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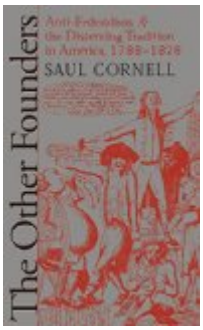

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The Economic Origins of Anti-Federalism?

Although he was writing in the 1790s, William Manning's belief that the federal constitution had created a government "at such a distance from the influence of the common people" that the wealthy "think their interests and influence will always be the greatest sway," seems just as startlingly radical (and relevant) now as it did then. Yet one of the ironies of contemporary American politics is that the "dissenting constitutional discourse" of which Manning's "Key of Liberty" was a part, and which forms the subject matter of Saul Cornell's *The Other Founders*, has never been more hegemonic. Manning's belief that the power of the federal state should be strictly limited and that state governments were intrinsically more democratic and more responsive to the popular will than the national state, would encounter little opposition today amongst American elites, and command broad popular support in a political culture where most citizens (particularly white men) continue to equate liberty with localism.

This anti-government tradition has received a good deal of attention recently, most notably in Gary Wills's *A Necessary Evil*. But where Wills attacks popular hostility to government as reactionary, Cornell's work seeks to rescue the first critics of the federal government, the Anti-Federalists, from the enormous condescension of posterity and to re-establish the intellectual legitimacy of what he calls a tradition of "dissenting public discourse about politics and constitutionalism" (8).

Cornell thus confronts the neo-federalism of writers like Wills with a neo-progressive emphasis on the radicalism of Anti-Federalist ideas that, although he distances himself from their reductive treatment of ideology, echoes the work of earlier writers like Jackson Turner Main and Charles Beard. Unlike Wills, who sees anti-government ideology as the legacy of the American Revolution, Cornell locates the origins of a specifically anti-federalist ideology more precisely in the debates surrounding the ratification of the Constitution. After ratification he argues, Anti-Federalist ideas did not simply fade away but, developed and in-

corporated into the ideology of the Jeffersonian Republican party, became part of a distinctive and powerful counter-tradition of constitutional interpretation that has shaped American political life just as profoundly as the federalism of Alexander Hamilton and John Marshall.

Cornell makes this argument with admirable lucidity, carefully examining the differences between the constitutional ideas of important Republican writers like James Madison, John Taylor, Tunis Wortman, and St. George Tucker. By 1800, he argues, the Republican party was dominated by a "Madisonian synthesis" of constitutional ideas that owed a great deal to Anti-Federalist thinking. At one level his argument is convincing, but it's also familiar. Hostility towards the federal government has been one of the leitmotifs of American politics since the founding period, and at this stage Wills's neo-federalism seems fresher and more iconoclastic than the ideas associated with Cornell's "dissenting tradition."

In fact, I'm not even sure the tradition of anti-federalist constitutionalist interpretation which Cornell identifies is a dissenting tradition at all. This is not to say that anti-federalist ideas aren't progressive or radical, as Wills does, but only to acknowledge the immense influence they've had on American politics (an influence Cornell also wants to establish) and to question his tendency to see them as inherently counter-hegemonic. This is a problem of theory and interpretation to which I'll return below. But the other problem with Cornell's argument is slightly different: its overemphasis on the Anti-Federalist contribution to Republican ideology, or at least of Anti-Federalist ideas about the constitutional arrangements of the American state.

As Cornell demonstrates brilliantly in the first chapters of this book, the politics of hostility to the federal state has always depended as much on context as principle, and has always created strange bedfellows. This insight, and a well developed sense of the rhetorical and political context within which political texts are generated and disseminated, informs the first, and strongest, part of the book. Although Cornell recognizes clearly the common language that unified Anti-Federalists (or at least distinguished them from their Federalist opponents), he's also acutely aware of the heterogeneity and diversity of the Anti-Federalist coalition. Beneath a shared language of dissent, which dwelt primarily on fears of "consolidation" and "aristocracy," he finds significant ideological and social divisions.

Cornell identifies at least three variants of Anti-Federalist ideology: Elite, Popular and Plebeian. The first was the ideology of "cosmopolitan localists," Anti-Federalists of firmly whig principles who opposed the creation of a new national government not because it was anti-democratic but because it threatened the well-established social and political hierarchies upon which their own power and prominence depended. Far from being "men of little faith," these Anti-Federalists were part of a sophisticated political elite who believed that the creation of a more anonymous national public sphere -- mediated by the impersonality of print culture -- would undermine personal deference and thus popular support for a "natural aristocracy."

In contrast, Popular Anti-Federalism, which Cornell identifies with the "middling sorts," was more interested in defending democracy than localism and placed little faith in the disinterested virtue of political elites, relying instead on the creation of genuinely democratic institutions and a free press to ensure that rulers remained responsible to "the great body of the people." Egalitarian and class-conscious in their political rhetoric, but quite often liberal in their political assumptions and "decidedly pro-commercial" in their economic views, middling Anti-Federalists saw the states as democratic bulwarks against the consolidation of elite political power. Lastly, sharing the egalitarianism of their middling allies and the localism of their patrician ones, Cornell identifies a "Ple-

beian" strain of Anti-Federalist ideology that was deeply rooted amongst those "cottagers, tenant farmers, and less affluent mechanics who provided much of the base of grass-roots Anti-Federalist support" (89).

Cornell's refusal to homogenize Anti-Federalist ideas is accompanied by a refusal to reify them, and while his discussion of the divisions within Anti-Federalism is fascinating, just as interesting is the way he links these divisions to what he calls "inchoate class divisions in America" (49). As he shows, Anti-Federalist arguments about the dangers posed by the creation of a strong national state were profoundly ideological in nature, mobilizing class interests as well as beliefs about virtue and self-interest, liberty and license, democracy and aristocracy, consolidation and state sovereignty. And these class divisions within the Anti-Federalist coalition made it highly unstable. Popular Anti-Federalist enthusiasm for a vigorous public sphere, for example, was not shared by either Anti-Federalist elites or plebeian radicals. And the "extreme localism and radical democratic ideas" of "plebeian populists," alienated both elite and middling Anti-Federalists. Indeed, as Cornell makes clear, the rift between middling and plebeian Anti-Federalists, which became apparent during the Carlisle Riot of 1787 and the movement for a second state convention in Pennsylvania in 1788, not only helps to explain the defeat of Anti-Federalism but also how and why it transformed itself so quickly from an anti-constitutional movement into an "effective loyal opposition" (141).

Cornell's approach to ideology, although a little rigid in its identification of class interests and politics, is refreshing and represents not only an advance in our understanding of Anti-Federalism, but an advance in our understanding of political culture in the early republic, a period which has been plagued by rigid (and partisan) readings of political ideology. His ideas about Anti-Federalism complement wonderfully the recent collection of essays edited by Doron Ben-Atar and Barbara Oberg, *Federalists Reconsidered*.

But the promise of the first part of the book goes unrealized when he moves on to the 1790s. In his discussion of the ratification debates, Cornell treats Anti-Federalist arguments as precisely that -- arguments, embodying complex issues of power and interest, which were designed to persuade a range of readers within a well-established political context. But almost imperceptibly his approach shifts. In the first part of the book, Cornell balances sensitive textual interpretation with a desire to relate the complex, contingent meanings of political texts to the social and political realities of post-revolutionary America. By the time he reaches the 1790's however, he has largely abandoned this effort and his discussion of the Anti-Federalist legacy in the 1790's is more and more repetitious and decontextualized. Anti-Federalist arguments that were deeply ideological are stripped of their ideology and presented instead as simple (and well-justified) efforts to combat the "excesses" of Federalism and to create a more democratic constitutional order.

There are some signs of this slippage earlier in the book, especially in his rather conventional treatment of Federalism. Here the homogenization and reification of ideology turns up again with a vengeance. Federalists, he argues, believed in "force" while Anti-Federalists believed in "popular government." Federalists supported a repressive Blackstonian concept of libel law, while Anti-Federalists believed in a free press. This is tired old stuff. His discussion of the persecution of the printer Eleazar Oswald for example, adds little to Leonard Levy's account and completely overlooks the fact that Oswald's nemesis, Justice Thomas McKean, became a Republican in the 1790's. Federalist hostility towards the public sphere is a little difficult to square with their dominance of it until at least the late 1790s.

Moreover, Cornell's approach to Federalism jars with his own account of the ideological differ-

ences within Anti-Federalism. To take just one example, if elite Anti-Federalists could be localist anti-democrats, then why couldn't Federalists be democratic nationalists? Thomas Paine was one. In fact, as Cornell implicitly makes clear, if Anti-Federalism was a heterogeneous coalition of social and ideological interests then it stands to reason Federalism was too. Class and social hierarchy is crucial to an understanding of American politics in the 1780's, but it didn't neatly divide Anti-Federalists from Federalists and neither did a crude understanding of ideology. Many elite Federalists shared the concern of elite Anti-Federalists about the need to preserve a "natural aristocracy," but they didn't speak for all Federalists.

The Democratic Republican coalition that began to crystallize in the early 1790's was, if anything, even more socially and ideologically diverse than the Anti-Federalist coalition of 1787-88. Yet Cornell's interpretation of it becomes increasingly one-dimensional. This partly reflects a change in purpose: having established the character of Anti-Federalism, he now wants to establish its centrality to Democratic Republican ideology in the 1790s. But it also reflects a theoretical slippage, a failure to think through his approach to the history of political ideas and to pursue it consistently. As a result, his interpretation of Democratic Republicanism and Anti-Federalism becomes more and more restricted, predictable and problematic. Although he states that the divisions within Anti-Federalism which he identified in the first part of the book persist after 1789, they largely disappear from his narrative. "Plebeian" Anti-Federalism puts in another brief appearance during the Whiskey Rebellion but is then abruptly severed from the Anti-Federalist "heritage." Where did these plebeians go?

Did they vote for Jefferson in 1800? If so, why? Anti-Federalism, Cornell wants us to believe, became virtually synonymous with states' rights and strict construction during the 1790's and was defined by an increasingly narrow range of elite southern agrarian ideologues, and so was Democratic Republicanism. This is a far cry from the energetic, popular Democratic Republican party portrayed in recent work by Simon Newman and David Waldstreicher or even in older work by historians like Alfred Young.

What's most disappointing about Cornell's book however, is the way issues of class power and social hierarchy, which were central to his analysis of Anti-Federalism and central to the politics of the 1790's, become gradually submerged by arguments about the development of constitutional principles in a fairly restricted series of canonical Republican texts. And, in the end, although Cornell makes a good case for the continued influence of Anti-Federalist ideas on opposition thought after ratification, he over-emphasizes the role these ideas played in Democratic Republican ideology. Although issues of state versus federal power were crucial to the politics of the 1790s, the success of the Republican party lay precisely in its ability to subsume these issues within a broader and more politically effective debate about social inequality and its relationship to political power.

While rigid agrarian ideologues like John Taylor continued to resuscitate Anti-Federalist arguments, James Madison, Philip Freneau and others (some former Anti-Federalists, some former Federalists) were forging a new sense of "Republican" identity that revolved primarily around issues of social and political equality rather than issues of localism and nationalism. This was the most important achievement of Madison's well-known essays for the *National Gazette* in 1792-93. And although Cornell emphasizes the influence of Anti-Federalism on Madison, it's much more critical to emphasize the ways in which he modified and adapted Anti-Federalist arguments to create a genuinely populist and nationalist politics. If issues of class and social position were subordinated to issues of constitutional order in the debates about ratification in the late 1780s, by 1800 the

Jeffersonians had successfully inverted this relationship while preserving the importance of each, defining their Federalist opponents as privileged "Aristocrats" rather than simply consolidating nationalists.

Ironically, much of this interpretation is implicit in Cornell's own account of class politics and Anti-Federalism but it gets lost along the way. Nonetheless, *The Other Founders* is an interesting, thought-provoking book and a crucial addition to the reconstruction of early national political culture. Well researched, closely argued, and full of interesting insights, it sheds important new light on the character of Anti-Federalism as a political movement and helps to point the way towards a more nuanced and sophisticated understanding of ideology in the politics of the early republic.

It also makes clear once again the longevity and durability of anti-federalist thought in the United States, and helps us to understand the origins of this persistent anti-federalism, though not perhaps its contemporary ironies. One of the strengths of *The Other Founders* is that it makes clear the political fluidity of anti-federalist ideology, and one of its failings is that it gradually loses touch with this insight and with the multiple contexts within which anti-federalist thought was generated. As a result, Cornell's own work is likely to experience a process of decontextualization. Conservative constitutional scholars have long been laboring to recover an anti-statist past and his book provides them with a founding "tradition" they won't be able to resist.

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