J. G. A. Pocock’s Atlantic Republicanism Thesis Revisited: The Case of John Adams’s Tacitism

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IN A NOW CLASSIC 1992 ARTICLE ENTITLED “Republicanism: The Career of a Concept,” Daniel Rodgers examined the scholarly field that had grown around the history of American republicanism.1 Rodgers focused on J. G. A. Pocock’s notion that Italian humanist languages of republicanism and virtue had served as the linguistic building blocks for English and American revolutionaries alike. If Caroline Robbins, Bernard Bailyn, and Gordon Wood had shown that ideas such as “civic virtue” and the “common good” were the intellectual underpinnings of modern republican polities, Pocock saw the origins of these terms in the Italian Renaissance.2 Tracing the intellectual genealogy of Anglo-Atlantic political theorists such as Thomas Gordon, Trenchard, and Bollingbroke to Machiavellian and Tacitean traditions of studying political corruption and its remedies in classical virtues and political pragmatism, Pocock declared, “The American Revolution, which to an older school of historians seemed a rationalist or naturalist breach with an old world [of Aristotelianism and Machiavellism] and its history, now appears to have been involved in a complex relation with both English and Renaissance cultural history. . . .”3 This connection, Pocock implied, was rooted in a shared conceptual language of politics.

1 A version of this article previously appeared in Japanese in Shiso (Special Issue in Honor of J. G. A. Pocock) February (2008): 82–107.
4 Ibid., 506.
In response to Pocock’s claims, Rodgers countered that republicanism was “neither an ideological map to more than a small piece of experience, nor a paradigmatic language in the strong sense of Pocock’s early work.” He called its key conceptual terms—virtue, the republic, and the commonweal—“slippery.” He cited John Adams’s 1807 complaint that “there is not a more unintelligible word in the English language than republicanism.” At the same time, Rodgers conceded that the discussion of the idea of republicanism had enriched the debate on the origins of American constitutional originality. Rodgers’s concern about the American classical republican thesis was the danger of restrictions inherent in its methodological paradigms. He thus called for a study of republicanism in the wider contexts of “process and culture.” Rodgers claimed that the limitation of pure linguistic history of ideology and discourse could be enriched by political, social, and cultural history, and for this Rodgers cited the early social and cultural works of Linda Kerber, Rhys Isaac, and Sean Wilentz.

As historical methodology has become more complicated and many fields have faced evolution and hybridization—the sort of rich complexity called for by Rodgers—historians of “ideas in context” have sought to keep their context simple. Paradoxically, a movement that had sought to historicize philosophical texts has become quite textual itself, sticking to the discourse history of the 1970s and limiting its view to purely high-minded conversations between great authors using the medium of grand ideas in monumental, ever-constant classic texts. While Pocock himself has expanded his historiographical methods, historians of philosophical discourse such as Quentin Skinner, Richard Tuck, and others have not responded to Rodgers and other American historians’ critiques of Pocock’s Atlantic classical republican thesis, nor have they looked beyond discourse to understand the high cultural mechanics of republicanism.

What have emerged are essentially two camps of historiography, each deaf to the other’s claims. While the history of political discourse has not taken into account new methodology or foundational works on the European Enlightenment, the field of early American history has generally moved toward a social and cultural history of politics, excluding the study of the high political culture of the founding fathers. The collection of essays edited by Jeffrey L. Pasley, Andrew W. Robertson, and David Waldstreicher, Beyond the Founders: New Approaches to the Political History of the American Republic, represents this new trend, which looks for the origins of the republic in everything but the works of the founding fathers or in the elite intellectual and social traditions Peter Gay and Margaret Jacob first traced in the European context. These historians have expanded the scope of American political history, focusing on political and cultural democratization, gender, race, identity, colonialism, and comparative slavery. At the same time, these innovators have left the founding fathers to commercial trade book historians such as Jo-

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4 Rodgers, “Republicanism,” 37.
5 Ibid., 38.
6 Ibid.
seph Ellis and David McCollough. This expansion of the field of American history has enriched what had certainly been a one-dimensional narrative of the origins of American democratic republicanism, yet we still lack a social and cultural history of the republican tradition based on the examination of practices within a changing tradition.

To be sure, the republicanism of quattrocento Florence was not the republicanism of colonial America, and yet, as John Pocock showed, significant traces of philosophical republicanism passed from the Tacitean, Livian, and Machiavellian traditions into seventeenth-century political thought, and into the more radical neoclassicism of figures such as Thomas Gordon and William Davenant. Eighteenth-century North American political thinkers, such as Thomas Jefferson, were particularly influential, as they wrote not simply theory, but a real Declaration of Independence and a working constitution, beyond what English thinkers during the Glorious Revolution of 1688 had achieved. The American political philosophers read the books of classical republicanism to look for their model. Caroline Winterer has given a strong basis for us to continue pursuing the Pocockian thesis with her study of the important role of classics in late-eighteenth-century North American pedagogical and intellectual culture. While this history can be seen as a broken lineage, filled with appropriations and discontinuities, there is no question it was there. Whether it was the primary moving force or simply a major element of early American republicanism seems a point of semantics.

However, readers from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries did not simply appropriate the ideas of humanist political culture, such as republicanism. Like natural philosophers, they also appropriated practices of reading and interpretation that they consciously associated with a critical and skeptical political spirit associated with the accountability ideally inherent in republicanism. In their seminal article, Anthony Grafton and Lisa Jardine showed that the practices of

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9 Pasley, Robertson, and Waldstreicher, Beyond the Founders, 13.
reading and interpretation from the Tacitist and Livian traditions were a major element of political culture. If Machiavelli, Justus Lipsius, Gabriel Harvey, Amelot de La Houssaye, Queen Christina of Sweden, Montesquieu, and Thomas Gordon read political theory with the works of Tacitus and Livy at their sides, they were part of a conscious tradition that evolved over time and was not always republican, but it had the potential to be so. While it is possible to trace a number of practical traditions, such as accounting, from Florentine and Venetian republicanism to seventeenth- and eighteenth-century traditions of political liberty and republicanism, what this article shows is that John Adams consciously used this practice of reading in formulating his own practice of political criticism. Thus John Adams’s method of reading for political exempla can be seen as the persistence of a tradition first developed in Florence, Venice, Rome, France, and Holland, and connected to republicanism and the critique of tyranny.

POCOCK’S ARCHAEOLOGY OF POLITICS AND HISTORY

John Pocock has posited the republican tradition as part of an “American mixture” that brought with it “tensions and self-doubt.” Consistent with this recognition, Pocock’s own work has sometimes gone beyond the rigid confines of his own writings on methodology and reached into the messier worlds of the social and cultural history of knowledge. Indeed, it is not always easy to reconcile the densely packed *Machiavellian Moment* with Pocock’s more straightforward methodological tracts, “Verbalizing a Political Act: Towards a Politics of Language” and “The State of the Art.” Pocock’s dual existence as a maker of paradigms who, at the same time, questions them—as he does in his “Political Ideas as Historical Events: Political Philosophers as Historical Actors”—makes him difficult to understand and define. As Rodgers points out, “notoriously few” American historians actually read Pocock’s *Machiavellian Moment* in its entirety, mostly focusing on the final American chapter or on Pocock’s earlier work, “Virtues, Rights, and Manners.” Thus Americanists have never confronted Pocock’s rich set of historical references and his debt to the history of scholarship and historiography, a vibrant and rejuvenated field.

The first to point out the rather open character of Pocock’s method was Peter Miller. In his own work of intellectual biography, *Peiresc’s Europe: Learning and Virtue in the Seventeenth Century*, Miller combined the history of pure ideas with a social history of scholarship in the context of the history of antiquarianism and political thought. Situating his own project in relation to those of both Momigliano and Pocock, Miller stated,

Forty years ago, John Pocock published *The Ancient Constitution and the Feudal Law*, a study of the political uses of medieval English history in the seventeenth century. By locating the antiquarian heroes of his book, such as Henry Spelman and John Selden, in the history of history that had been sketched out a few years earlier by [Arnaldo] Momigliano in “Ancient History and the Antiquarian” Pocock implied that seventeenth-century political thought ought to be understood as antiquarian practice. And if political thought in the sev-
enteenth century was argued by means of historical scholarship, then an adequate history of seventeenth century political thought needed to be a history of that scholarship. Pocock’s book helped create a new way of studying the history of political thought. But this central claim seems to have gone unnoticed, or at least uncommented upon.16

Momigliano was a key northern Italian figure in the history of historical scholarship who became a leading member of the philological Warburg Institute in London, the stronghold of the study of ancient history and Renaissance humanist learned culture.17 Momigliano’s critique of intellectual history insisted on long genealogies that attached modern traditions of scholarship to ancient history.18 Momigliano studied Gibbon’s debts to ancient history and the evolution of Tacitism from antiquity to the humanist tradition.19 Few Americanists noted that, like Skinner’s *Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, the European chapters of the *Machiavellian Moment* mixed the history of scholarship and historiography along with politics. In this, both Pocock and Skinner revealed a debt not only to Momigliano, but also to Felix Gilbert and Donald Kelley, who had shown that humanist political theory was deeply rooted in the practices as well as the ideas of historical and legal culture.20 Historians were thus seen as ideologues and forms of early modern political philosophy a branch of erudite learning.21 In his *Foundations of Modern Political Philosophy*, a work with debts to Donald Kelley, Skinner remarked that humanist political theory was a historical enterprise. Yet Skinner failed to build on the ramifications of his own statement, leaving the question of historical scholarship to footnotes to Kelley.22 Indeed, the very notion that political theory is part of a historical practice leads not only to the history of humanist scholarship, but also to the complex and often ignored world of ecclesiastical history.23 Loyal to their strict definition of political discourse, Skinnerian historians of political philosophy have not gone far down the winding path of the history of scholarship, science, and religious culture, in spite of acknowledging that Gilbert and Kelley had shown that political philosophy was rooted in these cultures.

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Yet now, Pocock himself has distinctly turned to the history of scholarship and religion to contextualize Edward Gibbon’s ideas. In *Barbarism and Religion*, Pocock not only declares that “the capacity to read texts critically, vital . . . to the writing of Enlightenment history, was also a great part of what the age meant by ‘philosophy.’” Pocock examines the concept of decline and fall, yet he does so in the context of the vast tableau of Gibbon’s scholarship: his education and early readings; the intellectual traditions of which he was a part; and the practices of reading, scholarship, travel, collecting, and sociability that constituted his intellectual world. Volume 2 considers the history of antiquarianism and the archival, scholarly practices inherent to it. It is here that Pocock enunciates his new, complex approach to the study of philosophy. Philosophy, he warned,

“did not always indicate a body of systematic thought about nature and knowledge. It was often said to denote a method rather than a system, and this was not all. It could indicate no more than a civil attitude of mind, an openness to reason, a desire to control the passions of which fanaticism was one; but this apparently eirenic sense, it became the basis of a militant program of ideology.”

In *The First Decline and Fall*, volume 3 of *Barbarism and Religion*, Pocock paints a grand portrait of the history of empire and the most comprehensive reading to date of the influence of Tacitus on eighteenth-century thought. Thus Pocock returns to his antiquarian roots and shows the great influence of historical tradition, and archival, antiquarian, and ecclesiastical diplomacies in the world of Enlightenment historiography. He fires a powerful volley at the entrenched notion that scholarship, erudition, and religion had faded in the enlightened world of the philosophes, and in citing Momigliano, he shatters any notion of methodological purity that might be attached to his name.

Thus Enlightenment politics was in part the product of a Tacitist, Livian, and Machiavellian historical narrative of “decline and fall” and of “corruption and virtue.” This new philosophy of morals was the product of historical inquiry, antiquarianism, and even erudition. The philosophes might have been opposed to the antiquarianism and civil history of figures such as Dom Mabillon and Jean-Jacob Moreau, yet ecclesiastical and legal scholars were still major intellectual players in the eighteenth century, as Lionel Gossman, Dieter Gembicki, Blandine Barret-Kriegel, and Keith Baker have shown. There were elements of this antiquarian fascination with facts and objects in the *Encyclopédie* project. Indeed, there are more references to classical knowledge in the *Encyclopédie* than any other source.

Gibbon’s philosophy, as well as his scholarly practices and readings, reveal the cultural connections between humanist erudition, historicism, and Enlightenment philosophies of the mind.

26 Ibid., 2:18.
27 Ibid.
28 Ibid.
It was here at the crossroads of the tradition of Tacitism that Bodin, Lipsius, Grotius, Sarpi, Boccalini, Amelot de La Houssaye, and Montesquieu met Rousseau, d’Alembert, Gibbon, Adam Smith, Thomas Gordon, James Logan, Thomas Jefferson, and John Adams. Tacitus set the example that morality and psychology could be understood through civil history. Considering the almost theological debates that Pocock’s writings have inspired, it is surprising that eight years after his *Narratives of Civil Government*, volume 2 of *Barbarism and Religion*, his new historical approach has neither brought a reconsideration of his Atlantic republicanism thesis nor his linguistic approach to the study of philosophy.

**MACHIAVELLI, TACITUS, AND THE CULTURE OF READING FOR ACTION**

The Florentine tradition was not simply ideological. It was deeply rooted in historiographical and legal culture. Guicciardini and Machiavelli managed the state through its archives and paperwork; they also used these archives to write their histories and formulate their republican ideology. What produced Florentine and Venetian republicanism was not simply their ideologies, but also the fact that their constitutions and legal foundations were set in archives, and managed by skilled state humanists and secretaries. The birth of new Renaissance government—republican, monarchical, and imperial—grew in the secret charter rooms and formal archives of the Vatican, Salutati’s Florentine chancellery; the Sforza’s Milan under the Simonetta secretariats; in Venice’s ancient library and archive; Austria’s and Spain’s massive imperial archives; and in the growing legal humanism of France.  

It was in these laboratories of history, law, diplomacy, and ideology that both early modern republicanism and absolutism emerged. They were the source of the modern state.

Guicciardini and Machiavelli’s own increasing sense that “true” history was necessary reveals a link between scholarship, philology, political science, and republicanism. The idea expressed in the introduction to Machiavelli’s *Discourses*—that examples from civil history are the basis of sound prudential politics—leads back toward erudition and philology. Machiavelli stated that in his own work he had arrived at his conclusions by “comparing ancient and modern events,” and in doing so had “drawn practical lessons” from the study of history.  

Written at the very moment he was writing *The Prince* in 1513, Machiavelli’s “Letter to Francesco Vettori” illustrates that the act of reading and comparing histories is the basis for his own study of “what a princedom is, of what kinds they are, how they are gained, how they are kept, why they are lost.” Political science was not just born of reading the ancients, but also the reading of history in general, and noting long series of examples.

Political science was a historical pursuit. For examples from history to be useful, they had to be true, and thus from verified, established texts, Machiavelli and Guicciardini increasingly sought to write accurate history over propaganda. If one could master history, it just might be

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possible to influence fortuna.\textsuperscript{32} Hence Justus Lipsius’s great quest to establish the text of Tacitus and then to use it for practical politics.\textsuperscript{33} In the end, Machiavelli and Lipsius were scholars before being ideologues. Although their political ideals might not have been the same, their historical methods and their definitions of prudence were quite similar.

In any case, the late sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries saw the emergence of a deep culture of the use of history to create political science. As Anthony Grafton and Lisa Jardine have illustrated, historical reading techniques, pioneered by Machiavelli and Lipsius, became the basis of political philosophy. Following Machiavelli’s recommendation, princes and those interested in politics would have to read, annotate, extract and take notes. These notes would form commonplace books that could be organized into collections of examples such as The Prince or Lipsius’s Politica. By the 1570s, Sir Philip Sidney’s circle was involved with a collective enterprise of reading both classical and modern authors to extract political wisdom, which Gabriel Harvey described in his annotations in the margins of the Works of Livy. Here was Machiavelli’s historical source, used not simply for historical examples, but also for the method outlined in the first pages of the Discourses. Admittedly inspired by Machiavelli’s Discourses, which he cites, Harvey wrote in the margins of Livy’s History:

> Each decade is fine, but this one should be studied by the best actors. The quality of the content, and its great power; where the virtue of the Romans suffers so much. Certainly some light can be shed by Louis le Roy’s Commentaries on Aristotle’s Politics; Bodin’s Republic and Methodus; du Poncelet’s Turkish Secrets in the Gallic Court; Sansovino’s Political Maxims; the recent works by Althusius and Lipsius; a few others. And it is fitting for prudent men to make strenuous efforts to use whatever sheds light on politics: and to increase it as much as they can. Two outstanding courtiers thanked me for this political and historical inquiry: Sir Edward Dyer and Sir Edward Denny. But let the project itself—once fully tried—be my reward. All I want is a lively and effective political analysis of the chief histories: especially when Hannibal and Scipio, Marius and Sylla, Pompey and Caesar flourished.\textsuperscript{34}

Harvey read, annotated, and extracted from the text envisaging concrete political action or to give political advice.\textsuperscript{35} He did this in order to copy the “Method in Machiavel’s discourses,” in which he also described reading and extracting maxims, while also taking inspiration from Bodin.\textsuperscript{36}

The practices described by Harvey had become a pan-European culture of historical political reading. Jean Bodin had shown how to extract commonplaces from natural philosophy, law, economics, history, and political philosophy.\textsuperscript{37} Scholars such as Lipsius and Bacon filled their commonplace books with the fruits of their readings, medical, natural, historical, and political.\textsuperscript{38}

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\textsuperscript{32} Gilbert, Machiavelli and Guicciardini, 260–70.


\textsuperscript{34} Grafton and Jardine cite this passage from Harvey’s annotations of Livy in “Studied for Action,” 38.

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 39.

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., 43.


\textsuperscript{38} On commonplace books and their place in learned and political culture, see Francis Goyet, Le sublime du “Lieu Commun”: L’invention rhétorique dans l’antiquité et à la Renaissance (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1996); Ann Moss, Printed Commonplace Books and the Structuring of Renaissance Thought (Oxford:
The one thing that set political reading apart from other scholarly humanist pursuits was its practical, immediate ramification in the world of politics. Yet while the method of practical reading often spread via the absolutist work of Bodin and Lipsius, absolutist royal and ecclesiastical authorities would have increasing trouble with the “true” histories they commissioned, especially as they became more public and were increasingly followed by works critical of monarchy and religious authority. Republicans and political critics such as Paolo Sarpi, on the other hand, began to see the publication of the methods of prudence and revealing political histories as the very symbol of political liberty and free speech. These odd political mechanics by which true history was the basis of effective politics, but also of political criticism, was noted by Trajano Boccalini and other Italian reason of state philosophers. The critical truth was subversive to dogma as well as to absolutism. The seventeenth century thus became a Boccalinian moment, as arguments over Tacitean and Machiavellian philosophies of virtue and political action were publicized and coupled with discussions of historical accuracy and impartiality. As the French publicist and translator of Tacitus and Machiavelli, Abraham-Nicolas Amelot de La Houssaye, pointed out, critical history found a way to exist under tyranny, but it flourished with political liberty.

In this context, the Machiavellian humanist historical methodology evolved into something new. Hobbes and Grotius would use history in the humanist way, but they would come up with new ideas. Indeed, Grotius wrote his History and Annals of the Low Country Wars (1612) in a meticulous Tacitean Latin style. At the same time, it criticized cruelty, reason of state, and dissimulation. Grotius would use Tacitus not as a source for learning about reason of state, as Harvey had done with Livy, but as a moral critique of it. Tacitus, he inferred, could be used as a moral source and not just a coldly practical one. At the very moment Grotius was formulating his theories of natural law, he was emendating Tacitus, copying his writing and extracting maxims to use in his own history. He was reading in the old way for new ideas.

TACITISM AND THE FOUNDERS

This brings us back to J. G. A. Pocock’s thesis about classical republicanism in the early American context. The learned traditions that grew from humanism, but were popularized by Machiavellian and Tacitean culture throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, would have a remarkable influence on the leading American political philosophers. As the Machiavellism and Tacitism of tyrants evolved once and for all into republican fervor, the very methods that had bolstered political absolutism were now used to criticize it. Tacitus had been the historian of seventeenth-century monarchists, but the work of the Roman senator now became a firm pillar of republicanism, as the case of Thomas Gordon illustrates.

The Tacitean critique of political corruption and the practice of critiquing it through historical analysis became ever more influential as the cause of American republicanism grew. This

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39 On the idea that absolutist political culture contained seeds of political criticism and its own demise, see Soll, Publishing The Prince, 19–20.
should not be surprising. Tacitus was a primary staple of early American education and learned culture. He was not just a classical author amongst many, but he, like Livy, was seen as one of the principal sources of wisdom for political action. So much so that Thomas Jefferson wrote to his friend Peter Carr from Paris on the subject of the sciences, that one should read the Bible as one does Tacitus and Livy, with an eye to verifying the facts. All three sources, he stated, should be subjected to the test of natural reason. 41 Jefferson had pared Tacitus and Livy to the Bible for they were three texts that were clearly great authorities whose texts demanded close reading and deep skepticism; he was thus fluent in old humanist scholarly practice that saw these two classical authors as “Bibles” of secular political wisdom. As H. Trevor Colbourn noted in his “Thomas Jefferson’s Use of the Past,” Jefferson was not only a Lockian idealist: like many readers of the age, he was influenced by the reading of history and historical skepticism. 42 Even if he did not share the Tacitean distrust of humanity, he did see the need to learn through history for action. In the vein of Grotius, he stated that he believed that Tacitus was “the first writer in the world without exception,” since his work was “compounded of the history and morality of which we have no other exception.” 43 Colbourn reveals that Jefferson collated Thomas Gordon’s translation of the works of Tacitus with the Latin version, surely to make accurate extracts. If Tacitus’s narrative of Germanic virtues interested Jefferson, then Jefferson was tied to the old political fascination with corruption and virtue as Pocock claims. In any case, he kept the Machiavellian and Tacitean reading tradition alive using the old tools of humanist collation, annotation, and commonplacing. The paradox that Jefferson the Lockian should extol Tacitus and use Tacist intellectual tools is not surprising. The cultural and intellectual backgrounds of early American scholars mixed the traditional with the innovative. Jefferson’s library was both old-fashioned and innovative. It was filled with the classics as well as an unparalleled collection of books on America. Jefferson harbored some of the greatest self-contradictions in history: the great writer on liberty enslaved his own children. The complexity of his own political and social positions, as well as his family life, would have certainly attracted him to Tacitus’s psychological studies. Surely the examples of Augustus, Tiberius, and Nero had personal, professional, and political resonance all at the same time.

There are traces of strong Tacitist culture in early literate America. John Dickinson (1732–1808)—the founding father who opposed American independence—folded the pages of his signed edition of Gordon’s Works of Tacitus, pointing the ends of the pages to passages examining prudence and political liberty. 44 America’s first great private library was a traditional Tacitist collection. James Logan—the pioneering Irish Quaker, classical scholar, and book collector, co-founder of Philadelphia with William Penn, and later its mayor and chief justice—not only owned the finest private library during the first half of the eighteenth century, but he was also a traditional humanist reader of political history. His library contained five editions of the Works of Tacitus containing his signature; three copies of Livy’s History; eight editions of various works by Justus Lipsius, including an extraordinary three copies of the Politica; three copies of works by

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43 Ibid., 61.
Machiavelli, including *The Prince*; two editions of Guicciardini; Paolo Sarpi’s *History of the Council of Trent* and his *History of Benefits*; five editions of Trajano Boccalini, including two copies of his Tacitean masterwork, *I Regguagli di Parnasso*; and works by the Tacist, Virgilio Malvezzi. This was a Tacitean collection par excellence, based on ancient texts by Tacitus and Livy and then modern readings by Machiavelli, Lipsius, and the others.\(^{45}\) Indeed, his collection resembled seventeenth-century Tacist collections, such as Don Juan de Lastenosa’s library, organized in part by the Spanish Jesuit master of Tacitism, Balthasar Gracián.\(^{46}\)

Logan saw the reading of Tacitus and Livy as the basis of sound education. On the flyleaf of his copy of Tacitus’s *Germania*,\(^{47}\) he wrote to his son on May 30, 1733: “In thy Learning I desire thou shouldest goe on in the Greek; read Tacitus and Livy in ye Latin; getting ye of last, if thou hast none, one of ye small Dutch edition in I vol. 12mo, but perhaps I may send another for I have several ones.” In buying books, he sought scholarly editions by Lipsius, as we know from letters to his book buyer in London.\(^{48}\)

Logan’s collection of classical and humanist works stands in contrast to Franklin’s more traditional Enlightenment collection, with its top selection of works by modern *philosophes*. And yet, Logan and Franklin were still bound by the classical learned tradition. Logan was Franklin’s mentor, and he helped Franklin print his translation of Cicero’s *Cato Major* in 1744, the first classical book published in the colonies, thus consciously continuing the Aldine tradition. Franklin was a *philosophe*, but he was certainly influenced by the more humanistic Logan and formed by the classical traditions of both literature and print. In his “Silence Dogood” pamphlet series in the *New-England Courant*, July 9, 1722, Franklin quoted Livy’s *History*, book 2, chapter 8, on the popularity of leaders who allow free speech, and in the great Tacitean tradition, misquoted Tacitus, *Histories*, I, on the sweetness of political liberty:

> The best Princes have ever encouraged and promoted Freedom of Speech; they know that upright Measures would defend themselves, and that all upright Men would defend themselves, and that all upright Men would defend them. Tacitus, speaking of the Reign of some of the Princes above-mentioned, says with Extasy, *Rara Temporum felicitate, ubi sentire quae veils, & quae sentias dicere licet*: A blessed Time when you might think what you would and speak what you thought.\(^{49}\)

In his tract “On the Need for an Academy,” printed in the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, August 24, 1749, Franklin proposed founding an academy of fine arts and sciences in the colonies, the basis for his

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\(^{49}\) The meaning of the whole passage is somewhat different: “In my own case I had no acquaintance with Galba, Otho or Vitellius, through either kindness or injury at their hands. I cannot deny that my political career owed its beginning to Vespasian; that Titus advanced it; and that Domitian carried it further; but those who profess inviolable fidelity to truth must write of no man with affection or with hatred. Yet if my life but last, I have reserved for my old age the history of the deified Nerva’s reign and of Trajan’s rule, a richer and less perilous subject, because of the rare good fortune of an age in which we may feel what we wish and may say what we feel.” Tacitus, *The Histories*, trans. Clifford H. Moore (London: Loeb Classical Library, 1925), bk. 1, chap. 1, p. 3.
foundation of the University of Pennsylvania. To make his case, he cites an entire letter from Pliny the Younger to Tacitus on the value of formal education.

Of all the founders, John Adams was the most traditional in terms of his humanist style of scholarship. Yet Adams would use Tacitism in new ways: to attack the optimism and concept of human perfection of the philosophes, and to defend an Augustinian, Protestant pessimistic view of mankind and the political state of nature, and thus defend a literally conservative and cautious Whiggish republicanism based on deep skepticism, which Adams paired with an Augustinian, Protestant cynicism about humankind. Adams chose his personal motto from book 1 of Tacitus’s *Histories*: “libertatem amicitiam retinebis et fidem.” This passage was extracted from a description of Augustus’s discussion of how to lead effectively and wield power in the face of power and flattery:

But Augustus looked for a successor in his own family, I look for one in the state, not because I have no relatives or companions of my campaigns, but because it was not by any private favour that I myself received the imperial power. Let the principle of my choice be shown not only by my connections which I have set aside for you, but by your own. You have a brother, noble as yourself, and older, who would be well worthy of this dignity, were you not worthier. Your age is such as to be now free from the passions of youth, and such your life that in the past you have nothing to excuse. Hitherto, you have only borne adversity; prosperity tries the heart with keener temptations; for hardships may be endured, whereas we are spoiled by success. You indeed will cling with the same constancy to honor, freedom, friendship, the best possessions of the human spirit, but others will seek to weaken them with their servility. You will be fiercely assailed by adulation, by flattery, that worst poison of the true heart, and by the selfish interests of individuals. You and I speak together to-day with perfect frankness, but others will be more ready to address us as emperors than as men. For to urge his duty upon a prince is indeed a hard matter; to flatter him, whatever his character, is a mere routine gone through without any heart.  

The practice of loosely extracting maxims from Tacitus and using them for personal politics and ethics was a stock practice of Tacitism, but also of the Tacitean French moralists, such as La Rochefoucauld. Although he never cited him, Adams owned three books by the most popular French Tacitist of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, Amelot de La Houssaye (1631–1706), amongst them an English translation of Amelot’s *La Morale de Tacite. De la Flatterie* (Paris, 1686), *The Modern Courtier, or, The Morals of Tacitus upon Flattery, Paraphras’d and illustrated with observations by Amelot de La Houssaye* (London, 1687). Amelot’s treatise on Tacitean flattery was not simply a classic set of essays on the imperial corruption of power, with several notes about republican antidotes; the book was also a model of reading for action. Amelot would choose one maxim from Tacitus, translate it, and then write a long commentary explaining the political lessons that could be learned from examples of flattery, its dangers, and the effects of its corruption.

If John Adams drew from an eclectic mix of classical and humanist political thought as well as modern sources, he worked quite traditionally as a Tacitean, Machiavellian scholar, reading history for political action and decision making. Written to counter Turgot’s criticism of Ameri-
can bicameral government, Adams’s *Defense of the Constitutions of the United States against the Attack of Turgot in his Letter to Dr. Price* (1778) was also a stock exercise in Tacitism. It was a cento: that is to say, collections of maxims, commonplaces, and passages by other authors used to bolster an argument. In this, its pages resemble those of Amelot’s works. It is remarkable that Adams did not own any of the works of Justus Lipsius, whose *Politica* had set the model for the political cento. In spite of his prominent place in James Logans’s library, Lipsius had been an open absolutist, and his works, once popular, had grown obscure by the eighteenth century. Yet his traditional mode of Tacitist prudence and learned political virtue remained. Adams’s preface to his *Defense* is a collage of citations, many by Cicero and Tacitus in which they give their own criticisms of unicameral legislature. In it, Adams actively tries to see politics through their eyes:

If Cicero and Tacitus could revisit the earth, and learn that the English nation had reduced the great idea to practice, and brought it nearly to perfection, by giving each division a power to defend itself by a negative; had found the most solid and durable government, as well as the most free; had obtained by means of it a prosperity among civilized nations, in an enlightened age, like that of the Romans among barbarians; and that the Americans, after having enjoyed the benefits of such a constitution a century and a half, were advised by some of the greatest philosophers and politicians of the age to renounce it, and set up the governments of ancient Goths and modern Indians,—what would they say? That the Americans would be more reprehensible than the Cappadocians, if they should listen to such advice.52

Chapter 4 and letter 26, entitled “Dr. Price,” are pure centos of citations from ancient and modern authors to advance Montesquieu’s theory of mixed government against Turgot. It should be noted that Montesquieu drew heavily from the Tacitist tradition and quoted Amelot de La Houssaye’s Tacitist constitutional, *History of the Government of Venice* (1676), another work owned by Adams. In chapter 4, Adams cites Swift’s *Discourse of the Contests and Dissentions between the Nobles and Commons of Athens and Rome, with the Consequences they had upon both those States*, citing Tacitus and Polybius in the defense of mixed government. In letter 26, he cites Aristotle, Livy, Junius, Machiavelli, Sidney, Hobbes, Mandeville, De La Rochefoucauld, De Lolme, Harrington, and Beccaria. The following chapter is entitled “Mixed Governments. Machiavel’s Discourses upon the First Decade of Livy, Book I. C. 2.” There is obviously strong reference to the classical and northern Italian as well as the Swiss republican tradition, but also reference to a scholarly tradition by which he extracts and formulates political theory from historians ancient and modern. Adams was not just putting forward an idea of republicanism, but also a scholarly method of it.

Adams’s *Discourses on Davila* (1805) was a traditional humanist commentary on a famously Tacitean work of history, Davila’s *History of the Civil Wars in France* (1630). Davila himself had claimed that his work revealed “secret and notable circumstances” of the civil wars; having consulted the very princes involved in the conflict, his work would reveal their “motives” and the “causes” of the wars.53 In 1667 in a discourse entitled “On an active life and on a Contemplative Life, and when and why the one ought to be preferred to the other,” Lord Clarendon had extolled Davila’s *History* as a model of how to be a scholar and a statesman at the same time, essen-

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tially extolling the Tacitean use of history for understanding political prudence. Clarendon claimed that historians with practical experience of politics make better political historians than pure contemplative scholars, and thus Davila, who had been close to Catherine de Médicis and had played an active role in northern Italian politics, was, along with the Cardinal Bentivoglio, a perfect historian for learning the political motives of historical actors in civil wars.

In choosing Davila and the title “Discourses,” Adams was not just choosing a well-established Tacitean author; he was engaging in the old practice of choosing passages he believed were useful for political prudence and commenting on them in the vein of Machiavelli’s Discourses and Tacitists such as Amelot de La Houssaye. The very form of the book, maxims followed by commentaries often about tyranny, faction and prudence, resembled both the form and content of Amelot de La Houssaye’s La Morale de Tacite. “Discourse No. 3” is on the passage, “August verité! C’est à toi de montrer aux yeux des nations/Les coupables effets de leurs divisions,” and followed by a long historical dissertation begun by the phrase: “When one family is depressed, either in a Monarchy, or in any species of republic, another must arise.” He then goes on to analyze the mechanics of the decline of the Valois and the Rise of the Bourbons through a close analysis of Davila’s text. Discourse No. 7 is more in the vein of Amelot de La Houssaye’s Tacitean analysis of flattery and the decline of republican virtue: “The result of the preceding discourses is, that avarice and ambition, vanity and pride, jealousy and envy, hatred and revenge, as well as the love of knowledge and desire of fame are very often nothing more than various modifications of that desire of the attention, consideration and congratulations of our fellow men...” In studying the history of the French civil wars, Adams underlined the old Machiavellian topos of factionalism amongst the French nobility as part of his belief that rich and powerful citizens could not be excluded from the Republic. Thus he sought general maxims not only about morality, but also about historical prudence to create a tool to build stable government.

This method or techné of politics is nowhere more clear than in Adams’s manuscript annotations of printed books in his library. His library is filled with more than thirty books containing his annotations in the margins. This of course was standard for early modern readers, but the political tradition of Gabriel Harvey, John Dee, and Amelot de La Houssaye, to name just a few, used the practice of reading and annotating to handle and formulate political ideas and actions. This was a standard practice of Tacitism and of indeed religious reading practice: to use the marginal reference to authority to bolster or refute a certain text. Adams was not just using a generalized learned practice; he was clearly conscious of a longer political tradition, for when he read, he often cited Tacitus in the margins of his books.

In the margins of his books, Adams waged a personal war against what he saw as the naive and dangerous idealism of the philosophes and the French Revolution. And he did so through citations from Tacitus. Thus he read books, and either memorized Tacitus or had a copy of his works nearby from which he drew thematic citations. On the flyleaf (recto) of his copy of Con-

56 Ibid., 43–44.
57 See Zoltán Haraszti, John Adams and the Prophets of Progress (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1952). These annotations are now found online with digitized copies of Adams’s books: http://www.johnadamslibrary.org/.
dorcet’s *Outlines of an Historical View of the Progress of the Human Mind*, Adams wrote the following passage in 1811:

The rapid Progress of the The Mind to perfection has been the common Place Topick of Declamation for half a Century. But I can see no other End they have in View as their Ultimate Object than to bring Men back to the State of Mind so frankly avowed byTacitus and [Quinctilius]—absolute doubt, whether Chance or Fate governs the World. But it will be found that Men must be governed as well as cultivated. Without Government there is not a more savage Beast of the Forest.

The Phylosophers of France were too rash and hasty. They were as artful as Selfish and as hypocritical as Priests and Politicians of Babilon Persia Egypt India Greece Rome Turkey, Germany Wales Scotland, Ireland France Spain Italy or England. They understood not what they were about. They miscalculated Their Forces and Resources; and were consequently overwhelmed in destruction with all their Theories.

The Precipitation and Temerity of Phylosophers, h[ave] I fear, retarded the Progress of Improvement and Amelioration in the Condition of Mankind, for at least a hundred years.

The public Mind was improving in Knowledge and [the] public heart in Humanity Equity and Benevolence: The [illegible] [acts] of Feudality, the Inquisition, the Rack, the Cruelty of Punishment, Negro Slavery were giving Way etc. But the Phylosophers must arrive at Perfection, per Saltum. Ten times more furious than Jack in the Tale of a Tub they rent and tore the whole Garment to Pieces and left not one whole thread in it[.] They have even been compelled to resort to Napoleon, and Gibbon himself was [often] an advocate for The Inquisition. What an [illegible] Equality, Fraternity, and Liberty they have [illegible] established in [illegible].

These passages are extraordinary, for in them Adams not only enunciates his resistance to the optimism and sense of progress of French philosophes and revolutionaries, but also makes clear that he will use Tacitus as his historical witness to what he perceives as their folly. Throughout the margins of Condorcet, Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Historical and moral view of the origin and progress of the French Revolution: and the effect it has produced in Europe*, the abbé de Mably’s *De la Legislation*, and Voltaire’s *Traité sur la Tolérance*, Adams writes counter maxims, some cited by Tacitus, others in Tacitean style. Whether he cites him or not, Adams’s Tacitean message is clear—the quest for secular political perfection and man’s attempt to master natural law leads to folly and catastrophe. Indeed, he makes the same reference to human faultiness to defend traditional religion:

God has established no Equality among Men in Practice or Theory but a moral Equality. The Giant has a natural Right to his Eight foot Stature, and to his Strong equal to 500 Weight as the Dwarf to his Three feet and his Strong but equal to 50 Pounds. (p. ii)

Man is by Nature a religious Animal, a religious Man will say: and that The Phylosophers have taught the People, Atheism and irreligion in order to rob them. Invisible Powers th[a]t produce Sun, Moon and Stars Animals Vegetables, Fruits Flowers and Blossoms form themselves on the human Mind as soon as it can think. A Sense of his own Weakness,
Wants and Dependence forces him to think whence he came and what produced him and all Things. (p. 34)

In his copy of Voltaire’s Traité sur la Tolérance, Adams read Voltaire’s calls for tolerance and optimism with the lens of Tacitean cynicism. On page 26, Adams notes with scorn that Voltaire would have been guillotined as a member of the aristocracy. Where Voltaire writes “La Philosophie, la seule … l’avait emporté la fanatisme,” Adams writes, “Is it possible to read this in 1801”? His most extensive notes are on Wollstonecraft’s defense of the French Revolution, in which he attacks not only the idea that a woman could make profound political judgments, but also again the ideas of human perfection and political utopianism.

Adams annotated his own Discourses on Davila on February 24, 1813, critiquing a speech made by Napoleon on December 20, 1812, which Adams transcribed on the endpaper of the Discourses. Adams felt the need to bring out his book of Tacitean political commentaries again, for Napoleon, he believed, proved that his earlier pessimism was justified. Next to Napoleon’s speech, Adams writes, “Napoleon! Mutato Nomine, de te Fabula narrabature! This Book is a Prophecy of your Empire before your name was heard.”

Worn out by politics and time, Adams goes through his old book again, annotating his own commentaries, writing about events that have since taken place, and writing maxims in his own margins: “Science extinguishes no passions” (p. 85), or “Duties of Birth. What a dangerous idea!” (p. 124). At the beginning of the nineteenth century, as he feared the rise of oligarchy in the United States, he was still fascinated with the example of the Guises and how they attempted to gain power (pp. 110–13). And he could not hide his bitterness toward those whom he clearly saw as the leading figures of the political Enlightenment:

Franklin Turgot, Rochefaucault and Condorcet under Tom Paine, were the great Masters of that Academy! It may be modestly Suggested to the Emperor to coin another Word in his new Mint in conformity or Analogy with Ideology; and call every Constitution of government in France from 1789 to 1799 An Idiocrac y. / Quincy December 6. 1814. This Volume was returned yesterday from Mr Colman of Hingham, who has had it almost a year. The Events in Europe since March 3d 1813 are remarkable. Napoleon is now in Elba and Talleyrand at Vienna! Let Us read Candide and Zadig and Rasselas and see if there is anything extravagant in them. Have not Phylosophers been as honest and as mad as Popes, Jesuits, Priests, Emperors Kings, Heroes Conquerors. Has the Inquisition been more cruel than Robespierre or Marat or Napoleon? (/Page: next endpaper)

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60 Adams’s MS annotations, 29.
61 The speech is the following: By Napoleon Emperor of France. “On the 20th of December 1812. The emperor Napoleon made the following answer to an Address. ‘It is to Ideology, to that obscure Metaphysics which, Searching with Subtlety after first causes, wishes to found upon them the Legislation of Nations, instead of adapting the Laws to the knowledge of the human heart and to the Lessons of History: that We are to attribute all the calamities that our beloved France has experienced. Those Errors necessarily produced the Government of the Men of blood. Indeed who proclaimed the Principle of Insurrection as a Duty? Who flattered the People by proclaiming for them a Sovereignty, which they were incapable of exercising? Who destroyed the Senate and the respect to the Laws by making them to depend not upon the Sacred Principles of Justice, upon the nature of Things, and upon civil Justice; but only upon the Will of an Assembly of Men composed of Men, Strangers to the knowledge of the civil, criminal, administrative, political and military Laws? When we are called to regenerate a State, We must Act upon opposite Principles. History paints the human Heart. It is in history that We are to seek for the Advantages and disadvantages of different Systems of Laws. These are the Principles of which the Council of State of a great Empire ought never to lose Sight. It ought to add to them a Courage equal to every Emergency, and like the Presidents, Harlay and Mole be ready to perish in defence of The Sovereign, The Throne and The Laws.’”
Man ought to "drop into himself"! The Inquisition is now revived and the order of The Jesuits is restored. Sic transit Gloria Phylosophia! Even Gibbon was for restoring the Inquisition! Philosophy is now as distracted as it was At Alexandria, during the Seige of Jerusalem! And where is our New England bound? To Hartford Convention! And how many Paines and Callenders Robespierres and Napoleons are to be begotten by that Assemblage? Vide Rasselas, Candide, Zadig, Jenni Scarmontado. Micromegas, the Huron etc.

Ridendo dicere verum, quid vetat? 62

By the end, he no longer cites Tacitus, yet pessimism and moral scorn for tyranny are still his leading topoi. Government came not from "nature," but rather from "art," and this was learned from history and experience.

Adams might have considered republicanism an unintelligible puzzle, yet he was a republican, and on a quest to figure out this concept, he turned to the classical and early modern traditions of Tacitism as his primary intellectual tool for interpreting politics. If the founders did not build the entire republic or successfully create popular democracy, they did write the American constitutions and thus had a profound effect on the world. Remarkably, they build their republican founding texts with the intellectual tools of humanism from Italy, Britain, and France. The way Machiavelli read for politics was the way that Logan, Adams, and even Jefferson and Franklin did too. Thus Pocock’s republican thesis still has resonance. Cultural traditions from the Florentine and Venetian politics, in all their complexity, wound their way across the Atlantic, into the libraries and learned practices of the founders as they created their republic of history.  

62 See Adams’s annotations on p. 249 of his Discourses on Davila.