

## *Calhoun and his Critics*

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John C. Calhoun's commentary on American politics raised the most important issues of the American experience. Yet, many of the implications of his thought are neglected, and his legacy remains an issue of intense debate. Unlike normal patterns of criticism, in which early critiques are disputed by subsequent revisions based on new research, reassessments of Calhoun as a political thinker have not benefited from subsequent reevaluations. Instead, the original disputes that arose during his lifetime continue among contemporary historians and political theorists, although with greater complexity and without consensus.

While there are many studies of Calhoun's political theory, they tend to neglect his interpretation of popular rule, and his connection with the Founding Fathers's political theory. However, Calhoun's articulation of the Southern republican worldview facilitated an advancement in political life and the survival of the republic. His understanding of political experience figures most prominently in his worldview, and distinguishes his political theory during the Age of Jackson. His "principles" provide the philosophical foundation for a theory of politics that opposes personal and societal restraint to imprudent modification and dissension. Precisely because Calhoun's understanding of political restraint was more important to his own understanding than to the perpetuation of any particular regime,<sup>1</sup> he remains an important political philosopher.

Most academic works portray Calhoun as a source of disruption,

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1. "I would do any thing for Union, except to surrender my principles." in "Letter to Bolling Hall," February 13, 1831, in John C. Calhoun, *The Papers of John C. Calhoun*, Clyde Wilson ed., Vol. XI (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1981), p. 553. Hereafter, cited as *Papers*.

rather than as an important contributor to the American political tradition. Many rely on previous scholarship, without examining Calhoun as a political thinker. One tendency is to approach Calhoun studies from the standpoints of critics, who consider him to be a conservative, a pluralist, a radical, a class theorist, or a classical republican,<sup>2</sup> while another is to consider his thinking in terms of rigid “paradigms” or interpretative models. Clyde Wilson, editor of Calhoun’s *Papers*, has summarized the predicament in this way: “The literature does not so much progress as go round in circles, and large gaps remain in our knowledge. Nor can it be assumed that recent literature is in any sense more reliable than older writing.”<sup>3</sup> Perhaps the best way to address this predicament is to go back to the original sources of Calhoun’s political thinking.

More than any figure in the first half of the 19th century, Calhoun was aware of the true sources of disruption in American politics. He often lamented the movement of political life toward the extremes of the theoretical or the practical, and away from the need for thoughtful statecraft. His concern took the form of a plea for a combination of the two, and he often bemoaned the subordination of one to the other; all too frequently, the practical assumed priority over the theoretical: “It was much to be regretted that the all absorbing question among the people was, not whether great fundamental principles should be established or overthrown, but who should be President.”<sup>4</sup> Consequently, Calhoun was also one of the most prominent figures in American political history. The many appellations used to describe him — from the “young Hercules” of the War of 1812 to the “cast iron man” of his later life — have tended to distract attention from a rigorous understanding and appreciation of his contribution to American political thought.<sup>5</sup>

### *The Liberal Response*

The plethora of works on Calhoun remains overshadowed by the influence of Richard Hofstadter’s essay on Calhoun in *The American*

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2. For a fair account of the “categories,” see Carson Wilson, “John C. Calhoun and the American Political Tradition,” a paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Southern Political Science Association, Tampa, Florida (November 1991).

3. Clyde Wilson, *John C. Calhoun: A Bibliography* (Westport, Connecticut: Meckler, 1990), pp. 2-3.

4. “Remarks at Montgomery, Alabama,” May 8, 1841, in Calhoun, *Papers*, Vol. XV, p. 536.

5. See Margaret L. Coit, ed., *Great Lives Observed: John C. Calhoun* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1970), pp. 68-84.

*Political Tradition*, and Louis Hartz's treatment of Calhoun in *The Liberal Tradition in America*, arguably the two most widely read books in American political thought during the postwar era.<sup>6</sup> Both Hofstadter and Hartz worked within a framework that Michael Sandel has described as "deontological liberalism," which reaches back to Kant for inspiration, and emphasizes the rights of the individual over the good of society.<sup>7</sup> In perspective, both works are authentic liberal responses to the scholarship of an earlier generation of deterministic and egalitarian assessments of American political thought, namely the writings of Vernon Parrington, Charles Beard, and Charles Merriam. Hofstadter and Hartz presented John Locke as the progenitor of American liberalism, which triggered a revolution in the understanding of the American political tradition.

Neither Hofstadter nor Hartz particularly liked Locke: Hofstadter rejected Locke's materialism, and Hartz considered Locke's ideological "tyranny" to be the destructive force behind all of America's contemporary problems.<sup>8</sup> However, by emphasizing Locke's influence on American political thought, both Hofstadter and Hartz set the stage for later scholars to promote Locke as an American Solon. The tension between Hofstadter's desire to recover a lost liberalism, uncorrupted by the cast of characters he offers, and Hartz's desire to move beyond Locke to a statist "Americanism" actually promoted the invention of a Lockean founding of American political theory.<sup>9</sup> In a sense, the similarity between the individualism and radical majoritarianism of Lockean liberalism, decried by Hofstadter and Hartz, became the inspiration for contemporary liberalism; instead of providing a critique of Locke, these works present a "Manchesterian" liberal America examined through the lens of contemporary liberalism, and without any convincing alternatives.

Neither Hofstadter nor Hartz were able to assess Locke's true influence on American political theory, because they preferred to present Locke as the fountainhead of the maladies of liberal society.<sup>10</sup> Both could

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6. Richard Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1948; New York: repr. Vintage Books, 1973); and Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1955; repr. Harvest/HBJ, 1983).

7. Michael J. Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982), pp. 1 and 15-18.

8. Hartz, *op. cit.*, pp. 8 and 62.

9. Hartz, *op. cit.*, p. 260.

10. For a correction to Hofstadter and Hartz, albeit from a perspective that seeks to identify Locke as the authoritative source of a practical liberalism, see Ruth Grant, *John Locke's Liberalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), especially pp. 198-205.

have benefited from a closer reading of Calhoun, who acknowledged the strengths and weaknesses of Locke's influence on American political theory throughout his life.<sup>11</sup> For example, Calhoun considered Locke's presentation of an unburdened and egalitarian humankind in a state of nature to be a "hypothetical" possibility, but argued that a society founded on such a premise would be "opposed to the constitution of man."<sup>12</sup> In his view, the political order required a richer ground. Both Hofstadter and Hartz were opposed to an organic political community, which for Calhoun was the cradle of social and political life, even with all its foibles and dissimilarities. This explains why both Hofstadter and Hartz were unable to apprehend the foundation of the worldview that nurtured Calhoun's political theory. Instead, Hofstadter focused on Calhoun's penchant for isolation and independent study, and Hartz, following a very different path, offered a plea of sorts for a unitary communitarianism as a means of overcoming the ambivalences and complexities of organic social life.<sup>13</sup>

Both Hofstadter and Hartz sought to impose a social and political structure on society, while Calhoun saw community and society as preceding the state. For Calhoun, the South (and, to some degree, also the North) was a collection of communities, constituted and defined by the people, which allowed for a great deal of autonomy and liberty: "The Southern states are an aggregate, in fact, of communities, not of individuals. Every plantation is a little community, with the master at its head, who concentrates in himself the united interests of capital and labor, of which he is the common representative."<sup>14</sup> There really was no life outside of community. The possessive individualism of modern liberalism was not even contemplated by Calhoun or his contemporaries, except in a few nascent pockets of industrialism in the North. With the emerging conflicts between labor and capital, Calhoun found solace in the harmony so prominent in Southern society.<sup>15</sup> He thought the disputes that would come to dominate the industrial revolution might be reduced if the community was

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11. See Calhoun, *Papers*, Vol. XIII, p. 353 (on revolution); Calhoun, *Papers*, *op. cit.*, Vol. XVII, p. 285; and John C. Calhoun, *The Works of John C. Calhoun*, ed. Richard K. Crallé, Vol. IV (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1857), p. 509. Hereafter, cited as *Works*.

12. "Speech on the Oregon Bill," June 27, 1848, *ibid.*, Vol. IV, pp. 509 and 510.

13. Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition*, *op. cit.*, p. 94; Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America*, *op. cit.*, p. 56.

14. "Further Remarks in Debate on His Fifth Resolution," in Calhoun, *Papers*, *op. cit.*, Vol. XIV, p. 84.

15. Calhoun, *Works*, *op. cit.*, Vol. IV, p. 360.

preserved as the basis of society. In general, it is Hofstadter's and Hartz's failure to note the centrality of community and its importance for Calhoun's political theory that hinders their overall appreciation of his contribution to political theory.

For Hofstadter, Calhoun was the precursor of a Marxist, class-based theory of economic and political life. He portrays Calhoun as promoting the upper strata of society, the planter-capitalist class, against the peasantry, the workers, and the slaves. He goes so far as to argue that Calhoun's only concern was for "class," without any interest in the protection of slaves or the less fortunate.<sup>16</sup> Accepting Charles Wiltse's outmoded description of Calhoun's political theory as a progression from an early nationalism, to a mid-life promotion of regional interests, and finally, to a sectional defender, Hofstadter characterizes Calhoun as a "brilliant, if narrow dialectician," who did not understand the implications for greater movements within American society. According to this view, Calhoun's central failure was his inability to appreciate the success of Northern industrialism and wage labor. To the degree that Calhoun accepted the merits of economic growth, he presumably sought to manipulate this expansion of the economy as a means of aligning Northern capitalists with Southern agrarian leaders. Calhoun could see the future, but could not appreciate the ramifications of such a vision for his homeland.

Actually, Calhoun praised improvements in limiting the control government exerted over commerce, and he believed that American economic success hinged on "a free exchange of our products with the rest of the world."<sup>17</sup> Tariffs of one variety or another, a staple of American politics during his political career, were the most dangerous by-product of the government's involvement in the economic sphere. The increase of revenue from tariffs was quickly consumed by a growing rank of career politicians, who became leeches on the body politic. Their lifeblood was the burgeoning patronage system. Calhoun's political theory was based on a recognition of the value of a free exchange of goods, a republican notion of political liberty, and the need for social restraint. All of these elements could come to fulfillment only within the setting of the organic community, which served as the basis for preventing the degradation of the lower classes, and functioned as an all-encompassing safety net for the larger society. The Whig "American system," with all its accouterments, was the embodiment of government-sponsored economic activity antithetical to

16. Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition*, *op. cit.*, p. 116.

17. Calhoun, *Papers*, Vol. XIII, *op. cit.*, p. 272.

the deeper needs of the community and to the promotion of the virtuous civic culture that Calhoun cherished. Hofstadter's image of Calhoun as the "Marx of the Master Class" pales by comparison with Calhoun the statesman who, amidst the great battle over tariffs and other issues during the special Congressional session of 1841, led the struggle against the "great overruling moneyed power" seeking to "reduce the rest of the community to servitude."<sup>18</sup> In reality, the oligarchic revolution that Hofstadter considered to be the fulfillment of Calhoun's political theory was not promoted, but rather opposed by the Carolinian.

If Hofstadter fails to appreciate the organic and systematic nature of Calhoun's theoretical work, Hartz portrays Calhoun as the representative of a self-contradictory worldview. For Hartz, Calhoun was a disjointed Burkean defender of an organic society, colored by Lockean notions of individual rights, and further complicated by the requirement to defend a slave society. He suggests that the combination of Locke's wisdom and Sir Walter Scott's romanticism resulted in a "profoundly disintegrated political theorist,"<sup>19</sup> and concludes that Calhoun suffered from "intellectual madness."<sup>20</sup> According to Hartz, Calhoun was a second-generation *philosophe*, who provided "a scheme of man-made instruments that the French Enlightenment in its palmiest days never dared to develop."<sup>21</sup> As a political theorist, he allegedly was closer to the anarchism of William Godwin than to the republicanism of the Founding Fathers. But, in reality, Hartz's Calhoun never existed. Rich in metaphor and association, his portrayal lacks an adequate comprehension of Calhoun's attachment to community and, ultimately, to liberty.

In all of American political thought, no major thinker was less inclined to the excesses of European romanticism than Calhoun, with the possible exception of John Adams.<sup>22</sup> Throughout his life, Calhoun was a proponent of the federal union, albeit as originally outlined. Disruptions of the social order were to be avoided, if possible, and the concept of

18. "Remarks on the Goochland County Resolutions," August 20, 1841, in Calhoun, *Papers*, *op. cit.*, Vol. XV, p. 703.

19. Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America*, *op. cit.*, pp. 158-159.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 166.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 161. Lacy K. Ford incorrectly suggests that Hartz views Calhoun as a "very modern conservative." Hartz argues that Calhoun was a proponent of the "Reactionary Enlightenment," who could not overcome the limits of traditional liberalism in "Republican Ideology in a Slave Society: The Political Economy of John C. Calhoun," in *Journal of Southern History*, Vol. LIV, No. 3 (August 1988), p. 408; and Hartz, *op. cit.*, pp. 173-174).

22. Calhoun, *Papers*, Vol. XI, *op. cit.*, p. 468; on romanticism, see Irving Babbitt, *Rousseau and Romanticism* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1991).

revolution was defined as an effort directed toward recovering a lost or neglected aspect of popular government. Foremost among the historical influences on Calhoun was the English model of popular rule, and he often emphasized the importance of that tradition: "to them we are indebted for nearly all that has been gained for liberty in modern times."<sup>23</sup> When Calhoun used revolutionary jargon, as in the case of the debate over removing the Senate's censure of President Jackson in 1835, he argued for restoration of a damaged or lost notion of political order. Usually, the alternatives for a flawed regime were framed in terms of revolution, signifying a recouping of sorts, or a reformation, a pragmatic emendation of the existing structure of political participation or governing.<sup>24</sup> In fact, Calhoun's defense of the older idea of revolution supports the assessment of him as one of the last proponents of an ancient understanding of the corrigibility of regimes.<sup>25</sup> Calhoun's idea of revolution corresponded to the English and American examples so well known to his generation, but his remarkable exegesis of the texts and his participation in the translation of the theoretical and philosophical heritage encourage consideration of him as a seminal political thinker.

### *A New Science of Politics?*

Among the successors to Hofstadter and Hartz, Richard Current is perhaps the most acerbic. His importance lies not in his contribution, but in his remarkable attachment to the shibboleths of previous scholarship. In an influential article published early in his career, followed by a book-length expansion of the main themes, Current claims that Calhoun's "ghost" influences all aspects of Southern political thought.<sup>26</sup> Most of his arguments simply replicate Hofstadter's, although he also explicates Calhoun's political works at some length. For Current, Calhoun reduced the design of the regime to one purpose: the protection of slavery.<sup>27</sup> Like

23. *Ibid.*, Vol. XIII, p. 98.

24. "Remarks on the Alabama Expunging Resolutions," January 28, 1835, in *ibid.*, Vol. XII, p. 406 ["I say boldly things are now come to such a crisis that no alternative is left but reformation or revolution"].

25. The modern revolution usually is understood to be a progression toward a new stage of understanding not hitherto imagined. A prominent representative of such an approach is Mao Tse-tung: "Do not stop half way and do not ever go backward." Quoted in Frederic Wakeman, Jr., *History and Will* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), p. 275).

26. Richard Nelson Current, "John C. Calhoun, Philosopher of Reaction," in *Antioch Review* 3 (1943), pp. 223-234, and *John C. Calhoun* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1963).

27. Current, *John C. Calhoun, op. cit.*, p. 83.

many others, Current attempts to use slavery as a means of distracting students of Calhoun's political thought from a more complete examination of his work and its continuing importance to American politics. Defending slavery was not the touchstone of Calhoun's political thought. Although he offered a moderate defense of slavery, viewing the situation to be part of a larger discussion of the evolving nature of Southern society, it was neither the most important nor the most consuming aspect of his political thought. He believed that the slavery problem would resolve itself over time, but the need to preserve the republic and to improve the citizenry's understanding of the republic's foundational elements were of greater importance.<sup>28</sup> The predominant theme of Calhoun's life and work was the proper constitution of popular rule, "the primary principles of our Government, of which the right of self-government is the first; the right of every people to form their own government, and to determine their political condition. . . . for the cause of liberty."<sup>29</sup>

Current's unusual presentation of Calhoun as an obstacle to world peace,<sup>30</sup> and to the rights of minorities,<sup>31</sup> demonstrates a reluctance to consider the depth of Calhoun's political thought, with its emphasis on consensual rule, which is of great importance to regions where increasing social and political conflict has prevented the establishment of a governing authority.<sup>32</sup> Contrary to Current's notion that minorities cannot benefit from Calhoun's insight, Calhoun's defense of minority rights remains an evocative, if misunderstood aspect of his work. In fact, the use of Calhoun's political theory by minority groups has revived in recent years, encouraging the need for a thorough presentation of his thought, especially the *Disquisition* and the *Discourse*.<sup>33</sup>

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28. "Speech on the Treaty of Washington," in Calhoun, *Papers, op. cit.*, Vol. XVI, p. 406.

29. "Second Speech on the Bill for the Admission of Michigan," January 5, 1837, in *ibid.*, Vol. XIII, p. 342.

30. Current, "John C. Calhoun, Philosopher of Reaction," *op. cit.*, p. 234.

31. Current, *John C. Calhoun, op. cit.*, p. 147.

32. Arend Lijphart, "Majority Rule Versus Democracy in Deeply Divided Societies," in *Politikon*, Vol. 4., No. 2 (December 1977), pp. 113-126; and Ronnie W. Faulkner, "Taking John C. Calhoun to the United Nations," in *Polity*, Vol. 15 (Summer 1983), pp. 473-491.

33. For example, an American professor of political science who studied in Washington during the 1960s once came upon "black power" theorist Stokely Carmichael reading a copy of the *Disquisition*. Cf. the interview with Donald S. Lutz, November 6, 1993, Houston, Texas; and for another version, see Donald Lutz, *Preface to American Political Theory* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1992), p. 11.



For Current and many others who share an attachment to this understanding of Calhoun, the statesman was a devotee of Enlightenment rationalism, serving as a prophet of a new age of political experimentation and analysis. A number of studies place Calhoun among the radical defenders of a "new science of politics," making him the precursor to modern positivism and "today's behavioral political science."<sup>34</sup> Current even suggests that Calhoun considered himself to be "the Newton, the Galileo" of politics.<sup>35</sup> However, the most influential of these reassessments is Ralph Lerner's work, which recognizes the need for caution and exhibits an uneasiness in placing Calhoun among the more extreme American adherents to the Enlightenment: "Calhoun's science is not to be mistaken for an ethics or a particularistic empiricism or an arid 'scholastic refinement'; but it may be called metaphysics, if by that we mean as he did the mind's power of reducing a complexity to its elements and combining these into a harmonious system."<sup>36</sup> The problem for Lerner lies more in Calhoun's movement from the ascribed "metaphysical" abstractions and his general "scientific" theorems to the practical application of these ideas.<sup>37</sup> The critique he offers depends entirely on the more theoretical presentation found in the *Disquisition*, and does not make any attempt to examine the *Discourse*, which provides insight into the role of the practical in Calhoun's thought.

To Lerner's credit, he poses an important question: if Calhoun was a political theorist, and his work was truly "philosophical," could it be assimilated with a tradition concentrating on the practical? The answer is obviously yes. In anticipation of such a response, Lerner and other Calhoun

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34. Ralph Lerner, "Calhoun's New Science of Politics," in *American Political Science Review*, Vol. XVII, No. 4 (December 1963), p. 931. While Lerner represents the most thoughtful and philosophically disciplined of this "school" of critics, others who should be included in considering this approach to Calhoun are James D. Clarke, Harry V. Jaffa, and Robert Jeffrey. In his more recent work, Lerner seriously misrepresents Calhoun's attitude toward Native Americans as being nearly synonymous with those of Andrew Jackson in *The Thinking Revolutionary: Principle and Practice in the American Republic* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), pp. 162-163). For a corrective, see Calhoun, *Papers*, *op. cit.*, Vol. XIII, p. 436, Vol. XIII, p. 453, Vol. XIV, p. 279, and Vol. XV, p. 492.

35. Current, *John C. Calhoun*, *op. cit.*, p. 110.

36. Lerner, *The Thinking Revolutionary*, *op. cit.*, p. 918.

37. Calhoun described his study as a "science of government." See "A Disquisition on Government," in *Union and Liberty: The Political Philosophy of John C. Calhoun*, ed. by Ross M. Lence (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1992), p. 5. Hereafter, cited as *Disquisition*. Contrary to the implication that he attempted an esoteric stratagem, Calhoun followed a pattern common among American political thinkers. Publius, for example, made use of science to connote the thorough study of a particular concern in *The Federalist* 8, 9, 18, 25, 29, 37, 43, 47 and 66.

critics note the natural gravitation of Calhoun to Burke's political theory;<sup>38</sup> yet, there is a suggestion of overcompensation in Calhoun, i.e., an abrupt movement from the practical, human dimension to a denial of the "efficacy of human understanding" as it applies to politics.<sup>39</sup> Burke continued to be a political and philosophical mentor for Calhoun, doubtless owing to his association with John Randolph, but probably dating from a previous, formative period. As early as 1816, Calhoun called Burke "a statesman of great sagacity" for supporting the means necessary to fortify the financial base of a country in time of crisis.<sup>40</sup> For Calhoun, Burke's greatness could be seen in his response to the exigencies of everyday political situations and, of course, in his status as the "greatest of political philosophers."<sup>41</sup>

From Senators Henry Clay and John J. Crittenden during his lifetime to contemporary scholars, many critics have found fault with the presumed abstract quality of Calhoun's political theory. Usually in a summary manner, they imply that the obtuseness of Calhoun's philosophical orientation in his speeches and treatises prevented an adequate incorporation of the practical, i.e., the needs of everyday politics. Among these critics, there is nearly universal celebration of the practical as against the theoretical or the philosophical, not unlike the subordination of the study of political theory in contemporary political science. But Calhoun argued that to separate the philosophical from the practical would destroy the necessary dualistic character of a prudent political philosophy, that the philosophical informs the practical, and conversely, the practical informs the philosophical.<sup>42</sup> It was impossible for him to reflect on the human

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38. Many critics who attempt to depict Calhoun's political theory as purely abstract neglect the *Discourse*, which Calhoun intended to be an elaboration of and supplement to the earlier *Disquisition*. The purpose of the *Disquisition* was to present the "elementary principles of Government." See "Letter to Andrew Pickens Calhoun," July 24, 1849, in *Correspondence of John C. Calhoun*, ed. by J. Franklin Jameson, *American Historical Association Annual Report for 1899*, Vol. 2 (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1900), pp. 769-770. Hereafter, cited as *Correspondence*. For a prominent example of the failure to assess the *Discourse*, see Harry V. Jaffa, *Defender of the Constitution: Calhoun versus Madison, A Bicentennial Celebration* (Dallas: University of Dallas, 1987). Jaffa's *Original Intent and the Framers of the Constitution* (Washington: Regnery, 1994), makes only a superficial reference to the *Discourse* (p. 47).

39. Calhoun, *Correspondence*, *op. cit.*, p. 921.

40. "Speech on the Revenue Bill," January 31, 1816, in Calhoun, *Papers*, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 319; also, Vol. I, p. 386, Vol. XIII, p. 601, Vol. XIV, p. 71, Vol. XV, p. 151, Vol. XV, p. 482, and Vol. XV, p. 718.

41. Calhoun, *Papers*, *op. cit.*, Vol. XI, p. 254.

42. See Benedetto Croce, *Philosophy of the Practical*, tr. by Douglas Ainslie (New York: Biblo and Tannen, 1969), pp. 293-305.

condition, the nature of politics, the essence of a democratic regime, etc. without the coexistence of the philosophical search for truth, augmented by a concept of volition that provided for moral action. He defended this approach on the grounds that the search for truth necessitated more comprehensiveness: "The fact is, that it is abstract truths only that deeply impress the understanding and the heart, and effect great and durable revolutions; and the higher the intelligence of a people, the greater their influence. It is only the ignorant and brute creation over whom they have no control."<sup>43</sup> For Calhoun, the decomposition of American politics was the result of a flight from principles, and the decline was present among many of his critics. In fact, most of Calhoun's criticisms of Henry Clay, Andrew Jackson, and Martin Van Buren, among others, were based on his concern that these leaders had abdicated their devotion to disciplined reflection on the very nature of the regime. By failing to follow a principled approach to politics, they had forfeited the responsibility incumbent upon them.<sup>44</sup>

When united with a deeper appreciation of the regime, practical political reflection was to be understood as a sacred obligation. Unfortunately, to concentrate solely on the practical led to abrogating the statesman's mission. When an effort was made in 1837 to amend a universally accepted tariff agreement, largely based on the desires of President-elect Van Buren and his partisans, Senator William Rives of Virginia praised Van Buren as a practical politician. The appellation of "practical" implied for Calhoun a willingness to compromise principle for expediency, thus degrading the twofold basis of political reflection. Van Buren was a politician, but, for Calhoun, genuine practicality is inseparable from the philosophical: ". . . we are told he is a practical politician. Now sir, what sort of an animal is a practical politician? I will endeavor to describe it. It is a man who considers the terms justice, right, patriotism, & c. (sic), as all being so many abstractions, more vague phrases . . . [He is] shaped wholly by circumstances."<sup>45</sup> Calhoun had penetrated the dark veil of interest-driven politics. Instead of establishing a connection to the living dynamics of political life, practicality served as a euphemism for the movement toward opportunism, and signified a refusal to return the regime to its original design. To argue for a connection between the philosophical and the "real"

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43. "Remarks in Debate on His Fifth Resolution," in Calhoun, *Papers, op. cit.*, Vol. XIV, p. 72.

44. *Ibid.*, Vol. XII, p. 474.

45. "Speech During Final Consideration of the Bill to Reduce Certain Tariff Duties," February 25, 1837, in Calhoun, *Papers, op. cit.*, Vol. XIII, pp. 474-475.

was an effort to defend republican government as the best possible alternative to other types of political rule. Calhoun identified such a principled understanding of America with the "sacred regard for the letter and spirit of the Constitution, and a determination to protect the rights of the mass in opposition to the moneyed and manufacturing" elements of society.<sup>46</sup> Without an approach consisting of a composite duality of emphases, the "ultimate tendency" of politics could not be discerned in its totality, which could lead to the eventual degeneration of the regime.

A guide to understanding Calhoun's use of reason, as well as his devotion to the theoretical, is found in the application of his inherited worldview to the political crises he faced. Obviously, Lerner believes reason is devalued in Calhoun's political theory. According to Lerner, instead of portraying humankind as the primary participant in politics, guided by some form of reason, Calhoun valued primarily "fortunate historical accidents." For Lerner, Calhoun's reason encourages selfish motives within politics, while omitting a concept of virtue.<sup>47</sup> To scrutinize Calhoun on such grounds presents a serious, if not overwhelming problem. For Calhoun, "sound reason" was an integral part of political participation. The nurturing of human reasoning could be found in an individual's own community as well as elsewhere, although not all members were willing to rely on reason as a guide, preferring instead to succumb to "gross appeals to the appetites."<sup>48</sup> As one who shared the classical and Hebraic-Christian understanding of the role of reason in politics, Calhoun appreciated its capacity for defining both the concreteness and the universality of political life, which illuminated the higher potentialities of humankind that balanced the needs of the individual with those of the community. In fact, Calhoun's understanding of reason was underpinned by a concept of justice, and by an insistence on the role only experience could provide. From time to time, he was willing to defend human reason as a means of assessing the enduring and temporal problems facing the American republic. He often challenged those who would relegate the importance of reason to academic discussions, and always defended the centrality of a properly constituted concept of reason as a guide for political theory. At an early juncture in his public life, in the debate on the

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46. "Remarks on the Bill Relating to Duties and Drawbacks," August 27, 1841, in *ibid.*, Vol. XV, p. 741-742.

47. Lerner, "Calhoun's New Science of Politics," in *American Political Science Review*, *op. cit.*, p. 921.

48. *Disquisition*, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

embargo with England during the War of 1812, he argued against the propensity to “renounce our reason” when it was temporarily expedient to do so.<sup>49</sup> In failing to ascertain the precision and centrality of Calhoun’s use of reason and its role within his political thought, Lerner, along with other critics, misunderstood a primary aspect of Calhoun’s position.

Also attached to this major current of Calhoun criticism are efforts to deride Calhoun as an opportunist, as a man controlled by personal “insecurity,” as having launched an “assault on majoritarianism.”<sup>50</sup> In his description of Calhoun as an opportunist, Gerald Capers provides the most vehement and unusual attack on Calhoun’s political theory. His work constitutes an amalgamation of every negative, unreflective criticism of Calhoun ever written. He also underestimates the role that Calhoun’s inherited worldview assumed in his political thought. Prominent among these sources were the Kentucky and Virginia Resolutions. According to Capers, the Resolutions, authored by James Madison and Thomas Jefferson, were merely a “political maneuver” to influence a temporal political objective.<sup>51</sup> In fact, the Resolutions were a brilliant presentation of republican political theory, and were designed to reduce the “appetite for tyranny” encouraged by the Alien and Sedition Acts.<sup>52</sup> For Calhoun, the Resolutions were also a primary source of the “old Republican States right doctrine of ’98,”<sup>53</sup> the “daughter and mother” of a vibrant alternative understanding of American politics, especially in regard to the early political successes of the Federalists.<sup>54</sup> Calhoun always turned to this vision, guided by a duty to preserve the republic.<sup>55</sup>

More recent interpretations by John Niven and George Kateb view Calhoun as a politician and theorist who self-destructed before his countrymen. Niven attributes Calhoun’s failure to his insecurity as a political

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49. “Speech on the Albany Petition for Repeal of the Embargo,” May 6, 1812, in Calhoun, *Papers, op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 107.

50. Gerald M. Capers, *John C. Calhoun, Opportunist: A Reappraisal* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1960); John Niven, *John C. Calhoun and the Price of Union* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988); and George Kateb, “The Majority Principle: Calhoun and His Antecedents,” in *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 84, No. 4 (December 1969), quotation on p. 601.

51. Capers, *John C. Calhoun, Opportunist: A Reappraisal, op. cit.*, p. 97.

52. Senator Henry Tazewell, “Letter to James Madison,” Unpublished, July 12, 1798, Rives Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

53. Calhoun, *Papers, op. cit.*, Vol. XIII, p. 310.

54. “To George Sanders,” June 19, 1840, in *op. cit.*, Vol. 15, p. 282.

55. Calhoun’s considerations about assuming positions of responsibility were always guided by his principles (See *op. cit.*, Vol. XX, p. 538).

thinker, suggesting a gentler version of the personal denunciation initiated by Hofstadter and Hartz.<sup>56</sup> While different from Capers and Niven, but still part of the trend that portrays Calhoun as a theoretical anomaly, Kateb describes Calhoun's political thought as the "theory of a permanent minority."<sup>57</sup> Kateb's assessment places Calhoun within a minority political framework, but he fails to distinguish Calhoun's original interpretation of popular rule from an attempt to destroy majoritarianism in any form. Calhoun's imaginative proposals regarding the use of extra-constitutional measures for dealing with conflicts are also not appealing to Kateb. He prefers to criticize Calhoun from the standpoint of pure majoritarianism. Ultimately, as with every critic who is part of this current, Kateb considers Calhoun to be a force that "demoralizes" political theory.<sup>58</sup>

### *Calhoun the Statesman*

Throughout the 20th century, a second current of Calhoun criticism emerged, stressing the importance of Calhoun as a wise statesman who supported lost causes. The principal figures were Charles Merriam, Vernon Parrington, Ralph Gabriel, and Merle Curti.<sup>59</sup> The central problem undermining them all is their unwillingness to appreciate Calhoun as a participant in the perpetuation of the inherited understanding of the republic, and their disregard of his approach to popular rule. To their credit, they make an effort to comprehend Calhoun as a political thinker, and to place him within the American political tradition.

Calhoun's work assumed a special significance for Merriam, who attempted to "sketch the principles of his political philosophy."<sup>60</sup> Following an overview of Calhoun's political theory, he correctly identified Calhoun as a thinker within a republican cosmos, and suggested the

56. Calhoun allegedly "impaled" himself on a cross of logical contradictions. See Niven, *John C. Calhoun and the Price of Union*, *op. cit.*, p. 329.

57. Kateb, "The Majority Principle: Calhoun and His Antecedents," in *Political Science Quarterly*, *op. cit.*, p. 605.

58. *Ibid.*, p. 582.

59. Charles E. Merriam, *A History of American Political Theories* (New York: MacMillan, 1928), pp. 252-288; and an earlier version of this essay, "The Political Philosophy of John C. Calhoun," in *Studies in Southern History and Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1914), pp. 319-338; Vernon L. Parrington, *Main Currents in American Thought*, Vol. II (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1927, repr. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1986), pp. 69-82; Ralph H. Gabriel, *The Course of American Democratic Thought* (New York: Ronald Press Co., 1940), pp. 103-110; and Merle Curti, *The Growth of American Thought* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1943), pp. 442-453.

60. Merriam, "The Political Philosophy of John C. Calhoun," *op. cit.*, p. 319.

connection between Calhoun's writings and those of St. George Tucker,<sup>61</sup> the American editor of *Blackstone*.<sup>62</sup> He also praised Calhoun for exposing and remedying the "despotism of the majority," and ranked him "as among the strongest of American political theorists in the first half of the nineteenth century."<sup>63</sup> Parrington also encouraged a study of Calhoun's thought, but he concluded that Calhoun did not conform to the romantic, "middle-class" mode of Jeffersonian political thought, which he presumed to be central to American political and literary experience. While praising Calhoun as the "outstanding political thinker" of his time, Parrington considered his political theory to have been the "child of necessity," the result of Calhoun's personal and political predicament.<sup>64</sup> By contrast, Gabriel argued that Calhoun was an idealist, who was attached to the Union at all costs.<sup>65</sup> Although Calhoun was never elected president or led a major political party, his role as a statesman warrants celebration in these studies. It is also in accord with Calhoun's self-understanding, since he considered the statesman to be the antithesis of the politician: "The distinction between the statesman and the politician is broad and well defined. The former is an ornament and a blessing to his country, but the latter is a pest."<sup>66</sup> Curti characterizes Calhoun's support of (as Secretary of War) Stephen Long's explorations of the Rocky Mountains as an indication of his administration's prophetic nature.<sup>67</sup> But Curti underestimates the enduring quality of Calhoun's political theory, by describing it as purely "realist" in contrast to the Jeffersonian philosophical tradition.<sup>68</sup>

Others in this current of criticism suggest ways to better understand Calhoun's political theory, but none of them very clearly. Alan Grimes' once-fashionable survey of American political theory summarizes some

61. Merriam mistakenly attributed the editorship of *Blackstone's Commentaries* (1803) to Henry St. George Tucker, who was the son of St. George Tucker. Calhoun sent his son, John C. Calhoun, Jr., to the University of Virginia to study under Henry St. George Tucker (see Calhoun, *Papers*, *op. cit.*, Vol. XVII, p. 117-118), but later he was dismissed from the University. St. George Tucker's middle son, Nathaniel Beverly Tucker (and half-brother of John Randolph) wrote a novel entitled *The Partisan Leader* (1836), with Calhoun as its hero. See Beverly D. Tucker, *Nathaniel B. Tucker* (Tokyo: Nan'Un-Do Publishers, 1979).

62. Merriam, *A History of American Political Theories*, *op. cit.*, p. 266-267.

63. Merriam, *ibid.*, p. 271; and Merriam, "The Political Philosophy of John C. Calhoun," in *Studies in Southern History and Politics*, *op. cit.*, p. 328.

64. Parrington, *Main Currents in American Thought*, Vol. II, *op. cit.*, pp. 69 and 72.

65. Ralph Gabriel, *The Course of American Democratic Thought*, *op. cit.*, p. 108.

66. Calhoun, *Papers*, *op. cit.*, Vol. XI, 141.

67. Curti, *The Growth of American Thought*, *op. cit.*, p 223.

68. *Ibid.*, p. 442.

aspects of Calhoun's insight, but draws the egregious conclusion that his political theory deserves a Hobbesian label.<sup>69</sup> A greater comprehension of Calhoun's political world has been provided by William Freehling, although his argument for Calhoun as a "revolutionary" does not deserve serious consideration. It was Calhoun, after all, who helped contain a truly revolutionary "Bluffton Movement," composed of his fellow South Carolinians. During 1844, many leading South Carolina politicians threatened drastic responses to a troublesome new tariff and the questionable status of Texas.<sup>70</sup> Calhoun's success at moderating the conflict demonstrated both his restraint in a crisis situation, and his lack of control over the politicians described by Freehling as "Calhounites."<sup>71</sup> A recent Marxist assessment of Calhoun acknowledges his propensity for statecraft, citing his celebrated union with Webster and Clay in the Senate.<sup>72</sup> Calhoun's location in the theoretical landscape of political thought has been debated widely, and a recurrent theme within this controversy has been Calhoun's relation to modern theories of pluralism.<sup>73</sup>

### *Calhoun the Republican Philosopher*

The last current of Calhoun criticism consists of a small group of scholars who appreciate his critique of popular rule, and consider his *Disquisition* and his *Discourse* to be important contributions to political theory. Yet, they ignore the prejudices created by the other currents of scholarship, and treat Calhoun as an original theorist whose work transcended his own time and place, and continues to be relevant for American politics. During the 19th century, both John Stuart Mill and Lord Acton praised Calhoun for his appreciation of the diffusion of political authority and for his defense of liberty. Mill's *Representative Government*

69. Alan Grimes, *American Political Thought*, Revised Edition (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960), p. 246.

70. William H. Freehling, *Prelude to Civil War: The Nullification Controversy in South Carolina, 1816-1836* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), p. 172. For Calhoun's anti-revolutionary notions of statesmanship, see Calhoun, *Papers*, *op. cit.*, Vol. XIX, p. 525.

71. Freehling, *Prelude to Civil War*, *op. cit.*, p. 134. See also, Freehling, "Spoilsmen and Interests in the Thought and Career of John C. Calhoun," in *Journal of American History*, Vol. LII, No. 1 (June 1965), pp. 25-42.

72. John Ashworth, *Slavery, Capitalism, and Politics in the Antebellum Republic* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 203.

73. See Peter F. Drucker, "A Key to American Politics: Calhoun's Pluralism," in *Review of Politics*, Vol. 10, No. 4 (October 1948), pp. 412-426; Darryl Baskin, "The Pluralist Vision of John C. Calhoun," in *Polity*, Vol. II, No. 1 (Fall 1969), pp. 49-65; and Peter J. Steinberger, "Calhoun's Concept of the Public Interest," in *Polity*, Vol. 13, No. 3 (Spring 1981), pp. 410-424.



applauded Calhoun's understanding of "federal representative" government as a means of providing for the greatest participation of the populace, while avoiding conflict and discouraging corruption in the central government.<sup>74</sup> According to Mill, Calhoun encouraged a return to the division of political power and to "principles" designed by the Founding Fathers.<sup>75</sup> He suggested that the moderating influence of the states within the union could be implemented by the "extension of the practice of cooperation through which the weak, by uniting, can meet on equal terms with the strong."<sup>76</sup> By protecting the role of minority elements in the regime, Calhoun was offering a means of reinvigorating the federal concept that had "broke[n] down in the first few years of its existence."<sup>77</sup> Lord Acton expanded on Mill's exposition of Calhoun, and described Calhoun's work as being "the very perfection of political truth," and "profound and so extremely applicable to the politics of the present day."<sup>78</sup> It was not Calhoun's theory of representation, but his presentation of an authentic constitutional tradition as distinct from the "pure democratic views" fashionable in the 19th century that made him "the real defender of Union," and of democratic theory.<sup>79</sup>

Calhoun's concept of popular rule has been assessed also by Charles Wiltse, Margaret Coit, August Spain, and Russell Kirk. More recent works by Theodore Marmor, Irving Bartlett, Eugene Genovese, Clyde Wilson, and David Ericson extend and revise earlier interpretations. Wiltse's massive biography set the standard for all subsequent studies by

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74. John Stuart Mill, *Considerations on Representative Government* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1958), pp. 237-249.

75. Mill appeared to refer only to Calhoun's *Disquisition* as a "work of great ability," but he may have intended for *Disquisition* and *Discourse* to be viewed together as an extended meditation on the problem of representation (*Representative Government, ibid.*, p. 244). This assumption is based on the publishing history of these works. *Disquisition* and *Discourse* were published together posthumously in 1851, and republished in 1853 as the first volume of *The Works of John C. Calhoun* (1853-1855). Writing to his wife in 1854, Mill more clearly expressed his view of the works: "I am reading the American book, a *Treatise on Government* generally and on the institutions of the U. States in particular — it is considerably more philosophical than I expected, at least in the sense of being grounded on principles." See "J.S. Mill to Harriet Mill," February 18, 1854, in *The Collected Works of J. S. Mill: The Later Letters, 1849-1873*, Vol. XIV (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1972), p. 163.

76. Mill, *Considerations on Representative Government, op. cit.*, p. 246.

77. *Ibid.*, p. 240.

78. Lord Acton, "Political Causes of the American Revolution," in *Selected Writings of Lord Acton*, Vol. I, ed. by J. Rufus Fears (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1986), p.240.

79. *Ibid.*, p. 245.

providing a trenchant commentary on Calhoun's own understanding of the American republic, as well as his principled political theory.<sup>80</sup> Coit's survey of Calhoun's life and political thought demonstrates the consistency of his moral and prudent statesmanship.<sup>81</sup> The redirection of scholarly attention to the central problem of popular rule and its importance to republican government in Calhoun's political thought has been aided by the works of Spain and Kirk,<sup>82</sup> and the more recent assessments by Marmor, Genovese, Ford, Wilson, and Ericson have contributed to a better understanding of the historical situation, as well as to the enduring significance of Calhoun's political theory.<sup>83</sup>

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80. Charles M. Wiltse, *Jeffersonian Tradition in American Democracy* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1935); *John C. Calhoun: Nationalist, 1782-1828* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1944); *John C. Calhoun: Nullifier, 1829-1839* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1949); *John C. Calhoun: Sectionalist, 1840-1850* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1951); and "Calhoun's Democracy," in *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (May 1941), pp. 210-223.

81. Margaret Coit, *John C. Calhoun* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1950).

82. August O. Spain, *The Political Theory of John C. Calhoun* (New York: Bookman Associates, 1951); and Russell Kirk, *The Conservative Mind: From Burke to Eliot*, 7th rev. ed. (Washington: Regnery, 1987).

83. Theodore Marmor, *The Career of John C. Calhoun* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1988); Eugene Genovese, *The Southern Tradition* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1994); Clyde Wilson, ed., *Calhoun, Papers*, Volumes X-XXIV, *op. cit.*, *John C. Calhoun: A Bibliography, op. cit.*; and introduction to *The Essential Calhoun* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1992); David F. Ericson, *The Shaping of American Liberalism: The Debates Over Ratification, Nullification, and Slavery* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993); and Lacy K. Ford, Jr., "Inventing the Concurrent Majority: Madison, Calhoun and the Problem of Majoritarianism in American Political Thought," in *Journal of Southern History*, Vol. LX, No. 1 (February 1994), pp. 19-58.