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Aziz Rana. *The Two Faces of American Freedom.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010. 432 pp. $29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-04897-3.

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Like so many of the phenomena encountered by historians these days, American freedom, in Aziz Rana's conception, is Janus-faced. One face stares inward, at itself; the other stares outward, at what it is not. Neither visage has much to recommend it; the first, for the most part, expresses complacency, the second hauteur. We will discover from Rana's book that this is not an unusual state of affairs–although we will also discover that it has not always been thus. But whatever they might individually reveal, the two gazes are, of course, interlocked and interdependent, each condition and consequence of the other. And occasionally, such are the optics of history, their eyes meet–with results at once revealing and unsettling. Hence Rana's epigraph, from Walt Whitman: "Long having wander'd since, round the earth having wander'd, / Now I face home again, very pleas'd and joyous, / (But where is what I started for so long ago? And why is it yet unfound?)."[1]

Rana's Two Faces of American Freedom is itself two-faced, ambitious to arouse its audience to action, earnest in its desire to find American freedom's lost hope. Something of both ambition and earnestness is conveyed by the prize the book won in its previous life as a Harvard University Government Department PhD dissertation, the Senator Charles Sumner Prize (2008), given for the best dissertation "from the legal, political, historical, economic, social, or ethnic approach, dealing with any means or measures tending toward the prevention of war and the establishment of universal peace."[2] A Yale University JD (2006), and since 2009 assistant professor of law at Cornell University, Rana has attempted to deliver on the promise (and burden) of the Sumner Prize by rewriting his dissertation as a lengthy and vigorous synthesis of American legal and political history from the outset of English colonizing until the present, aimed both at exposing America's "long-standing difficulty in imagining liberty without suppression and free citizenship without the control of subject communities" and at identifying "emancipatory alternatives" (pp. 3, 17).

Synthesis, Gordon Wood has remarked, is sorely needed in American history. The field is drowning in monographs; it cries out for scholars bold enough to combine all of its specialized and refined output in "comprehensive narratives."[3] Measured by this standard, Two Faces is a success. Rana has read broadly enough, and he writes well and clearly enough (no small accomplishment) to pull off a project that requires sustaining very large-scale generalizations across four hundred years of empirical argumentation. Rana fails Wood's other test, the well-known "presentism" standard,[4] for in Rana's own words, Two Faces "is not a work of traditional historical scholarship" at all, but "a form of social criticism." History is not presented for itself, but "in the service of today's problems as well as tomorrow's latent possibilities," an approach Rana describes as "ultimately instrumental," which seeks in the American past "normative tools for grappling with the current moment" (p. 17). Offered a chance to join the objectivity club, Rana thus demurs. Still, believing historians should not allow themselves to be overly bothered by the brio with which Rana embraces a frankly normative agenda. When Rana actually cuts to the chase, his scholarship–political and legal history written as intellectual history–is careful enough, and worth taking seriously.

What is the structure of Rana's synthesis? Four chapters–perhaps better thought of as semiautonomous essays–divide Rana's four hundred years into relatively traditional and recognizable lumps: "Settler Revolt and the Foundations of American Freedom" deals with the period from first settlement to the Revolution; "Citizens and Subjects in Postcolonial America" takes us from the 1780s to the Civil War; "The Populist Challenge and the Unraveling of Settler Society" focuses on the 1880s and 1890s; and "Plebiscitary Politics and the New Constitutional Order" begins with Progressivism and ends with

the New Deal. Though lengthy and detailed, averaging some seventy-five pages apiece, Rana's substantive chapters are neither exhaustive nor internally chronological. Each, rather, grapples with a distinct stage in the development and decomposition of the "constitutional and political experiment" that Rana dubs "settler empire" (p. 3), a conceptualization he employs to encapsulate the double character of American freedom. The four substantive chapters are bookended by an introduction and a conclusion that state and restate Rana's general argument, and (primarily in the conclusion) his hopes for a better future to come.

Settler empire is the conceptual pivot that links American freedom's two faces–"internal liberty and external subordination" (p. 13). At least through 1900, says Rana, American history is best represented as the history of a settler society sustained by relentless territorial expansion, indigenous displacement, and forced and unforced immigration. Characterized by an ideology of "republican freedom" (p. 12), internal (settler) liberty depends on the space gained from, and the subordination projected outward onto, those that settlers displaced. But though American empire is real enough in itself–figured first continentally and then oceanically–"internal" and "external" reference far more than territorially bounded conditions: they stand too for social and civic divides–what Barbara Young Welke has called "borders of belonging."[5] In Rana's analysis, indeed, what distinguishes American freedom is the intricate political and constitutional relationship between territorial conquest and social/civic identity. This relationship–expressed ideologically and structurally as "settlerism" (p. 14)–is what his four substantive chapters successively examine.

Rana's first chapter, "Settler Revolt," surveys the legal and political history of English colonization and eventual Anglo rebellion. Rana is sensitive to the emancipatory promise of the colonizing project for its white male foot soldiers, a promise that by the eighteenth century had congealed as the ideal of propertied independence (republican freedom), the first clear expression of internal liberty vis-à-vis marginalized (externalized) others. This was the liberty that Anglo settlers would fight to maintain against a newly distended polyglot British Empire, insensitive to the territorial, racial, and religious biases of colonial society. Rana aptly underscores republican freedom's fusion with millennial Protestantism, its dependence on continuous territorial conquest to sustain the independent citizenry at its core, and its hierarchical conception of the relationship between citizen and other. All that said, Rana seems least at home in the book's early going. His characterization of English colonizing relies on an unconvincingly sweeping characterization of Sir Edward Coke's opinion in Calvin's Case as the key text of Tudor-Stuart imperialism; his seventeenth-century history is excessively Virginia-centric, and too reliant for key demographic facts on George M. Fredrickson's inaccurate White Supremacy.[6] Occasional minor errors–placing John Cotton aboard the Arbella, for example–do not help.[7]

Chapter 2 is more surefooted. Postindependence, republican freedom as embodied in the likes of Thomas Paine and William Manning briefly evinces some capacity to shake off its hierarchical character, to assert a general "popular" will and entrench that will in government. Here was born a form of "producerist" populism that would reemerge at key points throughout the next hundred years. Yet producer self-assertion had to contend with the "harsh post-colonial reality" of a world still dominated by European colonial powers (p. 132). Elite power-brokers meeting in Philadelphia constructed a framework for national independence that insulated the Republic from external threats and populist participation. Frustrated settlers recast their populism "as a politics wary of any prerogative authority" that concentrated its attention outward, on the economic security to be won from physical expansion and on the civic security to be ensured by "maintaining the duality separating settler insiders from excluded outsiders–be they native, slave, or later Mexican" (p. 132). The Republic thus reincarnated settler empire, fueled by aggressive territorial growth, unrestricted white immigration, and racism. It would prove to be "a form of political association even more virulently exclusionary than that of the comparatively hierarchical colonial period," climactically crowned by Dred Scott (p. 131).[8]

By now it will be clear how the story continues. American freedom is constantly at war with itself, its (potentially) universalizing promise of "broad-based individual proprietorship" always fatally contradicted by the means–empire–of achieving it (p. 157). At key moments, distinct forms of populist political discourse emerge to suggest how the contradiction might be repudiated and substance given to the universalizing promise: Paine and Manning in the 1790s, Thomas Skidmore and Orestes Brownson during the Age of Jackson. But they always fail.

No greater challenge will occur than in the 1880s and

1890s, nor more agonizing failure. Rana's third chapter, "The Populist Challenge," discusses challenge and failure in detail: the emergence of the most "robust" populist version of republican freedom so far seen, institutionally carried by the Knights of Labor, Farmers' Alliance, and the People's Party; the emergence of a political discourse indicative of a "universal and nonimperial mode of popular politics ... engaged in a thoroughgoing critique of external American power and its corrosive effects on internal liberty" (p. 15); its moments of triumph and growth between 1885 and 1895; and its dénouement in 1896. The whole sequence of events, expectations, and bitter endings will be familiar to historians of this momentous period. In Rana's chapter, they are embodied in the familiar figure of Tom Watson, "agrarian rebel" and latent xenophobe, who first promoted populism's critique of settler empire, then undermined it.[9]

In one crucial respect, of course, the moment of the 1890s was different. The territorial safety valve that was settler empire could not persist–it had run out of continent. This added potency to the populist challenge at the same time as it encouraged the turn to greater internally focused executive authority that politicians and judges reacting to populism had already begun to make. The "unraveling of settler empire" thus moved the United States in the direction of forms of "bureaucratic and legal" rule that characterized Europe. "In the process, collective institutions moved away both from the dichotomy between free citizen and stratified subject and from the emancipatory promise implicit in settler society" (p. 182). Republican freedom had lost its settlerist moorings.

These processes are considered in Rana's final chapter, which opens with a question: "What constitutional structures should govern a postsettler society and what account of freedom could justify these structures and ground a new ethical basis for citizenship?" (p. 236). In fact, the normative query is postponed while Rana describes what actually came about–the continuous expansion of forms of plenary state power, culminating in the New Deal's security state, and the development of a "plebiscitary" political regime, which means a regime of politics "premised on executive leadership" that identifies the presidency "as the single body able to represent the nation as a whole" (p. 390n104). Throughout, as in his earlier chapters, Rana discusses what did develop in light of what might have developed by investigating the ideas of a number of Progressive and New Deal era intellectuals: Walter Weyl, Herbert Croly, John Dewey, Horace Kallen, Randolph Bourne, Robert S. Lynd, and Thurman Arnold. All were engaged (from different points of the compass) in debating the agenda of an interventionist state abroad and, increasingly, at home, and the possibility under these circumstances, of a mobilized public, of freedom as self-rule.

Whatever intellectuals might think, actual outcomes emphasized elite, technicist means of intervention, both locally and globally, directed by executive authority, at the cost of public mobilization. Mostly, the intellectuals went along, though Rana notes honorable exceptions like Bourne. The long-term tendency of "postsettler" society is perhaps best summarized by Lynd and Arnold. In 1939 we find Lynd writing that "undiscriminating adherence to the forms of democracy operates to cripple the expert performance of essentially democratic functions," and that "There is no way our culture can grow in serviceability to its people without a large and pervasive extension of planning and control to the many areas now left to casual individual initiative."[10] Four years earlier, Arnold had offered similar thoughts wrapped in a rather revealing metaphor: "In [an asylum] the physicians in charge do not separate the ideas of the insane into any separate sciences such as law, economics, and sociology; nor then instruct the insane in the intricacies of these three sciences. Nor do they argue with the insane as to the soundness or unsoundness of their ideas. Their aim is to make the inmates as comfortable as possible."[11] Sixty-six years later, President George W. Bush would offer an oddly similar thought in publicly reassuring a fourth grade school child who had written to him about her confusion in how to react to the 9/11 terror attacks. "People are going about their daily lives, working and shopping and playing, worshipping at churches and synagogues and mosques, going to movies and to baseball games. Life in America is going forward."[12] True enough. Comforting, certainly. Mobilizing? I think not.

What then of the normative, Rana's "should"? In place of a plebiscitary presidency and its "politics of substitution, in which the popular will quietly morphed into those policies implemented by an energetic executive," Rana seeks an energized public (p. 325). As in his earlier chapters, he finds his inspiration on the outskirts, in the 1960s civil rights movement, and in the more recent immigrant mobilizations of 2006. As always the peril of cooptation is great. Though Martin Luther King Jr. is faithfully remembered, each and every year, his realization that African American emancipation is inextricably

interwoven with elimination of "evils of racism, poverty and militarism … local authoritarianism and economic expropriation," has largely been eclipsed (pp. 332, 335). "The notion of tying economic subordination within the United States to global patterns of inequality, let alone the democratic ideal of a permanently mobilized social agent, is hardly ever broached" (p. 336). This notwithstanding, Rana still ties his "emancipatory ambitions" to the agitations of the excluded, the "concerted activity" of those beyond the borders of belonging, the "men and women deemed unfit" (p. 348). These, rather than revered founding fathers, or the frameworks of fundamental law they created, are his last best hope.

It is hard not to like the enthusiasm that Rana brings to his arguments, the palpable sense of urgency that imbues his book. Interested in others' reactions to Two Faces, I undertook the usual Google© search and came across two early reviews. David Greenberg, in the Washington Post, finds Rana's central argument "a bit of a reach" because "notwithstanding certain shameful presidential policies, such as the open-ended jailing of suspected terrorists without trial, most of the world envies the unprecedented freedoms enjoyed by Americans, even those in Guam, Puerto Rico or other parts of the 'empire."'[13] It is unclear what source provided Greenberg with his information about how "most of the world" thinks.

Jim Cullen, for the History News Network, wonders "What does Rana want?" Freedom, after all, "is a means, not an end." So what if Americans barter it for security? "What else is there?" Cullen answers his own question: "One answer, of course, is the esteem that comes with publishing books with high-profile presses and teaching at an Ivy League university. But of course not all of us are as smart, talented, and lucky as he his. I myself have another answer, which among other ways takes the form of paying absurdly high local taxes for what some administrators would plausibly consider an absurdly inefficient (read: small) school district. That gives me the right to be a helicopter parent and to vote on an annual school budget. On Sundays, I can nod to a couple local policemen from my pew at church, which I hope will make a difference on a future bad day. I'm not sure how many brown neighbors I have (a few), but none of them are cleaning my house or mowing my lawn." Perhaps his suburban life does not measure up to Rana's elevated standards, Cullen wonders. "No one would call this utopia." But is it not "an authentic form of freedom, albeit underwritten by the prerogatives of empire?" adding, parenthetically, "Can freedom ever not be?" Cullen concludes, almost fiercely, "If this isn't good enough, what is?"[14]

I have reviewed Rana's book. I am not going to review the reviews. I will say only that each in its own way stands in for one of the Janus faces with which I began: Greenberg's for the hauteur of the outward stare at all those unfortunates longing for what he has; Cullen's for the complacent inward gaze that sees nothing wrong in empire underwriting his secure suburban localism; as long as he does not look; as long as he is not reminded.

Though passionate, Rana is idealistic, not angry. No hectoring ideologue, he is, rather, a true believer in the promise of American freedom. That might make him naïve, but if nothing else he seems to understand what worried Whitman rather better than either of these interlocutors.

Notes

[1]. This Walt Whitman excerpt was first published in 1860 in the "Children of Adam" section of Leaves of Grass, and first given the title "Facing West from California's Shores" in the 1867 edition. In full, as follows:

Facing west from California's shores,

Inquiring, tireless, seeking what is yet unfound,

I, a child, very old, over waves, towards the house of maternity, the land of migrations, look afar,

Look off the shores of my Western sea, the circle almost circled;

For starting westward from Hindustan, from the vales of Kashmere,

From Asia, from the north, from the God, the sage, and the hero,

From the south, from the flowery peninsulas and the spice islands,

Long having wander'd since, round the earth having wander'd,

Now I face home again, very pleas'd and joyous,

(But where is what I started for so long ago? And

why is it yet unfound?)

[2]. Aziz Rana, "Settler Empire and the Promise of American Freedom" (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2007). The Sumner Prize citation can be found at http://www.gov.harvard.edu/graduate-program/news/senator-charles-sumner-prize-best-dissertation (accessed June 16, 2011).

[3]. Gordon Wood, "In Defense of Academic History Writing," Perspectives on History 48, no. 4 (April 2010): 20,http://www.historians.org/perspectives/issues/2010/1004/1004pres.html (accessed May 27, 2011).

[4]. Ibid.

[5]. Barbara Young Welke, Law and the Borders of Belonging in the long Nineteenth Century United States (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

[6]. Calvin's Case, 7 Coke Report 1a, 77 English Reports 377 (1608); and George M. Fredrickson, White Supremacy: A Comparative Study of American and South African History (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981). Fredrickson's estimates of Virginia's population and indentured servant labor force, relied on by Rana (Two Faces, p. 42), are not plausible.

[7]. The Reverend John Cotton did not join the first Puritan migration to Massachusetts Bay and hence could not have "repeatedly" sermonized the Arbella's hapless passengers. The (single) sermon to which Rana here adverts is Cotton's famous "God's Promise to his Plantation," delivered at Southampton in 1630 to farewell the fleet. Cotton eventually set sail for New England in 1633, aboard the Griffin.

[8]. Dred Scott, Plaintiff in Error, v. John F. A. Sandford, 60 U.S. 393 (1857).

[9]. C. Vann Woodward, Tom Watson: Agrarian Rebel (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963).

[10]. Robert S. Lynd, Knowledge For What? The Place of Social Science in American Culture (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1939), quoted in Rana, Two Faces, 307.

[11]. Thurman Arnold, The Symbols of Government (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1935), quoted in Rana, Two Faces, 309.

[12]. George W. Bush, speech at the World Congress Center (Atlanta, GA, November 8, 2001), http://www.september11news.com/PresidentBushAtlanta.htm (accessed May 27, 2011).

[13]. David Greenberg, review of The Two Faces of American Freedom, by Aziz Rana, Washington Post (November 12, 2010),http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/11/12/AR2010111203209.html (accessed May 27, 2011).

[14]. Jim Cullen, review of, The Two Faces of American Freedom, by Aziz Rana, http://hnn.us/roundup/archives/36/201009 (accessed May 27, 2011).

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