



Isaac Kramnick

March 6, 1938 – December 21, 2019

Isaac Kramnick, eminent historian of political thought, legendary teacher and advisor, and exemplary University citizen, died on December 21, 2019, at 81. Kramnick joined the faculty in 1972, became Richard J. Schwartz Professor of Government in 1983, and retired in 2015, after 43 years at Cornell. Even as his scholarship earned him recognition as a fellow of the Royal Historical Society and member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, Kramnick also had a lasting impact on the educational mission of the University: as Cornell's first Vice Provost for Undergraduate Education, he was a driving force behind the West Campus House System and the New Student Reading Project. A tireless advocate for his students and advisees, he insisted that Cornell live up to its highest ideals. He lived a scholarly and engaged public life with decency, integrity, and clarity of moral vision.

Kramnick was raised by foster parents in Millis, a small agricultural community outside Boston. His impoverished upbringing in a family of conservative Orthodox Jewish farmers did not necessarily presage academic success, but after graduating from a small public high school, Kramnick became the first member of his family to attend college. As a scholarship student at Harvard, Kramnick met two teachers, Judith Shklar and Stanley Hoffmann, who inspired him to pursue a life of scholarship, and showed him the power of clear, lucid prose. Kramnick graduated *summa cum laude* from Harvard in 1959, writing a thesis on radical British political philosopher William Godwin. He pursued graduate study at Cambridge and then as a doctoral student in Government at Harvard, where he wrote a dissertation under Shklar's guidance on opposition Tory politician and influential "country" republican political philosopher, Henry St. John, 1st Viscount Bolingbroke. A revised version appeared three years later as *Bolingbroke and His Circle: The Politics of Nostalgia in the Age of Walpole* (1968); this widely praised book earned Kramnick (who had previously taught at Brandeis and Yale) a tenured appointment in 1972 at Cornell. He was promoted to full professor in 1975.

Both *Bolingbroke and His Circle* and Kramnick's second book, *The Rage of Edmund Burke* (1977) displayed his gift for understanding prominent figures in the history of political thought

who were hard to classify in conventional ideological terms. Bolingbroke had been the leading extraparliamentary opponent of Walpole's Whig government in the 1720s and 1730s, but was attacked after his death as an Enlightenment radical by no less than Edmund Burke—only to be elevated alongside Burke into the “Tory pantheon” in the nineteenth century. Many commentators saw this as a symptom of Bolingbroke's unprincipled opportunism and lack of philosophical depth. For Kramnick, however, it pointed to the uncertain situation of Britain itself in a period marked by the disruptive emergence of a new economic order, led by finance rather than landed property; Bolingbroke thus appeared as a subtle, realistic kind of conservative who wished neither to keep everything as it was, nor to escape into romantic dreams of a bygone era. In *The Rage of Edmund Burke*, too, Kramnick set out to show that his subject was more complex than most readers recognized, particularly the postwar Anglo-American conservatives who celebrated Burke as an “inspirational hero.” Here, Kramnick employed a more provocative psychological approach, appealing not to unsettled socio-economic conditions but to Burke's inward “ambivalences” (about his place in society, about his sexuality, and about the relative values of independent self-assertion and receptive submission) to make sense of his curious combination of enthusiasm and anger toward the now more firmly entrenched “bourgeois” world he encountered.

This world came to the center of Kramnick's attention in the next phase of his research, focused on writers who had embraced the heady mix of religious dissent, reverence for work and entrepreneurship, scientific rationalism, and disdain for inherited privilege that he called “bourgeois radicalism.” Supported by a Guggenheim Fellowship and a term at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences, Kramnick developed a distinctive view of the shape of Anglo-American political thought across the eighteenth century, partly by studying individual thinkers like Godwin, Paine, Price, and Priestley, and partly by studying the ideological operations of whole genres of writing, like children's literature, in industrializing England and in British North America. This work had a lasting impact on the study of Anglo-American political thought not least because it bucked the trend of historical scholarship. Beginning in the late 1960s, Bernard Bailyn, J. G. A. Pocock, and Gordon Wood, among others, had questioned the conventional understanding of the political ideology of the American Revolution as an extension of a “liberal” individualist and rights-centered strand of British political thought represented by John Locke, focusing instead on the significance of “republican” ideas about civic virtue and corruption drawn from the early modern reception of classical Greek and Roman sources. Without denying its power, Kramnick argued that this new “republican synthesis” overlooked the resurgence of interest in Locke in Britain and America after 1760, as well as the emergent ideology of a newly self-conscious and assertive group of middle-class radical reformers, which played a powerful part in the arguments leading to American independence, and in the “Great National Discussion” around the ratification of the Constitution. Kramnick's collected essays on these subjects, published as *Republicanism and Bourgeois Radicalism* (1990), was probably the most influential of his books, and—to judge by the controversy it aroused—the one whose polemics most stung their targets. And for readers who did not doubt the existence of a persistent liberal strand in Anglo-American thought but saw it as little more than a rationalization of inequalities of private property, the book was also a powerful reminder that, in the eighteenth century, liberalism—whatever its limits—was “still subversive of the status quo.”

Republicanism and Bourgeois Radicalism marked Kramnick's decisive pivot toward the United

States: subsequent essays in the history of American political thought appeared as introductions to editions of *The Federalist Papers* (1987) and Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* (2003; 2007), culminating in the remarkably ambitious and comprehensive collection of primary texts he edited with his Cornell colleague Theodore Lowi in 2009: *American Political Thought: A Norton Anthology*. In the 1990s, Kramnick also began to undertake substantial research projects with co-authors. With British Labour MP Barry Sheerman, he wrote an acclaimed intellectual biography of socialist theorist and Labour Party activist Harold Laski (1993). With his Cornell colleague R. Laurence Moore, he wrote two books exploring the deeply contested history of secularism in American political life. *The Godless Constitution: A Moral Defense of the Secular State* (1996) argued that, conservative claims notwithstanding, America was not conceived as a "Christian nation" but as a bold constitutional experiment in "Godless" political secularism; the book mounted a lively, learned historical defense of American religious freedoms, including freedom from religion. In *Godless Citizens in a Godly Republic: Atheists in American Public Life* (2018), Kramnick and Moore focused less on the secular worldview woven into American institutions than on the powerful religious forces in American public life that have resulted in the treatment of atheists as "dangerous people and unworthy citizens," and often in their loss of basic rights and liberties. Together, these books illuminated the depth of the political fissures over religion that still animate contemporary culture wars.

Devoted as Kramnick was to scholarship and to writing—he once said that "there are few euphoric highs, sheer ecstatic joys, that compare with how one feels after a good day of writing"—he was also a legendary teacher, whose courses, including "American Political Thought from Madison to Malcolm X," drew hundreds of students each semester for decades. An outstanding, engaging, funny lecturer, Kramnick took his students seriously as full participants in an ongoing conversation about political ideas. He received a Clark Distinguished Teaching Award in 1978, and nearly two decades later was voted "Cornell's Favorite Professor" in a poll sponsored by the *Cornell Daily Sun*. He also defended their rights and interests, individually and collectively, within the University. He worked tirelessly on behalf of students in a variety of administrative roles at Cornell, most consequentially as chairman of the West Campus Residential Life committee between 1998 and 2005, which overlapped with his service as Vice Provost for Undergraduate Education. As *The New York Times* noted in 2007, the integration of academic and residential life that Kramnick shepherded into existence "represented something of a revolution, not just at Cornell but across the country." These administrative roles, however, did not deter Kramnick from criticizing the institution, as he did during the 1980s campaign to end the investment of the University's endowment in companies doing business with apartheid South Africa. As his colleague and co-author Glenn Altschuler said on the occasion of Kramnick's retirement in 2015, Kramnick was "the kind of university citizen who demands that Cornell aspire to, act as, and become its best self," and who was willing to "speak truth to power" in pursuit of that goal. That intense but never naively uncritical commitment to the institution carried back over into Kramnick's scholarship, as he co-authored *The 100 Most Notable Cornellians* with Glenn Altschuler and R. Laurence Moore (2003), and *Cornell: A History, 1940-2015* with Altschuler (2014).

Beyond his remarkable professional accomplishments, Kramnick took his greatest joy in his beloved family and his close friends, with whom he made Ithaca a home for almost 50 years. Kramnick's deep love for his wife Miriam Brody, and his devotion to their children Rebecca,

Jonathan, and Leah—and, later, to their grandchildren Madeline, Anna, Samuel, and Milo—was undeniable to anyone who knew him. Kramnick’s gratitude to the place where he and his family made their home was visible in ways large and small. At the end of *Republicanism and Bourgeois Radicalism*, Kramnick offered one final bit of evidence for his view of the American founding as a moment of “paradigmatic pluralism,” in which the voice of John Locke echoed alongside those of Aristotle and Cicero. “My corner of the American text, in upstate New York,” he wrote, “was settled by Revolutionary War veterans in the last decades of the eighteenth century. When they named their parcels of the American landscape, they knew in what tongues to speak. There is a Rome, New York, and an Ithaca, and a Syracuse. For state builders fascinated with the founders of states, there is a Romulus, New York. There is a Geneva, New York, at the foot of Seneca Lake and ten miles from Ithaca there is even a Locke, New York. Such is the archaeology of paradigms,” Kramnick concluded, “far above Cayuga’s waters.”

Written by Jason Frank and Patchen Markell