

Introduction

ON A COLD DECEMBER night in 1786, barricaded behind stacks of books in his library in London's Grosvenor Square, John Adams made the fateful decision to begin writing. The mere act of putting pen to paper racked his nerves. "The manual exercise of writing," he later recalled, "was painful and distressing to me, almost like a blow on the elbow or the knee."¹ For it was not just any writing project. It was the first of his public efforts to criticize the democratic revolution.

The final outcome of this project would be two works. The first, the three-volume *Defence of the Constitutions of Government of the United States of America*, would eventually be hailed as "the finest fruit of the American enlightenment."² The second work, entitled *Discourses on Davila*, would earn Adams recognition as "the most assiduous American student of 'social psychology' in the eighteenth century."³

What made the undertaking so distressing was the knowledge that he was in some ways turning against the democratic movement he had done so much to build. Almost no one had championed the revolutionary cause as vigorously as had John Adams. Now, at the very moment when the revolution that had begun in America was sweeping the Atlantic world, Adams was deciding to convert from catalyst to critic. In the process, he worried, he would make enemies of "the French patriots, the Dutch patriots, the English republicans, dissenters, reformers." And most worrisome of all, he lamented: "What came nearer home to my bosom than all the rest, I knew I should give offence to many, if not all, of my best friends in America."⁴

This worry would turn out to be well justified. The two major works of political theory that would grow out of his critical efforts

would contribute greatly to the widespread belief that Adams had abandoned his republican origins. “In truth,” Adams would later lament to Jefferson, “my ‘Defence of the Constitutions’ and ‘Discourses on Davila,’ were the cause of that immense unpopularity which fell like the tower of Siloam upon me.”⁵ The common narrative, which would be propagated by his critics and would be picked up and repeated by later generations, was that Adams, the erstwhile revolutionary, had undergone a fundamental change of mind during his sojourn as a diplomat in Europe. As Jefferson would write, Adams had been seduced in Europe by the “glare of royalty and nobility.”⁶ And at the same time, the story would go, he had been overcome by reactionary dread upon learning of Shays’ Rebellion and other popular disturbances back in America. Adams’s *Defence* and *Discourses*, both of which casually discussed the role of aristocracy in America and seemed sympathetic to monarchical forms of government, were interpreted to be the clearest evidence that Adams had indeed betrayed his early republican convictions.

Perhaps what pained Adams most at the outset of his critical turn was the likelihood that he would be deeply misunderstood. As he would insist repeatedly in the decades that followed, he never intended to call for inegalitarian institutions. “I will forfeit my life,” he offered Jefferson, “if you can find one sentiment in my *Defence of the Constitutions*, or the *Discourses on Davila*, which, by a fair construction, can favor the introduction of hereditary monarchy or aristocracy into America.”⁷

If indeed Adams’s decision to criticize the democratic revolution was evidence of a turn to aristocratic sympathies, such a turn would have represented an abrupt departure from his humble origins. Born and raised in the quiet agricultural village of Braintree, Massachusetts, he descended from a line of middling farmers and artisans going back to his great-great-grandfather

Henry, a malter and farmer who first settled the Adams family in New England in 1636. A glimpse of the future statesman could be seen in Henry's great-grandson and John Adams's father, the elder John Adams, who served the Braintree community as a deacon of the church, a lieutenant in the local militia, and a selectman in the town meeting. Still, by occupation the elder John Adams was a shoemaker and farmer, a plain Puritan whose ambition hardly reached beyond his aspiration to see his eldest son attend Harvard College and join the clergy. The young John Adams would spurn his father's wish and enter the legal profession, choosing public life over the pulpit. But he never forsook his identity as a simple New England farmer. Indeed, even long after he acquired great fame, he never acquired a sizable fortune, and he continued until his last days to consider himself a middling farmer. Strange indeed was the label "aristocrat" to describe a man who, even while serving as the nation's first vice president, continued to self-identify as a plebeian.⁸

Even stranger was the label of "aristocrat" when considered alongside Adams's credentials as a leader of the revolution. In the year 1765, at twenty-nine years old, he had published *A Dissertation on the Canon and Feudal Law*, a fiery tract that laid out his view of the emergence of freedom in the American colonies and the dangers posed to that freedom by reactionary forces. A decade later, amid mounting grievances against parliamentary overreach, Adams penned a sharp critique of British imperial policy in the form of a series of papers published under the pseudonym Novanglus. In the spring of 1776, when the various colonies began plans to revolutionize their governments and draw up new state constitutions, it was to Adams they turned for ideas on the principles and institutions of republican government. Adams's *Thoughts on Government*, originally written as a letter to his fellow revolutionary Richard Henry Lee of Virginia,

was widely circulated in the colonies and became the blueprint for several state constitutions. It was no surprise that in 1779, when it came time to frame a constitution for the state of Massachusetts, it was Adams who was called upon as the chief draftsman.⁹

Adams's revolutionary agitation was not limited to the written word. Thomas Jefferson, to whom Adams had delegated the task of drafting a declaration of independence, would later recollect that it was Adams who championed the declaration in speech. Though sometimes lacking in grace and elegance, Adams was nonetheless "our colossus on the floor," at times speaking with a "power of thought and expression" that "moved us from our seats."¹⁰ Furthermore, Adams was among the cause's chief behind-the-scenes agitators.¹¹ Utterly committed to furthering the revolutionary cause through strategic action, Adams orchestrated the committee to draft the Declaration of Independence, plotted to appoint George Washington head of the Continental army, and, when later deployed as a diplomat in Europe, played an integral role in negotiating peace with Great Britain and securing loans from Dutch financiers.

Could it be that a man so devoted to the revolutionary cause suddenly betrayed his conviction and embraced the aristocratic forms of the old world? As we will see, it was a grave misunderstanding to construe Adams as an apologist for aristocracy. Just as Adams the politician had been wholly committed to the republican revolution, Adams the writer and thinker had long been committed to articulating and defending the foundational principles of republican self-government. His critical turn came not from a change of disposition, but from the conviction that his fellow revolutionaries had substituted ideology for sober analysis, that they had disregarded essential facts of political life, and that in doing so they had jeopardized the republican experiment that he had done so much to initiate.

From a young age Adams had engaged deeply in what could be called practical political science. As a lawyer-in-training, he had studied historical political constitutions alongside the writings of political philosophers in an effort to illuminate the principles of republican order. In a diary entry written at the age of twenty-three, he spelled out the ambition of his studies:

Keep your law book or some point of law in your mind, at least, six hours in a day. . . . Labor to get distinct ideas of law, right, wrong, justice, equity . . . aim at an exact knowledge of the nature, end, and means of government; compare the different forms of it with each other, and each of them with their effects on public and private happiness. Study Seneca, Cicero, and all other good moral Writers. Study Montesquieu, Bolingbroke . . . and all other good, civil Writers.¹²

This commitment and resolve would not weaken with age. By the 1780s Adams had come to view the study of politics and government as a duty owed to future generations. “I must study politics and war,” Adams famously wrote,

that my sons may have liberty to study mathematics and philosophy. My sons ought to study mathematics and philosophy, geography, natural history and naval architecture, navigation, commerce and agriculture, in order to give their children a right to study painting, poetry, music, architecture, statuary, tapestry and porcelain.¹³

Living at a time when the United States was widely viewed as a precarious experiment, Adams believed that the study of politics was integral to human flourishing. Thus, even as he rose to public eminence, he would never abandon his vocation as a political scientist.

Adams's fateful decision to write *Defence of the Constitutions* was motivated by the belief that the principles he had done so much to institutionalize were now being profoundly misunderstood. At the heart of the matter, from Adams's perspective, was a profound naiveté about the power of social and economic elites. For the likes of Thomas Paine, Thomas Jefferson, and other leading lights of the age of revolution, there was an assumption that the power of wealth and family name was a vestige of the Old World, an artificial feature of monarchy and aristocracy that would disappear once those forms were abolished. What the ideologues of revolution had failed to understand was that the power of privilege was so deeply rooted that it would persist even in modern democratic republics.

Adams's critique was not single-mindedly focused on the power of elites. Like many of his Founding Era contemporaries, Adams feared that the popular energies unleashed by the revolution might result in tyrannical majorities and the undermining of property rights and the rule of law. Indeed, near the end of his life, at the Massachusetts Convention of 1820, Adams took an infamous stand against the expansion of the suffrage beyond property holders, citing a fear that the propertyless, if granted the right to vote, would "vote us out of our houses."¹⁴ A similar anxiety appeared in the third volume of the *Defence*, in which Adams predicted that the majority, if given absolute power, would abolish all debt and would plunder the rich through taxes and expropriation. "The idle, the vicious, and the intemperate," meanwhile, "would rush into the utmost extravagance of debauchery."¹⁵ Long before the *Defence*, even as he agitated for the patriot cause in the years preceding the revolution, he harbored a commitment to the rule of law that frequently put him at odds with his compatriots. This was especially the case in the spring of 1770, when British troops fired on a group of patriot agitators, leaving eight wounded and three dead. While

leaders of the patriot movement demanded vengeance for what came to be called the Boston Massacre, Adams's commitment to impartiality led him to rush to the side of the perpetrators and to sign on as their defense lawyer.¹⁶

And yet, for all of his worries about the rule of law and the unruly many, Adams's chief preoccupation was with the danger posed by the wealthy and wellborn few. This preoccupation was evident as early as his *Dissertation on the Canon and Feudal Law*, in which the twenty-nine-year-old railed against a pernicious class of men descended from "high churchmen and high statesman." The New England political order, argued Adams, had been built upon an explicit rejection of rule by an oligarchic elite. Through prolonged struggle, New Englanders had eliminated all homage, duties, and services paid to lords by landholders, and they had successfully replaced the priestly class of the Old World with an ordination process based only on "the foundation of the Bible and common sense." Perhaps most important, they had thrown off the yoke of ignorance by diffusing knowledge such that "the education of all ranks of people was made the care and expense of the public in a manner that I believe has been unknown to any other people ancient or modern."¹⁷ Yet now, Adams observed, a new class of elites had set out to effect "an entire subversion of the whole system of our fathers by the introduction of the canon and feudal systems in America."¹⁸ The emerging oligarchy had sought, among other things, to censure the public provision of education as "a needless expense and an imposition upon the rich in favor of the poor and as an institution productive of idleness and vain speculation among the people."¹⁹ The class of men he referred to in the *Dissertation* as grandees would change considerably during his lifetime: from the would-be feudal lords of the mid-eighteenth century to the commercial elite of the early nineteenth century. What would not change, as we will see, was

Adams's preoccupation with elite power and the danger it posed to republican institutions.

When the retired, elderly Adams reflected on his political writings, he described aristocracy as a major theme. Recalling his decision that night in London to set his critical sights on the revolution, he described his choice explicitly as a resolution to write something on the neglected subject of aristocracy.²⁰ Adams insisted that aristocrats had not disappeared from modern republics. They continued to be, as they always had been, "the most difficult animals to manage of any thing in the whole theory and practice of government." In spite of the abolition of formal titles of nobility, there remained a class of men in America and in all republics who "will not suffer themselves to be governed," men who "not only exert all their own subtlety, industry, and courage, but they employ the commonalty to knock to pieces every plan and model that the most honest architects in legislation can invent to keep them within bounds."²¹ As we will see, Adams set out to criticize the democratic revolution not from an attachment to aristocrats but from a fear of them.

Indeed, it is most accurate to say that Adams's writings were motivated by a fear of *oligarchy*. For when Adams obsessively wrote of aristocrats, he was not referring to that group of men whom the ancient Greeks had labeled the *aristoi*, meaning "the best." What Adams had in mind was those whom the likes of Plato and Aristotle had called oligarchs—those distinguished primarily not by merit but by such qualities as family name, beauty, and especially wealth. This class was designated as "the few" (*hoi oligoi*), a class standing apart from the "the many" (*hoi polloi*). Thinkers in the Western tradition had varied widely in their moral evaluations of the few, but many shared the view that oligarchic power was a stable, constitutive feature of republican politics. Insofar as republican governments were

successful, their success was due in part to institutions and practices that successfully managed or counterbalanced oligarchic power.²²

What Adams feared was that modern republics would fail in this regard. He adhered firmly to the classical tradition even as his contemporaries began to conceive of society not as divided among the few and the many but instead as consisting of a single, unified populace. As we will see, Adams believed that this new class-blind mode of conceiving of a democratic-republican society entailed a dangerous neglect of the problem of oligarchic power.²³

Though Adams's contemporaries, along with many intellectual historians of later years, took his obsession with aristocracy as evidence of an intention to defend class privilege, much closer to the mark was the interpretation of C. Wright Mills, the renowned sociologist and author of *The Power Elite*. Contemplating the powerful political-economic elite of twentieth-century America, Mills found in Adams's writings a precursor to his own analysis. Likewise, political theorist Judith Shklar identified Adams not as an aristocrat apologist but as the progenitor of a long American tradition of decrying and criticizing elite domination.²⁴ Indeed, as we will see, when Adams harangued his contemporaries on the topic of aristocracy, his intention was not to justify elite power but to criticize it, and especially to resist the democratic temptation to wish away elite power and in the process to leave it unregulated.

READING ADAMS

This book presents John Adams as a student and critic of the political power of elites. This characterization will surprise some scholars familiar with his writings. Just as Adams's contemporaries often viewed him as an apologist for aristocracy, historians

have frequently interpreted him as a defender of oligarchy rather than as a critic of it. Joyce Appleby has written that by the time Adams wrote his mature political works, he had “reassessed the political affirmations he had formed as a revolutionary leader” and had embraced the conservatism of many European *Anglomanes*—those who admired and wished to replicate the English constitution and its balance of power between the king, House of Lords, and House of Commons. In practical terms, this meant welcoming in America “institutions giving permanent political power to an assigned group.”²⁵ Likewise, an older line of interpretation considered Adams to be a founding father of American conservatism. Russell Kirk, who famously appropriated the thought of Edmund Burke as the foundation for the modern conservative disposition, found in John Adams a like-minded American figure. According to Kirk, Adams shared nearly all of Burke’s basic commitments:

Both declare the necessity of religious belief to sustain society, both exalt practical considerations above abstract theory, both contrast man’s imperfect real nature with the fantastic claims of the *philosophes*, both stand for a balanced government which recognizes the natural distinctions of man from man, class from class, interest from interest.²⁶

Much like Appleby, though with different purposes in mind, Kirk viewed Adams as a conservative apologist for class privilege—a characterization difficult to square with the one found in these pages.

A number of important studies of Adams’s political thought have convincingly recovered him from the camp of reactionary conservatism but have nonetheless overlooked the centrality of the theme of oligarchy in his political writings. One school of thought, inspired in part by Hannah Arendt’s treatment of

Adams in her *On Revolution*, has presented him as a proponent of a “classical republican” tradition beginning in ancient Greece and reaching its demise with the rise of modern commercialism. On this account, John Adams stands as an American exemplar of a long line of thinkers who understood that “public freedom consisted in having a share in public business, and that the activities connected with this business by no means constituted a burden but gave those who discharged them in public a feeling of happiness they could acquire nowhere else.” Likewise, J.G.A. Pocock has similarly called Adams’s *Defence of the Constitutions* “perhaps the last major work of political theory written within the unmodified tradition of classical republicanism.”²⁷

Meanwhile, whereas the classical republican reading has presented Adams as centrally concerned with public virtue, a line of interpretation that we might call classical liberal has drawn him as a constitutionalist focused on the securing of natural rights by means of elaborate political architecture. C. Bradley Thompson’s *John Adams and the Spirit of Liberty*—the most thorough and comprehensive study of Adams’s political thought to date—has presented Adams as above all a practical political scientist who, like James Madison and the other leading framers of the US Constitution, understood that the security of natural rights depended on a complex of institutions capable of controlling and elevating man’s passions and interests. Thompson has registered many of the themes explored in this book. He has noted that “no subject interested Adams more than the nature and origins of human inequality” and that one of the main goals of his institutional design was the containment of aristocratic ambition.²⁸ But Thompson’s presentation of Adams as a classical-liberal constitutionalist, much like classical-republican readings, have neglected the central importance of Adams’s thoroughgoing critique of oligarchic power. Though these studies effectively rescued Adams

from the charge of reactionary conservatism, they did not give pride of place to his preoccupation with the politics of inequality.

The seeds of the perspective of this book are found in Gordon Wood's stand-alone chapter on John Adams in his *Creation of the American Republic*. To a certain extent Wood read Adams much as Appleby would a few years later—as an outmoded and reactionary thinker attached to Old World institutions and incapable of comprehending the political innovations of his time. Yet even as Wood presented Adams as antiquated and “irrelevant” in the ideological context of the early republic, he also presented him as an anomalous figure harboring a preoccupation with matters of inequality and oligarchy at a time when his peers were inventing a liberal ideology that obscured these matters. “For too long and with too much candor,” wrote Wood, “he had tried to tell his fellow Americans some truths about themselves that American values and American ideology would not admit.”²⁹ Wood left vague what these truths were. This book aims to clarify at least one of them.

A few studies have explicitly recognized Adams as a biting critic of oligarchic power. In his classic comparative study of the late-eighteenth-century revolutions of the Atlantic world, R. R. Palmer recognized that even though Adams was often called an aristocrat, it was always clear from his writings that “aristocracy was Adams's principal bugaboo.”³⁰ Judith Shklar similarly characterized Adams as preoccupied with the dangers posed by aristocracy. Writing of the “suspicion of aristocracy” that has appeared again and again in the American political tradition, Shklar wrote that “no figure in the early history of the Republic mirrored and thought through these attitudes more urgently or intensely than did John Adams.” The various diatribes against elite power by later Americans, from Thorsten Veblen's critique of elite behavior to the progressive “denunciation of corruption”

to the populist “outcry against monopolized power,” all echoed Adams.³¹

If these last references provide useful hints about Adams’s preoccupation with social and economic elites, several works of biography have more directly anticipated my study by recognizing and elaborating the theme of oligarchy in Adams’s political thought. Joseph Ellis has found that for Adams the “central dilemma of political science” was that of controlling the energies of elite factions. Adams was immune, Ellis has written, “to the seductive illusions that had established themselves as central assumptions in post-revolutionary political culture.” The point Adams was at pains to make, noted Ellis, was that “in all societies for which there was any kind of historical record, political power and wealth tended to go hand in hand; and a few people invariably accumulated more wealth and power than the others.”³² Likewise, according to John Ferling it was the growing sway of financiers, speculators, and merchants that motivated Adams eventually to abandon the Federalist Party. “It was humanity’s oppression at the hands of the wealthy few,” Ferling observed, “that Adams thought most likely, and it was that which he most dreaded.”³³ John Patrick Diggins similarly presented Adams as an antidote to Jefferson, Paine, and others who “championed the French Revolution as the death of monarchy and had no qualms about the new life of money.” Adams has been called an aristocrat defending wealth, argued Diggins, “when he was actually a moralist admonishing it.” A defender of executive power and critic of the rich, Adams foreshadowed Theodore Roosevelt’s progressive effort to assert the might of the presidency against the “malefactors of wealth.”³⁴

Yet if scholars have noticed Adams as an early student of wealth and politics, they have stopped short of revealing his critique of oligarchic power in all of its depth. As we will see,

what makes Adams's writings relevant today is not just that he shared our concerns with inequality and the threat of oligarchy, but that he analyzed these features of political life with striking originality. Adams's writings uniquely synthesized two patterns of thought. The first was a mode of inquiry that we might call practical political science: a lifelong study of political institutions informed by experience and guided by historians and political philosophers from Plato to Polybius, from Machiavelli to Montesquieu. The second was the late-eighteenth-century Scottish Enlightenment, an intellectual movement preoccupied with the moral-psychological dynamics of the emerging commercial order. It was a synthesis of these two strains of thought—practical political science and Scottish moral psychology—that led Adams to understand the power of wealth as rooted in the human psyche.

WEALTH AND POWER

What can John Adams teach us about wealth and power in our own times? I wish to suggest that he can help us as we attempt to comprehend and respond to one of today's most urgent problems: the outsized influence of wealth in our politics. We have learned in recent years that, in spite of the widespread democratic expectation that the decisions of elected officials should reflect the preferences of ordinary citizens, the decisions of policy makers all too often reflect the preferences of the affluent and, even more so, the superrich.³⁵ How is it that a wealthy minority wields such influence in a political system expected to empower majorities? If there is a single prevailing theory today about how the rich get their way in politics, it is that they are able to *buy* political influence. The rich purchase electoral voice through campaign contributions and powerful opinion-shaping institutions. They win in Washington with deep-pocketed lob-

bying efforts and what Jeffrey Winters has called an “income defense industry” consisting of lawyers, accountants, and wealth-management consultants.³⁶ Yet in today’s context, this explanation appears insufficient. Can the lobbying efforts of Bill Gates and Mark Zuckerberg account for the enormous influence of their views on issues ranging from education to immigration policy? Can the appeal of billionaire candidates like Donald Trump be measured merely with reference to their campaign spending? Wealth, it seems, enjoys even greater influence than it is able to buy.

In the course of his political writings, Adams elaborated an understanding of the power of wealth that might aid us in our quandary. If today’s students of money and politics have understood the power of wealth largely in terms of purchasing power—a power to bankroll campaigns, purchase media space, and fund lobbying efforts—Adams traced the political influence of wealth not just to its power to buy but to its grip on the human mind. Though he was no stranger to the purchase of political influence, Adams repeatedly urged his readers to appreciate sentiments like sympathy and admiration for wealth as less tangible but no less potent sources of oligarchic power.

In his letters, essays, and treatises, Adams explored in subtle detail what might be called *soft* oligarchy—the disproportionate power that accrues to wealth on account of widespread sympathy for the rich. As scholars of international relations have long known, coercion through the use of brute force and inducement through monetary payment are not the only available forms of power. In addition to the powers of compensation and coercion—carrots and sticks—there is also “soft” power, defined by Joseph Nye as “the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments.” The United States, for example, wields soft power when the world’s people admire its ideals and are attracted to its culture. Favorable sentiments,

rather than carrots and sticks, lead populations around the world to want what the United States wants and to follow it willingly.³⁷ It was something like this type of soft empire that John Adams attributed to wealth. The power of riches was not only the ability to coerce through relations of material dependency or to induce through direct payments, but also the ability to command influence through sentiments like admiration and sympathy.

Similar to the way the subjects of monarchies had admired royalty and nobility, the citizens of commercial republics would tend to admire the rich. In commercial society the people tended to associate wealth with happiness and therefore to look up to and celebrate the wealthiest citizens as the happiest. Adams drew on the moral psychology of Adam Smith to describe how public admiration of wealth, much like public admiration of royalty, could be a potent source of political power. In *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* Smith had described the “disposition of mankind . . . to go along with all the passions of the rich and the powerful” and the obsequiousness to our superiors that “arises from our admiration for the advantages of their situation.” “We are eager,” Smith wrote, “to assist them in completing a system of happiness that approaches so near to perfection; and we desire to serve them for their own sake, without any other recompense but the vanity or the honor of obliging them.”³⁸

John Adams’s innovation was to apply this lesson of moral psychology to the political realm. The political power of wealth, he insisted, could not be fully appreciated without understanding its roots in public sentiments. Though it was true that oligarchic power derived in large part from more tangible sources, such as social connections and relations of material dependency, Adams insisted that “there is a degree of admiration, abstracted from all dependence, obligation, expectation, or even acquaintance, which accompanies splendid wealth, insures some re-

spect, and bestows some influence.”³⁹ Adams did not deny the importance of the purchase of political influence by money. It was “a natural and unchangeable inconvenience in all popular elections,” he wrote in *Defence of the Constitutions of Government of the United States*, “that he who has the deepest purse, or the fewest scruples about using it, will generally prevail.”⁴⁰ But Adams also traced the influence of wealth to the deep admiration for the rich felt by the public and to the insatiable appetite for that same admiration possessed by society’s most ambitious. It was the *grandeur* of wealth, and not merely its purchasing power, that accounted for its immense political influence.

Political theorists have paid ample attention to the corrupting influence of wealth but have largely neglected the sentiments of the public as a source of oligarchic power. John Rawls argued that the outsized influence of the rich on the political process undermines the basic principle that all citizens, regardless of social or economic position, must possess “a fair opportunity to hold public office and to influence the outcome of political decisions.”⁴¹ Similarly, Michael Walzer has influentially contended that the disproportionate political influence of wealth undermines the foundations of liberalism by allowing one’s standing in one sphere of life to dictate one’s position in another.⁴² Just as liberalism requires protecting the sphere of civil society from that of state power, argued Walzer, it is also necessary to protect both civil society *and* politics from the growing power of wealth.⁴³ Yet for these theorists, the power that wealth wields in the political sphere is understood only as the power to purchase. According to Rawls, the rich gain disproportionate sway over campaign outcomes and political decisions through their contributions. Walzer likewise criticized the tendency of political life to assume the form of a marketplace in which influence is for sale to whomever is willing and able to trade economic goods for political goods. As Cass Sunstein has put it, democracy depends

on a basic distinction “between market processes of purchase and sale on the one hand and political processes of voting and reason-giving on the other.”⁴⁴ The power of money, the theory goes, is a transactional power—a power, as Jean-Jacques Rousseau put it, to “make commerce of the public freedom.”⁴⁵

A mounting political-science literature on the role of money in American politics likewise traces the power of money to its capacity to purchase political power. Though direct quid pro quo exchanges may be rare, there are numerous less direct means by which the wealthy buy influence. A disproportionate electoral voice can be acquired through investment in opinion-shaping institutions.⁴⁶ The rich can and do incline representatives to vote their way by means of well-funded, well-organized lobbying efforts.⁴⁷ The wealthiest citizens have historically succeeded in beating back adverse policy initiatives through the aggressive use of lawyers and consultants.⁴⁸ Thus, students of American politics, like political theorists, have conceptualized the problem of wealth in politics in terms of money’s capacity to purchase political power. As Samuel Huntington wrote in his classic work on the American political tradition, money “becomes evil not when it is used to buy goods but when it is used to buy power.”⁴⁹

There is much at stake in our understanding the psychological sources of oligarchic power. Indeed, consideration of this facet of the power of wealth reveals a neglected set of concerns. If wealth commands power not just as a currency but also as an idol, it would seem important for political theorists to ask how such power might be curbed or contained. Perhaps those interested in the corrosive effects of money in politics should not limit their focus to the regulation of lobbying and campaign finance but instead should widen their scope to consider how modern democracies succeed or fail to divert public admiration away from wealth.

The core of this study is an analysis of three texts. In addition to Adams's two most significant works of political thought, *Defence of the Constitutions of Government of the United States of America* and *Discourses on Davila*, his retirement-era correspondence with Jefferson also receives extended analysis. As we will see, the Adams-Jefferson letters contain some of Adams's most probing reflections on the power of wealth and birth, and his thinking on this theme is clarified through his lively engagement with Jefferson's distinctive views.

A number of Adams's lesser known works appear at the periphery of my analysis. I attempt to shed light on his mature works of political theory by examining their antecedents in earlier works, including his 1765 *Dissertation on the Canon and Feudal Law* and his 1776 *Thoughts on Government*. I draw from his correspondence, with a special focus on those exchanges that are richest in political-philosophical content. My treatment of Adams's conception of "natural" aristocracy in chapter 2 is supplemented by an analysis of a series of letters written to John Taylor of Caroline, who wrote a book-length critique of Adams's *Defence*. Similarly, my treatment of Adams's correspondence with Jefferson is supplemented by analysis of his well-known correspondence with Benjamin Rush, an exchange that occurred at nearly the same time and covered similar subject matter. Finally, I seek to enrich my study of Adams's thought by examining his sharp criticism of a range of works in his library, including Jean-Jacque Rousseau's *Discourse on the Origin and Basis of Inequality among Men*, Mary Wollstonecraft's *An Historical and Moral View of the Origin and Progress of the French Revolution*, and the Abbé de Mably's *De la législation*.

There are two quite different methods of intellectual history that I have employed in these pages. First, I have sought to situate Adams's ideas within the context of the history of political philosophy, and more specifically within the history of

philosophically probing attempts to understand the nature of oligarchic power. My overarching goal, as signaled above, is to recover Adams's fear of oligarchy and, along the way, to uncover his unique understanding of the psychological sources of oligarchic power. In order to highlight the originality of his ideas, I consider Adams's differences with such figures as Samuel Huntington, Robert Dahl, Alexis de Tocqueville, Thomas Jefferson, Adam Smith, James Harrington, Niccolò Machiavelli, Polybius, and Aristotle.

It would be premature, however, to attempt such a reconstruction of Adams's thought without first acknowledging an important objection. As discussed above, it has been contended that Adams, far from being a critic of oligarchic power, was an apologist for it. His most significant political writings, after all, were efforts to advocate for an English-style "balanced constitution" that would limit democracy to one *part* of government situated alongside aristocratic and monarchical elements.

So before I reconstruct Adams's theory of oligarchy in light of a broader history of political philosophy, I set the stage by situating Adams's writings in the immediate intellectual and political context of his time. In chapter 1, I consider Adams's *Defence of the Constitutions* within a transatlantic debate about the desirability of English-style balanced government—a constitutional model that attempted to counterpose the monarchic, aristocratic, and democratic social elements together within the same government. The debate was most pronounced in Paris in the years preceding the French Revolution, when Anglomans who sympathized with balanced government defended the model from the attacks of French reformers. I argue that Adams, though a defender of a certain idea of balanced government, departed from the prevalent theory. Whereas conventional Anglomans had emphasized the danger to such balance posed by the popular, democratic element, Adams was preoccupied instead with

the threat to that balance posed by an overweening aristocratic class.

Having demonstrated Adams's preoccupation with aristocracy, I then proceed in chapter 2 to reconstruct his understanding of aristocratic power. By revisiting his debates with Thomas Jefferson and John Taylor of Caroline, I recover the reasoning behind Adams's bleak prediction that wealth and birth—and not talent and virtue—would enjoy the preponderance of power in republican America. I turn, in chapter 3, to the question of how, precisely, Adams understood wealth to translate into political influence. As previewed above, I draw from *Discourses on Davila* and other writings an understanding of oligarchic power that traces the political power of wealth not to the capacity of the rich to buy influence but instead to public admiration and sympathy for the rich.

The notion that oligarchic power derives in part from public admiration suggests that those seeking to mitigate oligarchy ought to consider the means by which modern democracies might divert admiration away from wealth. In chapter 4 I draw from Adams's writings to argue that the most effective means of diverting admiration from wealth might be to create and maintain offices and stations that, by virtue of the honor they bestow, enjoy the admiration of the public. Meritocratic judgeships and high elected offices, when honor is attached to them, might compete with the grandeur of wealth for public admiration. As we will see, the spirit of Adams's political thought warns against the democratic impulse to knock down honorable institutions. A democratic political community might believe it is equalizing conditions by electing judges and secretaries of high office rather than appointing them, or by regulating political offices with highly restrictive limits on the duration and number of terms, but the unintended consequence of attempts to bring offices closer to the people might be the elimination of the only markers of social

distinction that can compete with wealth for the admiration of the public. Adams captured the point succinctly in his notes on Mary Wollstonecraft's *An Historical and Moral View of the Origin and Progress of the French Revolution*. Responding to Wollstonecraft's attack on the distinctions of prerevolutionary France, Adams warned that "the distinction of property will have more influence than all the rest in commercial countries, if it is not rivalled by some other distinction."⁵⁰ Adams's political thought serves as a warning that the egalitarian impulse to empty offices of their honor might have the unanticipated effect of increasing the already immense influence of wealth in modern democracies.