

POLITICS & GOVERNMENT

Locke and the Founders

“Serving God and Mammon: The Lockean Sympathy in Early American Political Thought” by Joshua Foa Dienstag, in *American Political Science Review* (Sept. 1996), American Political Science Assn., 1527 New Hampshire Ave. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036.

During the past quarter-century, historians have overturned the once widely accepted scholarly view that a liberal “Lockean consensus” existed among America’s Founding Fathers. Gordon Wood and others now argue that the Founders adhered to a “republican” creed. Their pervasive talk of “virtue” and political “slavery” is said to be evidence of a republican civic humanism anchored in Aristotle and Machiavelli. Dienstag, a political scientist at the University of Virginia, disagrees.

“The language of virtue and [political] slavery . . . has, in fact, a perfectly plain Lockean provenance,” he asserts. It is rooted in the Christian asceticism that is at the heart of Locke’s liberalism. The spirit of self-sacrifice that John Locke (1632–1704) and the American Founders championed did not stem “from polis-centered public-mindedness (as in republican thought),” Dienstag contends, “but from an inward-looking ideal of self-denial. It is not necessary to trace the founders’ notions of virtue and self-denial tortuously backward through several layers of English political thought to vague connections to 15th-century Florentine philosophy.”

The rejection of Locke as a shaper of the Founders’ thought has its roots in the 1950s, when several scholars offered radical reinterpretations of his thought. Leo Strauss portrayed him as a secret atheist, for example, and C. B. Macpherson attacked him as a Hobbesian authoritarian who favored a rapacious capitalism. Locke’s new interpreters considered it

impossible to reconcile his defense of property rights (and the resultant inequality of wealth) with his professed Christianity. The new Locke was hardly a suitable basis for a modern democracy. Scholars looked elsewhere for roots. But Locke himself had no difficulty reconciling faith and property, Dienstag observes. He subscribed to what sociologist Max Weber a few centuries later dubbed “the Protestant Ethic.”

Locke’s worldview was “reasonably coherent,” Dienstag maintains. He used the term *labor* to refer to both physical and mental activity, and he identified both sorts with virtue, so long as the labor is self-directed. “When one’s labor is not under one’s control, one is in a state of slavery,” Dienstag explains. Enslavement can come about in three ways. “From within oneself comes the threat of indulgence of the passions at the expense of frugality and industriousness. From outside come the threats of both mental enslavement (through restrictions on liberty) and physical enslavement (through the seizure of property).”

American Founders as different in their political views as Thomas Jefferson and John Adams were “sympathetic” to this outlook, Dienstag says. Asceticism was at the root of their moral philosophy, which divided “them neither from Christianity, nor from liberalism, nor from Locke. Rather, it was Locke’s remarkable ability to combine both of these doctrines with a defense of revolution that rendered him so attractive to the founders.”

The Welfare Reform Boomerang

“Block Grants: A Perennial, but Unstable, Tool of Government” by Paul L. Posner and Margaret T. Wrightson, in *Publius: The Journal of Federalism* (Summer 1996), Meyner Center for the Study of State and Local Government, 16 Kirby Hall of Civil Rights, Lafayette College, Easton, Pa. 18042–1785.

Last year’s controversial welfare reform measure ended Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) as an entitlement and provided for federal block grants to the states instead. If the history of such grants

is any guide, the pressure to reverse course is likely to grow very strong in the years ahead, argue Posner and Wrightson, director of federal budget issues and assistant director of federal management issues, respectively, at