The Return of John C. Calhoun

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Though he served long years as U.S. Representative, Senator, Secretary of War, Secretary of State, and Vice President, John C. Calhoun's chief importance is as a philosopher of constitutional government. Tragically, his original and prescient thinking has been neglected in the more than 140 years since his death. If his work is treated at all, it is considered part of a sectional defense. Calhoun was concerned, however, with the most fundamental of political issues—the nature of society, the character of the human condition, and the structure of government. He has been libeled by ideologically tainted historians, one of whom called him the “Marx of the master class.” His real purpose was to preserve liberty and prevent government oppression, while giving government the powers necessary to fulfill its functions. He wrote in a bare-bones style completely without the flourishes of nineteenth-century political writing. His major works remind one of Aristotle, yet they are written in an astonishingly modern mode that brings to mind Bertrand de Jouvenal.

Professor Clyde Wilson, who has published 20 volumes of Calhoun’s papers, has compiled a magnificent anthology which will endure as long as Americans are interested in close reasoning about the nature of government and society. He has drawn on a rich lode of documents from Calhoun’s hand, including several thousand surviving letters.

Calhoun has been styled the “cast iron man,” and the notion has prevailed that he was lacking in human warmth. This volume shows that this notion is unfounded. He always was mindful of duty, however. His central belief is clearly set forth in a letter to his daughter, Anna Marie Calhoun Clemson, in which he wrote: “I hold the duties of life to be greater than life itself, and that in performing them manfully, even against hope, our labor is not lost, but will be productive of good in after times.” He added: “no appreciation of my efforts, either by the present, or after
times, is necessary to sustain me in struggling to do my duty in resisting wrong. . . .” This statement clearly sets him apart from the modern political figures who are counterfeit statesmen.

The most important section of The Essential Calhoun, in this writer’s view, is the first—the text of his “Disquisition on Government,” a short treatise which has the close reasoning and compelling power of Aristotle’s Politics. In this disquisition he expounds his doctrine of the concurrent majority. The treatise is an analysis of liberty and power and explains how liberty is endangered by an incomplete American political system, which lacks the built-in protection of an explicit concurrent majority feature. Calhoun begins with an analysis of man as a social being and illustrates how the law of self-preservation leads to conflicts between individuals and, then, to “the tendency to a universal state of conflict.” He stresses that government has “a strong tendency to disorder and abuse of its power.” He exposes a major fallacy which has become a part of modern thinking, namely, that the right of suffrage is sufficient to ensure constitutional government. He envisions the struggle for power and domination in America and the conflict between different interest groups. In words that might come from a late twentieth-century analyst, he describes how the community will be divided into “two great classes: one consisting of those who, in reality, pay the taxes, and, of course, bare exclusively the burthen of supporting the government, and the other who are the recipients of their proceeds.” Before the middle of the nineteenth century, he foresaw the transfer-payment system of our time.

Calhoun’s central argument was that liberty cannot endure if the numerical or absolute majority is to prevail at all times, if sufficient checks on majority will are not built into the system. He sought safeguards for “interests as well as numbers,” warning that “to confound the numerical majority with the people” is “a radical error,” for society is made up of many interests. The way to prevent tyranny in the future, he wrote, is to seek a concurrent constitutional majority, comprising the interests of all major and naturally formed communities and groups. He deemed it an “indispensable element” in a system of constitutional government. The result of not making adequate provision for the concurrent majority in American political practice has proven to be a majoritarian reign, which, though styled democracy, actually serves narrow interests. The American system is rapidly becoming a kakis-tocracy, or rule by the worst.

It is not surprising that Americans generally have ignored Calhoun’s philosophical writings. He challenges fallacies and taboos of American political discourse that have grown even stronger since Calhoun’s own time and have contributed to our current civic disorders. In the “Disquisition,” he confronts a major illusion, saying that the weaknesses in the American political system “have their origin in the prevalent opinion that all men are born free and equal—than which nothing can be more unfounded and false.” He declares that this opinion “rests upon the assumption of a fact which is con-
trary to universal observation.... It is, indeed, difficult to explain how an opinion so destitute of all sound reason, could ever have been so extensively entertained....” Calhoun's judgment in this regard is that of Aristotle, who wrote that some men are unfit for liberty. In a society that has elevated the notion of equality to the level of theological dogma, one can be sure that Calhoun's view will be greeted with fury. It is the ultimate in political incorrectness.

Nevertheless, *The Essential Calhoun* is likely to have a strong and lasting impact on students of politics and society who are truly dedicated to underlying truth, who genuinely endeavor to understand why American society has become a collapsing society and why American government no longer serves the interests of the American people. While the Adams family of Massachusetts never had any fondness for Calhoun, one of its most prominent members, Henry Adams, understood and described the peril in democratic dogmas. He was following in the great critical tradition established by John C. Calhoun of South Carolina.