

Playing Pretend With the Founding Fathers

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September 2020

In a remarkably disjointed, bombastic defense of “the liberal order,” C. Bradley Thompson writes in *American Mind* about the dangers posed by “Pajama-Boy Nietzscheans” and the supposedly surging “neo-reactionary movement on the Right.” According to Thompson, “radical Left and Right have now merged” in a virulent form of anti-Americanism—the essence of which consists of not agreeing with Thompson’s idealized regime.

The true America that Thompson claims to be upholding “was forged when the ideas of Thomas Jefferson passed through the Cumberland Gap and were put into practice by men like Daniel Boone and women like Annie Oakley.” It seems that our pioneers in the early 19th century read Thompson’s mind centuries in advance while trekking out West.

According to Thompson, anti-Americanism is raging across this land, and its scariest representatives are on the far right:

Much more interesting than the ho-hum anti-Americanism of the progressive Left, though, is the rise in recent years of a rump faction of former Paleo or Tradcons, who have come out of their ideological closet and transitioned from pro- to anti-Americanism. The recent rise of the radical Right in America is distinguished from all previous forms of conservatism and libertarianism by its explicit rejection of the founders’ liberalism.

The names on Thompson’s list of bogeymen, from which my name was astonishingly kept out, includes such nasty *hombres* as: “Joseph de Maistre, Louis de Bonald, Georg Friedrich Hegel, Friedrich Nietzsche, Carl Schmitt, Martin Heidegger, Julius Evola, Giovanni Gentile, Leo Strauss, and the Japanese novelist Yukio Mishima.” Moreover, neo-reactionary “political heroes include Charlemagne, the Stuart monarchs, General Franco, and Viktor Orbán.”

The folks poring over these poisonous thinkers are exemplified by the Catholic writer Patrick Deneen and the populist Michael Anton. Some anti-American rightists are also apparently getting high on Curtis Yarvin’s reactionary website, which disparages the American Revolution and its ideals. Deneen has apparently behaved in a particularly reprehensible way by challenging the classical liberal principles behind the American experiment, as interpreted by Thompson. Thompson is equally upset that some of his fellow Jaffaites at the Claremont Institute have

interpreted the master and his defense of democratic equality in an improper manner. These supposed deviationists from Claremont orthodoxy, according to Thompson, have strayed into “anti-Americanism,” which, by the accuser’s circular reasoning, amounts to not agreeing with his dogmatic theology.

It may never have dawned on Thompson that perhaps not all his targets are on the same wavelength. Anton, for example, may think quite differently from Yarvin, Nietzsche, Heidegger, etc., and may also have significant differences with Deneen. The fact that these people are not thinking the same as what Thompson imagines the early American pioneers were thinking as they “passed through the Cumberland Gap” does not mean they are dangerous or worthless. These scorned social critics may have interesting and even valid things to say.

The conclusion of Thompson’s article, in which all the baddies are indiscriminately thrown together, makes careless use of historical comparison. “So, this is where we are in 2020,” Thompson writes. “Like antebellum Southern slaveholders and postbellum Progressives, today’s radical Left and Right share a common disgust for the principles of the American Founding.” And, lest we miss the aforesaid questionable comparison, there is this: “Reminiscent of the early Weimar Republic, the radical Left and Right are intentionally driving the United States to the point of crisis.”

Perhaps I missed something. As far as I can tell, neither the Catholic distributist Deneen, nor Yarvin, writing as the pseudonymous Mencius Moldbug, are inciting crowds to occupy the streets of Portland and Seattle. Nor are they causing young rioters to beat up senior citizens on street corners or to shoot policemen, black and white. And who are the antebellum Southern slaveowners against whom we are supposed to be on guard? Have they occupied the American media yet?

Despite Thompson’s dubious accusations, there is much that one might rightly criticize about the American right, of which Thompson is a now widely honored member.

In an anthology of critical essays centered on the conservative establishment, *The Vanishing Tradition* (2020), my contributors and I show how predictably Conservative Inc. has slithered to the left on social questions while implausibly claiming to speak for “permanent things.” Its leaders and media personalities have gotten rich from the largesse of defense industries and serve the Zionist lobby with slavish obedience. We should be wary of those speaking for the “American vision,” particularly when they come with a political agenda. Thompson brings such an agenda with his self-designated role as an interpreter of the American founding.

Both *National Review* and *The Wall Street Journal* have published glowing reviews of Thompson’s “new moral history,” as reflected in the first of his projected two-volume study, *America’s Revolutionary Mind* (2019). Much to the delight of this cheering gallery, the Clemson University professor views John Locke, as interpreted by West Coast Straussians and Cato Institute libertarians, as the overriding influence on the creation of the American Republic and its underlying principles of freedom and equality. This Lockean founding supposedly determined the long-range course of the U.S. toward becoming a more inclusive society. We would more readily accept Thompson’s Lockean path to salvation, were it not for the amoral, antidemocratic troublemakers on the right, who ask inappropriate questions.

Unfortunately, I have a few. Firstly, was John Locke's influence on the founding as extensive as Thompson insists? Barry Shain, Forrest McDonald, Robert Paquette, and scores of other accredited research historians would dispute this interpretation. Certainly, Bernard Bailyn's classic, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (1967), offers a far more complex picture of the theoretical influences that shaped the American revolutionaries.

Perhaps the single most important work for the defense of the American Constitution, and one that Madison studied carefully while drafting his *Federalist Papers*, was David Hume's *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary* (1758). The Scottish philosopher made a pragmatic defense of the English monarchy, which came furnished with well-balanced parties and prudent cabinet members. Hume also famously mocked Locke's notions of natural rights and his imaginary state of nature. Although distrustful of Hume's monarchist proclivities, Jefferson studied his writings on politics and moral questions deeply.

As an admirer of Ayn Rand, Thompson follows his atheistic guru in attributing non-Christian views to the American founders. Although some of these luminaries may have been deists, such as Jefferson and Franklin, it's harder to make the same assumption about other Founders, some of whom made repeated confessions of Christian faith. Samuel Adams was a revolutionary hothead in the 1770s but remained throughout his life a Calvinist Christian. M. E. Bradford's small book, *A Worthy Company* (1982) cites numerous statements of religious belief by early American leaders.

In *The Faiths of the Founding Fathers* (2006), moreover, David L. Holmes shows that most of these leaders believed at least minimally in Protestant Christianity, or were occasional Christians with religious doubts. It's surely open to question whether they would have met the agnostic or atheistic standards of Thompson's Randian sect.

Even if we grant Thompson's under-determined thesis, was the reading of Locke among the founding generation the same as Thompson's? James Wilson, a signer of the Declaration and one of the first justices of the Supreme Court, regarded Locke as a dangerous thinker for Americans because he denied the human mind the moral properties necessary for an adequate knowledge of justice. Wilson called for a return to medieval philosophy to acquire an understanding of human moral consciousness that would serve the American Republic.

Whatever one may think of Wilson as an interpreter of Locke, clearly, he did not share Thompson's enthusiasm for the putative guiding spirit of the "American experiment." One may also note the contradiction between what Thompson wishes us to believe about Locke and the actual person.

Unlike Thompson and his mentor Harry Jaffa, Locke never expressed criticism of slavery. His first political legacy to the New World was the *Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina* (1669), which both protected slavery and made provisions for an aristocracy. Presumably, Locke had not consulted with Thompson or the Claremont Institute before he penned this document.

These observations are not intended to denigrate a 17th-century precursor of a later Western liberalism. But we should be aware of the folly of looking for representatives of our late modern politics in a much earlier time. Thompson's journalistic fans may wish to celebrate American progress toward a more perfect equality. They have every right to their personal preferences, which

they share in principle with the left. But they should not foist their fashions on 18th-century state-builders.