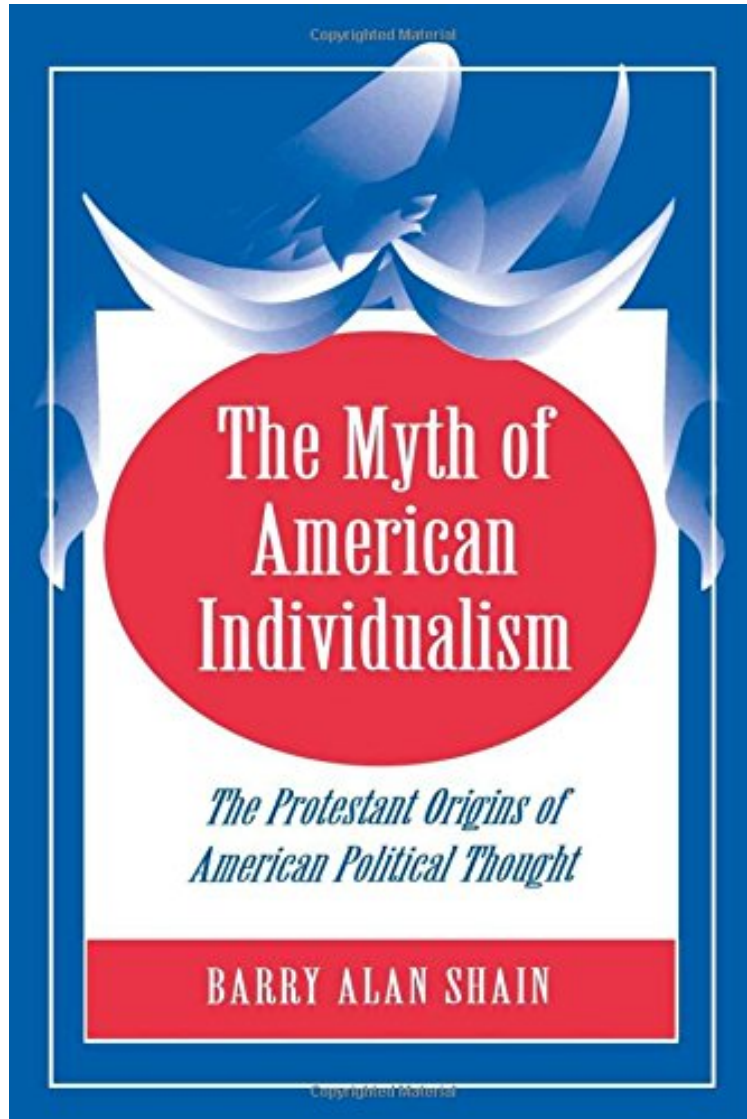


[FREE] The Myth of American Individualism

The Myth of American Individualism

Barry Alan Shain

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Barry Alan Shain : The Myth of American Individualism before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Myth of American Individualism:

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Give us LibertyBy Nathan StoneThe nature of freedom is one that is still debated, over two thousand years after the Greeks first uttered the idea and set it in writing and almost 250 years after the Revolution. Is freedom really the individualistic and atomistic power that some would say today? Barry Shain says no and marshalls rigorous evidence and arguments to support his thesis that the Founders' idea of freedom was

180 degrees different from the definition of the modern world. 14 of 38 people found the following review helpful. MIAB By Along Red River of the North Shain's thesis advocating Protestant communitarianism as the sole basis for American independence and constitutionalism builds a strawman/bogeyman out of modern liberal individualism, and claims that solipsistic slackers did not exist in colonial and revolutionary America, so let's discount liberalism as part of our founding DNA. These debates about the founding ideologies of the USA, championing some over others, are increasingly tiresome. The historical consensus embraces the conclusion that by the 1760s there were several streams, undercurrents, or sources (pick your metaphor) of thought that shaped what Jefferson called, "an expression of the American mind," or "the harmonizing sentiments of the day." 1) English common law - rule of law; trial by jury; habeas corpus 2) dissenting Protestantism - increasing pluralism spurred by huge immigration and the Great Awakening led to increasing Arminianism and individualism, along with more questioning of religious and political authority and a weakening of established churches. 3) republicanism - classical (Aristotle, Cicero) stemming from the English Civil Wars/Revolution (Sidney); Cato's Letters Franklin - "only a virtuous people are capable of freedom" 4) Lockean liberalism - social compact theory; Glorious Revolution; English Bill of Rights; Act of Toleration 5) Enlightenment/Scientific Revolution rationalism All of these religious and political ideas crisscrossed the Atlantic world - both ways, and overlapped, intertwined and reinforced each other into a variety of syntheses influenced by history, region, race, class and gender. In addition, a freer "public sphere" (via newspapers, pamphlets, broadsides, coffeehouses, taverns, clubs/debating/mutual improvement societies) with a freer press (after the Zenger case) created more fertile ground in America for ideas to be debated by ordinary folks (commenting on and criticizing governance) to be turned into actions regarding the nature of liberty, government and relations between church and state. Last, but not least, how can a book subtitled "The Protestant Origins of American Political Thought" omit the political thoughts and influences of the two most creative Protestant "planting fathers" in colonial America: Roger Williams and William Penn? They did not just philosophize or speculate (ideologically or theologically) about what constituted a good society or good government. They actually created them: William's "lively experiment" and Penn's "holy experiment." For all of their flaws or failings, they worked, contra Shain's thesis. 9 of 33 people found the following review helpful. Mr. Shain -- the new Plato? By CL Shain seriously argues that the ideals of the American Revolution lacked political individualism. In reality, he sees the principles forwarded by the Founders opposing 'political theories that gave priority to 'the liberty, rights, or independent action of the individual' (Shain 21). He sees the primary political goal of the revolution as cementing the communal power to determine the consciousness of the individual. But suddenly, out of nowhere, he observes that 'shortly, after the War of Independence (which ended in 1783), however, some of the nationalist elite began to turn away from communal ethical goals' (Shain 113). Surprise, surprise! Could this sentence be the source: 'And thus every man, by consenting with others to make one body politic under one government, puts himself under an obligation to every one of that society, to submit to the determination of the majority, and to be concluded by it' (Locke Par. 97). Or maybe this one: 'I mean not to exhibit horror for the purpose of provoking revenge, but to awaken us from fatal and unmanly slumber' (Paine, Common Sense). And how does Mr. Shain explain the evolving American Romantic? He characterizes a whole literary movement from Melville, Poe, Thoreau, Emerson, to Twain and Crèvecoeur as 'a small group of exceptional Americans' (113). Coming from an existentialist background, I reject Shain's argumentation as profoundly as Marx opposed Hegel ' but, of course, the other way around. I think his argumentation is inconsistent and weak. Even the Puritans had a sense for individualism (see e.g. the poetry of Anne Bradstreet or the experiences of Mary Rowlandson). Mr. Shain defers too much in order to argue his Aristotelian logic. There is, furthermore, no philosophical discussion about determination vs. free choice. Names like Althusser or Nietzsche do not appear at all in his bibliography.

Sharpening the debate over the values that formed America's founding political philosophy, Barry Alan Shain challenges us to reconsider what early Americans meant when they used such basic political concepts as the public good, liberty, and slavery. We have too readily assumed, he argues, that eighteenth-century Americans understood these and other terms in an individualistic manner. However, by exploring how these core elements of their political thought were employed in Revolutionary-era sermons, public documents, newspaper editorials, and political pamphlets, Shain reveals a very different understanding--one based on a reformed Protestant communalism. In this context, individual liberty was the freedom to order one's life in accord with the demanding ethical standards found in Scripture and confirmed by reason. This was in keeping with Americans' widespread acceptance of original sin and the related assumption that a well-lived life was only possible in a tightly knit, intrusive community made up of families, congregations, and local government bodies. Shain concludes that Revolutionary-era Americans defended a Protestant communal vision of human flourishing that stands in stark opposition to contemporary liberal individualism. This overlooked component of the American political inheritance, he further suggests, demands examination because it alters the historical ground upon which contemporary political alternatives often seek legitimation, and it facilitates our understanding of much of American history and of the foundational language still used in authoritative political documents.

From Scientific American A fascinating work that does much to expose the hollowness of early American individualism. "Barry Shain is perhaps not so much an anti-liberal as a general trouble-maker....He studies the year 1760-90, and he finds this period very much different from the one characterized by individualism which liberals have portrayed. On the other hand, he finds no secular republicanism of the kind celebrated by Hannah Arendt and the 'communitarians' she has inspired."--Harvey Mansfield, The Times Literary Supplement "Shain has gone a considerable way toward illustrating how America's 'lively experiment' was defined by profoundly Protestant, communitarian, and localist impulses. A must-read for scholars of colonial religion and politics."--Mark S. Massa, Theological Studies "This book demolishes a central tenet of American civil mythology. . . . The author displays impressive command over a wide range of primary and secondary sources; his account moves seamlessly between social history and political philosophy."--David Zaret, American Journal of Sociology "Shain's purpose is to articulate and defend for political philosophy and understanding of the American past which has been developing for several decades in social and intellectual history. In this effort he is remarkably effective. . . . Shain's striking conclusion is that the U.S. virtually backed into liberal modernity. . . . the book raises a host of important and in many ways novel questions."--William M. Sullivan, Canadian Philosophical "An impressive, well-argued, deeply researched book that enriches our understanding of early American history and arm us for current political struggles against the twin tendencies to cultural nihilism and political centralization."--Eugene D. Genovese, First Things "With this tightly organized, carefully argued study, Barry Alan Shain makes a major contribution to the contemporary debate over the political ideology of the American Revolutionary era."--Thomas E. Buckley, Catholic Historical "A fascinating work that does much to expose the hollowness of early American individualism."--William J. Watkins, Jr., Chronicles "In a provocative book, Barry Shain goes to great lengths to argue against the common conception of an America based on the absolute freedom of the individual to do as he or she sees fit. . . . Shain concludes that individual liberties as conceived in 20th-century America were not valued nearly as much as communal rights and communal freedoms. . . . He is a sophisticated thinker and a complex logician who impressively deconstructs the image of the Revolution's unfettered individualism."--Zachary Karabell, Boston Book "Barry Shain is perhaps not so much an anti-liberal as a general troublemaker determined to cause embarrassment on all sides. In The Myth of American Individualism, he studies the years 1760-90, and he finds this period very much different from the one characterized by individualism which liberals have portrayed. On the other hand, he finds no secular republicanism of the kind celebrated by Hannah Arendt and the 'communitarians' she has inspired."--Harvey Mansfield, Times Literary Supplement From the Back Cover "Barry Shain has ambitiously set out to deracinate eighteenth-century American individualism, leaving in its stead the roots of a Protestant localist political culture from which contemporary Americans might recover the language of community. The result is a fresh look at the values that animated America's revolutionary generation."--Joyce Appleby, University of California, Los Angeles