

The Demon at the Center

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Ronald Reagan, the Movie and Other Episodes in Political Demonology. Michael Paul Rogin. University of California Press, Berkeley, Cal., 1987, Pp. xx, 366. \$25.00.

In the puzzle about whether there can be unconstitutional constitutional amendments, one can notice a problem inherent to all views of American politics. All understandings of the American polity presuppose a distinction between core and peripheral elements. The lawyer who believes that some amendments to the Constitution are unconstitutional, even though the new text satisfies all the procedural provisions of Article V, rests her case on the claim that the proposed amendment offends some fundamental value or principle of the Constitution. On the other hand, those who believe that any amendment that surmounts the hurdles of Article V is therefore constitutional are making the claim that procedure is the core of the Constitution.¹ The puzzle is no mere academic conundrum but rather an avenue into the meaning of America.

The larger literature of American political culture can be read, too, as an extended debate over the definition of America. Because students of political culture have addressed the question of collective identity explicitly, their work should be helpful to constitutional theorists, whose arguments regarding the defining elements of the polity often remain implicit. Moreover, by addressing collective identity as an explicit theme, one is led quickly to see more clearly the extra-constitutional aspects of America's constitutive thought.

Although it is difficult to characterize as a whole, much of the

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¹ For consideration of the problem of unconstitutional constitutional amendments, see, e.g., Walter F. Murphy, *An Ordering of Constitutional Values*, 53 S.Cal.L.Rev. 703, 754-757 (1980). See also Walter Dellinger, *The Legitimacy of Constitutional Change: Rethinking the Amendment Process*, 97 Harv.L.Rev. 386 (1983) (discussing the role of courts in policing the amendment process); Douglas Linder, *What in the Constitution Cannot Be Amended?*, 23 Ariz.L.Rev. 717 (1981); William F. Harris, II, *The Interpretable Constitution* (forthcoming).

literature on American political culture has been preoccupied with explaining the benign center of American politics while accounting for the irrational and malign character of the periphery. This American duality is often said to mark America as "exceptional," although the attributes of distinction and causes of it are continual sources of scholarly dispute. Some have traced the preoccupation with America's exceptional character to post World War II scholarly interests and popular fears of communism. Why is it, asked scholars from both the left and the right, that viable socialist movements have never taken root in America? Why has American politics been less ideological than that of other industrial nations?

These sorts of questions have inspired recent studies, but exceptionalism more broadly understood has a much longer legacy. Puritan settlers provided America with a political vocabulary drawn from the Bible emphasizing the country's providential design.² More secular political leaders from the Federalists through Lincoln noted that:

It has been frequently remarked that it seems to have been reserved to the people of this country, by their conduct and example, to decide the important question, whether societies of men are really capable or not of establishing good government from reflection and choice, or whether they are forever destined to depend for their political constitutions on accident and force. If there be any truth in the remark, the crisis at which we are arrived may with propriety be regarded as the era in which that decision is to be made; and a wrong election on the part we shall act may, in this view, deserve to be considered as the general misfortune of mankind.³

Exceptionalism remains a theme around which most accounts of American politics radiate today, whether or not that theme is specifically addressed. Whether explicit or not, much writing on the theme today is derivative of the exceptional thought of the founding in the sense that it exemplifies the secularized democratic Puritanism visible in more self-conscious form in colonial rhetoric. For example, Louis Hartz's well known account marks America as beholden to a special *history* free from feudal hierarchies.⁴ In Hartz's reading, this special history accounts for American consen-

² On this point, see especially Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad* (1978), and Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Puritan Origins of the American Self* (1975).

³ Federalist 1, in Clinton Rossiter, ed., *The Federalist Papers* 33 (1961).

⁴ Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America* (1955).

sus-style politics, free from the ideological divides that characterize so many European polities. The attention to the movement of history echoes the classic American preoccupation with a secularized Providence, and the focus upon consensus elaborates *The Federalist's* claim that America is democracy's test.

If the center is depicted as democratic in the accounts of consensus school historians and pluralist political scientists, the periphery is often portrayed as authoritarian, irrational, or in the phrase of Richard Hofstadter, "paranoid."⁵ Excluded groups are depicted as resentful of their status and irrationally fearful of the power of the cosmopolitan center to oppress them. For example, Joseph Gusfield analyzed the politics of the temperance movement as a product of the status anxiety of increasingly marginalized elites.⁶

The brilliant political scientist Michael Paul Rogin directly challenges all of these common theses of American political culture in a profoundly disturbing new book. In *Ronald Reagan, the Movie and Other Episodes in Political Demonology*,⁷ Rogin reverses conventional wisdom. He argues that the center of American politics is irrationally and malignly countersubversive, while the periphery is the locus of truly noble, not merely benign, American aspirations and attitudes. As Rogin states at the outset:

The aim of this book is to name and characterize a countersubversive tradition at the center of American politics [The] terms, *countersubversive tradition* and *political demonology*, are not in common discourse. I use them to call attention to the creation of monsters as a continuing feature of American politics by the inflation, stigmatization, and dehumanization of political foes. (p. xiii).

Rogin does not offer a new history, chronologically presented. Instead, he presents a series of essays to illuminate the thesis from several angles. He treats competing conceptions of American politics in essays on political repression and pluralist group theory, as well as in an acute retrospective essay that concludes the book while it summarizes Rogin's career.⁸ The relation of Indians,

⁵ Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays* 3-40 (1979).

⁶ Joseph Gusfield, *Symbolic Crusade* (1963).

⁷ Michael Paul Rogin, *Ronald Reagan, the Movie and Other Episodes in Political Demonology* (1987). All parenthetical page references are to this work.

⁸ Rogin's major publications include: *The Intellectuals and McCarthy* (1967); *Fathers and Children: Andrew Jackson and the Subjugation of the American Indian* (1975); and

blacks, and women to the American center are the subjects of several chapters. The countersubversive significance of the presidency is the subject of two essays. Finally, the book gains its title from one of three essays devoted to demonological themes in American cinema, a form especially suited, he argues, to countersubversive stratagems. (One of the cinematic chapters is on Reagan, another is on Cold War movies, the third, and perhaps the finest essay in the book, is on D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*.)

It is impossible to summarize, let alone do justice to, the richness of these essays in a review such as this. One can nonetheless illustrate the significance of Rogin's essays with additional contrasts of his views and conventional perspectives on the American polity.

For example, the study of excluded groups is not itself a new project. Numerous studies point to their existence and argue for their inclusion in a fully American history. Rogin, however, focuses not so much on the excluded groups themselves as on the center—on the leaders and groups that do the excluding. To be sure, many scholars have been interested in the processes of political exploitation. But the materialist basis of most work with this theme precludes examination of the semi-autonomous power of political ideas. Says Rogin:

The American economy exploited peoples of color, but American racial history is not reducible to its economic roots. A distinctive American political tradition that was fearful of primitivism and disorder developed in response to peoples of color. That tradition defines itself against alien threats to the American way of life and sanctions violent and exclusionary responses to them. (p. 45).

On the other hand, Rogin contends, scholarship that *has* been most sensitive to the political significance of thought and ideology has incorrectly identified the truly constitutive ideas. For example, recent attempts to resurrect and amplify a "republican" tradition in American political discourse have failed to see the true significance of American's Puritan origins. "Whatever the power of the classical tradition for eighteenth-century revolutionaries and constitution makers, . . . republicanism has made a smaller contribution to the peculiarly American form of liberal nationalism than has the conjunction of Protestant Christianity with American westward expansion" (p. 283). Rather than view America through the

lens of European categories, Rogin urges us to seek a truly indigenous angle of vision.

Although my work . . . stresses the importance of communal aspirations, it does so not by searching for corporate alternatives to liberal individualism but by examining communal and autarkic wishes within it. Instead, therefore, of seeking a place to stand inside America that is derived from the tradition of English Puritans, European republicans, or Scottish common-sense philosophers, my ground is the critical analysis of liberalism itself. (p. 281).

To probe the interior of American liberalism, Rogin explores its psychology. The dominant center does not merely exploit the periphery; it defines and reveals its inner uncertainty through manipulation of marginal groups. The countersubversive's construction of excluded peoples as conspiring to overthrow the center speaks less to the political place of the periphery than it does to the character of the center. For example,

Responses to the Indians point to the mixture of cultural arrogance and insecurity in the American history of counter-subversion. The identity of a self-making people, engaged in a national, purifying mission, may be particularly vulnerable to threats of contamination and disintegration. The need to draw rigid boundaries between the alien and the self suggests fears of too dangerous an intimacy between them. (p. 50).

Rogin patiently moves beyond the exercise of unmasking the center's false claims about the periphery. It is the meaning of these ascriptions rather than their immediate effects that deserves the attention of those interested in the problem of collective identity. Seen this way, the construction of the periphery as subversive and threateningly malign is not merely the unjust act of the powerful, but is rather an aspect of that power. Or as Rogin states, it is "America's dark double":

The alien comes to birth as the American's dark double, the imaginary twin who sustains his (or her) brother's identity. Taken inside, the subversive would obliterate the American; driven outside, the subversive becomes an alien who serves as repository for the disowned, negative American self. The alien preserves American identity against fears of boundary collapse and thereby allows the countersubversive, now split from the subversive, to mirror his foe. (p. 284).

Rogin's psychological insights are the great strength of the

book. They are also its small weaknesses. When Rogin discusses the psychologies of particular men as windows upon the culture that honors them—D.W. Griffith, Ronald Reagan, or Abraham Lincoln, for example—his observations are both probing and politically acute. At several junctures, however, Rogin claims to be interested not in the cultural resonance of individual psychologies but rather in the individual personalities themselves (see, e.g., p. 293). We are treated to fascinating but politically irrelevant details about Griffith's and Reagan's personal lives.

Even when focused directly on the political realm, Rogin's masterful application of psychological and interpretive insights is stronger in its critique of the legitimacy and self-definition of the American center than it is in articulating its own theory of legitimate rule (perhaps the subject for another book). For example, following Tocqueville, Rogin shows clearly that the destruction of native American Indians was the inevitable result of American "liberalism." Both the image of the Indian as monstrous and as noble savage

appropriated Indians for white purposes. Both made the Indians children of nature instead of creators and inhabitants of their own cultures. Both ignored Indian agriculture and depicted a tribalism that menaced private property and the family. Neither the noble nor the devilish savage could coexist with the advancing white civilization. Both images rationalized the dispossession of the tribes. (p. 46).⁹

Left implicit in Rogin's keen analysis is the non-liberal (or improved liberal) polity from whence this kind of critique can be launched. Put another way, Rogin's preferred polity seems to rest on liberal tolerance at the same time that it eschews liberal American culture. How would it work?

An unintended irony also suffuses this book. After learning that the center imitates the periphery that it constructs, one begins to wonder about the extent to which Rogin's new construction—the countersubversive—is Rogin's own dark double. There may be no more lucid "conspiracy theorist" writing today than Rogin, who ascribes coherence, coordination, and almost supernatural powers to a reconstructed center led by elites who have maintained a two century-old conspiracy. One need not be a naive positivist to wonder whether something may be amiss when everything

⁹ See Alexis de Tocqueville, *1 Democracy in America* 316-407 (J.P. Mayer, ed. 1969), and Ralph Lerner, *The Thinking Revolutionary* (1987) chs. 4, 5.

Reagan says or does not say confirms the thesis that he is the apotheosis of the countersubversive tradition.

Unlike the utterances of a countersubversive, however, Rogin's reflections are full of wit. Indeed, the provocative partisan bite of these essays along with their elegant and humorous style make them a delight to read. *Ronald Reagan, the Movie* is the culmination of an ambitious project to reinterpret the major strands of American political culture. Given such scope, it need only be partially successful (and it is surely that at least) to be one of the best books on American politics published in the last decade.