

# INTERPRETATION

## A Journal of Political Philosophy

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## A Journal of Political Philosophy

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COMMENT: THE POLITICS OF  
MARTIN DIAMOND'S SCIENCE

THOMAS J. SCORZA

I wished to show what a democratic people really was in our day; and by a rigorously accurate picture to produce a double effect on the men of my day. To those who have fancied an ideal democracy, a brilliant and easily realized dream, I endeavored to show that they had clothed the picture in false colors; that the republican government which they extol, even though it may bestow substantial benefits on a people that can bear it, has none of the elevated features with which their imagination would endow it, and moreover that such a government cannot be maintained without certain conditions of intelligence, of private morality, and of religious belief that we, as a nation, have not reached, and that we must labor to attain before grasping their political results.

To those for whom the word *democracy* is synonymous with destruction, anarchy, spoliation, and murder, I have tried to show that under a democratic government the fortunes and the rights of society may be respected, liberty preserved, and religion honored; that though a republic may develop less than other governments some of the noblest powers of the human mind, it yet has a nobility of its own; and that after all it may be God's will to spread a moderate amount of happiness over all men, instead of heaping a large sum upon a few by allowing only a small minority to approach perfection. I attempted to prove to them that whatever their opinions might be, deliberation was no longer in their power; that society was tending every day more and more towards equality, and dragging them and everyone else along with it; that the only choice lay between two inevitable evils; that the question had ceased to be whether they would have an aristocracy or a democracy, and now lay between a democracy without poetry or elevation indeed, but with order and morality; and an undisciplined and depraved democracy, subject to sudden frenzies, or to a yoke heavier than any that has galled mankind since the fall of the Roman Empire.

I wish to diminish the ardor of the republican party and, without disheartening them, to point out their only wise course.

I have endeavored to abate the claims of the aristocrats and to make them bend to an irresistible future; so that the impulse in one quarter and resistance in the other being less violent, society may march on peaceably towards the fulfillment of its destiny. This is the dominant idea in the book [*Democracy in America*]*—*an idea which embraces all the others, and which you ought to have made out more clearly. Hitherto, however, few have discovered it. I please many persons of opposite opinions, not because they penetrate my meaning, but because, looking at only one side of my work, they think that they can find in it arguments in favor of their own convictions. But I have faith in the future, and I hope that the day will come when all will see clearly what now only a few suspect. . . .

—Alexis de Tocqueville,  
Letter to M. Stoffels, (Paris,  
21 February 1835).

One day several years ago, about a year after I received my Ph.D., Mr. Diamond finally persuaded me to refer to and address him as "Martin." He had suggested several times previously, without success, that while "Mr. Diamond" was necessary and proper when I was his student, my new status as a professional colleague had authorized my using his first name. On the day in question, in my last, desperate attempt to avoid actually addressing him as "Martin," I told him a story about my baseball-playing boyhood, foolishly using for anecdotal purposes *his* sport. I told him that while I had always called my Brooklyn Dodger heroes "Duke" and "Gil" when I had spoken *about* them, I found myself saying hello to "Mr. Snider" and "Mr. Hodges" when, after winning a contest, I actually got to *meet* them. To this, Mr. Diamond responded that while I *had* to speak both of and to him as "Mr. Diamond" when I was a Little League political scientist, I could speak both of and to him as "Martin" now that I was playing triple-A ball. This happy analogy tipped the scales and led me to accept my calling him "Martin," although for some time afterward I avoided addressing him by name at all. In any case, I took his argument to be quite a compliment—until, that is, I realized that he had located me securely in the minor leagues. . . .

It would be nice, of course, to enter the major leagues, and what better way than by using this opportunity to show the error or weakness in the work of my major league hero? And some days ago I thought I had Mr. Diamond for sure: at the APSA convention in New York, I'd leave the minors forever! But, alas, I must report that my devastating critique of Martin Diamond has recently fallen apart, and far from discovering why I should be admitted to the majors, I have come to see more clearly than ever why Martin Diamond was a star in the biggest league of all.

After reviewing Mr. Diamond's writings, I had concluded that there is a discrepancy between his descriptive account of the principles of the Founders and his later apology for the republic they had founded. Like Mr. Meyers, I saw a tension between Mr. Diamond's picture of the Founders as thoroughly modern, wholly realistic democrats and the argument that the American republic constitutes a character-forming regime in which an ascent towards excellence is encouraged or fostered. I had concluded, to quote Mr. Meyers' eloquent paper, that Mr. Diamond had given "to America far more than his . . . interpretation of 'the American Way' . . . permits."

With this satisfying conclusion in hand, I outlined a three-pronged strategy for my presentation of this commentary. First, I would detail the tension between the quasi-regime that emancipates and harnesses self-interest and the real regime which seeks to inculcate virtue in all its free citizens: I would show that whatever might be said in favor of a plan that secures civil liberty by a stupendous feat of modern, realistic engineering,

it could not be said that such a plan is conducive to true human virtue. Secondly, I would argue that the best public possibilities of the American republic are at a level of decency decidedly below true excellence and further that the possibilities of both this public decency and true private excellence within a commercial republic depend upon the preservation of things like deference, familial authority, and religious conviction, things which predated the Founding and exist in the nonpolitical fraction of the complex of things which constitute the American way of life. Finally, I would argue that the essential problem posed by the American republic is that its founding principles tend to consume the very things in society which nourish and sustain the political order: the extended commercial republic tends to undermine deference, parental authority, religious conviction, and the local governmental units in which such things both support public decency and invite the pursuit of repute, honor, and therefore individual virtue. The problem of the Founding, I would argue, is that it threatened the very things that made its targeted goal possible and its untargeted possibilities admirable. Thus, we need to praise not the republic's original goals but enlightened efforts to realize its possibilities against its own problematic tendencies.

It was when I went about following my outlined strategy that the picture of my glorious triumph disappeared before my eyes. I noticed first how tentative and qualified were Mr. Diamond's highest praises of the highest American excellences. And then things *really* fell apart. To show the profound difference between the home of acquisitiveness and the regime of virtue, I found myself quoting—Martin Diamond. To support my argument that the Founders of the American republic aimed at modest public decency rather than at true individual nobility, I recurred to lessons I had learned from—Martin Diamond. And when I examined my understanding of the problem of the Founding sketched above, I found that I was merely following the understanding of Tocqueville that I had learned from—Martin Diamond. In short, I realized that Martin Diamond had taught me the very things by which I had planned to demonstrate his inadequacies and my own qualifications for big league status. I felt then roughly like Mr. Diamond must have felt when, as a boy, he caught but then dropped and lost a home run ball hit by Babe Ruth.

I would like to suggest that the connection between Mr. Diamond's descriptive and his apologetic work is provided by his pedagogic and therefore his political intention, much more than by the psycho-personal calculus suggested by Mr. Meyers. I believe that if there was a "need" beneath Mr. Diamond's apologetic work, it was a need dictated by professional obligation and not by personal considerations. For as Mr. Diamond interpreted the nature of political science and his role as a teacher of political science,

he had a positive duty to present a sympathetic defense of the decent republic he so well understood. His was a *political* science of the American republic in which a critical question concerned the political consequences of his scientific discoveries.

I do not suggest that Mr. Diamond's pedagogic intent gave him license to portray certain impossible excellences as likely achievements within the American republic. Rather, I believe that Mr. Diamond seized upon the fact that in a liberal society nothing can be said to be impossible, and he went on from there to celebrate the unlikely best possibilities precisely because the celebration itself would make those possibilities more likely and the worst possibilities less likely. If there was some dissembling in this, it was surely dissembling of the noblest kind. Mr. Diamond sought to make the American republic "young and beautiful again," thereby indicating his care for the political survival of the leading modern polity which, perhaps out of a kind of enforced carelessness, permits philosophy to reside. It was James Madison's republic, after all, which became the refuge of Leo Strauss.

I think that Mr. Diamond did not take irresponsible refuge among the ancients precisely because he understood and followed them. Platonic political philosophy and Aristotelian political science are centered upon the tension between pure philosophy and pure science on the one hand and the requirements and limitations of the city on the other; therefore, properly understood, the example of the ancient writers is an example of coming to terms with the political dimension of the love of wisdom about political things. This is why it is a cardinal principle of Aristotle that the political reformer must never forget the character of the regime he would seek to reform: enlightened reform must be tailored to the nature of the defective actual. By extension, we should say that when Mr. Diamond tried to bring about the best possibilities of a problematic modern polity by encouraging our sympathetic attachment to its strengths, by giving us a concerned understanding of its limitations, and by suggesting to us the way to adjust its faults, he was being an Aristotelian political scientist in the fullest sense. It would have been easier to falsify Aristotle and to use his writings in support of a self-righteous disdain of the actual, and it would have been easier to falsify Plato and to use his writings in support of a self-aggrandizing contempt for the impure, desperately inviting, as it were, the honor of drinking the hemlock. But Mr. Diamond took the more difficult path and entered the modern trenches to make the best of the modern world, having learned the direction of better and worse from the ancients and having learned from them too the political responsibility that attends the love of wisdom.

Despite the fact that he did not subscribe to Tocqueville's apparent historical fatalism, Mr. Diamond, I believe, was in a position analogous to Tocqueville's. As a scientist, Mr. Diamond offered a "rigorously accurate"

picture of what democracy in America really is. But this scientific offering necessarily had a political dimension. In the first place, contrary to the major premise of most contemporary political science, a descriptive understanding of the true character of the Founders' principles *required* an evaluation of those principles in light of the tradition of western thought, and this evaluation in turn had to have an effect upon those who came into possession of Mr. Diamond's science. Secondly, independently of the effect engendered directly by Mr. Diamond's science, that science entered a world in which there was already contention about democracy and its merits. Thus, Mr. Diamond's descriptive work was necessarily political by reason of both its inherent effect and its mere existence in an already politicized milieu.

Understanding the Founders meant understanding them as they stood against classical and Christian thought, for even if Mr. Meyers is correct about the proximate political orders upon which the Founders sought to improve, their notion of improvement is not fully understandable except as it compares to prior notions of improvement. In any event, Mr. Diamond's picture of modern and secular Founders had an unsettling effect upon those who wished to be loyal but could not love what could not pass muster before a philosopher-king or a saint. From these Mr. Diamond urged patriotism, not by the unscientific argument that the Founders were secretly Aristotelian or Christian statesmen, but by the political argument that the Founders' modern democracy had a "nobility of its own." On the other side, Mr. Diamond's portrait of the Founders' modern realism disappointed those modern "idealists" who would be loyal only to a democracy formed according to the promise of their own "brilliant and easily realized dream." From these Mr. Diamond also urged patriotism, not by the unscientific argument that the Founders' democracy was the immature prelude to their own, but by the political argument that the Founders' very sober democracy offered the only form in which real freedom was possible in the modern world and in which equality would not lead to "an undisciplined . . . democracy, subject to sudden frenzies, or to a yoke heavier than any that has galled mankind since the fall of the Roman Empire." It is the measure of Mr. Diamond's standing as a teacher that his study of the American republic speaks so well to the disparate elements of his audience, in a way that is both scientific and politic, and in a way that allows the committed to benefit and the uncommitted yet to learn.

My portrait here of Mr. Diamond allows me to avoid the unselfish sadness of Mr. Meyers, who believes that Mr. Diamond's greatest work was yet to come, presumably the work in which Mr. Diamond would successfully overcome the tension between his science and his *apologia*, whether by raising his Founders' sights or by lowering his own praise, we can only

speculate. In my view Mr. Diamond completed his work: he gave us an essentially accurate understanding of the Founders and a completed picture of the task of political science. To be sure, much remains to be done on the Founders' work and on the connections between the various elements of their system; but all of this will constitute extrapolations of Mr. Diamond's basic insights. And the pedagogic task articulated by Mr. Diamond will always need adjustment—the rhetoric of teaching is as variegated as the audience to be taught; but here too Mr. Diamond's students will simply be following his fully developed example. But while I thus avoid Mr. Meyers' unselfish sadness, I am left with an immodest and selfish sadness that I am a willing follower of someone in a bigger league, and with the more modest but still selfish sadness that if I ever hit a homer here in the minors, my major league hero will not hear of it.