

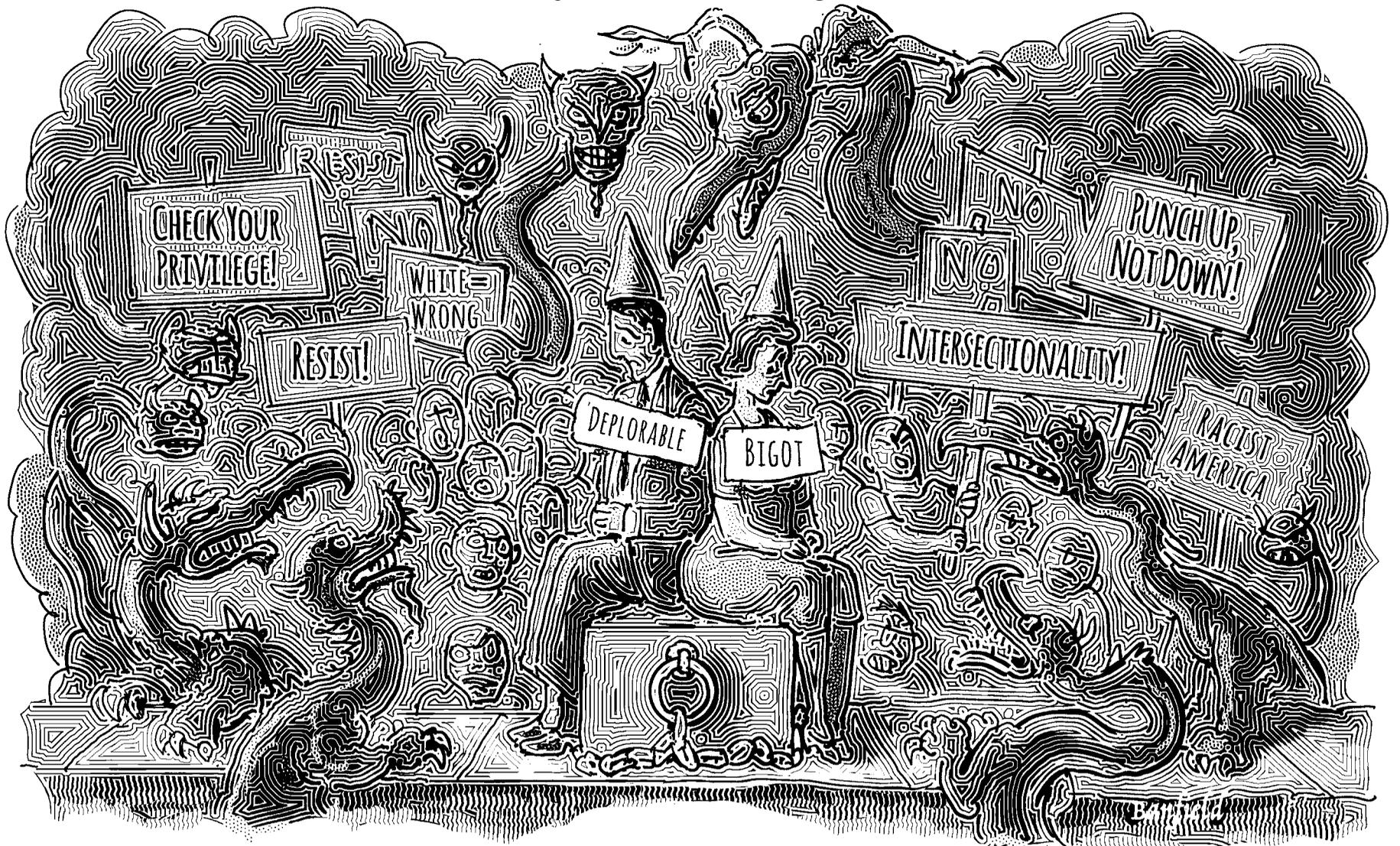
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Book Review by Ken Masugi

CAN ARISTOTLE MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN?

America, Aristotle, and the Politics of a Middle Class, by Leslie G. Rubin.
Baylor University Press, 310 pages, \$49.95



Cincinnatus at the Plow

After the painting by Constantino Brumidi
at the U.S. Capitol

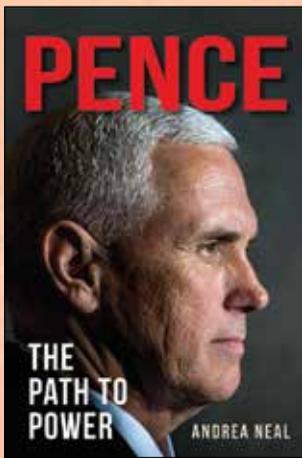
IN MODERN TIMES, AS IN ANCIENT ONES, establishing and then maintaining republican government is free men's highest responsibility. Leslie Rubin's *America, Aristotle, and the Politics of a Middle Class* restores Aristotle and the American Founding's political philosophy of republicanism to a place of honor. Using Aristotle to assess America's goals and attainments with respect to the best practicable regime, Rubin, who taught political philosophy and American politics at Kenyon College, the University of Houston, and Duquesne University, strengthens the current scholarship elevating political friendship's importance. Stressing the "middling" citizen character required for republican self-government, she cautions us against expecting human greatness in republican America.

Since the Middle Ages philosophers and poets have debated whether Aristotle is a

monarchist or a republican. (Short answer: Yes.) Republican government in its diverse manifestations has always been subverted by the monarchical temptation—from ancient Israel through Anglo-American political history to today's administrative state. Revelation, prudence, and philosophy all point to this perpetual war between combining the ruler's potency and decisiveness with the submission of the ruled and, on the other hand, giving maximum latitude to the diverse freedom inherent in human nature. Rubin's reflections on Aristotle's *Politics* detail how statesmen might strengthen republican government by teaching that politics is best understood as the study of regimes and citizens. The regime (*politeia*) is not just the government, but also the citizens' character and way of life. The republic (also *politeia*) is a particular type of regime, like a democracy or oligarchy, but a more complete form of what any regime in

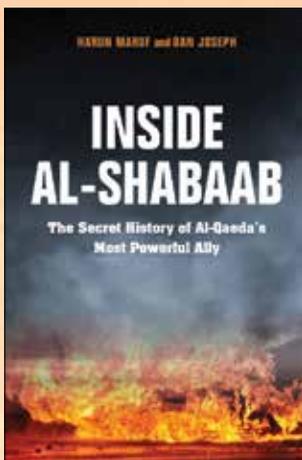
the Aristotelian understanding wants to be—stable and just, with citizens of the corresponding, requisite character.

TO SECURE THEIR REPUBLICAN GOVERNMENT, American practice closely resembled Aristotle's theory. "Like Aristotle, the American founding writers speak of the virtue of friendliness toward other classes and toward fellow citizens generally in their praise of honesty, simple manners, 'zeal for public good,' and 'affection for fellow citizens.'" This is the core of Rubin's "middling" republican characteristics. The list of American traits compares with those she finds in Books III and IV of the *Politics*. She sees in Aristotle a republicanism characterized by "reasonableness, lack of arrogance and malice, moderate ambition, willingness to rule *and to be ruled* as free people are ruled, friendliness, self-reliance" (emphasis



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in the original). Neither list, she repeatedly points out, contains heroic virtues, though I would argue that one can see in the American list patriotism and thereby courage and even self-sacrifice for the homeland. We see Abraham Lincoln recalling the dead at Gettysburg, and Ronald Reagan doing the same in his First Inaugural Address with the otherwise unknown World War I hero, Private Martin Treptow, showing how "ordinary" Americans can be heroic.

THese reflections on Americans' republican character merit significant amplification, but let us first note that they downplay some important elements. These include: the work ethic; braggadocious patriotism, which Tocqueville found objectionable; and civil associations, which fulfill many purposes of self-government in less bureaucratic regimes. Those associations in turn reflect the importance of churches in civic life, another Rubin omission. America had until the last half-century or so a functional unity of religion and politics, even as church and state were formally separated.

Her understanding of morality (without religion) may preserve Aristotle, but it distorts her political understanding of America. Her defense of America is itself middling:

Barely a single one of the Aristotelian middling virtues or the founders' republican manners is openly revered today. The term "virtue," or even the somewhat more neutral term "manners," is barely to be found in public discourse.

But why would an American today "openly revere" being middling or "mediocre"? Typical Americans would want and claim to be above average. Moreover, Americans demand honesty from their politicians, even as they know they are naïve to insist on it. Their "simple manners" make them delight in McDonald's, flee mainline churches, and avoid most lefty Hollywood films.

"Middling" Americans proudly chant, "We're #1!" Donald Trump's self-praise contrasts with the modesty of, say, the Bushes, but which one is the "deplorable" favorite? Authority, Rubin writes, "has simply been surrendered to a culture that prizes self-definition (license) over old-fashioned liberty and notions of equality that are beyond the capacity of free society to achieve." "Middle-Americans" would agree, but wonder why enforcing immigration laws, for example, has allegedly come to be "beyond the capacity" of our free society. And, no, the striving American, the

"go-getter," has never been satisfied with "a moderate income" that Rubin says should content them, especially one driven down by the administrative state.

Rubin's misperception of America has theoretical as well as empirical causes. Though she briefly criticizes the Progressives, she has little respect for the American political tradition's emphasis on property rights, which encompasses ownership of *one's rights*. If she downplays the necessary conditions of republican political life, such as acquisition of wealth and property, she presents an unconvincing account of her sufficient condition, civic education, by which she means generally formal education. Thus, she overlooks one of Thomas Jefferson's most emphatic defenses of democratic republicanism, from a letter he wrote in 1787: "State a moral case to a ploughman and a professor. The former will decide it as well, and often better than the latter, because he has not been led astray by artificial rules." Artificial rules must be those that violate "the laws of nature and of nature's God," part of the common sense of mankind. Despite Jefferson's warning, Rubin scans the founding era for proposals for schools of civic education. She comes dangerously close to John Adams Wettergreen's criticism of the "republican" scholarship of the 1970s as a "chicken word" for socialism.

IN HER THOROUGHLY ARISTOTELIAN "FIRST law of politics, we agree that 'If a regime is going to be preserved, all the parts of the city must wish it to exist and continue on the same basis.'" The republic as specific regime (the good democracy) is thus the name for that judicious mixture of oligarchy and democracy that acts on behalf of justice, the common good. This transformation—using deficient forms of government to produce a decent one—is the direction and dynamic of the *Politics*: to refine the meaning of republican government. Aristotle does not demand a reformation of human nature to produce justice. "The republic based on a large middle class is Aristotle's political regime *par excellence*."

Since friendship perfects justice, Rubin seizes the chance to discuss friendship, as developed in Books VIII and IX of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, a major element of Aristotle's political science that is typically ignored. "The task of a successful republic is to foster political friendship among its citizens: as a result of which they will trust each other to rule and treat each other as free and equal human beings, rather than as children or subjects, customers or employees." But without justice, friendship becomes like corrupt reason, another weapon for the powerful and unjust.



In this context, Rubin asks whether a system based solely on self-interest might prevail: If “citizen ‘virtue loses all her loveliness,’ that patriotism may not survive; it may turn to cynicism.” She is quoting the proto-Marxist defender of slavery, George Fitzhugh. We look in vain for a Lincolnian response. Rubin does not take up Harry V. Jaffa’s “Aristotle and Locke in the American Founding” (CRB, Winter 2001), which argues for the prudence common to both philosophers. She does, however, agree with Jaffa when she maintains that the American Founders “discovered from the observation of politics in various regimes called republics the same political truth that Aristotle discovered from observing various regimes.”

IN HER STUDY OF CITIZEN CHARACTER, Rubin stresses qualities more associated with Jean-Jacques Rousseau and ultimately Immanuel Kant than with Aristotle. Rubin bolsters the Jeffersonian modest republican side of America, as opposed to Alexander Hamilton’s powerful commercial empire. She may have taken this moralistic direction because she overlooked the ultimate political context of the middle books of the *Politics*, and in particular Book VI, on the farmers. The farmers (who can be rich, middling, or poor) enable Aristotle to bring about a middle-class republic that anticipates James Madison’s argument in *The Federalist*. (See Douglass Adair’s admirable *Intellectual Origins of Jeffersonian Democracy: Republicanism, Class Struggle, and the Virtuous Farmer*, which maintains that Aristotle is the source of Jefferson’s agrarianism.) Republics come in many

varieties. Contrast her argument with Thomas G. West’s natural rights/natural law focus in *The Political Theory of the American Founding* (2017). West’s approach embraces the prudence of both Aristotle and John Locke. His citizens are robust defenders of liberty, combining theory and practice. But Aristotle’s best republic—not his best *practical* republic—would unjustly enslave the farmers on behalf of the warriors and the rulers. This oligarchic injustice was intended to show that the warriors and the farmers should instead alternate places as rulers and ruled, the very definition of the political relationship. The “politicizing” of these classes would moderate both with respect to the common good, uniting the city. The warriors and farmers would identify further as citizens and no longer as classes. In urging readers to honor both political and trans-political justice, the best *politeia* of the *Politics* is instructive in the same way as Plato’s *Politeia*, the *Republic*. Moral virtue and the *kalon* (splendor) it seeks have a use in the refinement of Aristotle’s best republic, where the good citizen and the good man merge. One compares the American Revolution and the Civil War where the citizen-soldier together with statesmen elevated this nation to “vindicate the honor of the human race.”

Civic education is concerned with the souls of the students as well as their country. For Americans, the Bible is thus part of that education, but as Rubin tries to combine the two cities of rich and poor, she would separate the two cities of God and man, leading to further civic atrophy. America cannot be understood exclusively as either ancient or modern, nor as Christian or secular.

IN EMPHASIZING FORMAL INSTITUTIONS of civic education, including a national university, Rubin makes a questionable assumption. The states and civil associations (not to mention families) would have to do much of this work, as they did. But that in turn meant more reliance on Christian institutions. A national university, such as George Washington and other founding figures she surveys proposed, would have become corrupted, just as the University of Virginia was, in becoming the font of pro-slavery civil theology. An even greater triumph for the Slave Power would have been such a pro-slavery national institution in antebellum Washington, D.C. Ultimately, institutions cannot replace citizen character or the statesmen that foster it—not even after the resolution of the slavery crisis that Rubin avoids.

In our fight against the tyranny of the administrative state, let us grow in wisdom and patriotism by profiting from Leslie Rubin’s estimable revival of republicanism. Having known Leslie for decades as the indefatigable head of the North American Chapter of the Society for Greek Political Thought, I grieve that her sudden, untimely death in October 2017 ended her scholarship, still short of its apogee. I had looked forward to sparring with her over Aristotle, Trump, and “middling” America. But I among her friends take solace that her brilliance as a teacher of things splendid and just will abide over the years.

Ken Masugi is a senior fellow of the Claremont Institute, and the editor or co-editor of ten books on political philosophy and American politics.

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