which fundamental political equality could be taken for granted. Democracy, to cite a word this time from Kloppenberg’s sub-title, remains a “struggle.” In the United States, for example, if we take even a minimal definition of democracy—one person, one vote—that condition remained unmet until the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, only to be scuttled 48 years later by a 5-4 vote of the U.S. Supreme Court that struck down a key provision of that act.

Kloppenberg’s pre-history begins in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when two intellectual movements began to challenge a once-dominant political landscape. One emerged from the field now called political theory: thinkers such as Thomas Hobbes and John Locke, even if in radically different ways, began asking questions about authority; so long as they did, and so long as they were read and understood, those in power had to find means of justifying themselves. (Kloppenberg is especially good in his treatments of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and David Hume, both of whom tend to be neglected by American historians.) Ultimately the questions that Locke in particular asked led directly to the Enlightenment, whose thinkers framed the questions the founders of the United States asked as they contemplated the idea of a society with neither hereditary rulers nor an established faith.

Unlike many contemporary historians, Kloppenberg also examines the role of religion as the second factor in this profound transformation. In Europe, the Catholic Church had all too often allied itself with authoritarian monarchs and held fast to the practice of allowing only priests to read and interpret the Bible. That all changed with the Protestant Reformation and especially with Martin Luther’s attacks on Catholic privilege. Though Luther himself possessed an authoritarian personality, and continually modified his once-radical ideas, his concept of a “priesthood of all believers” prepared the groundwork for the individualism democracy required.

It is, however, too simple a story to view Catholics as the bad guys and Protestants as the good ones. Kloppenberg is especially sensitive to anti-Catholicism, which, he writes, “waxed and waned but never clearly disappeared” in the early history of New England. Still, the great accomplishment of America’s thinkers and doers was to avoid the political and religious dogmatism so evident in Europe. “Rather than trying to freeze their institutions and laws in a particular form, a temptation given their serious commitments to the apparently fixed truths of Christianity and natural law,” he writes, “the creators of the new American state governments provided for open-ended experimentation.” Their efforts were unprecedented. “By the 1790s, almost no one doubted that the United States of America was the world’s first democratic nation.”

This idea of the first democratic nation is true in one sense: the absence of a king. But, as Kloppenberg also points out, it is radically false in another: American democracy was limited to white men, and by no means all of them. So many historians of Kloppenberg’s generation have written about the role of women before they had the suffrage, or pondered the question of how America could be a democracy while sanctioning slavery, that Kloppenberg has little original material to add to these discussions. Still, his treatment of Thomas Jefferson’s inability to reconcile his faith in equality with the life of luxury that slavery afforded him is especially poignant. Slavery, Kloppenberg correctly writes, was “the deepest tragedy of American history.”

It was a mixed brew that the founders of American democracy drank; an immigrant nation naturally consumed a bewildering variety of ideas. “Shaped by a blend of Protestant Christianity, Enlightenment principles, and Scottish common-sense philosophy, the sensibilities of Madison, [James] Wilson, Adams, Jefferson, and other members of their generation combined confidence in the human capacities of reason and benevolence with a sober assessment of the dangers of passion and self-interest.” American democracy would become a test case for a particular version of moral philosophy: unlike strict versions of Calvinism, individuals would...