INTRODUCTION

Liberalism and the Civic Strand in the American Past

We find civic aspirations everywhere we turn in the American past, even in the most unlikely places. Civic aspirations arose from conservative and radical perspectives, from theological and secular foundations, from a bleak view of human nature and a hopeful one, and from the determination to either overcome the depravity of human nature or to unlock its potential. They appeared in times of war and times of peace, in periods of economic depression and economic expansion, and in debates concerning work and leisure as well as politics. Americans have recognized civic affairs as the measure of their civilization, from the Puritan effort in 1630 to "seek out a place of cohabitation and consortship under a due form of government civil and ecclesiastical" through President Dwight Eisenhower's warning in 1961 that "security and liberty may prosper together" only if "an alert and knowledgeable citizenry can compel the proper meshing of the huge industrial and military machinery of defense with our peaceful methods and goals." An integral and ubiquitous aspect of American experience, our unrealized civic aspirations provide the essential counterpoint to an excessive focus on private and individual interests. They speak to our better selves.[1]

Civic Aspirations and Liberal Values

Liberalism in both its classical and modern forms treats private interest as the essential business of life and thereby obscures our civic aspirations. It leaves public matters to representatives of the people, who are thus freed to pursue their private happiness. American liberalism in its great historical innovation, the United States Constitution, asserted that a republic might dispense with civic

virtue and minimize the influence of citizens in public affairs. Rather than count on the civic virtue of citizens, the Founding Fathers relied on a system of checks and balances to "make it advantageous even for bad men to act for the public good." Vice would check vice and ambition check ambition, making virtue unnecessary.[2]

It has never been that simple. The liberal tradition for two centuries lived off the borrowed capital from civic and religious traditions that tempered and enriched its vision of private freedom. But in the recent past, liberals lost touch with those traditions and gave rein to license. Liberalism now lacks the moral resources to chasten the self-seeking that returns nothing to the society it exploits. Its vision of the liberated individual is no longer leavened with a recognition of the obligations and opportunities that bind us together. This leaves an unalloyed liberalism ill-equipped to satisfy aspirations for self-government at a time when people believe they have lost control of the institutions that shape their lives and that their communities have fallen into disarray.[3]

In this crisis, Americans have exhibited a renewed interest in the virtues missing from the liberal tradition. Liberal values, they discovered, gave an excessively private cast to our civilization, focusing it on capitalist enterprise, individual rights, and domestic ideology. Market expansion, driven first by individual entrepreneurs and later by corporate enterprise, made material abundance a central part of the American dream. The United States embraced the cult of domesticity and the single-family dwelling more completely than any other society. In the last half of the twentieth century, Americans' fear of intrusive government gave rise to an expansive conception of privacy, placing a long list of private choices beyond the reach of democratic majorities.[4]

Immersed in our private lives, we abandoned the responsibilities and satisfactions of self-government. Rather than face up to internal tensions and injustices, Americans exported their conflicts to an ever-expanding frontier, which now includes the Middle East and the militarized reaches of outer space. The elaboration of our imperial infrastructure in the national security state and military-industrial complex of the post–World War II period created the most imperial of presidencies in the first years of the twenty-first century. The Founding Fathers' nagging fear that an unfettered executive, in collaboration with the military and secret services, might lead to catastrophic consequences has never been timelier.[5]

An Urban Thesis

But there is also a civic strand in the American past, one associated with cities rather than frontiers. From colonial times, the city "forced attention to matters of common concern which could not be ignored even by a people individualistically inclined," wrote Arthur Schlesinger in his 1940 essay from which urban historians trace their origins. City life promoted a "necessary concern with the general welfare" that "contravened the doctrine of individualism and nourished

a sense of social responsibility." Cities promoted a "civic spirit," Schlesinger concluded, fueling voluntary efforts that provided "training in collective action, constantly reenforced by the everyday contact of the citizens in less formal undertakings."[6]

Schlesinger's essay came at the culmination of a hundred years of American thought centered on the ideal of the great city that provided people with stimulation, beauty, and communion. Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote that "we can ill spare the commanding social benefits of cities." They must be reorganized to suit "an intellectual purpose," while public sponsorship of art, music, and intellectual life should insure universal "access to the masterpieces of art and nature." Cities played a special role in shaping our civilization, an 1843 study of American life added, because they afforded "a wider field both for virtue and vice and they are more prone to innovation, whether for good or evil." A powerful religious impulse reinforced civic concerns. The city "reveals the moral ends of being," a midcentury minister put it, and "sets the awful problems of life."[7]

The recognition of the city's role in American life came to a head at the turn of the nineteenth century. Having gone through a period of political upheaval and cultural anxiety, Americans explored their urban future in a national literature of the city (Crane, Norris, Dreiser), a school of urban painting (Sloan, Henri, the Ashcan artists), and utopian visions and programs of action. Given national prominence through the White City at the center of the 1893 Chicago World's Fair, the new civic architecture of the City Beautiful movement envisioned a city organized to meet the needs and interests of its people.[8]

Neither frontiers nor rugged individuals, markets nor self-interest, but the city and civic life stood at the center of Progressive Era ideals. "Make no little plans, they have no magic to stir's men's blood," wrote Daniel Burnham, whose *Plan of Chicago* (1909) exemplified the civic aspirations of the era. We forgot how "intensely interesting civic affairs are," another progressive argued, "and how admirably adapted to the beautiful and happy use of leisure are the common services of thought and action." Let us emulate Athens, a settlement house leader added, and "use leisure time to create great ideals, great loyalties, great power" rather than imitate Rome and "dissipate our leisure time and corrupt not only ourselves but the whole world." As late as the Great Depression, the usually staid pages of *The Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* still described the city as "the vital concern of all who desire high national aspirations."[9]

The civic strand thus leads us inevitably to cities. The city is etymologically and historically the foundation of civilization, often defined as the ability to live harmoniously in cities. For at least two thousand years, cities have been cradles of civilization where the full richness and potential of human life unfolds. Cities must cultivate citizens who create, sustain, and organize civilized life. As part of that process, cities have long nurtured experiments in face-to-face politics and self-government, an irrepressible demand that reemerges every time it is suppressed. The unique promise of American cities has always been the aspiration to build a democratic civilization that involves each individual in civic life and

thereby encourages the highest development of the mind and character of all. An active, articulate, and responsible citizenry represents democracy's most demanding ideal and the ultimate achievement of a democratic civilization.[10]

As the organizing force in the rise of our democratic and capitalistic civilization, American cities have been the crucial arena for the cultivation of an active citizenry attentive to the public good and suspicious of those who put self-interest above the welfare of the whole. Cities therefore shaped national debates over the competing demands of civic and market, public and private. These national debates, in turn, often focused on cities. Thus, the following narrative develops an overlapping analysis of national and urban experience, placing cities at the center of our national history and urban issues in a broader political, cultural, and economic context. The story returns always to cities, where the tensions between civic and market and between public and private have been most pronounced.[11]

The narrative also develops an overlapping analysis of economic and cultural matters. The prospects for a democratic civilization in the United States have always depended on the construction of an economy and a culture that complement our civic aspirations. The triumphs and the tragedies of our history thus reveal themselves only through these overlapping stories. Therefore, while the general thrust of the narrative is chronological, its thematic orientation requires some moving back and forth in time. Finally, the narrative invites other narratives to overlap this one. This book, that is, offers *a* civic history, not *the* civic history of the United States, for no single study can possibly comprehend the richness and complexity of our civic history.[12]

Part I examines the search for economic arrangements that would produce a responsible citizenry from the Revolution through Reconstruction. At the height of this long age of revolution, just as Americans embarked on a breathtaking experiment in transforming slaves into citizens, a genteel culture of manners and morals undercut the faith in democracy and helped to bring Reconstruction to an end. Part II picks up this theme of culture, retracing our steps through the nineteenth century, focusing on the rise and fall of a democratic culture, and ending with the eclipse of the public in the Gilded Age. Part III begins with the rediscovery of the public as a counterweight to corporate power in the Progressive Era. It then explores the transformation of the Progressive Era faith in public opinion into the techniques of public relations during the pivotal period just before and after the American intervention into World War I. Part IV analyzes the role of the corporate economy and consumer culture in transforming civic values in the twentieth century and ends with a discussion of the role of postwar suburbanization in the decline of the city. The conclusion considers the future role of the city in American civilization.