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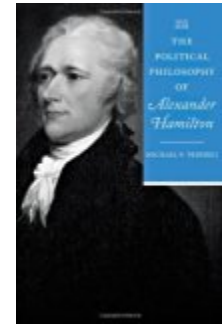
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Michael P. Federici. *The Political Philosophy of Alexander Hamilton*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012. viii + 291 pp. \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-4214-0539-1.

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Published on H-Law (June, 2013)

Commissioned by Christopher R. Waldrep



Alexander Hamilton: Constitutional Realist

Since the dawn of the Republic, Alexander Hamilton has held a precarious position in the pantheon of “The Founders.” For more than two hundred years, politicians and scholars have picked over Hamilton’s voluminous corpus both to praise and to bury the first secretary of the treasury. Simultaneously denounced as a monarchist and praised as a republican, Hamilton has routinely been marshaled into action both to attack and defend the growth of the federal government, laissez-faire economics, and judicial activism. Any idea that Hamilton’s politics are the stuff of esoteric arguments locked in the ivory tower were put to rest nearly a decade ago when the New York Historical Society’s exhibit “Alexander Hamilton: The Man Who Made Modern America” elicited wide criticism for having a conservative tilt.[1]

To make sense of Alexander Hamilton’s ideas and their legacy, Michael Federici has authored *The Political Philosophy of Alexander Hamilton*. An entry in the Johns Hopkins University Press’s *The Political Philosophy of the American Founders* series, this book should serve as an excellent introduction to the complicated and sometimes contradictory mind of the founder. In clear prose that is accessible to students, scholars, and educated readers alike, Federici accomplishes the unenviable task of unpacking the political philosophy of a man who never authored a work of systematic thought. In part, this was because Hamilton’s life was tragically cut short at the age of forty-nine and thus he never had a chance to reflect back on his life the way that John Adams and Thomas Jefferson did.

Yet even had Hamilton’s life been spared by Aaron Burr, it is uncertain that he ever would have produced such a tome. In fact, this is where Federici begins his analysis, arguing that Hamilton was a moral realist who believed that the lessons of history were far more valuable to constructing a government than any abstract philosophy. Accordingly, Federici is forced to read the largely public writings of Hamilton (such as *The Federalist* and other newspaper columns) in order to construct his own framework of Hamilton’s political philosophy. The result is appropriately quite Hamiltonian as Federici draws on what his subject called the “accumulated experience of ages” to make his case (p. 50). Federici also draws on the considerable secondary literature on Hamilton—most notably biographies by Forrest McDonald and Ron Chernow—as well as writings by contemporaries such as Thomas Jefferson.[2]

The result is largely satisfying. Attempting to “provide a balanced, nuanced view of Hamilton, one that may be messy but is more true to his political ideas than any ideologically driven view,” Federici succeeds in placing Hamilton in his late-eighteenth-century context, often going to great lengths to explain why present-day labels such as “nationalist” are ill fitted to his subject (p. 23).

The book is organized functionally, beginning with the man and his political philosophy writ large, before moving to the specific application of Hamilton’s ideas and ending with a contrast of Hamiltonian and Jeffersonian philosophies. This organization means that sev-

eral points and examples reappear two and even three times, although this may make the book more accessible as readers and teachers who want to sample a single chapter can do so and still grasp the totality of Federici's argument.

Following an effective introduction, Federici begins his exploration of his subject with a brief biography of Alexander Hamilton. Federici essentially recaps a familiar story of Hamilton the bastard son of broken West Indian family who made his way to New York City on the eve of the American Revolution. Hitching his wagon to George Washington's star, the ambitious Hamilton rose in the ranks of the Continental Army and the Washington administration before leaving to devote himself to the organization of the Federalist Party and the promotion of its policies, only to be gunned down in an unfortunate duel with vice president Aaron Burr. Federici illuminates Hamilton's "impatient enthusiasm" which made him a busy author and attracted powerful enemies (p. 35). Most importantly, Federici argues that Hamilton was "an ethical dualist" who believed that humankind could not be made perfect (p. 39). This put Hamilton at considerable odds with Jefferson and Thomas Paine, whose idealism preached that the popular will was infallible and thus should be unshackled from the tyranny of government. Hamilton believed that government was necessary to protect people from their own selfish ends, a stance that Federici observes brought Hamilton's political philosophy closer to that of Edmund Burke than that of Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

From the personal, Federici moves to Hamilton's philosophical anthropology and theoretical foundations of constitutionalism. In two substantial chapters, he expands on the nature of Hamilton's "ethical dualism" and how this influenced his role in the shaping of the U.S. Constitution. According to Federici, Hamilton has long suffered unfairly for a "pessimistic, dark, or cynical" view of human nature (p. 63). However, Hamilton's prescriptions for government followed neither Thomas Hobbes's amoral realism nor Niccolò Machiavelli's evil efficiency. Instead, Hamilton's sober realism was balanced by a refreshing optimism. He opposed African American slavery as unjust and believed that some individuals could rise above their baser instincts and put community before self-interest. Such a hopeful view of humanity was critical to Hamilton's faith that a "natural aristocracy" would emerge to guide the republic (p. 54).

In addition to challenging the view of Hamilton as a pessimist, Federici also works effectively to dismiss the

old canard that Hamilton was a monarchist. He demonstrates Hamilton's consistent allegiance to republicanism before examining the sources historians have cited as "proof" of Hamilton's monarchism, effectively explaining away each one as misconstrued or ill informed. Nevertheless Hamilton's ethical dualism meant that he distrusted the masses to always make the right decision on their own. In particular, he feared that "a momentary lower passion" might "overwhelm the dictates of reason and virtue" (p. 76). Hamilton thus opposed direct democracy and sought to interject elements of "permanence" into the Constitution such as an unelected judiciary and senators for life (p. 130). Such is not to say that Hamilton did not trust the people; in fact, he demanded broad suffrage for the House of Representatives. Rather, Hamilton desired a mixed constitution that was as balanced as his view of human nature.

Having established Hamilton's views writ large, Federici focuses in on a few debates and, in the process, clears up a number of popular misconceptions about Hamilton. Although a proponent of a strong and energetic national government, Hamilton did not seek to abolish the states or even to make them dependent upon the nation. Instead, Hamilton believed that power had to be properly divided between the nation and the states so as to prevent future tyrannies. For this reason, Federici dismisses the label "nationalist" for Hamilton. Arguing that "the rise of totalitarianism, fascism, certain types of authoritarianism, and imperial democracy" has so radically changed the meaning of nationalism, he suggests that by the modern definition of nationalism, Hamilton may actually have been "one of the first antinationalists, because he recognized that nations are not the ultimate measure of goodness or justice" (pp. 182-183). Hamilton did seek to knit the states together into a tighter union—which did necessarily require that they relinquish some of their power—but localities were essential to a balance of power.

By the same logic, Federici also rejects efforts to make Hamilton a hero of either laissez-faire capitalism or the modern welfare state, arguing that "his view of human nature would not have allowed either the faith in economic anarchy suggested by libertarians or the heavy regulated state advocated by Keynesians" (p. 191). Instead, Hamilton generally called for free markets except when the security of the nation demanded otherwise. As a result, Hamilton the treasury secretary appears far more moderate than many have assumed. For example, we learn here that Hamilton supported assuming state debts after the Revolutionary War, but railed against in-

flated national financial obligations. Federici also pushes back against the idea that Hamilton sought to make law by judicial fiat, contending that “his judicial theory has little in common with modern judicial activism, because it remained largely inconsistent with the original meaning of the Constitution” (p. 218).

All told, *The Political Philosophy of Alexander Hamilton* is an effective investigation of an extremely consequential man and his ideas. Highly accessible, this volume should prove useful to those who seek a general introduction to Hamilton’s politics as well as decided scholars who have traced the conflicting historiography of this founder.

If there is something missing here, it is that in seeking to place Hamilton solidly in the eighteenth century, Federici runs the risk of anachronism. Federici is correct that Hamilton did not support the modern welfare state, judicial activism, or twentieth-century forms of nationalism. However, because these ideas did not exist when Hamilton died in 1804, the relevance of arguing for their absence in Hamilton’s writings is somewhat dubious. Conversely, if Federici is arguing that Hamilton’s logic cannot be extended to encompass these ideas, this oddly assumes that Hamilton’s philosophy would not have changed over time in accordance with circum-

stances. In this, it is unfortunate that Federici does not explain how Hamilton’s reasoned and thoughtful advocacy of an active (and uniquely American) federal government was adopted and expanded on by the likes of Henry Clay, Abraham Lincoln, and Franklin Roosevelt. By limiting Hamilton’s ideas in this way, Federici’s otherwise skillful analysis runs the risk of making the man and his ideas seem antiquated and perhaps even unimportant to the modern day. Worse, it could provide fodder to those who seek to make Hamilton into an advocate of small government, state’s rights, and unfettered capitalism.

Nevertheless this book is an intelligent investigation that ultimately reminds us that the ideas of the founders remain as relevant in 2012 as they were in the 1790s.

Notes

[1]. “Alexander Hamilton: The Man Who Made Modern America,” New York Historical Society, <http://www.alexanderhamiltonexhibition.org> (accessed August 27, 2012); Edward Rothstein, “Our Father the Modernist,” *New York Times*, September 10, 2004.

[2]. Forrest McDonald, *Alexander Hamilton: A Biography* (New York: Norton, 1979); Ron Chernow, *Alexander Hamilton* (New York: Penguin, 2004).

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Citation: John G. McCurdy. Review of Federici, Michael P., *The Political Philosophy of Alexander Hamilton*. H-Law, H-Net Reviews. June, 2013.

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