

The Catonian Moment: 18th Century Classical Icons and the American “Millennial Generation”

The significance of classical ideas for the drafting of the American Constitution has been widely documented. But while the US Constitution formed the basis for an evolving democracy, its Framers hailed from a classically educated elite and sought to limit what they considered democratic excesses. Even so, aspects of the classical legacy were widely disseminated, appealed to broad audiences, and contributed significantly to the spread of republican ideals. The elites were of course familiar with the canon of classical texts inherited from the British educational system and derived republican values in part from their classical readings. As classical values began to complement Christian ideals, several classical figures, including Cicero and Cato, emerged as icons throughout the 18th century. They reflected American preoccupations at particular times and appealed to increasingly broad audiences, culminating in what might be called a “Catonian moment” during the American Revolution.

Republican values deriving in large part from the classical legacy became a core component of American democracy, even as their classical roots began to be less appreciated. However, recent developments reflect an awareness or at least openness to the connection between the emergence of American democracy and the classical legacy. This trend is illustrated, for instance, by segments on Athenian democracy taught in some American public schools, the growing interest in the classical tradition among American scholars and students, and even by contemporary popular culture as reflected in recent blockbuster movies. That the “Millennial Generation” of Americans seems particularly open to the classical republican values promoted during the 18th century can be gleaned from current sociological research, but also from analysis of public discourse, including Barack Obama’s inaugural speech. Anecdotal evidence suggests that college students are eager to study and embrace the central role of the classical legacy in the emergence of American democracy. It will be up to scholars and teachers to guide them further in their quest.