

## Don't Cry for Me Argentina

In the end, MMT comes down to this: the government spends a lot, issues a lot of debt, and prints a lot of money. It is not as if it hasn't been tried before.

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## **America's Revolutionary Mind: A Moral History of the American Revolution and the Declaration That Defined It**

C. Bradley Thompson  
New York: Encounter, 2019, 584 pp.

The Founding Fathers of America eloquently expressed the high-minded ideals "all men are created equal." At the same time, however, many of the Founders engaged in the brutally cruel practice of slavery. This disconnect between principles and practice has caused historians to investigate what the Founders truly believed as opposed to what they said. In 1980, Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States* argued that the Founders' buzzwords of equality and liberty were just that. Their lofty language of revolution was merely a cloak for the aristocratic elite's nefarious goals of increasing and securing their grip on power and wealth. Zinn's approach was to peel back the Founders' rhetoric and see what they were really after behind their slogans. In more recent times, authors of the *New York Times's* "1619 Project" claim American

elites declared independence as a means to protect the institution of slavery.

Thankfully, C. Bradley Thompson's newest book, *America's Revolutionary Mind: A Moral History of the American Revolution and the Declaration That Defined It*, takes an entirely different approach: viewing the Founders' expressions of their ideas, sentiments, and aspirations not as carefully crafted rhetoric, but instead as genuine expressions of their sense of morality. Thompson is offering more than just an antidote to the more cynical tone of authors such as Zinn. In *America's Revolutionary Mind*, Thompson aims and succeeds in applying a new methodology of history, one which focuses on the connection between principles and practice. Thompson dubs this methodology "the new moral history." This new moral history explains the development of ideas akin to intellectual history, but its primary goal is to investigate "the intersection between moral thought and moral action, between what people say and what they do." Using this methodology, Thompson aims to show that motives explain actions better than large-scale processes of change and that, by examining the motivation of individual actors, we can come to more fruitful and accurate conclusions on historical events.

Spokesmen of the revolution such as John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, Thomas Paine, and the lesser-known Joel Barlow all expressed a similar sentiment, that the major cause of the revolution was a new mode of moral thinking, which informed and guided the actions of American colonists and preceded the revolutionary struggle that was to come. According to this reading, the American Revolution was a consequence of a new way of thinking about morality, which took root before a single shot had been fired. Adams explains that the real revolution was not the War of Independence but, in fact, the "radical change in the principles, opinions, sentiments, and affections" of the American people. Thompson agrees with Adams's conclusion arguing that scholars have ignored the "generative mainstream of the Revolution, namely, its moral causes."

Following the assessments of Adams closely, *America's Revolutionary Mind* is a book that has two main goals: first, "to elucidate the logic, principles, and significance of the Declaration of Independence as the embodiment of the American mind," and second, to focus on the moral underpinnings of the revolution. Thompson uses the Declaration of Independence as the "ideological road map" of the American Revolution, seeing it as the

culmination and expression of the real revolution that Adams articulated. In the first chapter, Thompson argues that the Declaration of Independence is an expression of Enlightenment principles of nature, reason, and ethics informed by thinkers such as Isaac Newton, Francis Bacon, and above all, John Locke. Thompson asserts that “America’s revolutionary mind is virtually synonymous with John Locke’s mind.” If the Declaration of Independence is a culmination of America’s moral revolution, then the Declaration and its contents must be Lockean in their nature.

*America’s Revolutionary Mind* is not a linear historical narrative; instead, Thompson opts to deal with topics thematically. Eight of the twelve chapters in the book deal with the four self-evident truths of the Declaration of Independence, which can be boiled down to equality, rights, consent, and revolution. In each of these chapters, Thompson draws out how essential Locke’s thought was for the colonists to express what would become their highest ideals in the Declaration of Independence. Thompson not only invokes the most esteemed authorities of the day but also scores of lesser-known figures. Letters, pamphlets, sermons, and newspapers are all liberally quoted to draw out an interpretation of the broad consensus of Lockean values that pervaded Colonial America. What emerges is not an ad hoc, inconsistently applied grouping of Lockean principles but instead a comprehensive, holistic, and pervasive philosophy. By delving so deeply into contemporary records and artifacts, *America’s Revolutionary Mind* corrects previous scholars who underestimate the intricacy of the theory of natural laws and natural rights that the colonists held dearly.

Given recent political events, Chapters 4 and 5 stand out as they cover the Declaration of Independence and the self-evident truth of equality. Thompson covers the Declaration’s most famous phrase: “that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” Chapter 4 consists of an explanation of how the colonists perceived equality. Their idea of equality was deeply Lockean in that equality meant freedom from the dominion of others. No person naturally rules over others without consent. Equality does not mean equal abilities, status, or wealth; equality instead is the state of not being dominated by another, being allowed to make use of one’s natural life to pursue happiness.

The obvious elephant in the room is slavery. Chapter 5 attempts to navigate how the Founders could believe in the inherent natural rights of all people but ignore the fact that they held slaves in often brutal bondage. Thompson explains that none of the Founders endorsed slavery; in fact, many were aware of their moral hypocrisy. While some such as John Adams never held slaves and others like Benjamin Franklin became abolitionists, men of the Founding generation such as Thomas Jefferson and George Washington held onto their plantations and slaves despite their high-minded ideals. Few defended the institution of slavery, so why did it last so long? Thompson argues that the post-emancipation problem was what held the Founders back from fully practicing what they preached. Fearing reprisals from former slaves, men such as Jefferson resigned to the comforts of self-preservation before the demands of justice. Thus, the ideals of the revolution were intended to apply to all, but ideals of the revolution were too demanding for many of the leading revolutionaries.

Does this mean that the moral revolution Thompson describes was merely a set of principles that could be selectively chosen to suit one's preferences? Thompson emphatically says no and describes the Declaration of Independence as "the moment of America's great moral awakening." Faced with the ideals of the Declaration and the reality of the peculiar institution of slavery, Americans began to question slavery more than they ever had previously. The Declaration of Independence failed to abolish slavery. It made the crucial step, however, of establishing a benchmark from which to evaluate and to criticize slavery, that benchmark being the idea that all men are created equal. Under this reading, the Declaration was not an end to slavery but instead an awakening to its inherent unjust nature.

Thompson, in his preface, shows his intentions in *America's Revolutionary Mind*. He aspires to contribute to scholarship in the same manner as Gordon Wood and Bernard Bailyn. Their contributions have not yet been matched in originality or influence despite being written in the sixties. While Thompson has not put forward a strikingly new analysis, he has aptly affirmed the vitality of Locke within the revolutionary mind of colonial America.

But, at times, Thompson overstates the influence of Locke to the detriment of other important authors who had comparable reputations amongst the colonists. Jefferson himself stated that the Declaration of Independence was based upon the ideas contained

within the elementary books of public right written by Aristotle, Cicero, Locke, and Algernon Sidney, but all of these authors only merit brief mentions from Thompson. Yes, the American Revolution was a product of Enlightenment thought, but that does not mean the past was abandoned. The Americans vested great authority in the wisdom of classical authors such as Tacitus, Plutarch, and Cicero, as well as more recent English Republicans such as Algernon Sidney, James Harrington, and the authors of Cato's Letters John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon. Thompson does not engage with the classical-republican scholarship of the American Revolution, possibly saving these arguments for his next book covering the philosophy of the American Constitution, expected to be titled *America's Constitutional Mind*. Nevertheless, for a book which is described as self-sufficient, the approach of valorizing Locke above all others can obscure the nuances and intricacies of the American mind, which was well versed in matters beyond Locke.

Thompson's vision of new moral history is exceptionally welcome at a time when the Founder's motives are constantly under cynically guided scrutiny. I commend this book highly for taking the Founders seriously. By doing so, Thompson interrogates the American temperament and character to a degree that is rarely achieved. The new moral history of Thompson is a breath of fresh air for its unique approach. *America's Revolutionary Mind* is an excellent guide to how America's most important generation thought about the foremost issues of their day and how Locke's thought was indispensable to the Declaration of Independence, one of the most important documents in American, if not world, history.

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### **Free to Move: Foot Voting, Migration, and Political Freedom**

Ilya Somin

New York: Oxford University Press, 2020, 263 pp.

Immigration policy is the most debated and controversial issue of our time. Across the developed world, political parties have greatly diverged on this issue. In Europe, political parties with a nativist bent have won elections and governed in coalition with other mainstream parties. But even mainstream parties, such as the Danish