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Book Note: "The Constitution of the People":
Reflections on Citizens and Civil Society. Edited by
Robert E. Calvert.

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“THE CONSTITUTION OF THE PEOPLE”: REFLECTIONS ON CITIZENS AND CIVIL SOCIETY. Edited by Robert E. Calvert. Lawrence: The University Press of Kansas. 1991. Pp. xii, 157. \$12.95 (paper).

Broadly stated, the contributors to this collection of essays are all concerned with the problem of the dissociation of modern Americans from the political life of the nation, and even from any notion of what “citizenship” means. Each essay comes at the problem from a different perspective, from historical to economic, and Robert Calvert’s concluding essay is a well-written summary of how the dissociation manifests itself today.

Calvert argues that the Progressive movement which cumulated in the New Deal fought against the powerful business interests of the early Twentieth Century by exposing their interest-group politics to “realism.” From this realism, even cynicism, about how government “really works,” they launched their platform for a centralized government which regulated business and transferred wealth in the interests of the majority of Americans. The cynicism of the Progressives came eventually to be applied to the government they had created, and is now firmly entrenched in popular culture. It has so undermined the notion of civic virtue (replacing it with self-interest) that George Bush could hold up his wallet at a campaign stop in 1984 and say, “I’ll tell you what wins votes. Whatever puts money in here wins votes, and whatever takes money out of here loses votes.” This remark was not meant nor understood as an indictment of the materialistic side of American culture, but as a simple statement of the way things are (and, implicitly, should be).

Calvert’s essay should probably be first in the volume, because it does better than Wilson Carey McWilliam’s introduction to set the context for the rest of the essays in the book. J. David Greenstone’s essay explores John Adams’s and Thomas Jefferson’s views on slavery as representative of two tendencies in American liberal thought: on the one hand, the social order exists to promote the common good, and on the other, the freedom of the individual must be maximized. As Jean Bethke Elshtain’s essay points out, though, traditional liberal thought has always assumed that the individual would participate in groups, and that the Framers designed the republic in such a way that groups would have to cooperate to act in national government, and that this cooperation would ensure the common good.

Michael Walzer looks at how the Framers designed the “two texts” of the Constitution—the unamended body and the Bill of

Rights—to promote the action of groups in civil society. As he puts it, “[w]hen one asserts ‘the right of the people peacefully to assemble,’ one expects assemblies—not litigious individuals tracked by lawyers, but gatherings, meetings, caucuses, and party conventions; not legal argument, but political debate; not briefs, but pamphlets.” Unfortunately, though, “the chief ritual observance” of the civil society established by the Constitution is litigation, which is an inherently privatizing form of social action.

Robert Bellah’s essay on pluralism in American society is the most positive in the book. His position is that understanding self-interested individuals as the referent for political analysis is not accurate, and neither is looking at insular social groupings opposed to one another. In the relations of some churches in America in recent years, he sees a model of how communities can interact to produce a common understanding of the good, while maintaining their individual identity.

The most controversial essay is Michael Novak’s on the “commercial republicanism” of the Framers. While few would argue with his position that the Framers were strongly influenced by Adam Smith and John Locke on free commerce and private property as means to secure individual rights, Novak reduces their originality to the protection of property. To be fair, he does point out that the Framers saw commerce as an important way to increase the ties of isolated communities in the early republic, but he does not confront the problem presented by the industrial and post-industrial world: commerce is the province of corporate bureaucracies and private consumers, and is in fact a privatizing, not a public-oriented, force.

Overall, the essays are readable, not over-footnoted, and thought-provoking. All are on the philosophical side of political science rather than the practical side, and it invites reflection and further work on how the privatizing trend of American society can be counteracted and public-spiritedness reinjected into political discussions. The authors’ common hope for discussion of and work toward the “common good” may not sit well with hard-boiled political cynics (who are distressingly common among legal academics), but the book does remind us that the *common* good is why the United States was founded.

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