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978-0-521-51438-5 - The Colonial American Origins of Modern Democratic Thought

J. S. Maloy

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The Colonial American Origins of Modern Democratic Thought

This first examination in almost forty years of political ideas in the seventeenth-century American colonies reaches some surprising conclusions about the history of democratic theory more generally. The origins of a distinctively modern kind of thinking about democracy can be located, not in revolutionary America and France in the later eighteenth century, but in the tiny New England colonies in the middle seventeenth. The key feature of this democratic rebirth was honoring not only the principle of popular sovereignty through regular elections but also the principle of accountability through non-electoral procedures for the auditing and impeachment of elected officers. By staking its institutional identity entirely on elections, modern democratic thought has misplaced the sense of robust popular control which originally animated it.

J. S. Maloy is Assistant Professor of Political Science at Oklahoma State University, where he teaches courses in political theory and American constitutional law and writes on a wide range of topics in the history of political thought. He was born and raised in Austin, Texas, and educated at Brown University (philosophy), the University of Cambridge (history), and Harvard University (political science).

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Preface

This book originated in a curious fact about my move to England more than a decade ago: I quickly developed a previously unknown interest in studying the country from which I had come. Though I was not at that moment ideally situated for studying the history of American political ideas, I was well placed for learning about the places and intellectual traditions from which the reverse migration had first been made. Thus I started doing groundwork in English and to some extent European political thought from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. When I returned to the United States, I set out more directly on my path toward composing a first volume in the history of American political ideas.

That volume has yet to be produced. This book is the surprising result of my researches toward that project; it has not fulfilled the project itself. I wanted to acquire knowledge about American political ideas for its own sake, but along the way I discovered things about modern democratic thought which may be of interest even to people who find the other subject inherently uninteresting. Human affairs being as they are, to learn something important about the history of democratic thought is necessarily to learn something important about democracy itself. Thus I am deliberately offering a hybrid book, and I can only hope that seekers of knowledge about both the fields that it covers will find in it some reward for their pursuit.

Another curious feature of this book, and one that surprises those who know me well, is the amount of sustained attention I have given (not to say devoted) to matters of Christian theology – or, more precisely, ecclesiology. It is another subject considered by some to be inherently uninteresting, but I have found it to be both indispensable to understanding the seventeenth-century Englishmen who figure below and also powerfully explanatory in relation to the ideological origins of modern

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democracy. One of the hazards of doing intellectual history is that the most important lines of inquiry often diverge from the inquirer's personal favorites.

Notes on the Text

In the interest of simplicity, accessibility, and ease of reading, I have not reproduced sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English quotations in the exact form found in their original texts. Instead I have rendered them in modern American English spelling, but I have preserved original punctuation, capitalization, and italics except in a few cases where clarity seemed to necessitate a change.

Also in the interest of accessibility, I have preferred to cite modern editions and translations of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century texts if such exist, though I have attempted always to make clear the date and circumstances of original composition or publication in the text and Bibliography. For works by Plato and Aristotle, citations refer to Stephanus and Bekker pages, respectively. For parts of a book lacking numbered pages, citations refer to signature-page and folio; for example, A/2b stands for sig. A, fol. 2b.

Acknowledgments

While in England I had the pleasure of working with Jonathan Scott and John Dunn, who were not only helpful but even friendly – and not only during my two years there but also on the odd occasion since. I was also fortunate to know and to learn from Mark Goldie, Anthony Pagden, and Quentin Skinner.

My greatest debts are held in the United States, especially by Nancy Rosenblum and Thomas Skidmore, who provided early and formative support to my efforts to be a student and a scholar. Nancy has the dubious distinction of having been exposed to not only the latest but also the earliest instances of my writing on political theory. She has been among the chief supports for this book in particular, alongside John McCormick, Richard Tuck, Cary Nederman, Eldon Eisenach, and Russ Muirhead – all of whom provided vital assistance in both word and deed. Other colleagues who have helped with my work on this project in various ways over the years include Craig Borowiak, Bob Darcy, Noah Dauber, Yannis Evrigenis, Julian Franklin, Bryan Garsten, Jim Kloppenberg, Philip Pettit, and Thad Williamson. Special mention goes to two venues where I presented work-in-progress from this book: Oklahoma State University's Political Research

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Seminar, including Vincent Burke, Jim Davis, Jason Kirksey, Jim Scott, and Mark Wolfgram; and Texas A&M University's Political Theory Colloquium, including Cary Nederman and his graduate students as well as Judy Baer, Lisa Ellis, Ed Portis, and Diego von Vacano. My only regret is that, had I availed myself of these valued colleagues more often, I might have avoided whatever errors are found in the text below.

Financial support for various phases of my research over more than ten years has come from the Marshall Aid Commemoration Commission in the United Kingdom, the National Science Foundation in the United States, the Department of Government at Harvard University, the Mark DeWolfe Howe Fund of Harvard Law School, and the College of Arts and Sciences at Oklahoma State University.

Finally, this book requires special tribute to be paid to an indispensable institution of human civilization: the public library. I am especially indebted to all those who have helped to maintain and to staff the Edmon Low Library of Oklahoma State University, the McFarlin Library of the University of Tulsa, and the Perry-Castañeda Library and the Tarlton Law Library of the University of Texas – each of which allows a person to enter, browse, and read. I am also grateful for the opportunity to use some less accessible but more magnificent instances of the genre: the University Library at Cambridge, the British Library in London, the Widener Library and the Houghton Library at Harvard University, the Boston Public Library, and the New York Public Library. Special thanks are also due to Lynn Wallace and the staff of the OSU-Tulsa library, on whom I relied heavily in the later stages of my research; and to Toby Wilson and Dan Crutcher at the Institute for Teaching and Learning Excellence at OSU-Stillwater, who helped with the book's illustrations.

I dedicate this book to my mother, Crista Kiefer McCormack, to whom I owe the love of knowledge for its own sake, among other debts too numerous to mention; and to my father, Jon W. Maloy, who has taught all his sons that the love of knowledge and the dignity of labor are compatible and complementary things.

Tulsa, Oklahoma, June 2008