
Pro Rege

Volume 43 | Number 3

Article 8

March 2015

Politics on a Human Scale: The American Tradition of Decentralism (Book Review)

Doug Vande Griend

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege

Recommended Citation

Vande Griend, Doug (2015) "Politics on a Human Scale: The American Tradition of Decentralism (Book Review)," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 43: No. 3, 39 - 41.
Available at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol43/iss3/8

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the University Publications at Digital Collections @ Dordt. It has been accepted for inclusion in Pro Rege by an authorized administrator of Digital Collections @ Dordt. For more information, please contact ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu.

Taylor, Jeff. *Politics on a Human Scale: The American Tradition of Decentralism*. Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2013. 648pp. ISBN 978-0-73918-67-49. Reviewed by Doug Vande Griend, Attorney, Salem, OR.

It is common for a book reviewer to at least pretend to be neutral about the object of his review. That's not this review, about this book.

I have been practicing law for 35 years and in that role have experienced government at all levels, watching it do what it does and trying to influence that process, whether for my clients, myself, or my ideals and perspective (public interest work). Interacting that much with courts, legislatures, and administrative agencies tends to mold one's thinking about how governing is done well and not so well. I have often said, for example, that if everyone were required to do two years' worth of indigent criminal defense work, we would have a voting population that would quickly cause an extensive transformation of our criminal justice system.

Perhaps that is why I like Jeff Taylor's book *Politics on a Human Scale* so much. It is apparent that Taylor does not simply write only via academic familiarity with his subject. He is an Iowa farm boy for whom, I suspect, academia and personal political involvement became both vocation and avocation, and I also suspect the order of the two relates only to the element of employment compensation.

I more than like this book. I love it. I want every American to read it, or at least every American who intends to vote in any election. Yes, this book would be great reading for college history and political science students (probably upper-level), but this book is about the real world, written by someone who has seriously engaged in this dimension of the real world and then combined that experience with deep academic research into the history that is the context for the subject matter.

Politics on a Human Scale is, first, a *political prescription*, perhaps even a political manifesto of sorts. It unapologetically argues for a particular perspective about how to implement government in the United States. Second, the book is history, but not like the typical academic text that covers all facets of a certain place during a certain time. Rather, it traces, in much depth, one major thread of US political history: the struggle within these United States for centralized or decentralized government power and administration. And this particular but deep rendition of history is the envelope that contains the political prescription. In that sense, *Politics* reminds me of bit of what Francis Schaeffer did in *How Then Shall We Live?* There, Schaeffer traverses the history of western civi-

lization in order to ask at the end, "given what we've done and what's happened because of it, what choices should we make going forward?"

Although Taylor makes a political appeal for decentralization, his rendition of history is solid, neither trite nor a mere minimal foundation that provides him an excuse to rant about political issues (in fact, political *issues* as we think of them these days are not much covered at all). The history contained in the book is remarkably in-depth, and each chapter is followed by a wealth of helpful endnotes. It is as good a treatment of the subject matter as I have read.

The historical coverage in the book begins by distinguishing the differing political perspectives of the founders, which Taylor separates into two poles, Hamiltonianism (the perspective of Alexander Hamilton) and Jeffersonianism (the perspective of Thomas Jefferson). Hamilton favored a strong, centralized government, captained for the most part by those more wealthy and powerful (the *elite* class); Jefferson favored a federalist structure wherein the central government (federal government) plays a minimally necessary role; and the states (and their subdivisions), the greater roles, where distributed rule was accomplished by many local leaders, including those Hamilton would consider much too inadequate to take on such a job.

According to Taylor, Hamilton wanted banking, and thereby the entire economy, to be controlled by the federal government. His goal for the US was that it resemble a European power (e.g., Britain), and that it be an equal or better international player in all world matters. Conversely, Jefferson maximized the priority of local political freedom (whether individual or community or state), desiring instead that the US be an *exception* to the European elitist model, that the US be a nation of a kind the world had not yet seen, and less inclined to meddle in the affairs of other nations. Jefferson's model de-emphasized national economic power, a trade-off for political freedom. For Hamilton, being a nation meant nothing if the nation did not maximize economic power, and that was best done in a way resembling a nation ruled by a European monarchy. For Taylor, Hamiltonian influence would render a system of government/politics characterized by corporatism and bureaucracy. Jeffersonian influence would render a nation that existed more for the individual, for the local community, or at the state level. Jefferson wanted govern-

ment to be done on a more “human scale.”

From this bi-polar starting point, Taylor’s book traces American events, arguments and people since the nation’s founding, explaining them in terms of their Jeffersonian or Hamiltonian inclinations or characteristics, elucidating the ebb and flow of constant battle between those perspectives, bringing the reader all the way from the beginning of the federal constitution in 1789 to the present day. (To Taylor’s dismay, our present situation appears much more Hamiltonian than Jeffersonian.)

What perhaps makes this book such a page turner is its very thorough treatment of political players, issues, and events throughout US history. If your understanding of the terms “liberal” and “conservative” is typical of today’s voter, reading this book will utterly confuse you before it then breaks down your old definitions and starts to construct new ones. Taylor shows that the meaning of both modern labels has morphed significantly over time. He paints no simple pictures. Presidents and other major players are shown to be other than many now have thought they were. Events are shown to have been moved by means other than how many have thought they were moved. Heroes are sometimes debunked as such, and losers are sometimes revealed as people who should have won for the sake of the nation.

In only one illustration of this, the book mentions on several occasions two modern-day movements that most US voters today would consider opposed to the other: the Tea Party and Occupy Wall Street (OWS) movements. Most people would say that neither movement has much in common with the other. Yet Taylor correctly views them as having much more in common, fundamentally at least, than not. The Tea Party began as a political revolt against government’s oppressive control, especially of small businesses and the middle class. The OWS movement protested against oppression that supposedly resulted from the power held by large domestic and international corporations, which increasingly controlled what society produced, what it consumed, and most of all who made the rules that kept them in power.

For Taylor, both movements are rooted in American traditions that argue for sociopolitical decentralization, a tradition that extends back to the divide between Hamilton and Jefferson. Certainly, completely different people marched in the protests of each movement, but their concerns, at least if viewed through a Jeffersonian vs. Hamiltonian lens, reveal very similar concerns. In fact, as Taylor notes

in his discussion of Republican President Dwight Eisenhower’s 1960 warning about the military/industrial complex, the power of both government and industry is quite fused these days. Today, while the work of certain industrial sectors is in behalf of the Pentagon, the same relationship has fully matured in the home mortgage industry, the education industry, and more recently the health care industry. In fact, it is harder today to give examples of where government-corporate associations do not exist than where they do. While it may be that Tea Partiers see the federal government as the bogeyman, while the OWSers think the same of multi-national corporations, the fact is that the two are increasingly becoming one.

As well, the current divide between the Tea Party wing of the Republican party, which opposes corporate subsidies and federal government overreaches, and the traditional wing of the Republican Party, which is only purportedly anti-big government and certainly pro-big corporation, provides us with a concise picture of today’s Jeffersonian/Hamiltonian divide. In the private sector, the contrast between the NFIB (National Federation of Independent Business) and the US Chamber of Commerce reveals the same struggle.

While discussing this widespread struggle, Taylor does an excellent job of covering historical issues that involved the centralization/decentralization dynamic, issues such as states’ rights, slavery and foreign affairs. He covers famous figures that further the cause of either Hamilton or Jefferson, such as Andrew Jackson, William Jennings Bryan, Robert LaFollette, Franklin Roosevelt, Hubert Humphrey, and Ronald Reagan. Even Abraham Kuyper gets some coverage (he is depicted as the Dutch equivalent of William Jennings Bryan). And Taylor covers crucial historical events like the various recessions, the Great Depression, and key national elections. Of course, Taylor sticks with his thesis; his historical coverage relates only to that which has something to do with Hamiltonian centralism or Jeffersonian decentralism. In other words, one will not find comprehensive coverage of World War I or II, as wars, in this book.

Will this book influence political thinking in this country? I hope so. Taylor breaks political molds that need breaking, exposes political inconsistencies that need exposing, and debunks myths in need of debunking. Above all, he offers a new paradigm by which political analysis might be more profitably done. Still, the ocean that this book’s bucket of water finds itself in is immense. Americans are very capable of corrupting or wrecking their government,

despite what their founding fathers carefully constructed, and of being deceived about what they are supporting or voting for when they agree to protest and vote. This book meticulously illuminates the historical course of that happening. But I say that as a Jeffersonian. I suspect today's Hamiltonians are quite pleased with where things are: that the Tenth Amendment has long been declared essentially non-existent, that the constitutional doctrine of delegated powers has been ignored, and that the US Supreme Court recently refused to rule the Congressional passage of the Affordable Care Act (Obamacare) as unconstitutional. If change does come, it will no doubt be because old political categories are broken so that new arguments, and unlikely alliances, are made—as Taylor discusses in this book.

No review would be complete without some

negative criticism, I suppose. Were I to offer that, the length of the book (over 600 pages) would be at the top of the list. The length is also a strength of the book, but that strength would be more acknowledged by dedicated college or post-graduate students, or very serious political hobbyists (I consider myself the latter). The fact is, if Taylor wants to have a lot of influence with lots of voters, he should realize that many or most will start reading another book when they see the length of, and small print in, this one. Given that the book appears to be at least in part a compilation of prior articles and papers done by Taylor, perhaps he will do us all a favor by releasing future books that are designed, visually and content-wise, for the reader who just wants to be an intelligent voter and modest political participant. I'll keep this one though.

Schuurman, Derek C. *Shaping a Digital World: Faith, Culture and Computer Technology*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press Academic, 2013. ISBN 978030827138. Reviewed by Charles Veenstra, Professor of Communication, Dordt College.

One need not be a computer scientist in order to be concerned with the issues surrounding computer technology. Some might see computer technology as a challenge; others may fear that they are being controlled by it in ways that are uncomfortable. Derek Schuurman, an electrical engineer who became a teacher, steps back from his work as a computer scientist to examine a wide range of issues from his Reformational Christian perspective. For example, he shows that technology is not neutral, that digital technology influences how we think, and how to develop responsible technology. This little book can serve very well as a resource in many courses beyond those in computer science. It provides a wonderful introduction to how Reformational thinking influences all of our work. It demonstrates how a scholar should wrestle with issues, and he includes discussion questions, which should make this a very fine book for a variety of classes—even for church groups. The bibliography itself is worth the price of the book because it points to many Reformational scholars who have laid foundations on which the rest of us can build.

Drawing on a wide range of Reformational thinkers throughout the book Schuurman explains in the second chapter how the themes of creation, fall, redemption, and restoration set the context for thinking about technology. He draws on Dooyeweerd's scheme of modal aspects to help understand how diverse entities function in creation. He argues that the

lower aspects function more like creation laws and the higher ones appear to be norms rather than laws: "The 'earlier' aspects (starting with the numeric) provide a foundation for the 'later' ones (up to the faith aspect)" (42). And "whereas laws are in effect without human intervention, norms involve human freedom and responsibility" (44). He then shows how the various modalities function when working with computers. This section is particularly helpful in understanding these modalities because he illustrates with computer examples how they function. "A simple example is a digital image; although it is formed using low-level binary pixels (numeric aspect), the image that is formed enables higher aspects in a human subject. A digital image can prompt feelings of affection (psychic aspect), serve as a cultural object (historical aspect) and be used to portray symbols or text (lingual aspect). Digital images can portray friendships (social aspect) and also beauty (aesthetic aspect)" (43).

In the third chapter which deals with the effects of the fall, Schuurman uses Albert Wolters' concepts of structure and direction to explain how the possibilities of computer technology are intertwined with the effects of sin: "The web is useful for communicating and disseminating truthful information; on the other hand, online gambling and pornographic websites are destructive. Email and social networking can shrink the distances between people; but compulsive computer use leads to loss of authentic human con-