

John G. Grove. *John C. Calhoun's Theory of Republicanism.* Lawrence, Kansas: University of Kansas Press, 2016. 213 pp. (\$37.50 cloth).

John G. Grove's *John C. Calhoun's Theory of Republicanism* is an attempt to situate John Calhoun as a political theorist in the classical republican tradition. While Grove's treatment is impressive and his writing clear and logical, he does not quite prove his thesis.

Grove posited that his study of Calhoun was necessary because Calhoun's ideas had previously been treated unfairly. No one had seriously considered Calhoun's complete arguments. Many commentators had just been dismissive based on a few selective citations. And there was no consensus on which theoretical camp Calhoun represented (pp. 1-16).

Grove's study centers on a close reading of Calhoun's *Disquisition* and *Discourse*. He found that Calhoun's emphasis on promoting a virtuous citizenry in a stable community reflected the classical republican tradition. Calhoun posited the rights of the community over the rights of individuals, rejecting the liberal/Enlightenment view of individual rights. Instead Calhoun argued that individuals only had rights within particular communities, and these communities were a product of a long historical development. Here Grove found Edmund Burke's refuting utopian French ideas that ignored historical progress having an influence on Calhoun (pp. 17-57, 124-31). Likewise, Calhoun viewed abolitionist arguments as similar to the destructive ideas of radical French philosophers (pp. 139-56).

As Grove noted, Calhoun used his concurrent majority argument as a mechanism to protect historical communities from an abusive foreign force (read the Federal Government) brought into power by a decadent numerical majority. Every intact community (the States) should have the ability to veto acts of this abusive majority. Calhoun's eventual goal was compromise between all such interests and communities to secure the truly common good and preserve the union. In this chapter Grove provides an excellent discussion of nullification within American history (pp. 92-123).

Calhoun's writings have received a pretty thorough treatment, but perhaps what is unique about Grove's version is that he sought to separate Calhoun's political theory from the growing controversy over slavery. Calhoun is usually assumed to have used his concurrent majority argument to justify protecting Southern slaveholders. Grove instead argued that Calhoun's political theories could stand on their own without regard to the slavery issue. Grove found that Calhoun had held to classical republican theories long before slavery became such a divisive issue (pp. 58-78). Grove even thought that Calhoun's defense of slavery contradicted his essential theories. Thus Grove positioned Calhoun as a political theorist who happened also to be a slaveholder and a defender of "paternalistic" Southern slavery (pp. 170-74). This is where Grove's argument, however, seems to break down.

Grove discusses Calhoun's ideas in a bit of a vacuum, as if Calhoun were a contemplative political theorist proposing grand and serious ideas. While Grove does include a brief discussion on Calhoun's defense of slavery, this is at the end of the treatment and is relatively unrelated to the rest of Grove's analysis (pp. 157-75). This, however, is a serious problem. Calhoun was not an island, and he certainly was not an idealistic political thinker removed from the ongoing political controversy. Other contemporary defenders of slavery had preceded

Calhoun in arguing that men had no natural rights and that maintaining stability and order of the community was more important than the rights of the individual (William Harper, "Slavery in the Light of Social Ethics," 1837, in Mason, 1985, p. 460-62). Calhoun, then, must be read in this context, not as a unique and independent thinker. Grove neglects to do this.

All of this being said, Grove is correct that Calhoun argues some profound points. Certain minority interests do need protection from potential abuse of majority rule. This is a theme of the *Federalist Papers*. In *Federalist* 10, for example, Madison suggested, contrary to classical republicanism, that republican government would be improved by enlarging the territory beyond the local community, bringing into play many more interests to prevent any one interest from domination. Calhoun, however, apparently found this to have failed, especially with the rise of political parties which were not created to promote compromise but to secure only the rights of their partisans at the expense of the losers (pp. 79-91). This is a useful topic of discussion, but again Grove failed to consider both the contemporary discussions opposed to the rise of political parties and the academic analysis on this issue (Hofstadter, 1969).

Overall, Grove's *John C. Calhoun's Theory of Republicanism* is a good read. It includes a useful, thorough discussion of Calhoun's theories. But the lack of properly situating Calhoun by considering relevant contemporary writings is a serious omission. After a century in which the powers of the Federal Government seem to have expanded with few limits, some of Calhoun's ideas might have significance today.

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References

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- Mason, Alphaeus Thomas and Gordon E. Baker, eds., *Free Government in the Making: Readings in the American Political Tradition*, 4th ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985.