

interpretation

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Volume 9 Numbers 2 & 3

- 141 Larry Arnhart The Rationality of Political Speech:
An Interpretation of Aristotle's *Rhetoric*
- 155 Jan H. Blits Manliness and Friendship
in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*
- 169 Mary Nichols *The Winter's Tale*:
The Triumph of Comedy over Tragedy
- 191 Jerry Weinberger On Bacon's *Advertisement Touching A Holy War*
- 207 John Parsons, Jr. On Sir William Temple's
Political and Philosophical Teaching
- 229 Susan Power John Locke:
Revolution, Resistance, or Opposition?
- 245 Barry Cooper The Politics of Performance: An Interpretation
of Bolingbroke's Political Theory
- 263 Philip J. Kain Labor, the State, and Aesthetic Theory in the
Writings of Schiller
- 279 Michael H. Mitias Law as the Basis of the State: Hegel
- 301 Stanley Corngold Dilthey's Essay *The Poetic Imagination*:
A Poetics of Force
- 339 Kent A. Kirwan Historicism and Statesmanship
in the Reform Argument of Woodrow Wilson
- 353 Richard Velkley Gadamer and Kant: The Critique of Modern
Aesthetic Consciousness in *Truth and Method*
- 365 Robert C. Grady Bertrand de Jouvenel:
Order, Legitimacy, and the Model of Rousseau
- 385 William R. Marty Rawls and the Harried Mother
- 397 Jürgen Gebhardt Ideology and Reality:
The Ideologue's Persuasion in Modern Politics
- 415 Kenneth W. Thompson Science, Morality, and Transnationalism
- Discussion*
- 427 Peter T. Manicas The Crisis of Contemporary Political Theory:
on Jacobson's *Pride and Solace*
- Book Reviews*
- 437 Patrick Coby *The Spirit of Liberalism*,
by Harvey C. Mansfield, Jr.
- 439 Will Morrisey *Political Parties in the Eighties*,
edited by Robert A. Goldwin

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Volume 9 numbers 2 & 3

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WILL MORRISEY

Nearly twenty years ago, Robert A. Goldwin edited *Political Parties, U.S.A.*, a collection of essays that informed and educated that portion of a generation of college students whose professors judged books discerningly. Of the essayists, Edward C. Banfield was the lightning rod, attracting heat and sometimes light from fellow contributors and readers. Almost alone in the warm, reformist atmosphere of the early sixties, Banfield stood for unreconstructed parties:

Anyone who reflects on recent history must be struck by the following paradox: those party systems that have been most democratic in structure and purpose have been least able to maintain democracy [he was probably thinking of the Weimar Republic and the Third Republic in France]; those that have been most undemocratic in structure and procedure—conspicuously those of the United States and Britain—have proved to be the bulwarks of democracy and civilization.¹

Banfield predicted the increase of voter manipulation by television and ideologues if party patronage declined further. A pessimist in Camelot, he predicted that egalitarian reform would reduce the organized power of the American polity, its ability to get things done. For that reason,

Jefferson may have been right in saying that democracy cannot exist without a wide diffusion of knowledge throughout the society. But it may be right also to say that it cannot exist *with* it. For as we become a better and more democratic society, our very goodness and democracy may lead us to destroy goodness and democracy in the effort to increase and perfect them.²

The reformers, of course, were not listening. Banfield's serious critics thought the gentleman too dismissive of reasoned planning (Walter Berns), and reminded him that ordinary, patronage-based politics must at times give way to the principled politics of "great parties" (Harry V. Jaffa). But they knew that Banfield's main argument was right.

So, increasingly, do the rest of us. Goldwin's new collection, *Political Parties in the Eighties*, contains only one enthusiastic defense of the much-reformed system we now have, and even its authors recommend still more reforms. Journalists, politicians, and scholars are, for the most part, unenthusiastic. The public, which disliked the old system but liked its results, now dislikes both the system and its results.

¹Edward C. Banfield, "In Defense of the American Party System," in (Chicago: Rand McNally, *Political Parties, U.S.A.*, ed. Robert A. Goldwin 1961), p. 23.

²Banfield, "In Defense," p. 39.

Goldwin reminds us that Banfield told us so; not only does he reprint the 1961 essay in the Appendix, but he includes a new essay in which Banfield tells us that he told us so. Perhaps too pessimistically, he contends that, despite his telling and retelling, “Enthusiasm for pressing further and faster toward direct democracy remains unabated”³; the dissatisfaction with the present system only goads Americans toward further democratization. Thus, “during the Bicentennial period in which we celebrate the achievement of the Founders, we also complete the undoing of it.”⁴ The American founding is undone because, as Banfield and Nelson W. Polsby argue, the attempt to establish direct democracy instead of representative government leads, in practice, to the ruin of those political authorities who once stood between the populace and its most powerful rulers. In the short term this results in what we see today: a centralized but divided elite that attempts to rule a somewhat bewildered, restless people by holding up idols called images and extolling quasi-ideas called concepts. Instead of Jeffersonian enlightenment, we see the decline of knowledge, concurrent with the decline of that class of politicians who made it their business to know. The new knowers, the journalists, lack political experience and political responsibility. Responsible to executives whose business is to attract customers, journalists provide the melodrama customers want. Predictably, the public is entertained but not ruled; the star of our favorite afternoon serial may excite us, but we do not confuse him with a ruler. With the dramatizing of politics, people do not confuse contemporary politicians with rulers, either.

Two members of the Democratic Party’s several commissions on party reform defend the system they helped devise. Kenneth A. Bode, a reporter for NBC news, and Carol F. Casey, who spent much of 1980 working on Senator Kennedy’s campaign staff, argue that the reforms ended many undemocratic practices—a fact no one seriously denies—and say that if new elites have replaced the old ones, observers should not gape and losers should not complain.

They are less convincing and tough-minded when they try to debunk myths about the genesis and results of party reforms. They deny that the left-liberal, McGovernite wing of the party controlled the Commission on Party Structure and Delegate Selection: “Senator McGovern was chosen to chair the commission by Senator Humphrey, who viewed Senator Harold Hughes of Iowa as too liberal and too closely identified with the McCarthy/Kennedy forces.”⁵ Anyone who recalls that McGovern was a stalking horse for Robert Kennedy in 1968 will wonder at that. Moreover, Hughes was appointed to the commission along with liberal Birch Bayh and left-liberal Fred Harris—a Humphrey backer⁶ at the

³Edward C. Banfield: “Party ‘Reform’ in Retrospect,” in *Political Parties in the Eighties*, p. 31.

⁴Banfield, “Party ‘Reform’ in Retrospect,” p. 33.

⁵Kenneth A. Bode and Carol F. Casey, “Party Reform: Revisionism Revised,” in *Political Parties in the Eighties*, pp. 11–12.

⁶Bode and Casey, “Party Reform,” p. 12.

time, but hardly one averse to undercutting traditional authority. For that matter, Humphrey himself was to the left of the majority of Democrats, a fact that escaped his left-wing critics in 1968.

Another myth—that the reforms give power to activist elites who do not represent most voters—turns out not to be a myth at all: “That is and has been true in every election held in the United States.”⁷ Rule by the old elite did not always work anyway, for “when party leaders substituted their judgment for the popular view registered in primaries [they must mean the somewhat more popular view—they mention the selection of Stevenson over Kefauver in 1952, Humphrey over McCarthy in 1968] . . . they do not always pick winners.”⁸ True, but no one picks winners every time; does anyone imagine that Kefauver could have defeated Eisenhower, or that McCarthy could have defeated Nixon?

The authors also deny that proportional representation “will fragment the American party system, exacerbate divisions, prolong the nominating contest, and make unity more difficult.” “Contrast 1976 with 1968,” they suggest.⁹ Very well, but contrast 1972 with 1976, and 1980 with 1976. As for the myth that “guidelines eliminated party leaders from national convention delegations, thereby depriving the convention of their judgment and experience, . . . there is some truth to this charge,” although more in 1972 than in 1976.¹⁰

In sum,

Parties are getting weaker. Anyone would concede as much. But they have been eroding over the course of the past century. . . .¹¹

Indeed: since the reform movement began. Bode and Casey actually contend that Americans are less cynical about politics today than ten years ago, proving that our debunkers of myths also have a penchant for making them.

Of the four essayists who seriously prescribe, two concern themselves with practice, two with theory. Donald M. Fraser, who succeeded McGovern as chairman of the Democratic Party’s Commission on Party Structure and Delegate Selection, regards the problem of political authority with something like historical fatalism: “once the legitimacy of the old ways was challenged, the national party had little choice but to acquiesce in a movement toward procedures that were more defensible under the values of a democratic society.”¹² But surely the legitimacy of the party leaders’ authority had been challenged for decades. Fraser mistakes enthusiasm and the inability to moderate it for acquiescence.

⁷Bode and Casey, “Party Reform,” p. 15.

⁸Bode and Casey, “Party Reform,” p. 15.

⁹Bode and Casey, “Party Reform,” p. 18.

¹⁰Bode and Casey, “Party Reform,” p. 13.

¹¹Bode and Casey, “Party Reform,” p. 19.

¹²Donald M. Fraser, “Democratizing the Democratic Party,” in *Political Parties in the Eighties*,

Fraser sees that the results of democratization, as distinguished from the idea of it, leave few people enthusiastic. He hopes to regain some of the old system's virtues by exhorting the organized party, whose members know the potential candidates better than most voters do, to enlighten its rank and file, to improve communications within the party. He would reduce the number of primaries and, in general, strengthen the national party. He does not consider if this would only further weaken the local party organizations; he may believe their weakness irremediable.

Political scientist James W. Ceaser knows more of political history and political philosophy than Fraser does. Unlike many scholars, he can put his learning to practical use. He shows that Martin Van Buren, the founder of "the idea of permanent party competition" in America,¹³ used a nonconstitutional innovation to serve the aims of our Constitution's farmers. In order to straiten the "personal factionalism" and "demagoguery" that developed during the 1820s, Van Buren proposed parties that would moderate the potential candidates by making them win support not only from the people, but also from powerful, "seasoned politicians."¹⁴ However, Van Buren had no immoderate appetite for moderation: recognizing the occasional need for important change, he did not prohibit the formation of new parties or the reforming of the old. Such change, he knew, often makes constitutional change unnecessary.

From Woodrow Wilson to George McGovern, the reformers have disliked the nonideological, routine politics of self-interest, with its hierarchies and its limited capacity for rapid change. Ceaser dislikes the reformers because they offer no evidence that their much-vaunted responsiveness will yield wisdom. Reform of institutions can increase responsiveness to the political atmosphere, but wisdom is another thing than the political atmosphere.

It is an affliction of one strain in the American mindset that when something goes wrong, some cannot attribute it to unavoidable circumstance or normal human failing, but instead see it as remediable by some institutional change. More than anything else, it may be the inability to accept the inevitable limitations of politics that lies at the basis of reformist thought.¹⁵

This echoes Banfield's complaint that "The fundamental fact of today is that man is seen, not as he is, but as he ought to be."¹⁶

Result: "The 'open' system at the [presidential] nominating stage now very much resembles the popular nonpartisan system at the final election stage," with its personal factionalism and demagoguery, "that Van Buren attacked in 1824."¹⁷ Ceaser recommends that the parties undo "much of what we have seen

¹³James W. Ceaser, "Political Change and Party Reform," in *Political Parties in the Eighties*, p. 101.

¹⁴Ceaser, "Political Change," p. 102.

¹⁵Ceaser, "Political Change," p. 109. Ceaser goes on to recommend institutional change; today, we are all reformers.

¹⁶Banfield, "Party 'Reform' in Retrospect," p. 33.

¹⁷Ceaser, "Political Change," p. 109.

in the last decade.”¹⁸ Instead of opening the parties by allowing primaries to proliferate, Ceaser would limit the number of primaries to ten per year, held on a rotating or lottery basis. (This would strengthen the state parties and, possibly, eliminate the need for government subsidies of primary candidates, whose expenses would decline.) While closing the parties, Ceaser would open the elections to third and fourth party candidates by abolishing contribution ceilings to new parties that do not receive public funding. He predicts that existing parties would then moderate themselves to prevent the loss of their centrist members to the new parties. At the same time, he would strengthen existing parties by allowing them to give money to their nominees in addition to public funding.

The essayists who offer theoretical prescription examine the philosophic basis of the American party system and, more importantly, of the American regime. Both men find the regime defective, but for radically different reasons.

Benjamin R. Barber, the energetic Rousseauist who edits *Political Theory*, condemns the American system as undemocratic. The practice of representation—more, the principle itself—kills “full freedom, equality, and social justice.”¹⁹ By voting for someone else to rule, whether in a party primary or a general election, we renounce our citizenship. Voters are “as far from citizens as spectators are from participants or patients are from the doctors they select to heal them,”²⁰ for true citizens make laws and set policies themselves. Representation kills freedom because only those “directly responsible” for “the policies that determine [their] common lives” are free²¹; it kills equality because it reflects only the formal, legal, abstract equality of one man, one vote in a mass society, and does not reflect economic and social reality. It also kills social justice because it “encroaches on the personal autonomy and self-sufficiency that every moral order demands, . . . incapacitates the community as a self-regulating instrument of justice and destroys the possibility of a participatory public in which the idea of public justice might take root.”²² Barber’s desire for both individual moral autonomy and community was shared, of course, by Rousseau, who understood their combination as paradoxical. Barber quotes Rousseau, but not on this point; he should have done so.

Representative government, Barber continues, destroys citizen autonomy and community. It destroys autonomy by allowing leaders to exist; it destroys community by promoting mere interests, private fragments of the public, at the expense of the general interest. (Barber mistakenly describes modern political

¹⁸Ceaser, “Political Change,” p. 114.

¹⁹Benjamin R. Barber, “The Undemocratic Party System: Citizenship in an Elite/Mass Society,” in *Political Parties in the Eighties*, p. 35.

²⁰Barber, “Undemocratic Party System,” pp. 35–36.

²¹Barber, “Undemocratic Party System,” p. 36.

²²Barber, “Undemocratic Party System,” pp. 37–38.

parties as identical to the factions Madison describes in the tenth *Federalist*. They are not—or, at least, not usually. See Harry V. Jaffa, “The Nature and Origin of the American Party System,” in *Political Parties, U.S.A.* (Bode and Casey also make this mistake.) Thus elitism and anarchy war with one another in the modern pseudo-democracies. Representative government “can know no form of citizenship other than the sometime voter and the hungry client, and can achieve no public purpose other than the self-interested trade-off and the prudent bargain.”²³

No mere reform can change this. Only what Barber calls “strong democracy,” a community ruled by “the deliberate common will of a community of active citizens,”²⁴ can remedy modern self-destructiveness. Antidemocrats dismiss communitarian democracy as impractical; they elicit some of Barber’s most thunderous rhetoric:

The strategy [of the antidemocrats] is elementary but not ineffective: give the people all the insignia but none of the tools of citizenship and accuse them of incompetence; throw referenda at them without providing civic education or insulating them from money and media [how about demagogues?] and then pillory them for their ill-judgment; inundate them with problem issues the ‘experts’ have not been able to solve . . . and then carp at their uncertainty or indecisiveness or simple-mindedness in muddling through to a position.²⁵

Alone among the contributors to this book, Barber gives signs that he knows the majority of his readers are undergraduates. In telling them America has feared human depravity too much and appreciated human virtue too little, he reminds one of Socrates’ observation: the young judge men too leniently because they judge by the light of their own innocent natures. Some forms of innocence no longer characterize American youth, but much political innocence remains beneath the cynicism. Professor Barber will mine it.

“Representative government has had two hundred years in which to commit a thousand errors,” he exclaims; “direct popular government is rarely given more than a single chance.”²⁶ If the ancient Greeks, who gave such democracy several chances, can teach us anything about it, they show that the reason direct popular government is given fewer chances than republicanism is that its errors are more spectacular. They are regime-ending errors. Republics, too, commit them, but usually after a much longer period of time—often, if we believe Spengler, periods of two hundred years.

Robert A. Licht “inclines toward the pessimistic view that the present state of the political parties portends an unraveling of what shall here be called the

²³Barber, “Undemocratic Party System,” p. 46.

²⁴Barber, “Undemocratic Party System,” p. 47.

²⁵Barber, “Undemocratic Party System,” p. 48.

²⁶Barber, “Undemocratic Party System,” p. 48.

polity.”²⁷ He regards the kind of recommendation Barber makes as a likely cause of that unraveling, and one unable to weave a new fabric.

Licht takes his political science from Aristotle, not Rousseau. Madison’s “new science of politics” was to have cured the factionalism seen by the old. Like Aristotle, Madison considered a strong middle class the thing that can moderate the contemptuous rich and the envious poor. Licht agrees with Paul Eidelberg that America was not founded as a democracy but as a mixed regime or polity.²⁸ Nevertheless, the economic basis of our regime differs from that of Aristotle’s: “an end to natural scarcity by human agency, and the creation of wealth as a goal of polity, are . . . radical alterations [of] Aristotelian thought.”²⁹

Still, the debate on reform, said to concern a struggle of “the interests” with “the people,” is “the lineal descendent of the quarrel between the oligarchs and the democrats” that Aristotle described.³⁰ In America, “everyone believes himself to be a ‘democrat,’” yet here the many are not poor, nor propertyless.³¹ “The American democracy then may perhaps best be described as an *oligarchical democracy*, although to say this requires more candor than prudently we should have.”³² Our regime is not a democratic oligarchy because even our oligarchs must speak of equality, albeit “equality of opportunity,” as distinguished from “equality of result.”

Oligarchs and democrats come to terms in America. Aristocrats, sometimes, do not. Jefferson’s “natural aristoi” do not lack means of advancement here, for they can enter the government or the science-dominated academy. But in America science serves commerce (and vice versa)—a service some aristocrats find distasteful. “The increase in prosperity based upon scientific inquiry is indispensable to a political liberty that is not based directly upon the older idea of virtue”³³; a distaste for the commerce that, with scientists’ help, brings prosperity amounts to a distaste for one foundation of liberty. Moreover, those of the aristocracy who have nothing to do with science, who have no “commercial value,” often dislike the regime intensely. “[R]esentment is now the

²⁷Robert A. Licht: “On the Three Parties in America,” in *Political Parties in the Eighties*, p. 69.

²⁸In doing so, he cites Eidelberg’s *The Philosophy of the American Constitution*, published in 1968. Apparently he had not read Eidelberg’s later and more impressive book, *A Discourse on Statesmanship* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1974). Unlike Licht, Eidelberg regards contemporary America as thoroughly democratized; he describes Woodrow Wilson as the founder of the new American regime. As Licht points out, Eidelberg does not regard the American founding as exclusively modern. See also Eidelberg’s *On the Silence of the Declaration of Independence* (Univ. of Massachusetts Press, 1976).

²⁹Licht, “Three Parties,” p. 74.

³⁰Licht, “Three Parties,” p. 75.

³¹Licht, “Three Parties,” p. 76.

³²Licht, “Three Parties,” p. 77.

³³Licht, “Three Parties,” p. 86.

aristocratic passion, not the democratic passion.”³⁴ This is to say that modern aristocrats partake of no classical virtue.

These discontented aristoi would replace prosperity with virtue, but not with classical or scriptural virtue. “The central idea that animates the natural aristocracy of our time is moral autonomy,” an ethics based on will and rights, not on custom, piety, or law.³⁵ For such men, political liberty as we have it (Barber considers it a combination of quasi-political and nonpolitical liberty) has lost its allure, as any halfway house must; they “forget the alternative,” which is totalitarianism³⁶—or they imagine, with Barber, a utopian alternative.

Their egalitarianism is “but a weapon” used against oligarchs, “and can stem from no love of equality for its own sake.”³⁷ (Here Licht assumes that our aristoi think consistently, an assumption permissible for paradigm drawing but for nothing more than that.) In attempting to win the hearts of the democrats, the aristocracy “undermines the middle class’s confidence by imposing its [the aristocracy’s] tastes,” which oppose those aspects of democratic taste that incline democrats to tolerate oligarchs.³⁸ The aristoi would supplant oligarchic democracy with “aristocratic democracy,” socialism.

Unfortunately, socialists in power cannot solve the problem of wealth. Even socialist economies produce some wealth, and rulers—being rulers—must do something with it. Having acquired control of the means of production, they find that they have followed, as it were inadvertently, the bourgeois king’s scorned advice: they have enriched themselves. Aristocrats who remain aristocrats in this circumstance are purged by their bourgeoisified comrades, only to reappear in future generations as the dissident scions of the once-new oligarchs.

Licht concludes with prescriptions put modestly in the form of questions, not exhortations.

Is it both desirable and possible to break the grip of this idea [moral autonomy] and, if so, on what intellectual basis? Is this the central question of our time?³⁹

These are questions one might not expect to see in a book titled *Political Parties in the Eighties*. But the editor of this book has a classical aristocrat’s taste for things beyond today’s atmosphere.

³⁴Licht, “Three Parties,” p. 93.

³⁵Licht, “Three Parties,” p. 87.

³⁶Licht, “Three Parties,” p. 89.

³⁷Licht, “Three Parties,” p. 91.

³⁸Licht, “Three Parties,” p. 92.

³⁹Licht, “Three Parties,” p. 96.