

Interpretation

A JOURNAL OF POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

Fall 1993

Volume 21 Number 1

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libraries and all other institutions \$40
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Single copies available.
Postage outside U.S.: Canada \$4.50 extra;
elsewhere \$5.40 extra by surface mail (8 weeks
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Payments: in U.S. dollars AND payable by
a financial institution located within the U.S.A.
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Composition by Eastern Composition, Inc.,
Binghamton, N.Y. 13905
Printed and bound by Wickersham Printing Co.,
Lancaster, PA 17603

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Steven M. Dworetz, *The Unvarnished Doctrine: Locke, Liberalism, and the American Revolution* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990), x + 247 p.p., \$37.50.

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Steven Dworetz's *Unvarnished Doctrine* provides evidence that the counter-revolution is proceeding in full swing, and, in the eyes of this interested observer at least, is now near total victory. Dworetz joins such other retrogrades as John Diggins, Joyce Appleby, Isaac Kramnick, Thomas Pangle, and Robert Webking in attempting to roll back the revolution in the historiography of the American founding initiated almost a quarter century ago by Bernard Bailyn. It is obvious the time for a "revision of the revisionists" has arrived, for the "republican paradigm," as Dworetz calls it, has by now left the pages of its initial sponsors, Bailyn, Gordon Wood, J.G.A. Pocock, and Lance Banning, and become not only the dominant view among specialists, but also the staple of college textbooks and the received wisdom among nonspecialists, especially, it seems, legal nonspecialists.

Dworetz's contribution to the counterrevolution is considerable. "The subject of this book," he says, is "a critical examination of the republican revision and a reassessment of the role of Lockean-liberal ideas in the American revolution" (p. 7). For those who have been in some sort of stupor since the late sixties he sketches the history of the historiography at some length, perhaps reflecting the origin of the book in a doctoral dissertation. The old, prerevolutionary view was captured well by the title of a famous article: "The Great Mr. Locke, America's Philosopher." The republican paradigm pushed Locke pretty far off stage; he had, at most, a negligible presence during the revolutionary era, much less significant than the classical republican or civic humanist conception of politics associated by Pocock and others with Machiavelli, Harrington, and, of most importance for the Americans, John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon, writing in the 1720's as Cato. Dworetz "considers this historiographical revolution in detail" and concludes that the old view was essentially correct, if not always well supported by its proponents. "In terms of language, theory, and prescription, American revolutionary thought differed in no essential way from Lockean-liberal political theory" (p. 96).

The nonspecialist might be pardoned for wondering why Dworetz devoted six or seven years of his life and why so many others get excited about what might appear a very academic question indeed, whether the Americans were

more taken with Locke or Machiavelli. Like most specialists, Dworetz could have made the classic “Everest defense” (“Why do I pursue this research? Because it’s there!”), but he insists the stakes are much higher than the mere posthumous reputations of Locke and a bunch of other dead political philosophers. “A society’s understanding of its founding doctrine is an integral part of its self-consciousness and the ultimate source of its sense of purpose and normative vision” (p. 3). This self-consciousness provides “the Republic’s self-understanding of its origins, purposes and national distinctions between good and bad, right and wrong, . . . the standards by which citizens evaluate contemporary events, practices, and arrangements” (pp. 3–4, 184). The Lockean version of the founding supplies “the essential source of historical legitimacy for the defense of constitutional politics in the modern age,” for Lockean theory is inherently liberal and constitutionalist (pp. 94, 186).

The republican paradigm, by contrast, “does not inherently preclude, and may in part be inclined toward, the antithesis of constitutional politics and personal freedom” (p. 5). Although it is probably entirely foreign to their purpose, the new historians are giving more than aid and comfort to liberalism’s contemporary “political enemies” (p. 38). Some unnamed “leading politicians” are now engaging in “antiliberal rhetoric” encouraging “the Republic to reject its own first principles” (p. 188). Insufficiently aware of the political implications of their own research, “the most principled scholars may inadvertently have helped to prepare the intellectual ground for this current political assault” (p. 38).

For reasons that will become clear later, this explicit political defense only partly tells the tale of Dworetz’s engagement with his subject, however. Beneath the surface and between the lines pokes out another kind of motive. His sense of fairness and truth is offended. The republican historians miss or dismiss so much clear evidence in order to make their case that Dworetz’s anger and spirit swell forth to “speak truth to power.” (It is power, by the way, because at the time Dworetz began his work the republican paradigm had a firm grip on the academic instruments of preferment and position.) He is concerned with historical truth, *per se*, and I for one find this at least as admirable if not quite so cosmic as his rising to the defense of the republic (cf. pp. 197 n. 43; 199 n. 72; 204 n. 31, 111–13). To be sure, this concern for historical truth makes him a pre-“postmodern,” but he seems blissfully untouched by such corrosive teachings.

He seems genuinely amazed that the historians could make some of the claims they do. For example, John Dunn, an English scholar for whom Dworetz retains much respect, asserted that the colonists, so far as they paid any attention to Locke in the prerevolutionary struggle, probably misread him in thinking that he supported their position. Instead, Dunn thought there was but one “objective reader of the *Two Treatises*” in those years, Peter van Schaack, who used Lockean arguments to conclude that revolution was not

justified (p. 21). Dworetz almost entirely disagrees with Dunn, believing instead that the colonists both widely and accurately used Locke, but he finds especially noteworthy what Dunn failed to say about Peter van Schaack. Dunn “left the theater at intermission. . . . In 1776, Van Schaack, by his own account of the event, *changed his mind, without changing his political principles*” (p. 28). Earlier he had “allowed the British government the benefit of the doubt”; more experience taught him that he had reasoned on the basis of “inadequate information concerning Parliament’s intentions” (p. 28). The full story of Van Schaack, then, provides no support for the idea that a genuinely Lockean reaction to the events of 1763–1776 would produce a Tory rather than a Patriot stance, for using the same Lockean principles, Van Schaack came to favor the revolution. But of this change of heart, we learn nothing from Dunn.

Another example that seems to have energized Dworetz concerns the tally by one scholar of the number of Locke’s works, relative to others, in colonial libraries. That scholar found a “priority accorded to [Algernon] Sidney’s *Discourses* over Locke’s *Treatises*,” a priority which that scholar was inclined to find fraught with “special meaning” (p. 41). Dworetz rightly notices, however, that this scholar has counted only separate editions of Locke’s *Treatises* and not sets of Locke’s *Works*, which, of course, contain his political essay. Recalculating with the *Works* included produces a quite different result: “Locke on government now heads the list” (p. 41). Scholarly procedures such as Dworetz corrects here cannot but give the impression that the scholars have allowed their pet points to prevail over their dedication to historical accuracy.

On these and other matters Dworetz shows how weak the empirical base for the republican thesis is. Acquaintance with the texts shows readily enough how prominent Locke was, and correspondingly, how much the historians have overstated the presence of Cato and other of the so-called classical republicans (p. 44). Dworetz tends, for the most part, to explain the empirical errors of his predecessors generously. Either they were not sufficiently acquainted with Locke to notice the presence of Lockean ideas when they saw them, or they labored under a questionable interpretation of Locke. Dworetz appears to find the first failing in Bailyn and the second in Pocock. An ability to recognize Lockean ideas is crucial because an investigator must be able to identify Lockean ideas independently of “objective” indications like attributed quotations. In the eighteenth century our conventions of footnoting and attribution had little place (p. 43). Some eighteenth-century political pamphlets consisted of nothing but quotations from Locke (or some other source) strung together with not one mention of Locke’s name or indication that the ideas expressed had an exogenous source, much less what that source was. It takes a learned eye, then, to spot the presence of Locke or any other source under those circumstances. Historical research, therefore, must be better grounded in political theory than most of the historians are. Dworetz believes that he can advance the question precisely because he brings “the interpretive discipline of political theory” to it.

The interpretive issue centers on the meaning of Locke's political philosophy. According to Dworetz, the proponents of the republican paradigm accept the "Chicago Locke," that is, Locke as interpreted by the late Leo Strauss. This is, according to Dworetz, a "secular," "bourgeois" Locke, who "represents only 'the spirit of capitalism'" (pp. 115, 173). The republican historians are correct, he thinks, not to find this Locke in the American sources, for the Americans knew nothing of him. Dworetz favors a "Cambridge Locke" instead, that is, Locke as interpreted by John Dunn, Peter Laslett, and others. This Locke is a real theist, indeed, is a thinker whose chief political commitments—to limited government, constitutionalism, and the right of resistance—can be understood only in terms of his theological commitments (pp. 39, 117, 123). This Locke was a particular favorite of the New England clergy, who sowed the political ideas that produced an abundant harvest at the time of the revolution. This Locke's "theistic liberalism" also had far more appeal to the clergy, and to the Americans in general, than the deistic doctrines of Pocock's republican theorists like Cato (pp. 135, 148). "The ministers must have felt more comforted with Locke, a fellow believer en route to the 'eternal estate' than on the civic humanist road to political salvation" (p. 183). Had the historians known about and looked for the Cambridge rather than the Chicago Locke, they would have found his unmistakable presence nearly everywhere.

By his own admission Dworetz does not do a very adequate job in establishing the supremacy of the Cambridge over the Chicago interpretation of Locke, but it is nonetheless worth mentioning a few difficulties. For one thing, his version of Strauss's interpretation is nearly a caricature. Strauss never said Locke represented "only the 'spirit of capitalism.'" Strauss also finds in Locke a liberal constitutionalist, as Dworetz does. Moreover, Dworetz's scholarship on this question is remarkably shoddy, ironically reminding a bit of the republican history he criticizes so effectively. He does not pay attention, for example, to the specific criticisms raised against the Cambridge Locke. He pays no attention to Strauss's reasons for rejecting the theistic Locke. It's not as though the theistic Locke is not generally accessible: he lies sprawled across the surface of Locke's texts. Strauss thought he perceived clear indications by Locke himself of difficulties with the surface and tried to follow out those indications. Dworetz, moreover, pays insufficient attention to the many discussions of Locke's rhetorical strategies that have accompanied the Chicago interpretation.

Dworetz waveringly concludes that his interpretation of Locke is only one among several, including Strauss's, which are textually defensible. "The fate of my argument," he says, "does not depend upon the proposition that the theistic Locke is the *only* Locke available in the Lockean corpus, or even upon denying the textual legitimacy of the bourgeois Locke" (p. 33). Although he does not always adhere to that tolerant position (cf. pp. 98, 110, 117, 125, 131, 138, 151), he invokes it because, he believes, the decisive issue is not really which Locke is the most textually authentic, but rather which Locke is most likely to

have been appropriated by the Americans. It is not merely a matter of what Locke “really meant,” but of what he was most likely to have been taken to mean by the population under investigation (p. 9). It was a religious age, therefore the theistic Locke. As simple as “I think, therefore I am.”

Dworetz has an important, although not entirely an original point here. He is, however, merely restating without realizing it a point made by Strauss himself. Strauss argued that Locke’s philosophic doctrine was not grounded in theistic thinking, but that it was presented (in part) in that form, and partly for that reason Locke’s doctrine became practically successful. Much depends on whether these facts are understood in the manner of Strauss or in the manner of Dworetz, however. If Strauss is correct, then Dworetz is in danger of missing what I think of as the “willy-nilly” factor: by appealing to his audience with positions only ostensibly grounded in their theistic commitments, does not Locke perhaps set them off on paths which, willy-nilly, may lead them quite a way from where they first thought they were going? Dworetz involuntarily testifies to this possibility when he insists on the one hand that the Lockean liberal society remains, in his judgment, viable and desirable; but on the other that the theistic roots of it he finds in Locke no longer are so. Dworetz concedes that under the aegis of liberalism, modern America has become secular; might this not have something to do with accepting Lockean political, moral, and epistemological ideas? He concedes also that liberalism is valuable quite independently of theism; therefore, there must be an alternate ground for it. Might Locke not have had such an understanding also?

Dworetz’s contribution to the demise of the recently triumphant republican paradigm is substantial and important; he unanswerably reinstates the centrality of Locke for the revolutionary generation, even disregarding the questionable parts of his discussion of the meaning of Locke. He is not persuasive, however, in his explanation for the shortcomings of the republican historians. First of all, Pocock surely is aware of the Cambridge Locke, being a close intellectual ally of the Cambridge political theorists. Secondly, the difference between Pocock’s republicanism and liberalism may perhaps be more starkly drawn vis-a-vis the Chicago Locke, but the disagreements persist even with regard to the Cambridge Locke. The issue has to do with the status of the political; Pocock’s republicans find the fulfillment of personality in citizenship and political life. No version of Locke affirms that. Pocock’s republicans are community oriented; even Dworetz’s Locke is emphatically individualist (cf. pp. 174–79).

Finally, it must be noted, Dworetz altogether fails in his “civic purpose” of reinvigorating contemporary liberalism by reinstating the Lockean character of the founding (p. 38). Dworetz’s founding Locke is the “theistic Locke,” but “theistic liberalism is not an ideology for our times. . . . Indeed, the theistic Locke has been honorably retired” (pp. 187, 188). Accordingly, “we have to depart from the theistic Locke in order to make a persuasive case for liberalism today.” Contrary to the premise of the enterprise, Dworetz does not uncover a

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“usable past” for us, able to legitimate our present. But if Dworetz is at all correct about what is at stake in these debates, might not a more open-minded approach to a more secular Locke prove both more textually sound and more appropriable as well? This is the question with which Dworetz’s helpful book leaves us.