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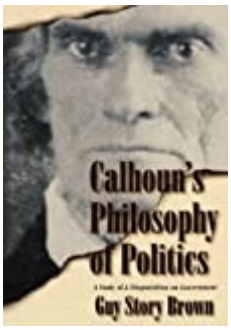

Guy Story Brown. *Calhoun's Philosophy of Politics: A Study of A Disquisition on Government.* Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2000. xi + 435 pp. $45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-86554-680-6.

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Calhoun as a Moral Philosopher

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In *Calhoun's Philosophy of Politics*, Guy Story Brown offers a close analysis of John C. Calhoun's *Disquisition on Government*. Calhoun is best known to scholars of American history as a leading exponent of the theory of nullification, and as an advocate of Southern sectional interests in the antebellum period. Calhoun began his career as an ardent nationalist, and came to national prominence as a War Hawk during the War of 1812. By the end of his career, however, he was identified with the doctrines of nullification and states' rights. He entered national politics as a Congressional representative for his home state of South Carolina in 1810, becoming Vice President in 1824. After the nullification crisis and his resignation from the Vice Presidency, Calhoun continued to play a leading role in national politics. It was during this period that he wrote both his *Disquisition on Government* and his *Discourse on the Constitution and Government of the United States*, which were published together in 1851, a year after his death. The most valuable contribution of Brown's book is in taking Calhoun seriously as a thinker and philosopher. While other scholars have emphasized the role of political and personal factors in Calhoun's intellectual development, Brown portrays Calhoun as a theorist whose ideas transcended contemporary political concerns.[1]

The unifying theme of Brown's analysis was Calhoun's belief in the primacy and value of politics. According to Brown, the governing assumption of Calhoun's *Disquisition* was the belief that man was by nature a political animal. And so, for Calhoun, government was not just a necessary evil, whose purpose was to restrain human vices. On the contrary, only through government–specifically constitutional government–could man fulfill his moral and intellectual capacities. For Calhoun, then, the ultimate end of government was the development of human reason and virtue. As Brown argues, in Calhoun's view, "Government is a positive good (p. 88)," and "[t]he perfection of political or human life is essentially a moral problem (p. 206)." Brown demonstrates that this theory of the purpose and function of government was premised on a dual view of human nature. On the one hand, Calhoun firmly believed that what defined and distinguished hu-

mans from other beings was reason. Even while recognizing the human capacity for virtue, however, Calhoun did not idealize human nature. Calhoun was well aware of the limitations on human reason. He feared, in particular, what he believed was a natural human propensity for conflict (p. 108). In sum, Brown suggests that for Calhoun, government served a dual purpose–it at once checked human failings, and furthered the development of man's higher capacities.

In Calhoun's view, governments themselves were vulnerable to the conflict of different interests. Once this happened, government would degenerate into tyranny and oppression. His solution to this problem was the idea of the concurrent majority. Calhoun differentiated between a numerical majority and the concurrent majority. Government by concurrent majority would be based on the consent of all the different interests in a community. A government that followed this principle would hold the community together by harmonizing and mediating between all of these conflicting interests. In turn, according to Story, "The constitutional or concurrent majority, while effectively preserving the whole community, also effectively promotes the perfection of the human moral and intellectual faculties" (p. 197). And so, one of the most important contributions of Brown's book is to demonstrate that Calhoun's theory of the concurrent majority was not just a device for protecting Southern sectional interests within the Union, or a way to safeguard minority rights in a democracy. Rather, this theory grew out of larger philosophical concerns about human nature and morality.[2]

Paradoxically, the strength of this book is also the source of its weakness. Brown goes too far in divorcing Calhoun from his social and political context, limiting the usefulness of his book for historians. One of the governing assumptions of Brown's analysis is that it is possible to understand Calhoun's ideas independent of Calhoun's background or his historical context. As Brown himself states, "*A Disquisition on Government* can be read and its principles grasped without ever having heard of John C. Calhoun. As in the case of astronomy, where the apparent centrality of earth itself must be seen and overcome as merely accidental to that science, it is accidental that the science of government is founded by an American or that that American is John Calhoun" (p. 6). The book thus explicates Calhoun's philosophy without explaining how or why it developed. We see little mention of slavery, Calhoun's sectional loyalties, or his sense of national identity, all of which contributed his development as a political thinker.

And while it is not Brown's purpose to explain the development of Calhoun's ideas, it is questionable whether we can fully understand the meaning of Calhoun's *Disquisition* without some attention to context, especially given the complexity and difficulty of this work. For example, when Calhoun spoke of "man" or human nature, whom did he mean exactly? Did he include women or African-Americans? Knowing more about Calhoun's context and background would help answer these questions. Given the patriarchal assumptions of Southern slavery and Calhoun's firm commitment to this institution, it is unlikely that he meant to include either of these groups. While it would be ahistorical to criticize Calhoun for such exclusions, it would be important for an understanding of his ideas to analyze these omissions and the function they served. Because Brown restricts his discussion to the text of the *Disquisition*, however, such questions barely come up in his analysis, receiving no more than a passing mention.[4]

Brown seems unwilling to tackle these questions partly because of his heroic view of Calhoun. While his sympathy for Calhoun gives him insight into Calhoun's intellectual vision and originality, it also makes him too uncritical of his subject. At one point, Brown describes Calhoun as possessing "in the highest degree," "superhuman talents, capacities, and labors" (p. 165). At such times, Brown reads too much like an apologist for Calhoun. More discussion of the limitations on or tensions in Calhoun's political thought would have enriched and deepened Brown's analysis, while greater attention to context would actually have strengthened his case for Calhoun's importance and distinctiveness as a political thinker. For example, one of the most interesting parts of his analysis is his discussion of Calhoun's concern with virtue. This discussion is significant in light of recent scholarship on the role of classical republicanism–with its emphasis on virtue–in American political culture. Had Brown delved further into the relationship between Calhoun and republican ideology, he could have both illuminated the debate over republicanism, and added to an understanding of Calhoun himself. Calhoun's concern with virtue was consistent with classical republican thought. At the same time, however, Calhoun was distinctive in arguing that the mechanism of a concurrent majority was necessary to promote and preserve virtue. In this way, Calhoun both departed from and reflected his context, and at once drew upon and modified republican ideals, demonstrating the complex and malleable character of those ideals.[5]

When Brown does leave the text to compare Cal-

houn to other philosophers–which he does periodically–he does not always make clear the larger significance of such a comparison. As a result, these references at times seem like digressions that muddy the coherence of his analysis, rather than illuminate his discussion of Calhoun. The structure of the book also makes Brown's argument difficult to follow. He spends most of the book offering essentially a paragraph by paragraph analysis of the *Disquisition*. Consequently, his discussion is often repetitive, and the reader becomes lost in the details of the text. Some of these problems could also be remedied by more careful editing–the flow of Brown's prose is marred by numerous typographical errors and overly convoluted sentences.

By pointing to Calhoun's larger philosophical purposes, Brown offers a valuable corrective to the perception of Calhoun as a reactionary particularist, concerned only with Southern sectional imperatives, or with the interests of the planter class. His work thus provides a useful resource for scholars wishing to take the next step in understanding Calhoun. Just as much of the recent scholarship on nationalism has demonstrated that national and sectional loyalties were not mutually exclusive, Calhoun's contemporary political concerns and his philosophical purposes were not necessarily incompatible with one another. And so, Brown's book, taken together with other studies of Calhoun, can be used to understand how Calhoun's political and philosophical concerns both intersected and conflicted with one another. In this way, scholars can use Calhoun to illuminate the complex relationship between the particular and the universal, the immediate and the transcendent.

[1]. For useful discussions of the historiography on Calhoun, see Richard R. John, "Like Father, Like Son: The Not-So-Strange Career of John C. Calhoun," *Reviews in American History* 23 (1995): 438-43; and Lacy K. Ford, Jr., "Toward a Divided Union," *Reviews in American History* 18 (1990): 349-56. Important studies of Calhoun include Charles M. Wiltse, *John C. Calhoun* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1944-51); John Niven, *John C. Calhoun and the Price of Union: A Biography* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988); and Irving H. Bartlett, *John C. Calhoun: A Biography* (New York: Norton, 1994).

[2]. On Calhoun's desire to use the notion of the concurrent majority to protect Southern slaveholding interests, see Richard N. Current, *John C. Calhoun* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1963). For the view of Calhoun as an advocate of minority rights, see Margaret Coit, _John C. Calhoun: American Portrait (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1950).

[3]. On Calhoun's commitment to slavery and the role that it played in his political thought, see Lacy K. Ford, Jr., "Republican Ideology in a Slave Society: The Political Economy of John C. Calhoun," *Journal of Southern History* 54 (1988): 405-24.

[4]. See Daniel T. Rodgers, "Republicanism: The Career of a Concept," *Journal of American History, 79 (1992): 11-38, for a useful overview of the debate over republicanism. For further discussion of the relationship between Calhoun and republican ideology, see Lacy K. Ford, Jr., "Inventing the Concurrent Majority: Madison, Calhoun, and the Problem of Majoritarianism in American Political Thought,"* Journal of Southern History_ 60 (1994): 19-58; and Ford, "Republican Ideology in a Slave Society," 405-24.

[5]. Works that emphasize the particularist and reactionary character of Calhoun's thought include Richard Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), 86-117; and Current, *John C. Calhoun.* On the compatibility between nationalism and sectionalism, and the complex relationship between these two tendencies, see, for example, David Potter, "The Historian's Use of Nationalism and Vice Versa," in *The South and Sectional Conflict* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1968), 34-83; and more recently, David Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes: The Making of American Nationalism, 1776-1820* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

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