best governments have incorporated a mixture of monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy (Adams 1772; Ryerson 2016, 89).²⁹ The mixed constitution balances unequal social orders that inevitably emerge in society, not just branches of government (Thompson 1998, 176–78; Ryerson 2016, 293). Whereas Polybius (quoted in Adams 1851, 4:440–41) emphasizes the tendency of democracy to degenerate into anarchy from the bottom up—"to change into a government where the multitude have a power of doing whatever they desire"—Adams's counterintuitive but persuasive claim is that "no-

27. "If a village of half a mile square, and one hundred families, is capable of exercising all the legislative, executive, and judicial powers, in public assemblies of the whole, by unanimous votes, or by majorities, it is more than has ever yet been proved in theory or experience. In such a democracy, for the most part, the moderator would be king, the town-clerk legislator and judge, and the constable sheriff; and, upon more important occasions, committees would be only the counsellors of both the former, and commanders of the latter" (Adams 1851, 4:301).

28. "The end to be aimed at, in the formation of a representative assembly, seems to be the sense of the people, the public voice" (Adams 1851, 4:284). In *Thoughts on Government*, Adams elaborates on the composition of the representative assembly, and its democratic nature is clear: "The principal difficulty lies, and the greatest care should be employed, in constituting this representative assembly. It should be in miniature an exact portrait of the people at large. It should think, feel, reason, and act like them. That it may be the interest of this assembly to do strict justice at all times, it should be an equal representation, or, in other words, equal interests among the people should have equal interests in it. Great care should be taken to effect this, and to prevent unfair, partial, and corrupt elections" (195). He proceeds, however, to introduce arguments for distributing the executive, legislative, and judicial powers among separate branches and dividing the legislative power between different assemblies.

29. While Ryerson (2016, 89–90) emphasizes the "Oration" as most noteworthy for its full-throated endorsement of a "broader Enlightenment faith," and specifically an "explicit endorsement of Locke's social contract," the fragmentary notes to the oration place at least as much emphasis on the concept of mixture and balance in the constitution.

bles” (the rich, well-born, or superior in merit) will easily dominate a single representative assembly over time, corrupting the democratic element of the mixed constitution.³⁰ The moral and legal equality before the law on which democracy is based does not abolish inequalities of wealth, birth, and fortune, “founded in the constitution of nature” (397). Lawgivers must account for such distinctions in the institution of government; the solution is “ostracism” of the “natural aristocracy” in a second assembly, the senate (290, 444–45). Adams insists that the passion for distinction and human inequalities thrive in democratic societies, and that a single legislative assembly will exacerbate these tendencies (Thompson 1998, 169–72). The institutional implication is the preservation of an independent executive power, embodied in a chief magistrate, who can check both the senate and the representative assembly. Republican government must contain the aristocratic passions, chiefly by maintaining executive authority.³¹

Plato and Polybius each support Adams’s core argument for “the necessity of permanent laws, to restrain the passions and vices of men,” and for “different orders of men, with various and opposite powers, prerogatives, and privileges, to watch over one another, to balance each other, and to compel each other at all times to be real guardians of the laws” (Adams 1851, 4:462). Whereas Thompson (1998, 138) emphasizes Adams’s divergence from the “Polybian system” and his invocation of Plato as the fuller explicator of the effects of constitutional change on the human soul, Adams’s defense of the mixed constitution constitutes a more fundamental convergence with Polybius.³²

As Thompson points out, after his discussion of the Polybian cycle, Adams turns to Plato (ca. 428–ca. 347 BCE) as the primary witness to the relationship between the individual human soul and political constitutions as they degenerate from republics to tyrannies, quoting from book 8 of *The Republic* (Adams 1851, 4:448–61). Plato presents his own cycle of degeneration, from which Polybius apparently drew, more attuned to the changing character of the human soul in each successive form of government than to constitutional design (Ryerson 2016, 283). Yet, as Thompson (1998, 142) acknowledges, Adams pointedly concludes that Plato declines to draw the lesson of the mixed constitution from his discussion of constitutional change. The constitution of human nature engen-

30. “It is from the natural aristocracy in a single assembly that the first danger is to be apprehended in the present state of manners in America” (Adams 1851, 4:444).

31. “If there is one certain truth to be collected from the history of all ages, it is this; that the people’s rights and liberties, and the democratical mixture in a constitution, can never be preserved without a strong executive, or, in other words, without separating the executive from the legislative power. If the executive power, or any considerable part of it, is left in the hands either of an aristocratical or a democratical assembly, it will corrupt the legislature as necessarily as rust corrupts iron, or as arsenic poisons the human body; and when the legislature is corrupted, the people are undone” (Adams 1851, 4:290).

32. Adams’s divergences from Polybius’s schema will be discussed below.

ders a tendency toward degeneration in every political order, revealed in history.³³ Simple governments, which concentrate power and fail to balance the various social orders that inevitably vie for control, succumb easily to this tendency, but the application of “reason and experience” can fight it (Adams 1851, 4:440; Haraszti 1952, 26). Mixed constitutions that balance the naturally occurring competing social orders, like those of Sparta, Rome, and of course England, have the best track record in terms of longevity and durability.

THE ADAMSIAN SYNTHESIS

Thompson has convincingly framed Adams’s work as a “confrontation with the tradition of political philosophy extending from Herodotus and Plato to John Locke and Adam Smith” (1998, xviii). This confrontation yields an original synthesis of ancient and modern wisdom.³⁴ Polybius and the republican institutionalists play a key role in the Adamsian synthesis, allowing the Bostonian to claim that the American constitutions, in imitating the English constitution, also exhibit applied wisdom based on experience and reason, both ancient and modern.

Thompson (1998, 149–52) and Ryerson (2016, 90–91) each argue that Adams endorsed John Locke’s idea of a social contract based on equal natural rights as the source of governmental legitimacy, with some modifications. Further, Thompson (1998, 192) argues that Adams was “the first major American theorist to reject classical republicanism explicitly” and that he was primarily interested in preserving natural rights, particularly the right to property. Thompson (1998, 195–96, 199–201) makes two arguments: first, Adams is skeptical of virtue as a guarantor of law and liberty; second, he emphasizes that constitutional design can contribute to virtue. The first argument needs revision; the second is correct but does not suggest a rejection of classical republicanism. Rather, Adams’s synthesis represents an adaptation of the institutionalist strain of that ancient approach to politics.

As Thompson notes, Adams challenges Montesquieu’s appeal to virtue in volume 3 of the *Defence*. However, his complaint refers to Montesquieu’s negative definition of virtue as frugality and “the absence . . . of ambition and avarice,” as opposed to both the classical mixture of prudence, justice, temperance, and for-

33. The tendency toward tyranny and its root in human nature was the central theme of an unpublished 1663 essay by the young Adams. This theme continually reappeared in his writings (Ryerson 2016, 42–43).

34. Thompson (1998, 202–5) has emphasized Adams’s project of synthesis with regard to the idea of separation of powers and the classical notion of mixed government: “Adams’s political thought represents a unique and powerful attempt to synthesize the classical notion of mixed government with the modern teaching of separation of powers.”

titude and Christian benevolence (Adams 1851, 6:206). Montesquieu's definition would exclude the great heroes of the ancient world and the ineradicable impulse of ambition. Additionally, Thompson understates the degree to which Adams exhibits concerns about virtue and the public interest. Thompson is likewise overly dismissive of the degree to which constitutions must be designed with virtue in mind; virtue is intimately connected with Adams's notion of good government.³⁵ For example, he states in the Braintree oration that the "Preservation of Liberty depends upon the intellectual and moral Character of the People." In *Thoughts on Government* he defines "happiness," the end of government, in terms of virtue.³⁶

Yet, Adams is indeed skeptical that even true virtue, whether Christian or pagan, can ultimately form the basis for a durable republic; men must be "compelled to prefer the public good before their own" (Adams 1851, 6:208). Thompson's second argument for Adams's abandonment of classical republicanism appropriately captures Adams's claim—the republican institutionalist claim that constitutional design alone is a sure foundation for liberty, and that while virtue cannot guarantee well-ordered laws, well-ordered laws can help instill virtue.³⁷ In volume 1 of the *Defence*, the imperfectly balanced constitutional orders of ancient Greece and Rome fail because they disenfranchise elements of the social order, inducing disregard for the laws instead of compelling them to prefer the public good to their own (208, 489, 520–21). In concluding volume 3 of the *Defence*, Adams makes his case for laws that balance the orders of society in a mixed constitution, as the primary factors in preserving liberty (219).³⁸ The omnipresence of ambition and the weakness of public virtue suggest that government must find means of channeling ambition toward public virtue, or at least toward respect for the laws. If Adams rejected the classical reliance on civic vir-

35. See Sandel (1996, 123–67) for a discussion of civic republicanism at the time of the founding.

36. "All sober inquirers after truth, ancient and modern, pagan and Christian, have declared that the happiness of man, as well as his dignity, consists in virtue. . . . If there is a form of government . . . whose principle and foundation is virtue, will not every sober man acknowledge it better calculated to promote the general happiness than any other form?" (Adams 1851, 4:194).

37. Sandel (1996, 126–29) points out that thinkers such as Adams were concerned about a degeneration of civic virtue following the American War for Independence. Some of these opted for the classical republican idea of instilling virtue, while others, including Adams, instead "sought, through constitutional change, to render virtue less necessary." This idea captures the republican institutionalist approach.

38. "If a majority are capable of preferring their own private interest, or that of their families, counties, and party, to that of the nation collectively, some provision must be made in the constitution, in favor of justice, to compel all to respect the common right, the public good, the universal law, in preference to all private and partial considerations" (Adams 1851, 6:8).

tue, he certainly did not reject the institutional elements of classical republicanism; rather, he embraced and amplified them (Thompson 1998, 192).

Adams supported the inclusion of representative assemblies in free republics, but he was not a social contract theorist. Indeed, Adams (1851, 4:463–64) has little use for Locke in volume 1 of the *Defence*, calling him to the witness stand only to demonstrate that even “men of the most resplendent genius and extensive learning” sometimes create or endorse “chimerical systems of legislation.”³⁹ For guidance, Adams must turn to actual founders and lawgivers—Lycurgus, Romulus, Cicero (106–43 BCE)—and also Confucius (551–479 BCE) and “Mahomet,” (571–632 CE), among others (Adams 1851, 4:297; Thompson 1998, 25, 231–33), in order to examine actual legislators and the results of their “experiments . . . on human life and manners, society and government” (Adams 1851, 4:297). He read and benefited from Locke, particularly during the period in which he advocated American independence from Great Britain, and he endorsed the principles of representation based on consent of the governed and the separation of powers (Thompson 1998, 205). He affirmed that, in principle, all human beings are equal in moral worth and possess natural rights (Adams 1851, 6:453–54).⁴⁰ However, his constitutional reasoning proceeded not in a Lockean manner but in a republican institutionalist manner. His starting point in apprehending the purpose of government and the correspondent principles of constitutional design is not the artificial construct of the social contract that animated Lockean (and Hobbesian) theory. Adams was more interested in historical instances of constitutional founding than imagined states of nature or social contracts.

THE POLYBIAN MOMENT

Scholars frequently attempt to identify “favorite” or “principal” figures who influenced Adams’s thought. Many of these authors also exhibit Polybian influence, particularly drawing from the “rotation of governments” in book 6 of

39. Thompson (1998, 229) acknowledges that Locke offers little help for the lawgiver with regard to actual “political architecture.”

40. Adams (1851, 6:453–54) writes in a letter to John Taylor, among those in a series he wrote defending the *Defence*, to emphasize this point—but also to argue against the idea that important distinctions remain even in democratic societies: “That all men are born to equal rights is true. Every being has a right to his own, as clear, as moral, as sacred, as any other being has. This is as indubitable as a moral government in the universe. But to teach that all men are born with equal powers and faculties, to equal influence in society, to equal property and advantages through life, is as gross a fraud, as glaring an imposition on the credulity of the people, as ever was practised by monks, by Druids, by Brahmins, by priests of the immortal Lama, or by the self-styled philosophers of the French revolution. For honor’s sake, Mr. Taylor, for truth and virtue’s sake, let American philosophers and politicians despise it.”

The Histories. This is true of Harrington, whom Ryerson (2016, 243, 295) refers to as Adams's "favorite political theorist" (Fukuda 1997, 12–17). Isaac Kramnick (1968, 138) includes Jonathan Swift (1667–1745), the first philosopher Adams calls as witness in the *Defence*, and Bolingbroke in a group of "Augustun writers on politics" who "often referred to the classical sources of the doctrine of mixed government." Indeed, the portion of Swift's *A Discourse of the Contests and Dissensions between the Nobles and Commons of Athens and Rome, with the Consequences they had upon both those States* (1701) from which Adams quotes includes a reference to Polybius.⁴¹ Kramnick also includes Spelman,⁴² whose translation of Polybius's book 6 Adams used, in this group of "Augustun" authors concerned with the classical notion of mixed government.⁴³

Most conspicuous is the influence of the Polybian rotation on Machiavelli, whom Thompson (1998, 113–14) argues is Adams's "principal teacher in political affairs," his guide in applying the Baconian and Newtonian scientific method to politics (42). Machiavelli's application of historical examples, drawn from the *Discourses on Livy* (1531), exemplifies an empiricist approach that treats human beings as they are, not as deductive philosophers would like them to be (115). For Thompson (1998, 113–14), Adams's "Machiavellian Moment" accounts for the distinction between his political thought and that of his contemporaries.⁴⁴ Machiavelli incorporates and extends the Polybian cycle of constitutional change in the *Discourses*,⁴⁵ passages of which Adams cites (Adams

41. "Polybius tells us, the best government is that which consists of three forms, *regis, optiamtum, et populi imperio*" (Swift, quoted in Adams 1851, 4:383).

42. Spelman's (1758, 372) praise for Polybius, specifically the mixed government, is effusive: "If my countrymen will attentively consider every argument, made use of by POLYBIUS, to [show] the excellence of a government founded on an equal mixture of monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy, they will, I dare say, have the same satisfaction I enjoyed; that is, they will find the system of policy, laid down by that great man, in the following dissertation on the constitution of the Romans, to be a description of the advantages enjoyed under That of England."

43. "A great deal of the vogue for both Machiavelli and Harrington is attributable to their praise of classical mixed government. Bolingbroke's circle was, in particular, fascinated by this aspect of classical thought, not only because they were humanists, but also because of the hope the principle held that a truly mixed government could postpone degeneration and decline. Obsessed with the sense of corruption of English government and society, it was inevitable that Bolingbroke's followers found the framework for their preoccupation in a body of thought similarly concerned with the problems of corruption, decline, and regeneration" (Kramnick 1968, 138).

44. "Machiavelli was for Adams a kind of missing link, an important bridge between the political science of the ancient world and the empirical political tradition of the modern age" (Thompson 1998, 113–14).

45. Ryerson's (2016, 295) claim that Polybius does not present a fully Machiavellian cycle of regime change is an oddly retrospective assessment. Machiavelli's portrayal of cyclical degeneration and regime change follows and builds on Polybius's.

1851, 4:416–20; Cumming 1969, 87–88; Pocock 1975, 189; McGing 2010, 215; Ryerson 2016, 292–98).⁴⁶

Yet, Adams's direct and indirect inspiration from Polybius suggests that his "Machiavellian moment" is more properly understood as a "Polybian moment" (Nederman and Sullivan 2012, 875–78). Thompson is on solid ground with his claim that Adams was "unique among the Founding Fathers in that he actually read and took seriously Machiavelli's ideas," if not the suggestion that Machiavelli was Adams's "principal teacher" on politics (Thompson 1995, 390). Still, Adams makes clear that Machiavelli's contribution was to recover and transmit an ancient tradition in the study of politics.⁴⁷ If Machiavelli is a bridge between ancient and modern political science, then Adams's political science is properly traced to Plato, Aristotle, and Polybius, the political historian who placed their regime typology in the context of temporal change, applying it to a concrete example of a mixed constitution (Pocock 1975, 77).⁴⁸ Harrington, Montesquieu (1689–1755), and other contemporary republican theorists, led by Machiavelli, aided in the recovery of an ancient tradition of republicanism (Thompson 1995, 394–95, 398, 406–15). Further, Adams's conclusion regarding the weightier effects of constitutional design, as opposed to civic virtue, fundamentally diverges from Machiavelli's but dovetails with Polybius's (Straumann 2016, 19–20, 153) and the republican institutionalist enthusiasm for the mixed government.

CONCLUSION

Identifying a single dominant influence on Adams's thought is a fool's errand; a notable quality of his writing, particularly in the *Defence*, is its appeals to numerous authorities. Nevertheless, Adams's constitutionalism was largely consonant with Polybius's institutionalist approach to history and the linked endorsement of the mixed constitution as the form of government best able to preserve stability and liberty. In keeping with Adams's defense of a proper mixture, this paper has sought to rebalance scholars' understanding of the Adamsonian synthesis back toward a view (Ames and Montgomery 1934; Chinard 1940; Harazti 1952, 157) that emphasizes its ancient roots, especially the influence of Polybius. These roots are especially on display in volume 1 of the *Defence*, which circulated in the American states prior to the Constitutional Convention of 1787 in Philadelphia and was "in the contemplation" of the par-

46. McGing (2010, 205–9) further notes Polybius's influence on Livy, Machiavelli's main source.

47. "Machiavel was the first who revived the ancient politics" (Adams 1851, 4:559).

48. See also Sandoz (1990, 102) on the "mediation of common notions of rule from antiquity" by Harrington, among others.

ticipants (Adams 1851, 4:435; Thompson 1998, 260; Straumann 2016, 333–34). Adams championed a Polybian political science that formed the basis for a republican institutionalism, with an emphasis on well-ordered constitutions to balance competing social orders in society and guard against excessive influence of the “natural aristocracy.”

Adams’s republican institutionalism, not his alignment with the Lockean natural rights tradition, defines his distinctive contribution to the American constitutional tradition. His major works on constitutional theory articulated a theoretical underpinning for bicameral legislatures and veto-armed executives, as opposed to the Pennsylvanian and French Revolutionary unicameral legislative model, which would seem to intuitively follow from the natural rights framework. Even as constitutional theorists such as James Madison and his coauthors of *The Federalist* modified Adams’s theoretical underpinnings, focusing on the danger of tyrannical majoritarian factions, the participants of the Convention maintained both bicameralism and the executive veto instituted in the Massachusetts Constitution. Their selection of a complex legislature, designed to produce an equilibrium that would prevent tyranny, reflected the influence of republican institutionalism, based on a wary view of human nature and a trust in “experience” over simple reason (Hamilton et al. 2001, 23).⁴⁹

Ironically, the features of John Adams’s political theory that, according to Gordon Wood (1993), made him increasingly “irrelevant” in his own time—those associated with his republican institutionalism—may be precisely the features that make it increasingly relevant to contemporary American politics (Mayville 2016, 14). Deneen (2018, 4) is not alone in pondering the Adamsonian question of whether the “American constitutional experiment” is “approaching the end of the natural cycle of corruption and decay.” The rise of a “new aristocracy” and persistent social and economic inequality, despite democratizing reforms in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, suggest that Adams’s intuition regarding the constitution of human nature—that it tends to generate distinct social orders even amid formal equality—possesses enduring relevance (Deneen 2018, 131–53). The spirit of republican institutionalism, if not its solution of mixed government, could stimulate renewed thinking about how to maintain a government of laws in an increasingly divided and tiered society. The richly variegated American constitutional tradition, including the Adamsian synthesis, may yet harbor resources for the renewal of American constitutional order.

49. See Sandoz (1990, 101–4) on the centrality of “Aristotle, Cicero, and Polybius” to the American constitutionalists’ effort to establish “a rule of law and not of men.”

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