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Jerome Huyler. *Locke in America: The Moral Philosophy of the Founding Era.* Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1995. xii + 394 pp. $40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7006-0642-9.

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Looking for Locke

Historical scholarship on the American founding era has come a long way since Carl Becker declared that, by 1776, "most Americans had absorbed Locke's works as a kind of political gospel."[1] In the fifty years following Becker's statement, most historians and political scientists described liberal origins of American society and portrayed Americans as either directly following Locke's teaching or unconsciously emulating his principles.[2] In the late 1960s and early 1970s, however, scholars such as Bernard Bailyn, Gordon Wood, and J. G. A. Pocock elaborated a new view of the American revolutionary era that stressed harmony with British opposition Whig writings and classical conceptions of virtue.[3] In short, these "republican" theorists located a strong communitarian ethos in early American society that contrasted sharply with the previous picture of atomistic liberalism. Over the past decade, however, critics of republican scholarship have strengthened their attack and have tried to reassert the primacy of liberalism, or, increasingly, find some way to reconcile the two (supposedly opposite) streams of thought.[4]

In *Locke in America*, part of a series on "American Political Thought" edited by Wilson Carey McWilliams and Lance Banning, Jerome Huyler plunges headfirst into this scholarly debate on the character of early American society. Incorporating a wealth of historiographic detail into his study, Huyler takes issue not only with the "republican" interpreters of history, but also with the supporters of a liberal reading of revolutionary America and an impressive array of Locke scholars. Huyler argues that a proper understanding of Locke's philosophy will show that the "patriots of the Revolution, the Framers of the Constitution, the Federalists and anti-Federalists alike, and the Jeffersonian republicans in the Federalist era were most deeply committed to … the social and political principles nowhere more clearly enunciated than in the writings of John Locke" (p. x). Echoing political scientist Stephen Dworetz, Huyler claims that historians enamored with republicanism peremptorily dismissed Locke from the founding era because they based their impressions of the philosopher on the mistaken perception that he was the "possessive individualist" that C. B. Macpherson posited.[5] According to Huyler, reading Locke through a lens tinged with Macpherson's Marxist analysis of capitalism will inevitably distort Locke's true principles. Having dispensed with earlier scholars' "conceptual baggage," Huyler declares that "it is time … to discard altogether the essentially misleading Lockean/republican dichotomy" and replace it with a new view in which the republican "science of politics" stands as a corollary to Lockean fundamentals (pp. xi, 39).

In the first half of the work, Huyler sympathetically portrays Locke as a philosopher with a "comprehensive worldview" as complete and consistent as Marx's (pp. 32-33). Making strong use of Locke's writings and the historical context in which he lived, Huyler traces Locke's development of an ethical system that held reason and industry as the paramount virtues. Using the shared goal of reason to link Locke with the English latitudinarian Anglicans, Huyler envisions Locke's political thought as emanating from his epistemological theory. Huyler thus claims that "the categories of legitimate economic activity proceed from and depend on a more basic category: an elusive *moral* category" (p. 107). That morality stemmed from men's "equal creation" in God's universe. Furthermore, Huyler identifies a strong social ethic in Lockeanism. Huyler uses Locke's writings supporting charitable giving to show that Locke had a strong sense of social responsibility rooted in his belief in equal protection. Despite this concern for the poor, however, Locke opposed any form of social welfare that led to government-sanctioned redistribution of wealth, on the grounds that it would violate the "equal protection" to which all men were entitled. Having established these precepts, Huyler characterizes Locke as neither a social democrat nor a rapacious, profit-obsessed opportunist.

"What Locke presents," Huyler argues, "is a theory of capitalism rooted not in class exploitation, but in certain intractable moral and metaphysical postulates that forbid the practice of political exploitation" (p. 164).

Armed with what he describes as a "civic humanist" picture of Locke, Huyler attempts to prove that the "Lockean fundamentals" examined in the first half of the book characterized early American society. To do so, Huyler first assays American colonial life, describing an environment of freedom and tolerance in which British colonists "were living the Lockean Enlightenment as a matter of daily experience" (p. 208). Huyler then moves to the ideology of the American Revolution, arguing that *Cato's Letters*, an important source to scholars who champion republicanism, fully comported with Locke's essential ideas. Citing a commitment to rationalism, a critique of factionalism, and an assault on corruption, Huyler asserts that the Americans of 1776 pursued a "Lockean conception of independence" (p. 246). Moving on through the "critical period" to 1787, Huyler portrays the fight over the Constitution as an essentially mechanical contest over how best to protect liberty, a debate in which all participants shared a "continuity of commitment to John Locke's liberal politics and, in particular, to the precepts of 'equal creation' and 'equal protection"' (p. 252). Huyler concludes by showing an early republic dominated by Hamiltonian fiscal policies, which, by favoring some groups at the expense of others, repudiated the Lockean commitment to ensure the equal protection due all citizens.

Huyler's book benefits from the author's strong sense of purpose and his ability to keep his work tightly focused on the issues he wishes to explore. For example, Huyler forgos the question of Locke's direct influence on American thought in favor of an investigation into the Lockean character of early American society. He acknowledges that some readers, particularly historians, will be disappointed with his decision, but he realizes that the discussion of influence could bog down his work in another fiercely contested academic debate. Instead, Huyler sketches a provocative interpretation of Locke's philosophy and then applies this model to the American scene. Huyler's methodical, well-argued account of British and American politics compares favorably with many other works of this genre that fail to tie their theoretical arguments to the actual historical events of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Finally, Huyler deftly integrates the conclusions of dozens of scholars into his argument without reducing his book to a historiographic exercise. Huyler's ability to keep his narrative relatively free of what he terms "high-brow name-calling" helps return civility to a debate that has often degenerated into hyperbole and vilification (p. 148).[6]

Despite the book's many strengths, *Locke in America* suffers greatly from its presentation of the "rosy scenario" of the American founding era. Huyler consistently overstates the freedom and religious tolerance of early American society and minimizes the elements of life that were anything but free. In focusing on the question of the Lockean character of American society, Huyler has placed on himself the burden of faithfully recreating that society. For this reason, the failure to come to grips with slavery points to a serious deficiency in his account. Although Huyler notes that some (particularly slaves and Indians) failed to share in America's freedoms, he does not adequately confront the fact that the presence of enslaved peoples squarely contradicts the Lockean society he wishes to portray. Edmund Morgan's assertion in *American Slavery, American Freedom* that the freedom of white Virginia society directly rested on its slave system, for example, should be addressed by Huyler.[7] By burying one of his few mentions of slavery in a paragraph on primogeniture and entail, and then asserting that slavery's opponents used "Lockean tones" to condemn the institution, Huyler attempts to distance his thesis from the unsettling elements of American society while still giving Locke credit for any criticism they engendered (p. 178).

Another related problem concerns the representativeness of the sources Huyler chooses to examine. For instance, the excessive attention he devotes to the liberal attitudes of such figures as Roger Williams and William Penn obscures their anomalousness in colonial society. Similarly, Huyler pays scant attention to the South, concentrating instead on areas such as the diverse middle colonies, which better support his argument for a liberal America. Different types of sources would help as well. Huyler's source base, composed mainly of philosophic treatises, religious sermons, and political tracts, cannot by themselves provide a fully comprehensive view of American society. A better investigation into the social history of the period could have complemented Huyler's broad knowledge of intellectual history and political theory and would have greatly benefited this study. Huyler should, at least, acknowledge that the sources he uses better capture the elites of American society than they do the society as a whole.

Huyler's framing of the issues he examines also creates problems with his narrative. Huyler's invocation that "[c]onfidence in reason's power as both a cognitive and motivational mechanism and hence confidence

in the individual's capacity for self-government are two of the most salient features of the American worldview at the time of the imperial crisis" shows his tendency to define issues in terms of epistemology, thereby relegating social, political, or economic conflicts to a subsidiary role (p. 198). Furthermore, Huyler uses Americans' acceptance of basic social contractarian and Enlightenment principles to prove that American revolutionary society conformed to Lockean ideas. Though in keeping with Huyler's goal to explore fundamentals such as the centrality of reason, this approach threatens to render Huyler's argument too general to further significantly our understanding of early America.

Finally, Huyler's attempt to prove his broader arguments sometimes leads him to questionable historical conclusions. Huyler's otherwise compelling reading of the Washington administration's fiscal policy goes astray when, in an attempt to show discontinuity with Lockean principles, Huyler asserts that the nation's institution of a protective tariff "signifies a momentous shift not only in public policy, but in America's basic philosophy" (p. 281). In failing to note that the Confederation government's inability to enact such a tariff, in the form of the impost, greatly influenced the calls for stronger government that culminated in the Constitution, Huyler exaggerates the shift in American economic thinking.

Despite such limitations, Huyler's book is a unique and challenging work that attempts to resolve several major scholarly issues. Huyler aims at no less than a full-scale reappraisal of Locke, a reconceptualization of the liberal/republican debate, and a new interpretative slant on early American history. His interpretation of Locke, particularly his claims for the comprehensiveness of the philosopher's work, will no doubt occasion further response. Although not always successful, Huyler should be recognized for creating a provocative, often compelling, book that will aid scholarly inquiry into the many issues he has examined. *Locke in America* will not end the debate over the character of the American founding era, but it makes a worthy addition to the conversation.

Notes

[1] Carl L. Becker, *The Declaration of Independence: A Study in the History of Political Ideas* (1922; reprint, New York: Vintage Books, 1942), p. 27.

[2] For the most influential exposition of the latter approach, see Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America: An Interpretation of American Political Thought since the Revolution* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1955).

[3] Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1967); J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1975); Gordon S. Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1969).

[4] The progress of republican scholarship can be best traced through three articles: Robert E. Shalhope, "Toward a Republican Synthesis: The Emergence of an Understanding of Republicanism in American Historiography," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 29 (1972): 49-80; Shalhope, "Republican and Early American Historiography," ibid., 39 (1982): 334-56; and Daniel T. Rodgers, "Republicanism: The Career of a Concept," *Journal of American History* 79 (1992): 11-38. Some important studies that have challenged or modified conceptions of republicanism include: John Patrick Diggins, *The Lost Soul of American Politics: Virtue, Self-Interest, and the Foundations of Liberalism* (New York: Basic Books, 1984); Joyce Appleby, *Capitalism and a New Social Order: The Republican Vision of the 1790s* (New York: New York University Press, 1984); Lance Banning, "Jeffersonian Ideology Revisited: Liberal and Classical Ideas in the New American Republic," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 43 (1986): 3-19; Isaac Kramnick, "The 'Great National Discussion': The Discourse of Politics in 1787," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 45 (1988): 3-32; Thomas Pangle, *The Spirit of Modern Republicanism: The Moral Vision of the American Founders and the Philosophy of Locke* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1988); Stephen M. Dworetz, *The Unvarnished Doctrine: Locke, Liberalism, and the American Revolution* (Durham, N. C.: Duke University Press, 1990); Paul A. Rahe, *Republics Ancient and Modern: Classical Republicanism and the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992); Michael P. Zuckert, *Natural Rights and the New Republicanism* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994); Lance Banning, *The Sacred Fire of Liberty: James Madison and the Founding of the Federal Republic* (Ithaca, N. Y.: Cornell University Press, 1995).

[5] C. B. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962).

[6] Dworetz, *The Unvarnished Doctrine*, p. 38, for instance, warns that scholars of republicanism are unwittingly giving support to contemporary liberalism's enemies. Dworetz writes, ". . . by now even the most insulated citizen of the ivory tower must realize that

historians and political theorists are not the only people who have been bashing liberalism in recent years. Liberalism also has *political* enemies. Some are highly placed; others are organized, well-heeled, and connected; many are enthusiastically committed to purging the liberal spirit from American society–whether or not they realize that by saving the republic from liberalism, they would ultimately destroy it. By unhistorically purging Lockean liberalism from the founding doctrine and exaggerating the historical significance of civic republicanism, the most principled scholars may inadvertently have helped to prepare the way for the current political assault."

[7] Edmund S. Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1975).

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