

Zakaras, Alex. *The Roots of American Individualism: Political Myths in the Age of Jackson*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022. X + 418 pages. Hardcover, \$31.63.

Alex Zakaras, an associate professor of political science at the University of Vermont, explores how American individualism perpetuated myths that were most prominently manifested in the Jacksonian era. Tapping a variety of sources, he demonstrates that both Democrats and Whigs during the aforementioned period defined their own version of individualism as it pertained to economic, political, social, intellectual, and moral components of society.

Containing a total of eleven chapters, the book is split into four parts. The first two chapters include an Introduction and identification of three foundational myths, all of which sought to express what it meant to be American. Today, we view the Jacksonian period as a critical time for the formation of popular narratives due to its features, which included the advent of mass democracy and economic changes caused by new technologies, infrastructure projects, expanding credit, and increasing demand for products. The myths, which conveyed a utopian vision of America, encompassed that of the independent proprietor, the rights-bearer, and the self-made man.

Part I covers three chapters and explains the independent proprietor myth through which American society is seen as a province of independent persons who control their own livelihoods. The enemies of independent proprietors during the Jacksonian Era comprised anything which could be attacked as aristocratic, such as banks, factory owners, and land speculators. While white men were included as part of this myth, Native Americans, Black Americans, and women were excluded.

Part II combines three chapters and deals with the right-bearer myth, defined as Americans united by a shared desire to secure natural rights against political oppression. Like the independent proprietor myth, mostly Democrats enunciated this myth. It emphasized the value of

labor, the importance of the free market, and the perpetuation of natural rights. Scottish political ideals influenced the latter areas, through Protestant religion and Newtonian scientific concepts. While the rights-bearer myth was ostensibly liberal, it too excluded anyone other than white men, according to the author.

Part III is structured as a single chapter and describes the myth of the self-made man. This myth was more associated with the Whigs than Democrats and embraced the role of government, the benefits of harmonic social classes, the advantages of state-sponsored capitalism, and the value of education. Unlike the other two myths, the self-made man myth venerated tradition and conceived of advancement as a matter of personal responsibility and practical moves by government, not supposed pre-existing, abstract principles. Though it did recognize the anxiety which rapid changes created, it nonetheless shared with the other two myths a positive spiritual dimension.

In Part IV, which encompasses two chapters, the author offers a critique of the individualism myths and how they developed from the Jacksonian span to the present. Just as the latter era employed the myths, they would reappear in similar forms later in American history. However, the consensus theory of American history which they fostered started to crack by the middle of the twentieth century. Since that time, the utopian view on which they were constructed has been subjected to fierce criticism for defending colonial expansion, racism, gender domination, and inequality.

Since the three myths of the independent proprietor, rights-bearer, and the self-made man are regarded as flexible and indeterminate, the author contends that they can neither be dispelled nor ceded. Therefore, whichever group is able to construct the most convincing narrative for

what America can and should be moving forward will succeed in redefining the country's self-conception.

There have been other books focusing on individualism's influence on American political thought over the last generation. Lawrence Kohl's 1989 text similarly evaluates individualism's sway on the Jacksonian period. Barry Shain assesses individualism over the 1760-1790 span in his 1996 book. Whereas both Aaron Barlow (2013) and Stephanie Walls (2015) study individualism from a general historical perspective, books published in 2022 by Lawrence Eppard and Galvin Benke apply individualism to issues of inequality and capitalism, respectively.

The present book could have been structured better. Instead of delineating types of individualism in the Appendix, that material would have made for a clearer understanding of the text if located in the Introduction.

Zakaras offers a convincing picture of how the Jacksonian era was both a catalyst for and result of American beliefs about individualism. While he states at the outset that his intention was not to trace the concept throughout the development of American political thought, it certainly impacted later periods, from the Gilded Age's embrace of Social Darwinism to the isolationist 1920s, to the rollback of public assistance in the 1980s. Zakaras posits that the contemporary fixation with gun rights resembles the independent streak of the Jacksonian period; his assertion that the goal of home ownership also does is less valid. Finally, his condemnation of American exceptionalism misses the mark. Rather than regarding that notion negatively, it should be seen as a part of the Constitution's promise of striving for a more perfect Union.

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