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# Review of: The Liberal Republicanism of John Taylor of Caroline

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discussion about how and why Reform Judaism emerged (out of Charleston) (138–39).

Pencak includes a curious ten-page discussion of two novels by non-Jews on the Jews' "acceptance in the American novel" in the Philadelphia section. It reads out of place; he had already reached his goal of showing that antisemitism in the turbulent 1790s had given way to a climate of ease and acceptance most importantly enshrined in states' new—or newly amended—constitutions by the 1800s (what he calls "the Jeffersonian triumph").

Despite these shortcomings, Pencak offers important insights and descriptions, including the remarkable ways that Jews created mythologies about the colonial period as soon as it had passed, obscuring the tensions and conflicts of the lived experience, valorizing their own acceptance as if it was Whiggishly attained rather than a struggle to accomplish. The book has already undergone four reprints since its publication four years ago. His writing is superb, his stories engrossing, and his research unimpeachable. Perhaps most importantly, Pencak achieves his own aim: to place Jewish communities in the local contexts of colonies and city life, particularly in terms of Jews' engagements with non-Jews.

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*The Liberal Republicanism of John Taylor of Caroline.* By Garrett Ward Sheldon and C. William Hill, Jr. (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2008. Pp. 263. Cloth, \$54.40.)

*Reviewed by Johann N. Neem*

This review provides an opportunity to look back on the work of Garrett Ward Sheldon, who teaches political science at the University of Virginia's College at Wise. Sheldon has written books on the political philosophies of Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, and now, with C. William Hill, Jr., on John Taylor of Caroline.<sup>1</sup> Taken together, Sheldon's

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1. Sheldon, *The Political Philosophy of Thomas Jefferson* (Baltimore, 1991); Sheldon, *The Political Philosophy of James Madison* (Baltimore, 2001).

three books make two major claims. First, they all argue that classical republican ideas were invoked as means to sustain a liberal society, and therefore there is no theoretical tension between republicanism and liberalism. Sheldon and Hill call this framework “liberal republicanism.” Second, his books argue that the American ideal is local participatory democracy. John Taylor is best remembered by historians today for his republican critique of Hamiltonian federalism. He is considered a hostile critic of liberal modernity. In contrast, the authors argue, Taylor embraced liberalism’s assumption—most famously expressed by Locke—that human beings are born “free, equal, and independent.” To Taylor, Europe represented the past, where society remained divided into orders and one was born into one’s station. The promise of the United States was to liberate the individual from this past.

But this did not mean individual liberty was secure. Threats to individual liberty, to liberalism, emerged from every direction. Classical republicanism provided a language to understand this threat. To Taylor, as to Sheldon’s Jefferson and Madison, the Hamiltonians sought to centralize political power in order to serve the few instead of the many. But when Jefferson, Madison, and Taylor invoked the republican language of corruption, they did so in order to protect individual rights. Their common good was the expansion of individual liberty—Lockean liberalism—even if the threats were understood in classical terms.

There is a dramatic difference between Taylor’s liberal republicanism and that of Jefferson and Madison, however. As Sheldon makes clear in his earlier books, both Jefferson and Madison believed that the state must aid people in their enjoyment of their personal liberty. Madison argued that threats to individual liberty could come from local governments as well as distant ones—hence Madison’s evolution from nationalist to federalist to nationalist again after the War of 1812. Sheldon and Hill’s Taylor, on the other hand, does not seem to recognize the ways in which individual liberty requires active government. Hence, the authors are unable to overcome historians’ long connection between Taylor’s hostility to national government and his defense of states’ rights and slavery. Lacking Madison’s awareness that the states might also threaten individual liberty, Taylor actively defended the states against the nation, and actively protected slavery from federal interference.

To Jefferson and Taylor, individual rights depend on citizens’ control of their government. But Jefferson understood in ways that Taylor apparently did not that local democracy itself required cultivating the people’s

abilities. In his earlier work on Jefferson, Sheldon argued that Jefferson believed that before the people could govern themselves—and thus protect their natural Lockean rights—they needed the “substantive rights” necessary to enter deliberation—education, economic independence, and opportunity to shape one’s destiny via participation in government. “Put another way,” Sheldon concludes, “Jefferson’s theory implies the right to be free from inadequate education, degrading poverty, and bureaucratic fiat.”<sup>2</sup> Would Taylor have agreed with Jefferson that Locke’s natural man was socially cultivated? If not, Taylor’s understanding of government’s role in American society is vastly different from Jefferson’s. Sheldon and Hill do not provide any evidence of what positive role government might play in Taylor’s political thought.

Sheldon’s work has done historians of the early republic good service. It demonstrates that the fears and dangers we associate with the republican tradition were not incompatible with what we consider liberalism; they were necessary to it. If we are to have a society that values individual freedom and a government that protects it, we need citizens and leaders who can accomplish that job. But liberal freedom is fragile, as Americans then knew, in part because of their reading in the classical tradition and, in Madison’s (and John Adams’s, one might add) case, the Augustinian tradition as well. The question was how to protect freedom from its dangers and, here, the republican tradition offered answers: the importance of civic virtue and the dangers of concentrated power.

But Sheldon’s liberal republicanism has a contemporary political message. Sheldon’s works read together suggest that freedom should not be trusted to a distant central government. Only Sheldon’s Madison concluded that the distance of government matters less than what a government does. But with Madison, Sheldon equivocates, emphasizing not Madison’s nationalism but his distrust of human nature, originally learned under John Witherspoon at Princeton. Even at Madison’s most national moments, therefore, Sheldon focuses on Madison’s fear of power. Madison does not offer to Sheldon a clear political solution.

Sheldon’s works argue instead that only local democracy can protect freedom, despite the fact that local democrats have often created petty tyrannies of the majority. These are imposing burdens of history for Sheldon’s theory to overcome. But Sheldon and Hill note that the

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2. Sheldon, *Political Philosophy of Thomas Jefferson*, 146.

savings-and-loans scandals, the dotcom bubble, and the Enron scandals all reinforce John Taylor's claim that Americans ought to be distrustful of distant governments allied with financial elites. A small *d* democrat, Taylor fought not just against big government but big money (29–30, 224–25). In today's political culture, big government is often seen as a challenge to capitalist excesses; Sheldon's reading of Jefferson and Madison and, with Hill, of Taylor make clear that these three founders would have considered the current Republican big government—with its close ties to Halliburton and Enron—as great a threat to individual liberty as today's Republicans consider the New Deal and Great Society. John Taylor, Sheldon and Hill conclude, is not thinking like a Robert Nozick-inspired libertarian against a welfare state. Rather, his fear is “the Federal government transferring the wealth of the vast number of honest rural citizens to special interests in banking and manufacturing” (140).

At a time when citizenship has been reduced to consumption, and democratic freedom is being threatened by the government's close ties to capital, Sheldon and Hill may be right that Taylor has something important to teach us about the relationship between active citizenship and individual liberty. Certainly, Sheldon and Hill offer up a good place to start rethinking Taylor's place in the American political tradition.

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***Diplomaticheskaiia missiia Dzhona Kuinsi Adamsa v 1809–1814 godakh. Russko–amerikanskii politicheskie i kul'turnye sviazi nachala XIX veka.*** [The Diplomatic Mission of John Quincy Adams, 1809–1814. Russian–American Political and Cultural Connections at the Beginning of the 19th Century]. By Nataliia Iu. Suchugova. (Moscow: Rosspen, 2007. Pp. 263. Cloth, 185.00 rubles.)

*Reviewed by Lucien J. Frary*

Marking the 200th anniversary of Russian–American diplomatic relations, Nataliia Suchugova has produced the first book in Russian on John Quincy Adams. Polished in style and well researched, the work is a milestone in Russian–American studies and a fine representation of the