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REVIEW OF BOOKS

A Journal of Political Thought and Statesmanship

William
Voegeli:
**Politics after
Trump**

Michael
Barone:
**Hubert
Humphrey**

David P.
Goldman:
**The
Pentateuch**

Richard
Brookhiser:
**Benedict
Arnold**

Kevin D.
Williamson:
**Don't Mess
with Texas**

Trumpism, Nationalism, and Conservatism

ESSAY BY
Christopher DeMuth



Charles R.
Kesler:
**The Road
to 2020**

Mark
Bauerlein:
**Camille
Paglia**

Charles
Hill:
**State
Secrets**

Angelo M.
Codevilla:
**Yoram
Hazony**

Michael
Anton:
**Draining
the Swamp**



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Aristotle and America

A reader of Ken Masugi's review will miss, I fear, the originality and importance of Leslie Rubin's *America, Aristotle, and the Politics of a Middle Class* ("Can Aristotle Make America Great Again?" Fall 2018).

Yes, Masugi at the start and finish acknowledges the book's "estimable revival of republicanism" and its contribution to scholarship on "political friendship." He agrees, too, that "America's practice [at the founding] closely resembled Aristotle's theory." But the review never brings out the book's two remarkable achievements: a masterly analysis of Aristotle's thoughts on middle-class politics and morals (Part 1), and a demonstration that America's founders would foster something similar in order to moderate the excesses of rich and poor (Part 2). Rubin instructs about Aristotle and America, both. What unifies her book is her warm liking for America, especially decent and moderate Americans, and her fear of "polarization"—divisions that can lead to "despotism," whether demagogic

or oligarchic. Aristotle's political science could help rebalance our republic around a middle class that has recovered moral and political authority, especially in its own eyes.

Masugi sets forth a string of objections that dwell on America's distinctiveness: its work ethic, doctrine of rights (especially property rights), and the influence of the Bible. But Rubin sees the similarity, too, noting our framers' "improved science" of politics. The Americans she quotes insist that civic education attend to rights, to the economic virtues of industry and frugality, and to the Bible. But these same writers commend simpler mores and balancing the power of a middle class—with John Adams, for one, expressly praising Aristotle's account.

Nor are moderate and middling ways themselves as foreign to the patriotic "We're #1!" American pride, as Masugi claims. Aristotle himself insists that a middle-class republic is the best regime—with room enough for patriotic heroes and decent go-getters—and its citizens should pride themselves on being the best. Rubin's defense of free politics and clarification of its superiority to aristocracy is a high point of the book. It is a far cry from the corrosive libertarianism, doctrines of salutary transgressiveness, and anti-bourgeois egalitarianism all too fashionable and often dictated to the poorly educated and resentful by the expensively educated and contemptuous. Aristotle's case for middle-class power and morals can help steady a theoretically fevered and otherwise divided republic.

Misled, perhaps, by the academy's excesses, Masugi goes so far as to suggest that institutional civic education may not be necessary at all. But then he should welcome Rubin's richly

informed turn to Aristotle, who holds that moderate politics comes chiefly from middle-class lives—that is, from those with property enough to live decently, unlike an envious and expropriating poor, but not enough to be at leisure without work, unlike an arrogant and overreaching rich. But we also need citizens sufficiently enlightened about free government to resist the attractions of modern-day sophists, an education that Rubin's timely and deeply considered book could help restore.

Robert Faulkner
Boston College
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Ken Masugi replies:

My thanks to Robert Faulkner for his letter. It is humbling to be instructed by such an esteemed scholar and teacher. Yet, differences remain.

"Frequent recurrence to fundamental principles," as the Virginia Declaration of Rights puts it—and the spiritedness they invoke—is the key to reviving republican government today. Institutional solutions need to be reassessed in light of those principles, those of the Declaration of Independence. In seeking the common good, the republic Leslie Rubin described seemed to slight this virtue, so she tried to supply it from outside the people, from elite institutions. It doesn't work that way—neither the Harvard divines of the 17th and 18th centuries nor the idols of the 21st are the most fitting teachers of a free people.

I know I am not the only reader to be put off by Rubin's use of "middling" and "mediocrity" in her praise of the middle class. Her institutions of republican virtue might appear to be aristocratic but in practice they are oligarchic, or, as we say today, elitist

or anti-republican. But perhaps I overreact.

Politics is about the whole regime, not just parts combined, however cleverly. (When Republicans complain about "class warfare," they misconstrue the real issue—they aren't defending a class, after all).

Faulkner addresses some necessary, but not the sufficient, conditions of republicanism. His recommended modesty of economic desires can be caricatured into Nancy Pelosi's advice to enjoy unemployment for all the life opportunities it brings. Such imposed "moderation" by the administrative state and bad trade policies is what striving Americans elected President Trump to reject.

The more philosophic issue is that, while Aristotle's *politeia* or republic is about a middle class, it is even more about civic friendship or patriotism, a love by all for the polity's just and noble elements. (Recall that Aristotle's *Ethics* has "timocracy"—rule of honor, that is, inequalities—in place of republican polity in its study of regimes.) The republic is about the whole regime, about citizen-soldiers and fellow workers united together for the common good. It is not fundamentally about one class or part (*pace* John Adams), nor is it simply moderation of property in the largest class. In this way, Trump is a better Aristotelian than, say, Paul Ryan.

In the review I explicitly referenced Alexis de Tocqueville's civic associations. Even parts of academia do more good than harm. But the institutions of the founding era, including the greatest itself, the Constitution, need to be revived.

Finally, if anyone needs to be cut down to size, it is those "arrogant and overreaching... modern day sophists" (to quote Faulkner's letter), who impose

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political correctness and are the masters of the administrative state. The latter-day sophists may well be middle class or better, economically, and they may even recommend severe moderation—albeit mostly for others (telling them to carpool or take the bus). But they embody the hubris and oligarchy of falsehoods that is destroying republican government.

I'll add that I last saw Leslie Rubin in December 2016 when she gave a spirited talk about Aristotle and the elections. "This is a teacher!" I thought. She still is.

Jaffa's Vitality

In his typically perceptive way, Charles Kesler pays deserved honor to Harry V. Jaffa on the centennial of his birth ("Harry V. Jaffa at 100," Fall 2018).

Kesler describes Jaffa as a medieval, and notes that his first book was *Thomism and Aristotelianism*, though Jaffa later came to modify his original interpretation of Thomas Aquinas. At first, Kesler explains, he had "understood Aquinas to be trying to make Aristotle safe for Christianity. Now, he realized, Thomas had been trying to make Christianity safe for, i.e., compatible with, Aristotle."

It is interesting to compare this with Jaffa's more famous reconsideration, regarding Abraham Lincoln and the American Founders.

"[I]n 1959 I regarded the founders as condemning slavery from the perspective of a prudent form of modern natural rights," Jaffa wrote in an essay near the end of his life. "Now I believe that the prudent form of classical Aristotelianism was already present in the founding." The preeminent political virtue, he explained, cannot be divided between ancient and modern versions. "[P]rudence is singular," because "natural right and practical wisdom are virtually synonymous." One might say that Jaffa moved from making the founding safe for America (i.e., transforming an inadequate beginning into something new through Lincoln) to making America safe for the founding (i.e., reviving contemporary America's commitment to its classically prudent—and therefore fully adequate—origins).

These examples are emblematic of Jaffa's devotion to finding the harmonies—the "underlying unities" as he described them—within those things his teacher Leo Strauss had contrasted: reason and revelation, ancients and moderns, theory and practice. Of course, a complete philosophic education would make use of the insights derived from both separating and combining.

The great medieval thinkers—including not just Aquinas, but also Alfarabi and Maimonides—were not exactly ancient, nor were they exactly modern. In calling Jaffa a medieval defender of the Declaration's classically modern faith, Kesler highlights

Jaffa's project of bridging the gaps, and exploring the tectonic foundations that make natural right and practical wisdom virtually synonymous.

The dynamic heart of Western civilization found in the tensions—and harmonies—between Athens and Jerusalem was also the secret to Jaffa's own vitality.

Glenn Ellmers
Washington, D.C.

J. Eric Wise
Old Greenwich, CT

Racism at Home and Abroad

My thanks to William Voegeli for his brilliant essay on the new racism ("Racism, Revised," Fall 2018). I would like to offer a further perspective. I am a WASPish Canadian who has lived in South America and traveled in many countries. I have encountered a lot of nice people, and some who disliked me (explicitly) because of my skin color. In the Left's new paradigm that Mr. Voegeli describes such an attitude may be other than racist because, in North America, non-Hispanic whites have power. What about in Venezuela, or Tanzania, or China? Am I inherently racist, because of my skin color, when I am home in Vancouver, but non-racist on an

alternating basis depending on which cultural and political leaders have power as I move from place to place? Does the new radical framework for analysis go no further than the Harvard diversity officer's line of sight, or are the Left's deep thinkers ignoring the experience of a majority of the world's citizens?

Gordon Johnson
Vancouver, Canada

Telling the Truth about Communism

Waller R. Newell's review of *Lenin: The Man, the Dictator, and the Master of Terror* by Victor Sebestyen reminds us of the truth about Lenin's murderous reign over the nascent Soviet Union ("Lust for Destruction," Fall 2018). Progressives and Marxists—but I repeat myself—have sold the false notion that Communist rule under Lenin, precluding Stalin's access to power, would have produced a gentle, thoughtful government. They maintain that Communism has yet to be tried, ignoring all those dictators who followed Lenin and their predictable failures. A subscription to the *Claremont Review of Books* is of great assistance; your articles never become stale.

Frederick G. Huggins
Louisville, KY

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