

Individualism

- Emerson and Thoreau
 - Not typically thought of as political writers.
 - Their writings raise interesting questions about the relationship between democracy and individual freedom and character.
 - Does democracy threaten individual freedom?
 - Do individuals threaten the functioning of democracy?

- At time of Emerson and Thoreau, move from republic (Federalists) to a Democratic-Republic (Jeffersonian Republicans) was being consolidated.
 - Compared to rest of world, equality in American more evenly distributed.
 - Rise of democratic conditions.
 - Democracy extending beyond government to civil society
 - Tocqueville: characterized American at this time as having a “equality of conditions,” which he (like Emerson) viewed as a threat to individual freedom
 - Thought it could lead to “democratic despotism” – as men become more equal, they become mainly concerned with material well-being and less interested in the affairs of government.
 - As a result, government is less accountable to people, and more likely to rule tyrannically; paternalistically.
 - Emerson and Thoreau focused on individual character:
 - Emphasized the need to cultivate the character of individuals;
 - They viewed this as a function of government, in addition to its more conventional functions of protecting rights and property.
 - Nature important part of building individual character – “Knowing thyself is studying nature” – meaning, people should rely on their own experiences to formulate judgments about the world.

- Student presentations on readings:
 - Emerson
 - Suspicious of parties, associations.
 - Focus on individual character, which was hindered if too much attachment to established groups or the past.
 - Challenged American scholars to move beyond history and think anew.

 - Thoreau
 - Critical of government.

- Reactionary? Anarchist?
 - Importance of simplicity, found in natural world.
 - Arguing for reforms of law, not anarchy.
 - Denies individuals have obligation to obey unjust government – higher law v. man-made law; if latter unjust, then individuals can disobey (civil disobedience).
 - Disdained voting; thought it was a cheap form of participation; instead, he believed people should participate more meaningfully.
- Stanton
- Echoes Emerson.
 - Psychology of individualism that transcends gender.
 - Importance of independence and solitude.
 - Argues that women should be equal in society to enable them to cope with individualistic struggles (e.g., loneliness that comes with old age).