

the certainties, the humanity and the self-righteousness, that Bromwich and Lock identify so effectively. It is there, also, that we may find the powerful awareness of human dignity that is a constant, if evasive, presence throughout the writings of Edmund Burke (not excepting those on political economy). All of which should be more than sufficient to rekindle or broaden our curiosity in this extraordinary figure.

John Adams and the Spirit of America

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John Adams and the Spirit of Liberty,
by C. Bradley Thompson, *Lawrence,
Kansas: University Press of Kansas,*
1998. xix + 340 pp.

JOHN ADAMS (1735-1826) was the most traditionalist of the American Founders and arguably the finest scholar among them. Perhaps because of this traditionalism, his immense contribution to the Founding goes largely unrecognized today. Although most college students come across *The Federalist* at some point, even specialists have little firsthand acquaintance with the thought of the man Jefferson called "the Atlas of Independence." *John Adams and the Spirit of Liberty* is therefore a welcome contribution. It is well written, vigorously argued, and clearly in sympathy with its subject. It gives a good overview of Adams's mature thought, with a thorough treatment of his masterpiece, *A Defence of the Con-*

stitutions of Government of the United States of America (1787-1788). This book will serve as the introduction to Adams's political thought for some time to come. It does not, however, entirely live up to its promise, for it mistakes Adams's place in the larger history of political philosophy. Since no adequate understanding of the character of the American regime is possible without understanding its philosophers, flaws in C. Bradley Thompson's argument must be corrected to prevent erroneous interpretations of the "American spirit."

Thompson's major claims are, first, that Adams was one of America's greatest political thinkers; second, that Adams was part of the mainstream of Revolutionary American thinking—against Gordon Wood's famous argument that Adams became "irrelevant" to the American debate; third, that Adams's thought was more or less consistent and did not grow more conservative. Thompson's arguments here are quite convincing.

The book is divided into two sections. The first, "Principles of Liberty," describes Adams's relation to the American enlightenment and his career as an apologist for the American revolution. Thompson overstates Adams's secularism in this first section. To argue that for Adams religion "was little more...than a religion of civic morality" is to misunderstand Adams's roots in Puritanism, however critical he may have been of Calvinist theology. Although there is some excellent material in this part—in particular on Adams's constitutional and legal pamphlets—Thompson does not give a thorough overview of the political philosophy of the early Adams. That remains a study to be written.

The second section, "Principles of Political Architecture,"—longer and more important than the first—explicates Adams's *Defence* and the subsequently published *Discourses on Davila* (1791), which is really the fourth volume of the

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Defence. The *Defence* is Adams's *magnum opus*, but it has not fared well with critics who condemn it as a disordered, repetitious, verbose work without coherence or focus. Perhaps intending the *Defence* as a "guidebook for lawgivers," Adams transcribed entire chapters of the great writers from Plato and Polybius to Montesquieu and Machiavelli, often without attributing the original sources. The cascade of quotations has unnecessarily obscured Adams's own thought. He himself knew this, acknowledging in the last volume that "[t]he whole has been done in the midst of other occupations, in so much hurry, that scarce a moment could be spared to correct the style, adjust the method, par off excrescences or even obliterate repetitions."

One can quarrel with some of the details of Thompson's explanations of the *Defence* (such as his weakly argued notion that Adams was deeply influenced by Machiavelli), but here I would like to concentrate on a single issue of crucial importance: Adams's relation to the classics. Thompson claims that Adams repudiated classical political ideals, arguing that "[h]istorians and political scientists have typically misunderstood Adams's relationship to classical republicanism." Contrary to convention, Thompson argues that Adams "had nothing but contempt for the ancient view of citizenship and virtue," and that he attempted "to turn the classical theory of republican government on its head," embracing instead an emphatically "modern republicanism."

Thompson defines classical republicanism as the tradition of Greco-Roman thought which holds that public affairs are the concern of the entire body politic and that citizens must assume direct responsibility for the public good. The success or the failure of the classical republic depended on the character of its citizens. Republican government, then, was a way of life that could not

endure without virtuous citizens. The concept of virtue was central to this ancient view. Virtue meant primarily civic virtue, defined as a love of laws and country and a disinterested duty to serve the public good.

According to Thompson, Adams rejected this line of thinking completely. Many contemporary French *philosophes* supported "simple government," *i.e.*, small and virtuous republics. The American Anti-Federalists were influenced by those ideas and opposed the mixed, more complex forms of government favored by Adams and his Federalist allies. Thompson uses this familiar history to develop a schematic understanding of American political philosophy. The Anti-Federalists were influenced by Montesquieu, Rousseau, and other neoclassical writers. They wanted to resurrect the small civic republic. Virtue was their organizing principle. They opposed the proposed federal government. The Federalists, on the other hand, found their inspiration in John Locke. America was to be a large, populous, commercial state. Their organizing principle was the conception of natural rights protected by a federal government.

Since Adams was a Federalist, this scheme thus forces Thompson to look for evidence that Adams opposed a politics of virtue and rejected the Anti-Federalist philosophy of classical republicanism. He accordingly quotes with pleasure from Adams's diatribes against Sparta, the virtuous republic *par excellence*. Adams believed that the Spartan polity violated human nature and justice. For Adams, the Greek city-states were too austere and small to serve as models for America.

But if Adams had nothing but contempt for a politics centered on virtue, why does he say in *Thoughts on Government* that the end of government is to secure happiness, and "the happiness of man...consists in virtue"? What about the

praise for virtue and the disdain for vice found throughout Adams's work, including many of the very quotations Thompson references?

Thompson runs into problems here because he accepts a notion of classical republicanism that is flawed and has polluted the historiography of the Founding for too long. "Classical republicanism" (sometimes referred to as "civic humanism") is largely an invention of modern scholars such as J.G.A. Pocock and Quentin Skinner. Although elements of their "civic republicanism" can be found in the history of Western political philosophy—in particular in Renaissance Italy—the notion of a coherent theoretical tradition of classical republicanism stretching from the ancients to Machiavelli and then to the American Founders is largely fictitious. The equation of "virtue" with "patriotism and public service" is integral to this modern fabrication, but it is without basis in fact. Virtue in the classical sense—*virtus*, *aretê*—is *not* the predisposition to sacrifice one's own good for the good of the community. Rather, virtue is excellence of character (an excellent man may, of course, sometimes sacrifice his own good for the common good). Virtue and vice, thus understood, form a central part of Adams's political and moral philosophy.

Moreover, Thompson's conclusion that Adams preferred "new modern virtues" (like "rationality, moderation, frugality, industry") to the classical virtues is also wrong. He marshals none of the textual and historical evidence necessary to prove that Adams rejected the classical virtues for some ill-defined set of modern virtues. And if *moderation* or *rationality* are not classical virtues, then what are?

Thompson's mistake is borne out by his misinterpretation of what Adams was doing when he condemned Sparta. Adams often *praised* Sparta. Of all the many regimes he examines in his three

volumes, Adams appreciated the Spartan, republican Roman, and English constitutions above all others, because they produced stable and long-lasting regimes. Sparta's constitution, for example, maintained a religious and manly polity for eight centuries. This is precisely what Adams dreamed of for America.

To be sure, Adams rejected the Spartan constitution as a model for the United States, but its effects on the virtue of the Spartans intrigued him. He believed, as he wrote in the *Defence*, that "exercises like those established by Lycurgus, running, wrestling, riding, swimming, scating, fencing, dancing, should be introduced into public and private education in America, which would fortify the bodies and invigorate the minds of youth." It is therefore unsurprising that he preferred the Roman republic, with a constitution like Sparta's, to unruly Athens, which in Adams's time had not yet acquired its mythical status as the political role model of the West.

Yet Adams believed that the contemporary English constitution had improved on classical models. In particular, Adams admired the separation of powers and representative government. He also recognized that America differed from antiquity in its dependence on *commerce*: the American states were richer, more populous and more spread out than the classical republics. The old problem of *luxuria*—moral corruption, the victory of vice over virtue by the accumulation of and desire for riches—was therefore a pressing matter for any American philosopher, more so than for classical philosophers. The ancients translated their aversion for *luxuria* into a distaste for traders. Adams moderated this position, finding classical support in his analysis of the Carthaginian constitution.

Thompson discusses Carthage, but because of his scheme gets it wrong. In the first place, he incorrectly writes that Carthage was the only ancient republic

Adams respected, when Adams actually writes more extensively in praise of Sparta and Rome. More importantly, Thompson writes:

Carthage was for Adams the classical antipode to Sparta. Its animating or character-giving "spirit" was commerce, considered by most republican theorists to be antithetical to true virtue. So contrary to the purpose of the classical republican ideal was Carthage that Aristotle did not even consider it a regime, in the strict sense. For Aristotle, Carthage was simply a society founded on contractual obligations concerning property and trade; it was a crass commercial society that partook of none of the higher civil, moral, or intellectual virtues that properly define a regime.

Thompson then contrasts the classical, Aristotelian view with Adams's praise for the Carthaginians, who had "preserved their primitive frugality of manners and integrity in elections," notwithstanding their commercial empire. The Carthaginians were commercial but not effeminate, which according to Adams disproved the old doctrine "that commerce corrupts manners."

But Aristotle does *not* say that Carthage was "a crass commercial society," not even "properly a regime" because it failed to inculcate virtue in its citizens. In the passage cited by Thompson, Aristotle actually points out that there is more to being a state than commercial exchange, alliance, and security from injustice, because then states that trade with each other and have alliances and agreements, perhaps even about securing justice, would have to be classified as being *one state*, instead of several, independent states. (*Politics* 1280a32-1280b36) The Carthaginians, Aristotle writes, were blessed with "an excellent form of government, which differs from that of any other state in several respects.... The superiority of their constitution is proved by the fact that the common people re-

main loyal to the constitution; the Carthaginians have never had any rebellion worth speaking of, and have never been under the rule of a tyrant." (*Politics* 1272b24-33)

For Adams, Carthage was interesting because its constitution and character were similar to those of Sparta, despite the fact that the Carthaginians were commercial rather than autarkic. This proved to Adams that it was possible to be virtuous and strong, whilst trading on a wide scale. In other words, Carthage lit the way for an affluent but still moral America. Hence Adams's remark that Carthage's constitution "resembles those of the United States of America more than any other of the ancient republics, perhaps more than any of the modern."

According to Thompson, Carthage is commercial, hence modern, which explains why Aristotle the ancient rejects it, whilst Adams the modern embraces it. In fact, however, Adams's embrace has nothing to do with a dispute between ancients and moderns, but merely with a defense of commerce against charges that it necessarily corrupts manners. Adams's political science differs from ancient political science because he sought to solve the same political problems—How to create a stable and lasting state? How to protect the property of the rich against the envy of the commoners? How to prevent the tyranny of a single man or a small group over the rest?—in the context of a commercial and large country. There is, however, little evidence that he believed those new circumstances entailed a cosmic shift in the nature of political life. Continuity must be stressed over difference.

Adams hoped for an American polity religious and commercial in character, with a strong, vigorous, and virtuous citizenry that nevertheless engaged in trade and inhabited a large country. He was convinced that statesmen can influence the character of citizens, not so

much by a coerced civic education, but by building enduring and reasonable institutions. Adams would have been proud that America retained its traditional constitution for such a long time, and he would have compared Americans' virtues favorably to those of other nations. But he would have deplored the current onslaught on the spirit and the constitution of America. Sometimes a people change their regime, their way of life, without even being aware of it. Were he alive today, John Adams would surely remind us that the spirit of America must always remain not merely "the spirit of liberty" in Thompson's title, but also the spirit of virtue.

Communist Illusion and Scourge

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The Black Book of Communism: Crimes, Terror, Repression, by Stephane Courtois, *et al.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999. 858 pp.

The Passing of an Illusion: The Idea of Communism in the Twentieth Century, by François Furet, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999. 596 pp.

CURRENTLY, THE TWO MOST MONUMENTAL books on Communism and its crimes worldwide in the twentieth century have both come out of France. Why France? As told by their in the main French authors, it was, indeed, the revolutionary traditions nurtured in France in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that paved the way

historically to latter-day totalitarianism, especially of the Communist type, and that fostered utopian illusions about Communism. France, after all, is the land of Robespierre, Babeuf, Blanqui, the Paris Commune, and the post-World War II French Communist Party, the most obedient of all of Stalin's quisling national Communist Parties belonging to the Moscow-manipulated Communist International (Comintern).

The authors are well schooled in the tradition that led by a red thread, as author François Furet puts it in *The Passing of an Illusion*, to "the concept of totalitarianism [as] a new reality constituted by a society almost totally enslaved by a party-state that reigns through ideology and terror." Mussolini, Goebbels and Hitler, Mao, Kim Il-Sung, Castro, Pol Pot, *et al.*, by their own admissions, all adopted wholesale the totalitarian concept first developed by Lenin and the Bolsheviks in the world's largest country in 1917. The latter-day Communist disciples employed it as a powerful tool by which to gain and hold onto power in their respective countries as remote from Soviet Russia as Angola, Cambodia, and Cuba.

The price at which this power was seized and held by the Communists—namely, up to 100 million victims—is told comprehensively for the first time by a team of French and non-French authors in *The Black Book of Communism*, under the editorial direction of Stephane Courtois. In *The Passing of an Illusion*, Furet asks how the Communist part of Communazism could have ever enthralled and captivated so many adherents in non-Soviet countries. Such collaborators, by lacquering it, in turn abetted the spread of its ideology and system into the democratic West and the so-called Third World. Courtois and Martin Malia raise the question of the complicity of the legions of Western apologists with Stalin, Mao, Ho Chi Minh, Fidel Castro, and indeed Pol Pot, "who even

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