

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

the U.S. General Accounting Office.

Block grants provide each state a fixed sum for a broadly defined purpose, and considerable latitude in how to spend it. (The more widely used categorical grants spell out in detail what states must do with the money.) Although they accounted for only about 16 percent of the \$213 billion in federal grants in fiscal year 1995, block grants have been an intermittently popular way of addressing national problems. In 1974, for instance, in response to the perceived failure of urban renewal programs, Congress created the Community Development Block Grant program. In 1981, President Ronald Reagan eliminated almost one in five categorical grants in areas such as public health and certain social services, setting up block grants instead.

"The record shows that states have often maintained a basic continuity in the delivery of block-granted services," Posner and Wrightson observe. Surprisingly, after recovering from the recession of the early '80s, states even used their own funds to make up for federal cuts in long-standing state programs in health and social services.

Yet on some 58 occasions between 1983 and 1991, Congress added new categorical provisions or restrictions to the block grants.

Congress also cut funding even as it provided new categorical grants in the same areas. Why? Members of Congress are able to claim credit for new categorical grants, the authors say, whereas most credit for implementing block grants goes to state and local officials. Also, many interest groups are stronger in Washington than in state capitals, and they like "targeted" grants.

But given the continuing pressure to cut federal spending, block grants are likely to retain their appeal, particularly for open-ended entitlement programs. The federal government can cap spending and shift the painful choices to the states, while the states, in turn, can blame the feds for forcing them to make those choices.

Many observers fear that states will not perform as well with block grants for entitlement programs such as welfare as they did with the block grants initiated in the early 1980s—that they will engage in "a race to the bottom" on benefits. But even if the states do a good job, the authors conclude, unless Congress and interest groups take federalism more to heart, history suggests that in the long run the states could well find themselves faced with reduced federal funding and "creeping requirements."

Conservatives on the Edge

"The End of Democracy? The Judicial Usurpation of Politics," a symposium in *First Things* (Nov. 1996), and "The End of Democracy? A Discussion Continued," in *First Things* (Jan. 1997), 156 Fifth Ave., Ste. 400, New York, N.Y. 10010.

"Articles on 'judicial arrogance' and the 'judicial usurpation of power' are not new," Richard John Neuhaus, a Catholic priest

who is editor in chief of *First Things*, and his fellow editors note in introducing a symposium that "addresses those questions,



A 1993 cartoon points up the endless problems that *Roe v. Wade* has caused the U.S. Supreme Court.

often in fresh ways, but also moves beyond them." This move beyond, particularly by the editors themselves, has prompted outraged resignations from the journal's editorial board, worried considerations of conservatism's "anti-American temptation," and ill-informed talk of "a full-fledged war" between "necons" and "theocons."

Federal court rulings in such charged matters as abortion, homosexuality, euthanasia, and assisted