

OF LEVIATHAN REPUBLICS

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Frank M. Coleman, *Hobbes and America: Exploring the Constitutional Foundations*, University of Toronto Press, 1977, pp. ix, 159, \$12.50 cloth.

America, in whose imperial shadows Canada's identity has failed to crystallize is, in this critical study, exposed as Hobbesian in structure and mentality. America could be saved from herself, if only through an alteration in identity. A changed, non-Leviathan, America could mean a totally different fate for Canada. History's mild irony is accentuated by the fact that *Hobbes and America* is written by an American political scientist, who has been influenced by the thought of the leading Canadian political theorist, C.B. Macpherson and has been published in this country.

This is a genuinely iconoclastic work. Without ever lapsing into fanaticism and humorless ferocity, it offers a systematic, intelligent and engaging thesis. Professor Coleman's work offers an interpretation of American constitutional thought and of the predicament of modern liberalism. Its central idea is that "the constituent principles of political association in Hobbes's philosophy and in American life are the same. Hobbes develops a philosophy of constitutionalism which is in keeping with the actual daily conduct of American politics". Thus Hobbes is declared the "true ancestor of constitutional liberal democracy," as well as "the parent source of the modern American concept of the political process" (p. 3). This unorthodox and provocative declaration sets the stage for Professor Coleman's theme which he elaborates and substantiates with sound scholarship, lucid, ingenious argumentation. At the outset Professor Coleman states his understanding of what a constitutional philosophy is and does. He defines it as "an imperial political ideology shaping the consciousness of a whole people through their national inheritance" (p. 6). What animates, mends and sustains institutions is Coleman's concern. He focusses only on those social structures and ideas which pulsate with life. The author warns us against an immutable, timeless image of constitutionalism. He tells us that "the idiom of expression of a constitutional philosophy will change over time, while the basic philosophy remains the same in terms of its controlling ideas" (p. 7). He exhibits great awareness of apparent changes which

OF LEVIATHAN REPUBLICS

only hide the substantive continuity. In a truly philosophic fashion, Professor Coleman seeks the substantive and essential and remains immune to the lure of mere appearance. He investigates critically prevailing views, which are contrary to his own. He rejects the mytho-ideological perspectives which in their hollow moralism ignore the most glaring aspects of our empirical reality. He also rejects the sterility of pure empiricism, with its assumption that facts can automatically disclose their truth. Professor Coleman correctly calls for and employs successfully a creative, critical synthesis of the empirical and the theoretical. Neither mind nor matter alone can suffice. The first, in isolation becomes unreal. The second is just inert.

Professor Coleman registers his strong dissatisfaction with the two prevailing traditions of interpretation regarding constitutional philosophy and the American political experience. The first consists of reformist interpretations of American constitutionalism. This body of thought errs, according to Professor Coleman, in its interpretation of the national political experience and it fails to come to terms with the meaning of its operative realities. It is a mythic perspective detached from actuality. The second is that of empirical-pluralism. Professor Coleman firmly believes that this school, though a great advance over the first, also fails to divulge the true character of the American political experience. Nevertheless he finds the pluralists accurate in the main. Their descriptive analysis discloses the truth, partially. Their analysis is useful in specifying the working arrangements of American political institutions. But this type of analysis without a proper theoretical, critical perspective, remains truncated. The theoretical limitation of the pluralists forces them to perceive and accept as natural what is in reality "an intentionally created political system" (p. 32).

It is this pluralist interpretation that provides the author with an account of the basic operative realities of the American political process: namely, ruthless individualism, transactional relations, conflict-management, and a merely policing sovereign. "The purpose of American political institutions is the management of social conflict; this purpose is operationalized in a political process involving bargaining and negotiation between independently situated political actors" (p. 32).

The portrayal of American political life captured in the pluralist literature is found, on substantive issues, to have an extraordinary affinity with the Federalist papers, particularly with Madison's thought on institutional management of social conflict (pp. 10-15). Professor Coleman is careful to show that formal differences do exist. For example the pluralists speak of a "group" rather than an individual approach. But Professor Coleman forcefully shows that the "group" remains highly privatized. No disagreement is found between Madison and the pluralist position on the goals and *modus operandi* of conflict-management. Professor Coleman finds disagreement between them

ALKIS KONTOS

only regarding *application*. "Whereas Madison relied upon *institutional* conflict and balance, the pluralist analysis centers attention on the composition of *social forces*" (p. 15). No substantive difference exists between the Federalists and the pluralists, according to Professor Coleman.

His descriptive definition of the operational realities of American political life allows Professor Coleman to initiate his crucial analysis of their political implications. This constitutes one of the most powerful and exciting segments of Coleman's theme. His verdict is frighteningly accurate. "The social failures of American political institutions are not like an oversight, corrected after a second look, but are a permanent blindness fixed in the nature of the institutions and the social philosophy used to design them" (p. 17). These social failures constitute areas which are not an object of decision by the sovereign: conurbation, structural unemployment, energy management and pollution, criminal recidivism. Between sentimental reforms and indifference there exists the need for fundamental structural changes. Coleman's critical commentary and analysis go further. They capture the basic physiognomy of the American body politic in its most unattractive characteristics. Turmoil and antagonism are basic to the American political life: unattended social problems, propensity toward violence, proneness to petty corruption. Coleman explores them meticulously, relentlessly.

After a detailed treatment of the operative realities and their inevitable negative consequences Professor Coleman undertakes the full demythologization of American politics. Only in light of a vicious and ugly reality can we perceive the myopic mythology of the reformist interpretations of American constitutionalism. I have mentioned already Coleman's main objection to this mode of interpretation. In a more systematic fashion he refutes the myth of the sovereignty of the people, with James MacGregor Burns as its major proponent, and the myth of the natural law tradition, promulgated by Arthur Holcombe.

Myths, according to Professor Coleman, have as their main function the concealment of reality from the public *and* the myth makers (p. 37). They constitute a grand, collective denial. They pretend to beautify and ennoble without touching the inner core of an intolerable reality.

Having exposed the myths surrounding American constitutionalism, Professor Coleman turns to the origins and meaning of the operative realities of America. The political philosopher who provides and illuminates the meaning of American political life is Hobbes, according to Professor Coleman. In a systematic and precise interpretation of Hobbes, Professor Coleman establishes that: 1. "Hobbes's regard for the monarchy was not inspired by feudal ties, but by the consideration that the office of the monarchy provided an external framework of order within which the commercial interest of the middle class could be pursued" (p. 57); 2. Hobbes "sought to clear away the doctrines of classical tradition which stood in the way of recognition of the individual as the

OF LEVIATHAN REPUBLICS

sole source of right" (p. 58); 3. Hobbes, through his rejection of the traditional, hierarchical perspectives of things political, manages to restrict "the purpose of political institutions to the satisfaction of the mortal needs of mortal men and lays the foundations of the modern theory of government by consent of the governed" (p. 62). Hobbes's achievement is that he replaced classical constitutional theory with a philosophy of constitutionalism appropriate to the temper of commercial Protestantism.

The treatment of Hobbes as a liberal democrat rests on the following grounds:

First, Hobbes is a liberal because he traces the source of government to the consent of the governed, taken one by one. Second, he is a democrat because he asserts that men are equal and have equal rights in the covenant relationship. Third, his doctrines of inalienable rights and a right of resistance show that the sovereign must uphold, not invade, the rights of bourgeois men. Fourth, Hobbes's political thought creates political institutions conforming to the pattern and purpose of politics in a liberal democracy. (p. 75)

Professor Coleman succeeds in showing that "the object of Hobbes's political theory is to encourage commercial Protestants, weary of conflict and hopeful of comfortable preservation, to negotiate their differences rather than fight them out" (p. 94). Cognizant of other interpretations of Hobbes's political theory, Professor Coleman intelligently and persuasively argues his position showing the validity of his claim. For Coleman

the central dilemma of Hobbesian politics is that the sovereign cannot resolve the conditions which give rise to conflict in society. These conditions are irremediable because they lie in the private and utterly discrete needs of man himself. While public authority performs an essential service in finally settling conflicts of private right, it can do no more than maintain a modicum of civil order. Thus the sovereign is deprived of an adequate ideal of civilization in terms of which the members of society may be organized. Segments of public order may relapse into the state of nature with no identifiable sense of loss on the part of bourgeois men. (pp. 98-9)

ALKIS KONTOS

This is the essence and consequence of Hobbes. This is the reality of America. Hobbes as the master analyst and advocate of modern egoism, that profound and haunting atomism which can never be consolidated into a genuine human community, is in this study the fountain-head of American constitutional theory.

While Professor Coleman sees Hobbes as the true ancestor whose ideas have been transformed without losing their essential character, he also acknowledges that Locke played a significant and crucial role in the transformation — followed by Madison and others.

The Lockean connection heralds, in Professor Coleman's view, a crucial shift in Hobbes's theory which tends to obscure the affinity between Hobbes and Locke. That both are bourgeois thinkers no sensible scholar would deny. What is novel with Locke, according to Coleman, is that his "sovereign is transmitted into a social no less than a political structure" (p. 100). Thus "a substantial narrowing of the claims of modern egoism occurs with Locke's exaggerated and monotonous emphasis on the rights of property appropriation" (p. 101). Though it is true, within the spirit of Professor Coleman's theme, that Locke achieved the metamorphosis of Hobbes's Leviathan — from a pure, naked, and, of consequence, sterile political structure into a social one — there are fundamental differences between Hobbes and Locke. Coleman tends to present them on an evolutionary historical continuum, whereas I believe Locke was fully cognizant of Hobbes's views and thought he was challenging them. The intensely atomistic, egoistic element exists in both. But Locke had a concept of social solidarity and class formation, totally absent in Hobbes. Natural law is for Locke no mere rhetoric; it is an indispensable class rationalization. Hobbes could not even conceive of such possibility. The Hobbesian jungle of the state of nature is alien to Locke, notwithstanding the constant reality of social conflict and violence.

The emphasis placed by Professor Coleman on the social dimension present in Locke's thought is accurate and very important. My claim is that a systematic elaboration of Locke's social and political thought would reveal inherent philosophical contradictions not because he is a crypto-Hobbesian but rather because he tried to disprove Hobbes's absolute atomism from an atomistic first principle. It is Locke's inadequate philosophic rigor and his political commitment to a class differentiated society that defeat his anti-Hobbesian intention. Full acceptance of Hobbes's views would undermine the glorification of the propertied class, so precious to Locke. It is their bourgeois mentality that unifies, politically, their differences. Capitalism cements their philosophically substantive distance.

From the Lockean connection, Professor Coleman returns once more to American constitutional philosophy via Madison, Thoreau, Calhoun, and Sumner in order to show the final stages of socio-political structures which tend

OF LEVIATHAN REPUBLICS

to disguise their essentially brutal origins.

Professor Coleman's primary task has been to tell the truth about the American polity (p. 38) — a truth that can enable a nation to find its purpose. Coleman's exposed (not ridiculed, mocked or vulgarized) America is "a national society which stands uncertainly on the edge of [Hobbes's] state of nature" (pp. 148-9). Many would disagree. If they do so they should not call as evidence the mythologized America nor an accurately descriptive portrayal of society that hides its inner structure and meaning. To attempt to challenge Coleman's bitter truth we must scrutinize the social and ideological roots of the American polity. In doing so we must be obliged to agree with Professor Coleman. We should not forget that for Coleman "Hobbes did not believe, like the *laissez faire* liberals of a later day, that the by-product of individual egoism is the public good" (p. 92). For Hobbes "public order, if it is to arise, is the product of costly deliberation, not the fortuitous consequence of individual acts of self-aggrandizement" (p. 93). Perhaps America, having yet to shed fully her fierce Hobbesian individualism, deceives herself that she indeed has moved successfully into the spirit of *laissez faire* liberalism.

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