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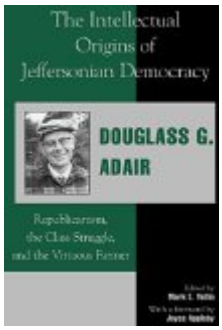

Douglass G. Adair. *The Intellectual Origins of Jeffersonian Democracy: Republicanism, the Class Struggle, and the Virtuous Farmer.* New York and Oxford: Lexington Books, 2000. xxvi + 185 pp. $27.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-7391-0125-4.

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Republican? Certainly! But What Kind?: Evaluating Adair's American Founding

Douglass Adair completed this essay, his dissertation, in 1943. Thanks to Mark Yellin's efforts as editor, *The Intellectual Origins of Jeffersonian Democracy*, "one of the most influential dissertations on the history of the American Founding and political thought," is now readily available to scholars (p. xiii). In this work, Adair attempted to bind together the theoretical beliefs of America's leading Founders with their practical recommendations for constitutional government. He tried to explain how the political theory of the Founding influenced the political science of the Founding. His effort was quite successful, and even more influential.

If the only criterion for review was the book's own place in intellectual history, Adair would have to receive three cheers. As Yellin notes, the dissertation "quickly gained notoriety, with a list of borrowers that resembled 'a who's who in early American history'" (p. xiii). In part, this fame stemmed from Adair's pathbreaking approach to his subject. As the title suggests, he consciously broke from the economic determinism of Charles Beard, best captured in the title of Beard's 1915 study, *The Economic Origins of Jeffersonian Democracy*. Yellin explains that Adair "meant to challenge the Beardian paradigm by arguing for the importance of ideas and beliefs in shaping the ways the Founders saw the world and made sense of their experience. In doing so, he explicitly rejected the notion that the Founders' framing of the Constitution was reducible to simple economic interest" (p. xiv). Thanks to this pioneering work, the stage was set for a generation of scholars who, rejecting the Beardian method, offered a much more detailed portrait of the Founding.

So we are appreciative. Yet, one must also ask whether Adair's study helps today's scholar to better understand the American Founding. Yellin correctly states that "in drawing connections between the Scottish Enlightenment and the Founding, and in setting the terms of the debate over the relative roles of republicanism and liberalism" (p. xiii), Adair's influence was considerable. Adair's findings on these subjects commanded wide influ-

ence, but even Yellin seems to acknowledge that the conclusions might be somewhat mistaken.

Again, the purpose of Adair's study was to uncover the political philosophy of the Founding and to explain the American Constitution in light of that theory. While Adair might have recognized divergent philosophic traditions in America, he finally believed that the principal debate at the Founding was a close cousin to the ancient conflict of regime types. With his focus on classical political philosophy and on an ancient republicanism dominated by competing claims to rule, Adair overlooked the modern quality of the Founders' republicanism. Furthermore, the dominance of ancient categories in his presentation was apparently encouraged by a genuine misreading of the Virginia Plan at the Constitutional Convention. That error led him to overemphasize David Hume's influence on James Madison's thought.

To be sure, Adair's errors were not total. He was absolutely correct to note the centrality of republican concerns to the American Founders. Likewise, one cannot read Hume's discussion of faction without concluding that it impacted Madison's thinking. Yet Adair failed to understand a critical aspect of American republicanism. In short, had he recognized the federal concerns that dominated the Constitutional Convention and their relation to the Founders' commitment to a certain type of republicanism, he might have seen that the division of the legislature and the separation of powers was something other than a manifestation of a compromise between the many and the few. And with the concern over faction, one that led Adair to look to Hume, superseded, he might have devoted more attention to Montesquieu's influence on American constitutionalism.

Yellin initially soft-pedals Adair's focus on ancient republican influences, claiming that he did recognize some differences between the republics of the Americans and those of the ancients. Yellin writes, "it is possible to read Adair as presenting two different types of republicanism" (p. xviii). He claims that in Adair one finds the source of the "Republican Synthesis," which "does not offer a dichotomy of republicanism (or civic humanism) versus liberalism, or Locke versus Machiavelli." Adair emphasized instead the "complementary aspects of those traditions that come together in the Founding generation" (p. xv). Yellin maintains that contemporary scholars "would be well served" to reconsider Adair's work, "to find the ways in which these allegedly separate and distinct traditions interpenetrate and complement each other" (p. xvi).

Yet, on reading Adair, one feels that Yellin's presentation of it as a "synthesis" of the tradition is generous, for liberal philosophy is decidedly absent, and both the political science of republicanism and the political theory of Aristotle are dominant. With his concluding statement, even Yellin acknowledges that his earlier description of Adair as a moderate in the liberal/republican debate was kind. His analysis of Adair-inspired scholarship concludes with Paul Rahe's ***Republics Ancient and Modern***, which "rejects the notion of continuity between ancient and modern republicanism" and argues for a "sharp discontinuity between them" (p. xx). In Yellin's estimation, Rahe presents a serious challenge to Adair, who failed to "draw a sharp theoretical distinction" between ancient and modern republicanism (p. xx).

This initial misappraisal of the political philosophy of the American Founding encouraged Adair to exaggerate the philosophic differences between the Founders and subsequently to mischaracterize the operation of their political science. The extent of Adair's failings surfaces in his sixth chapter, "The Extended Republic" (pp. 109-52), which explains the practical application of the Founders' competing theories. There the Hamiltonian aristocracy outlined in Chapter 5 and the Jeffersonian democracy of Chapters 2-4 collide at the Constitutional Convention. The re-

sulting compromise of principle required some theoretical justification. Madison's ***Federalist*** 10 provides it. Ultimately, Adair's analysis relies on an interpretation of Madison's Virginia Plan that is simply wrong on one critical point. That error works both forward and backward, causing Adair to misread both the American mind prior to 1787 and the philosophic source of Madison's theory.

Contrary to Adair's findings, for the Founders the question was not which group would rule, but how the rights of all could be protected when republicanism, the only solution available seemed to fail. The Americans believed that only republican government could reliably secure natural rights, and that only republican government adequately reflected the natural freedom of the individual citizen. This initial position led to further problems and inquiries. Because republics are necessarily small, America needed to federate in order to protect itself from external threats. America's federal character created numerous difficulties, however. Most immediately, the principle of state sovereignty made federations susceptible to internal disintegration, and they could not reliably provide government energetic enough to secure it from even the machinations of its own members, much less from outside threats. Even more troubling, by 1787 it was becoming clear that republican government alone was not adequately securing justice within the states themselves.

The mixed regime is a political fix for a society in which there are competing claims to rule. In America, as represented by Jefferson and Hamilton, there was no competition. For them and almost every Founder, the proper source of power was the people alone, not some particular class. Thus, the fix required by America was specifically related to its federal character, and those issues dominated the debate at the Convention.

Adair concluded, however, that the Constitution was a compromise between aristocrats and democrats. According to him, "the separation of the Senate and the House which had always been the traditional guard of liberty, also served after a little thought to satisfy those of the Fathers who were so torn between the respective merits of the few and the many. Archaic elements lifted from the ancient 'mixed governments' were woven into the very structure of the new state" (pp. 118-19). Thus, the new Constitution, a "bundle of compromises," represented a theoretical truce between those promoting different classes within the regime (p. 119), and the compromise was made possible by a flexible Virginia Plan and the creative theorizing of its author, James Madison.

Yet the Virginia Plan was hardly the "malleable," compromise-ready, draft Adair suggested (p. 118). Its driving focus was the creation of a new national government that would deprive the states of agency in its new institutions. The government of the Articles had been crippled through the constitutionalizing of the principle of state sovereignty. Its Congress was emasculated by the states through the selection of representatives, the requirement of unanimity, the power to recall representatives, and a lack of enforcement power over the represented bodies. To remedy this immediate problem, one derivative of America's federal character, Madison devised a scheme that would maintain the states, while creating a new government that derived its power exclusively from the people. Every actor in that new government would gain office either directly or indirectly from the people.

Adair claimed erroneously, however, that the Senate of the Virginia Plan would be chosen by the state legislatures (p. 111). In fact, Madison's principal goal was the creation of a new national government in which the institutions would be derived exclusively from a people unmediated by the state governments. The Great Compromise of July is better understood then not as a "compromise" between different regime types, but as a setback for those whose principal aim was the re-

moval of the states from the national government's institutions.

With that in mind, one finds that Adair's antagonists are, if not on the same line, at least on the same page. His assessment of the Founding as a debate between opposed class claims is thus undermined. Hamilton's distrust of the people surely ran deeper than Madison's and Jefferson's. He wanted to insulate the Senate and Presidency from popular opinion. Yet, for all of his fear of the hoi polloi (p. 114), Hamilton never suggested that officers of the national government should be chosen by any other than the people or their immediate national representatives. For him, the ultimate source of national power was never anything but the "demos" (p. 115).

The greatest differences then between Hamilton and the Virginians were at the practical rather than the theoretical level. While Jefferson and Madison, in spite of the failures of the federal system, hoped to maintain the states and limit the power of the national government through separated powers, Hamilton sought to eliminate the states while unifying power at the national level. In short, the central conflict between the Jeffersonian Democrats and the Hamiltonian Federalists was not over the relative merits of social classes, but in their approach to the pre-existing states and to the character of the reformed national authority. There was a serious division at the Founding, but Adair did not fully identify it. The Founders were primarily divided on the response to a problem caused by America's federal character.

By overlooking this critical aspect of the debate, Adair not only overstated the classical elements of the American Founding, but he also improperly identified the chief philosophical sources of Madison's thought. Adair thought that Madison furnished a "theory" required by the Convention to "justify" its compromises (p. 119). According to him, that theory is articulated in *Federalist* 10. While the essay undoubtedly provides insights into Madison's thought, Adair's analysis of it is questionable. He concludes that it is largely Humean in origin, but while it is more than likely that Madison's focus on the need to circumvent faction owed much to David Hume, it is equally clear that his solutions were suggested by Montesquieu.

Adair correctly assumed that Madison's essay was his "most original contribution to political theory" (p. 120), but he was wrong to conclude that the theory was "noteworthy" for its attempt "to devise a new formula which could be substituted for the weighty authority of the mixed monarchy theorists" (p. 124). Adair argued that Madison simply made the aristocratic attempt to protect the property rights of the few politically palatable with his discovery that society is "pluralistic, not dualistic" (p. 121). In other words, divisions between the rich and the poor would not generate attacks against the rich because the poor were divided among themselves. With this insight, Madison saw the "possibility of establishing a commonwealth where the functional checks and balances in the very body of society itself" would protect the few from the many (p. 123).

In Adair's view, *Federalist* 10 explains how a single polity can overcome faction through the promotion of a middling class that is itself divided, and he turned to David Hume's "Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth" as the source of Madison's insight. There Hume argues for the possibility of free government on a large scale in which faction is overcome. Hume's concerns do resonate with the interpretation of *Federalist* 10 assumed by Adair. That interpretation is lacking, however.

As argued earlier, Adair failed to see that Madison's principal concerns were federal: how to create an energetic national power through a federation of small states; and how to secure justice in the states without overwhelming them. Madison's solution came in two parts. First, he would emancipate the national government from the states. Second, he would permit the national

government to intervene in the states through a national veto over state law that would help to promote justice in the small state republics. ***Federalist*** 10 is best understood as an expression of that theory, but it does not provide much insight into the Constitution, as the Convention rejected both of Madison's proposals. The Constitution gave the states a power over the national government through the election of Senators, while depriving the national government of any hold on the states themselves by rejecting Madison's proposal for a negative over state laws.

Thus, the political science of ***Federalist*** 10 does not provide a complete answer to the question it poses. If one reads the essay without a full appreciation of Madison's political science, it is easy to forget that the problem identified by Madison at the outset of the essay is not actually solved by the Constitution. Madison explains that the state republics failed to secure justice for their citizens. How then will justice be secured there? Madison's answer was through a universal negative over state law. Without knowing this, however, one is led to conclude that Madison was a nationalizer like Hamilton, and that his principal concern in ***Federalist*** 10 was the overcoming of faction in a large, unitary republic. Hume offers himself then as the likely source of Madison's political science, for he had no federal concerns. Rather, Hume hoped to establish "a" commonwealth, and to reconcile factions in the mixed government of a unitary British system.

Given Madison's diagnosis of America's constitutional ills as federal in origin, it seems logical to conclude that the primary source of his constitutionalism is Montesquieu, not Hume. Montesquieu not only provided a theory of separated powers that would take root in modified form in the new national government, but he was concerned with precisely the problem Madison identified in the Articles: that of energetic government in a federated republic. Madison did not want to eliminate the states. Yet, how could a federal union be powerful enough to protect against external threat and internal rebellion? Moreover, how could a federal character be maintained while securing the liberties of all? It is likely that Montesquieu, not Hume, was Madison's principal companion as he sought answers to those questions.

Adair's history is admirable, for its explanation of the Founding pays attention to both political theory and political practice, and he rightly saw that the two reinforce one another in the Constitution. Adair's conclusions, however, are somewhat off base. In his account, the debate at the Founding was heavily mortgaged to ancient political theory. The primary antagonists were the Democrat, Jefferson, and the Aristocrat, Hamilton. Their opposed claims were reconciled in a compromise, theoretically justified by Madison. Adair was right to see a conflict at the Founding, but ultimately, it was not a conflict between regime types. Rather, it was between different approaches to America's unique situation as a republican federation committed to natural rights protection.

I am inclined to conclude that Adair's errors arise in part from his underestimation of Madison. Yellin recognizes that for Adair there was "no serious distinction between Jefferson and Madison in terms of political theory" (p. xv). That is accurate, but Adair also seems to think that there is no real difference between the Virginians' in terms of political practice. He assumes that Madison is a Jeffersonian Democrat and that his political science does little but offer a compromise between the advocates of the few and the many. Had Adair recognized the theoretical insights of Madison's political science, especially the advances made by the Founder's analysis of federations, he might have had cause to reconsider his own thesis of class division. He might have placed greater emphasis on the influence of Montesquieu at the Founding. And finally, he might have arrived at a fuller definition of Jeffersonian Democracy.

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