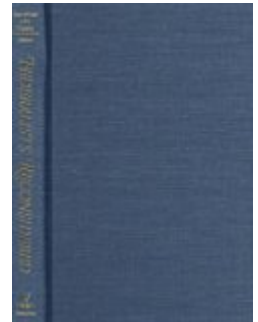




Doron Ben-Atar, Barbara B. Oberg, eds.. *Federalists Reconsidered*. Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1998. ix + 310 pp. \$65.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8139-1819-8.



Reviewed by Barry Alan Shain

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I have taken my title from that of James M. Banner Jr.'s insightful afterword. In it, he persuasively argues that the Federalists, more than all other actors in the early national period of American history, stand in need of the immediate attention of historians and their reconsideration of the role the Federalists played in the development of American political thought and institutions. As Banner points out, "one can say without irony that it is the Federalists--those exemplars of traditional, nationalistic, commercial, often antidemocratic, as well as purportedly white and male, values--who must now be rescued from the dustbin of historiography and the condescending regard of so many historians" (p. 248). And, although this is the declared intention of this collection of eleven essays (with an introduction by the editors and the afterword by Banner), this work cannot accomplish this on its own. It should, however, convince most readers that their understanding of the Federalists as anachronistic conservatives is greatly in need of reconsideration. Although accomplishing this is not an insignificant achievement, the reader is nonetheless likely to be left thinking that

this volume could and should have done more to effect this desirable end.

The first section, "The Age of Federalism," in which the authors focus directly on the political vision and economic policies of the Federalists during those years they were in control of the Federal government, is this collection's strongest. Each of the four entries is well written, intelligently argued, and advances the volume's central goal of showing "a nuanced, tension-ridden, and paradoxical Federalist legacy" (p. 15). The first, Rogers Smith's "Constructing American National Identity," explores the Federalists' understanding of national identity, begins the process of highlighting their preeminently liberal rather than republican or conservative sympathies, and, in a manner reminiscent of the arguments found in his *Civic Ideals* (1997), describes the importance of the diversity, and privileges and immunities clauses of the Constitution. The clever construction of these articles allowed Federal courts "to assert and expand the primacy of national" (pp. 26-7) over state citizenship. In the end, Smith demonstrates that the Federalists' infamous policies of the late 1790s

were neither accidental nor irrational, but reflected their understanding of national identity and citizenship.

The second essay, Doron Ben-Atar's "Alexander Hamilton's Alternative: Technology Piracy and the Report on Manufactures," and the third, Herbert E. Sloan's "Hamilton's Second Thoughts: Federalist Finance Revisited," both consider Hamilton's economic policies and show, in strictly economic terms, that they had been the right ones and on the cutting edge of eighteenth-century economic thought, even if "ill suited to late eighteenth-century American realities" (p. 62). In effect, his economic policies were progressive rather than reactionary; indeed, too much so for a conservative American electorate still largely agrarian in its mind set. Ben-Atar convincingly argues as well that Hamilton was no British stooge and that his "supposed Anglophilia in relation to his practice of technology piracy reveals a sophisticated and subtle plan of government sponsorship of manufactures that would challenge British industrial preeminence without risking U. S. involvement in a trade war it could not win" (p. 44). In the end, then, the limited success enjoyed by Federalist economic policy resulted not from it being illiberal or elitist, but as Sloan shows, from "the unwillingness of Americans to subject themselves to a European system of discipline and taxation. The Republican alternative was all too seductive, promising gain without pain" (p. 76). The Republicans, he suggests, were successful less because they devised a superior political economic policy and more because they were simply lucky.

The final essay of the first section, Andrew R. L. Cayton's "Radicals in the 'Western World': The Federalist Conquest of Trans-Appalachian North America," goes even further in rejecting the conservative or reactionary label indiscriminately attached to the Federalists. Cayton claims that the Federalists were radical in that by "privileging abstract impersonal principles above particular personal ties, they were redefining the nature of so-

cial and political relationships" (p. 78). Yet, what were they putting forward as novel social and political relationships? It concerned, Cayton suggests, the creation in the West of an orderly world based on education, Protestantism, and the national government. With the important exception of the all-powerful nationalist element (one contested by Banner in his afterword, p. 251), just how radical was this vision? Although Cayton is right in contrasting these values with those found in the Southwest territories, he is wrong to claim that one was traditional and the other not. What he shows, instead, is something long ago claimed by Daniel Elazar and more recently by David Hackett Fischer. They argued that cultures migrated with immigrants as they moved to the West and that in the Northern areas it was the New England town which was replicated, while to the South it was the world of the Virginian county-level government and society which was copied.

The second section, "Federalism and the Origins of American Political Culture," is somewhat less persuasive than the first. In particular, the first essay in cultural history, David Waldstreicher's "Federalism, The Style of Politics, and the Politics of Style," offers nothing that advances this volume's central concerns. The next essay, however, Rosemarie Zagarri's "Gender and the First Party System," does speak directly to this volume's central issues. Indeed, her remarks are of critical importance in highlighting that "in the early republic one party proved to be more receptive than the other to incorporating women into the political process and articulating women's role in the polity. That party proved to be the Federalists" (p. 119). Yet, because of the importance of her research to this book, it is unsettling that the quality of her evidence is not higher.

Her argument is too dependent on two authors, Mercy Otis Warren and Judith Sargent Murray, and what she attempts to glean from their differences. The former was a staunch Republican and showed no interest in advancing a new un-

derstanding of gender relations while the latter had a more progressive view. Yet, based on the evidence presented, Zagarri is unwarranted in claiming that it was their party affiliations that determined their admitted differences. Still, her work adds to this volume's overall strength.

The third essay, Paul Finkelman's "The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Federalism," is powerfully argued. As he had shown earlier in his *Slavery and the Founders* (1996), he amply demonstrates the importance of slavery to the politics and public policies of the day. He also demonstrates the existence of a considerable gulf between most Federalists and Republicans, in the North and the South, regarding slavery and their attitudes towards Blacks in America. By showing that "generally opponents of slavery were more likely to be Federalists than Republicans; the Republicans were more likely to support slavery than Federalists" (p. 152), he importantly adds to the perception that the Federalists were more, rather than less, liberal than their Republican counterparts.

The fourth essay, Steven Watts's "Ministers, Misanthropes, and Mandarins: The Federalists and the Culture of Capitalism, 1790-1820," also strengthens the perception that the Federalists were men of liberal sentiments. In Watts's case, however, this stance represents a reappraisal from the position presented in his *The Republic Reborn* (1987), and thus it is understandably more equivocal. Although his own ambivalence leads to a certain manner of confusion here, he nonetheless is able to declare "that Federalist conservatism is best understood in terms of a profound, wrenching ambivalence toward liberalizing change in the late 1700s and early 1800s that evoked intense guilt as well as fear. ... like Dr. Frankenstein overwhelmed by a monster of his own creation, these figures struggled mightily, and unsuccessfully, to restrain the liberalizing impulses they had helped liberate" (pp. 158-59). In a less persuasive fashion, though, he also claims

that the Federalists lost the political battle, but won the cultural war. He writes that "the Federalists' tense mediation between individual assertion and repression became, in fact, the basis of a Victorian culture that moved into the ascendancy in the United States by the 1830s" (p. 175). Although true in certain ways, he ignores that the Unitarian culture of which he writes, in anything approaching a pure strain, became a historical dead end especially when compared to the enormous vitality and growth of pietistic and more populous Protestant sects in antebellum America. Here, a better sense of the religious history of America, as throughout this volume, would have been invaluable.

All in all, the essays of the first and second sections push the reader towards developing a more nuanced understanding of the political culture of the Federalists; that is, towards seeing the Federalists in new and more complex ways, most particularly, by recognizing them as potentially the more liberal (economically, religiously, socially, familially, and even politically) of the two parties. One can only imagine that such revisionism is all to the good, since it might encourage readers to recognize that those values favored by today's elites, liberal and democratic, have not always been packaged together in American history (or even today). Indeed, between the two Great Awakenings, these values invariably were forwarded separately by different populations with different politics.

The third section, "Varieties of Federalism," is the shortest and weakest of the three, and unlike the first two, is of questionable value in advancing this volume's central concerns. It aptly opens with Keith Arbour's "Benjamin Franklin as Weird Sister: William Cobbett and Federalist Philadelphia's Fears of Democracy," which is delightful to read. Yet, with its peculiar focus on William Cobbett's occasional remarks in which he evidenced hostility to the memory of the long dead Franklin, it is hard to imagine how his essay might add to

this volume or to the reader's understanding of the Federalists. The second essay, Andrew Siegel's "'Steady Habits' Under Siege: The Defense of Federalism in Jeffersonian Connecticut," although more focused, is at odds with the overarching claims of this collection that the Federalists were, at minimum, pulled in liberal directions. In particular, the author's tired insistence on the classical republicanism of the Federalists lacks convincing evidence. His best is that Federalists held that the public good should be served. Not only did the putatively liberal Jeffersonians similarly claim as much, but so did most liberal Democrats of the 1950s! His discussion of the conservatism of the Federalists also cuts against the central line of argument developed in these essays and shows little understanding of conservatism as a political concept or of its history. And how one can write about Connecticut Federalists without taking into account the wrenching changes occurring in their religious foundations is hard to understand; yet, he did.

Finally, the third essay of this section, Alan Taylor's "From Fathers to Friends of the People: Political Personae in the Early Republic," explores the rise to wealth and political influence of four Northern men, most particularly General Henry Knox and William Cooper. Their stories make for fascinating reading, but the connection between their histories of land fraud and political manipulation seem at best tangentially related to Knox and Cooper having been Federalists. Indeed, this chapter has been previously published and seems as though it has been reworked to serve as an entry in this book, but without making it fully congruent with it. Accordingly, this chapter adds little to the reader's understanding of Federalist politics, but a great deal to their understanding of the rise to power of the *nouveau riche* in the post Revolutionary world. Taylor's efforts to paint men like Knox and Cooper as part of the older world of gentility is unpersuasive in that they seem distant from that world of refinement and much nearer to their fellow Republican upstarts. Accordingly,

the particular political party these men chose seems more a matter of convenience and circumstance than principled difference, and indeed, this is exactly what Taylor himself describes of Jedidiah Peck and Ezekiel Dodge (pp. 239 and 242-3). In short, the essays of the third section, even when well written as they mostly are, add little to this volume's goal of leading the reader to a critical reassessment of the Federalists and their politics and economics and, thus, are of questionable value.

James M. Banner Jr., in his illuminating afterword, suggests that "a continuing barrier to our fuller understanding of early national political culture has been the assumption, shared by almost all historians, that liberalism lodged only among the Jeffersonians ... [yet] many non-Hamiltonian Federalists held distinctly liberal, or at least protoliberal, ideas and behaved from time to time in recognizably liberal ways" (p. 251). With this challenge, then, it may be time, as the editors of this volume urge, to reconsider how best to categorize the Federalists. And after considering the evidence presented in these essays, it seems almost certain that in opposition to current conceptions, the Federalists were at least as liberal as they were conservative. When one adds to this their hostility to increased democratization, this places them, not surprisingly, in the tradition of New England Unitarians and their earlier opposition to the Great Awakening and their strong support of a liberal, but elitist, theology. This pattern of liberal sensibilities standing in opposition to democratic ones is even reminiscent of certain strains of Loyalist thought. And, if this is so, it would have been valuable for many of these authors to have distinguished and disaggregated the liberal (nationalist, elitist, more universalist and less racist and sexist, but nativist, and capitalist) and the democratic (localist, more populist, and racist and sexist, but less capitalistic) elements in early national American political thought. Recognition of the distinct analytical features of liberalism and democracy, and the different forces in

American history that have supported one or the other, but rarely both, is something that American historians (and political scientists) do with difficulty. Yet, with Alan Heimert's troubles still memorable, it is a distinction that they should aspire to become more competent in handling.

Also deserving consideration is this volume's too limited range of coverage. Although much that one might expect is covered, there remain gaping holes in its treatment of the politics and political culture of the Federalists. For example, there is absolutely no discussion of the changing religiosity of early national America. Religion, in fact, is never explored in this collection. Equally absent (apart from Banner's perceptive afterword) is any discussion of the relationship of the Federalists and Republicans to their respective pasts as either Federalists or Anti-Federalists. Who had been on what side and how, if at all, this shaped their politics is not considered. Although these are only two of the many subjects left wholly untouched by this volume, surely they are among its most glaring oversights.

In sum, this is a collection of essays that helps bring to light an important deficit in the historiography of the American early national and antebellum periods. Although, as I have suggested above, it has considerable deficits, its strengths outweigh them, and thus this collection deserves the attention of students of the period. Most importantly, this is because the collective strength of these essays should compel readers to reconsider their understanding of the Federalists as blindly reactionary in their political and economic thought. One should not come away from these essays continuing to subscribe to this too long held position. In spite of its difficulties, then, this volume begins the process of a full-scale reconsideration of the Federalists. And, for this, the editors and authors deserve our thanks.

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