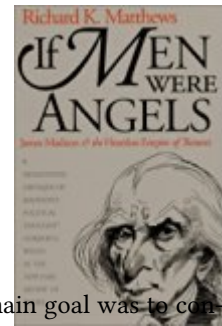


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Richard K. Matthews. *If Men Were Angels: James Madison & the Heartless Empire of Reason*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1994. v + 297 pp. \$25.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7006-0643-6.

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*If Men Were Angels* is an examination of the political theory of James Madison authored by Richard K. Matthews. As the jacket notes, it is the “second volume in his revisionist trilogy on the Founding that began with *The Radical Politics of Thomas Jefferson* and that will conclude with *Alexander Hamilton and the Creation of the Heroic State*.”

The purpose of the book is twofold. First, it “tries to construct the complete political theory of James Madison” (p. xvii). Second, it “provides a critical analysis of Madisonian politics” (p. xvii). To accomplish this daunting task, Matthews read and studied both the public writings of Madison and his private papers and correspondence. Recalling that Madison never wrote a systemic treatise laying out his political theory (or theories as it may be) and realizing that Madison’s writings fill over twenty volumes one can not help but feel admiration for Matthews’ Herculean effort. But Matthews work doesn’t stop with an examination of original source material. He also demonstrates outstanding familiarity with scholarly works which addressed the life and thought of James Madison. From Douglass Adair’s essays on Madison and the Scottish Enlightenment to Gordon Wood’s many works on the founding, he should be lauded for having read a wealth of relevant secondary sources.

Returning to the book’s first purpose (to construct the complete political theory of James Madison): it is Matthews’ conclusion that Madison was not “an inconsistent liberal” (pace Marvin Meyers), a “liberal democrat” (pace John Zvesper), a “civic humanist” (pace J.G.A. Pocock et al.), nor an “ideologue in search of an ideology” (pace Forrest McDonald. Rather, says Matthews, Madison is a “Constant liberal prince,” a thinker who did not allow himself to slip into abstract speculations but an

eighteenth-century liberal whose main goal was to construct a stable polity.

Madison’s thoughts on politics are framed by six interrelated postulates.

1. “Madison had little faith in either the demos or virtue. Mechanical government regulations and automatic social counterpressures established political and social stability; as Galileo and Newton had discovered certain laws of the universe that maintained its balance and equilibrium, political theorists ... had discovered analogous social laws that could be implemented to create balance and stability out of the disorder and anarchy of human behavior” (p. 22).

2. “The protection of individuals-especially their property and other rights-was one of the cardinal values in Madison’s politics...It was property rights, above all others, that must be secured” (p. 22).

3. “Although the unmolested individual was a goal of Madison’s politics, the individual as political actor should be of minor import if the Madisonian system functioned as designed. Individuals, while timid and reasonable when alone, join other individuals and form factions. Madison’s primary political concern centered on the maintenance of social stability by the political and social control of factions ...” (p.22)

4. “If Madison worshipped a deity, it would be reason-not the substantive Reason of philosophers as diverse as Plato, Hegel, and Marcuse, but the instrumental reason of the modern age” (p. 22).

5. “The individual and collective tendencies toward the irrational were so multifaceted and powerful that all segments of the political system needed an appropriate

degree of defensive power for self protection” (p. 23).

6. Rather than offering a six postulate, Matthews instead gives readers Madison’s place in the political spectrum; and that place is “within the predemocratic portion of the liberal tradition, somewhere between Thomas Hobbes and John Locke” (p. 23).

The author’s second purpose, “to provide a critical analysis of Madisonian politics,” offers a Sheldon Wolin/C.B. MacPherson type critique of Madison; namely that his liberal politics are based on fear and mistrust, that Madison’s system offers little to those who are not rich, and (echoing Norman Jacobson and H. Mark Roelofs) that Madisonian government is a “genuine tragedy” because it has created an “iron cage” society (p. 233).

As a superior standard of political thought, Matthews points to Madison’s long term friend, Thomas Jefferson. Unlike Madison, Jefferson held a much more optimistic view of man’s possible and desirable political and social association. Instead of the “Heartless Empire of Reason,” Jeffersonian politics envisioned a society in which liberty was held in higher esteem than stability, one in which man could experience social equality and community. In sum, Jeffersonian society would be like Rousseau’s ideal society- a place which Mr. Matthews considers clearly superior to the Madisonian or Hobbesian “iron cage of humanity of modern humanity” (p. 233).

When judging a text of this sort a reviewer must first ask whether the author succeeded at his own goals and whether these goals themselves are sensible. To make a long story short: yes the goals were sensible, but no he did not achieve them.

To speak to the latter: clearly a reconstruction of Madison’s political theory is a worthy undertaking. As Matthews rightly notes, few scholars have attempted to make sense of the thought of this towering figure in American history. Also, since Madison’s thought has so greatly shaped American democratic thought and institutions, in our own self interest Americans ought to question whether or not what we hold dear and how we as a society function are the best. One need not be a bomb thrower or an infidel to ask of America, “Is this the most desirable model of democracy or can we turn our eyes higher?”

Recall that *If Men Were Angels* has two goals—to construct the political thought of Madison and to critique it. Now clearly the second goal cannot be achieved if the

first is not—for how can one critique something if one has not accurately understood it? Sure, by explicating Jeffersonian politics (though only briefly, for a much longer treatment one must turn to his first text, *The Radical Politics of Thomas Jefferson*) he showed us an unfamiliar view of the good society. But by failing to give us an accurate portrait of Madison the author leaves us groping blindly at an attempt at comparison.

Matthews’ portrait of Madison strikes me as incomplete for three reasons. First, it did not use enough biographical information and non-political, non-economic, and non-scientific writings as source material. It seems that Madison’s political theory is drawn only from his writings on politics, economics, and scientific matters. This leaves us with little feel for Madison’s thought as a whole, let alone Madison the man. By mostly neglecting biography, abstracting a portion of his thought, and then closely analyzing it exclusively we are left with a caricature of Madison as a cold hearted, nervous, Hobbes-like man; one who while appearing to be “of sweet and amiable disposition” but was in fact a cold, calculating, paranoid hypochondriac (pp. 5-8).

Such a way of treating Madison leaves a reader with many questions, such as: “Did Madison write love letters to his wife?” and “Was any of his personal correspondence casual and something other than an attempt to persuade its recipients of the proper political order or the best methods of crop production?” Mr. Matthews’ text leaves us with no clue as to whether Madison ever thought and wrote upon something other than politics, economics, and science, like love, friendship, and the good life.

This leads in to a related problem. Matthews defines a political theorist as an individual “with relatively consistent and coherent views of humanity, history, politics, and the meaning of life” (p. 236). Very well. So what has Madison to say about the meaning of life? Nothing if we are to believe Matthews. And what are his thoughts on humanity? Well, Matthews shows that Madison wrote much on man in relation to the problem of creating and sustaining a polity. But what of humanity in itself? What has Madison to say about man’s relation to death? To eternity? To the opposite sex and his fellow man? Matthews is right when he states that Madison believed that man is no angel- but did Madison (like Hobbes) believe that man was solely an ego-driven beast, motivated only by desire for power and fear of death, living solely for the sake of self satiation and species propagation? These critical questions being unanswered, it would seem impossible to credit Matthews with success-

fully constructing Madison's political theory. Unless, of course, we want to take the wild position that either Madison did not think on these matters or that his political thought is somehow divorced from all thoughts on cosmology, ontology, theodicy, etc.

As a minor but important aside, Matthews seems to commit a related methodological error when he takes the political writings which center mostly on national politics (though some referred to state politics) and by extrapolation applies them to politics at all levels. More concretely, yes, Madison did want to minimize the role of the demos in national politics-but what of their role at the state, county/parish, and local level? Were citizens to act only as voters and "self interested watchdogs over their personal rights"? (pp. 217-18)

The third problem once again relates to his uses of original sources. In a text which requires an extensive use of original documents, the reader must trust that the author is not only using them honestly (i.e. not dipping in and snatching quotes which support his particular thesis) but also that the author is drawing conclusions from particular sources within their context. Let me speak to the latter.

In Chapter Six, "Madisonian Government," a significant portion covers Madison's stance on slavery. The author notes that Madison "abhorred the institution of slavery" (p. 205). Yet just two pages later, Matthews pillories Madison's way of dealing with slavery, concluding that when the chips came down, Madison held more dearly property in humans than personal rights. This conclusion he bases upon a public speech Madison delivered to the Virginia Constitutional Convention of 1829.

In this speech Madison, always a practical politician, urges the audience which consisted of slave owners and bigots to abolish the institution of slavery. However, realizing that there is no way Southerners will give up the economic capital they had in slaves, he urges that all slave owners be reimbursed. Sure, you compromise principal by paying slave owners to free their slaves, but you end slavery at minimal cost. No fighting, no hard feelings. So

how can Matthews blast Madison, treating this cleverly crafted piece of politicking as though it were a manifestation of Madison's true morals? Perhaps it was just an erroneously drawn conclusion. Or perhaps it was a case of an author's personal politics clouding his judgement.

And so we are led to the problem mentioned four paragraphs above, that of trusting an author with original sources. *If Men Were Angels* is anything but a calm and detached piece of scholarship. There are occasional complements to Madison, but most of the text is a no holds barred assault on what Matthews characterizes as Madison's political theory.

Indeed, one look at the title lets a reader know the treatment of Madison will be anything but sympathetic: *If Men Were Angels: James Madison and the Heartless Empire of Reason*. Heartless? Did Madison ever say that he wanted to fashion a heartless empire of reason? An empire of reason at the national level but at all levels and throughout society? Would not this entail the impossible project of making all men wise and unfeeling?

And what can be said of Matthews' respect for Madison's thought when he spends 233 pages attempting to explicate it and then in 30 pages he demolishes it, coming to the astonishing conclusion that not only did Madison make America what it is today (p. 279), but also that Madisonian politics have "produced a fragmented society with no hope of fraternity, equality, or community" and which is a "genuine tragedy" (p. 233)?

The question which we confront as readers is this: which came first, the research or the conclusion? Honest research is research which has hunches but no convictions. Honest research involves looking at all relevant original sources and then doing one's best to draw an accurate conclusion. Politicized research, the type that Michael Parenti (one of Matthews' secondary sources) has made a career at involves treating your scholarship, in the words of a current resident of a Big Ten university, "as an extension of one's politics". Is Matthews guilty of putting politics before scholarship and purposeful mischaracterization of Madison's thought?

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