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INTRODUCTION

Susan McWilliams Barndt, Nicholas Buccola,
and Roosevelt Montás

In so many obvious ways, the United States today seems impossibly different from the United States of even the recent past. New technologies, including the internet and social media, have transformed daily life, to say nothing of the rapid rise of artificial intelligence. Goods, services, capital, and people move at incredible speeds, connecting even the most distant reaches of the globe. The nation is more racially and ethnically diverse than ever. Women now comprise the majority of the American work force, and women now vote at higher rates than men. By law, Americans now are permitted to marry people of all races and genders. Fewer than half of Americans today belong to a house of worship—a church, synagogue, mosque, temple, or the like—and that number seems to be continuing to decline.

Any one of the thinkers whose works appear in this book would find much (if not all) of this overwhelming and unfamiliar. That's obviously true for the Native Americans and the Puritans of the 1600s and 1700s. But it is also true for the people highlighted in the book's last chapters. Even relatively recent thinkers, like Audre Lorde and Harvey Milk, might be surprised by some of the transformations to American life during the last quarter-century.

These changes can feel overwhelming to contemporary Americans, too—especially because each one of these changes has brought challenges that appear unprecedented. Changing technologies have contributed to rising income inequality, the hollowing out of the American middle class, the rise of corporate and government surveillance, the advent of new weapons of mass destruction, the decline of local journalism, the quick spread of propaganda and misinformation, and declining privacy—among other negative effects. Globalization has unsettled entire industries, cheapened wages and weakened labor protections, exacerbated international inequalities, and made pandemics inevitable. Technology and globalization have also contributed to the spread of addictive drugs and the worsening of environmental conditions for human beings and other living things. Growing racial and ethnic diversity means that more and more Americans have trouble seeing themselves represented in the traditional pantheon of American Founders, and explosions of racial hostility and violence continue to poison the land. Changing beliefs about gender—from having women in leadership positions to allowing same-sex couples to marry, to recognizing transgenderism—have raised a host of new policy questions along with cultural backlash. Declines in religious

membership have gone along with declines in other social and civic organizations, and it is now common to hear that the United States is in the grip of a “loneliness epidemic.”

With all of these changes and challenges (and more!) facing the American people, it might be easy to believe that the United States is in uncharted territory. Indeed, a majority of contemporary Americans worry that the nation’s political system—and democracy—are at a crisis point. It is easy to believe that the nation is on a rope without a net, that we require wholly new thinking for wholly new times.

But we hope *The Princeton History of American Political Thought* shows something else. Even though some of the specific challenges facing the United States are new, the underlying thematic and theoretic questions of American politics are not. In fact, those questions, and the conversations they inspire, have remained remarkably stable across the last four hundred-plus years despite myriad changes to American life. Those questions include:

What does it mean to make “from many, one”—the aspiration captured in the phrase *E Pluribus Unum*?

What are the responsibilities of Americans to the nation, and to each other? What are the responsibilities of Americans to people in the rest of the world?

How should we protect people’s rights to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness”?

How do we negotiate the tensions between our commitments to equality for all and to liberty for all?

What do we mean when we talk about “the American dream”?

How do we navigate the gap between American ideals and American institutions?

How do we think about a nation that has both operated as a violent colonial power and as a historical model of resistance to violent colonial powers?

What does it mean to value political tradition in a nation forged by political revolution?

How do we reconcile the nation’s foundational and philosophical commitment to human equality with its history and legacy of racial enslavement?

Does a country that is philosophically committed to equality and liberty have room for those people who argue against equality or against liberty?

What does it mean to be an American, and how is this related to what it means to be a citizen?

Those questions were as urgent 250 years ago as they are today. In a world where so much else has changed, these questions—and others like them—have remained the same. And they have remained at the heart of American political life.

For that reason, we believe that the best way to think about the history of American political thought is as a multigenerational, multi-perspectival, multidimensional conversation around these core questions. For more than four hundred years, Americans both inside and outside the halls of power have asked such questions of each other. And while there has never been a moment in American history when all Americans agreed on the answers, Americans have made continual recourse to these questions.

Of course, as befits any serious conversation, American political thought is marked by a diversity of opinions and perspectives—and no small amount of contention. This is appropriate for a large, disparate nation where fundamental questions are always on the table. Yet one of the purposes of this book is to suggest the larger canvas on which the discontinuities

and clashing ideas play out. There is, even in the nation's greatest points of dissent and diversity, a dynamic ecosystem of ideas with deep coherence and continuity in American political thought: ideas that are as relevant—as urgent—today as they have ever been.

Consider one core example. As we write this introduction, the country is marking 250 years since the American colonies declared independence from Great Britain. The Declaration of Independence itself invites us to think about some of the central questions that have recurred throughout the history of American political thought, including the claim that it is a “self-evident” truth that “all men are created equal.” The nation itself may be said to rest on this claim, making political equality the signal idea of America. From this bedrock commitment spring all the ideas that have given the nation its distinctive identity. It is at the heart of anything that could be called an American political creed. Human equality implies democracy, government by consent, the rule of law, the Bill of Rights, limited government, the separation of powers, freedom of conscience, freedom of markets, and much more.

The United States of America, the name with which the Declaration christens the new nation, conjures itself into being through the declaration of the “truth” of universal human equality. Once ratified by the representatives of the thirteen colonies in 1776, these words brought forth the new nation. Indeed, they are the very words that Abraham Lincoln referenced when he declared in the Gettysburg Address of 1863 that “Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.” On Lincoln's reading, it is a dedication to the proposition of universal human equality that makes America a nation. In other words, America's coming into being is one and the same act as its collective assertion that human beings—all human beings—are free and equal as a matter of membership in the species.

But even if we recognize its practical and historical importance in our nation, it is not always easy to understand the meaning of that famous line in the Declaration, or the principle of equality that it articulates. As the poet Robert Frost observed, “That's a hard mystery of Jefferson's. What did he mean?” Human equality *isn't* obviously self-evident. That all people are equal might even be the furthest thing from a self-evident proposition. If you walk into a room full of people, you are apt to notice the differences among them before you notice the similarities. People are not equally tall, or equally proportioned, or equally kind, or equally funny, or equally good. Are we really saying that Sojourner Truth and Pol Pot are equals? Mother Teresa and Adolf Hitler? When it comes to our surface-level observations of each other, it is not clear that human equality is what stands out.

For his part, John Winthrop (a Puritan leader who appears in chapter 1) argued that it is only through a recognition of our difference and diversity that we come to realize the truth of human equality—because our differences make us all dependent on each other. But even Winthrop's argument doesn't quite solve the dilemma of how to read the Declaration. For the very fact that human beings have, throughout our species' history, encountered each other and decided—on the basis of those encounters with diversity—that humans are in fact unequal, casts doubt on the idea of equality's self-evidence. Human equality is a radical theoretical proposition. It is not a proposition based on practice or history or appearance. So, what on earth did Jefferson mean?

Jefferson himself embodies the complications of the idea of equality. For as any American middle-school student can tell you, Thomas Jefferson was a slaveowner.

His position—including, probably, the circumstances that allowed him to write the Declaration of Independence—depended on a legal system of human enslavement that denied human equality. What do we make of a professed adherence to the truth of human equality, coming from a man whose actions belie his words? Was Jefferson more than a hypocrite? Was he lying? Was Jefferson an earnest egalitarian trapped in an evil system who hoped, through his words, to push the new nation to eradicate legal slavery? Or was something else going on? (As John Quincy Adams wondered, writing in his diary in December of 1819, forty-three years after independence, had Jefferson understood that his Declaration “laid open a precipice into which the Slave-holding Planters of his Country, sooner or later must fall?”) And what of the other slaveowners who signed the Declaration of Independence before going home to their plantations? What were they thinking, and what should we think about them? How do we wrestle with their double-edged legacy in the history of the nation?

And how do we make sense of the fact that some of the greatest changemakers in the history of American political thought—people like Frederick Douglass, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Martin Luther King Jr.—have argued for major political changes in the United States on the basis of that founding document? Americans are so used to this element of our history that we can forget how unusual it is: that calls for change in the United States have so often taken the form of appeals to the founding. In some ways, in this nation, conservatism and radicalism overlap. (One might expect no less from a country whose traditions are grounded in a right to revolution.)

Of course, human equality is recognized, at least verbally, in all modern, liberal democracies. But the United States, having been framed on that basis from the beginning—and given our extraordinary diversity and the centrality of racial slavery in our national history—has traveled further down the road of debating what such a commitment implies in actual practice. Our diversity, our changing and evolving kinds of diversity, and the fact that we don’t have traditions and encumbrances from a feudal past to muffle our debates about equality, we argue, lends to American political thought one of its most distinctive qualities.

The question of equality even points us to foundational questions about human liberty. The basic message of the Declaration is that individual liberty is the cornerstone of the pursuit of happiness and that it can only be secured through mutual recognition of equality. The Declaration ultimately affirms not just individual rights, as lots of thinkers have pointed out, but association in terms of equality and mutuality as the necessary conditions for realizing those rights. You can’t think about liberty without thinking about equality as well.

But that line of argument begs other hard questions. For instance: What is the right balance, in practice and policy, between communal equality and individual liberty? And is there a place in this nation for those who reject the vision of a society organized to secure individual freedom based on mutual recognition of equality?

What moral and political commitments ought to follow from the claim that all human beings are created equal, and endowed with the natural right to be free? Put another way: What moral, political, social, and economic conditions are necessary to honor universal human dignity and freedom?

Such questions take us back to the deep, underlying theoretical quality of American politics. The core tenets of American political practice beget theoretical questions. Americans have been arguing about such questions for more than 250 years and will continue to argue

about them as long as the nation continues to exist. Political practice in the United States is inextricably bound to, and depends upon, political thought. American political thought is more than a curiosity or a matter of intellectual history; it is the beating heart of American politics, and it always has been.

Our ability in this country to act as citizens depends on our ability and willingness to engage in theoretical questioning, and to provoke theoretical inquiry. In putting forth this claim we echo Frederick Douglass, who envisioned American citizenship as grounded on an interpretive commitment to the nation's founding charter. The American citizen is not a member of a tribe or a race, but of an interpretive community. The American citizen is the citizen-interpreter. The act of reading and advancing constitutional interpretations that promote liberty and equality lies at the center of Douglass's conception of American citizenship. In his view, American citizenship is not defined by blood ties or legal status but by investment in the interpretation of what Lincoln would call "a proposition" to which the nation was dedicated at its birth. American citizenship, Douglass thought, was defined by engagement in the conversations that make up American political thought.

Over the years, a number of scholars have accused Americans of being a nonphilosophic people, of being a nation devoted mostly to "practical" concerns and material industry. But we think this volume shows something else: that the ordinary, practical demands of American politics have made serious, philosophic political thought a necessity. That has been just as—if not more—true for those Americans who have been disenfranchised and denied power as it has been true for those Americans who have occupied the nation's highest political positions. The United States might not produce a great number of professional philosophers, but it has produced a great number of important political thinkers, people who confronted the challenges of their day with serious thinking about what liberty, equality, and justice demand.

On some level, every American voter—and potential voter—knows this. Elections ask American citizens to choose among candidates and policies that require broader reflections about political ideas, priorities, and visions. (Potential voters can even choose, upon reflection, to abstain from choosing at all!) The ordinary practices of American politics invite its participants into the possibility of theoretical reflection. That is also true for nonvoters, of course; some of the nation's most important political thinkers, some of whose words can be found in this book, were people whose disenfranchisement led them to great insights about what justice demands.

In other words, American political practice has always been grounded in, and inseparable from, traditions of American political thought. Confronting the myriad crises of our time—and of the times to come—will surely require some technical know-how. But more fundamentally, confronting such crises requires that new generations of Americans join the long conversations that comprise American political thought. This book, we hope, serves as an invitation into that conversation, though we want to emphasize one more time that the selection of thinkers in this volume represents only a small number of the many interesting and insightful people who have devoted their energies to, as James Baldwin once put it, "achieving our country."

We hope that readers of this book will accept this invitation, delving deeper into some of the thinkers we present here and seeking out others to meet, each contributing to a vibrant, dynamic, grounded, and pluralist future for American political thought.

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