
substantive content. Beaumont's writing is elegant but there is quite a bit of signaling, foreshadowing, recapitulation, and even repetition.

—Cyril Ghosh
Wagner College

Jeffrey A. Becker: *Ambition in America: Political Power and the Collapse of Citizenship*. (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2014. Pp. xi, 197.)

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Does moral decline pose a grave danger to American liberal democracy? This serious little book argues that it does. And if so, what can we do about it? Jeffrey Becker offers suggestions, but no guarantees. This is a book more confident about decline than recovery, although with thoughts on both.

Becker addresses such questions under an old-fashioned heading: how selfishness and zealotry can lead to the “collapse of citizenship.” But his concern is idealistic and up to date, as well as sympathetic to ordinary morals and public opinions. He understands citizenship as dedication to “popular self-government” and even “moral equality” (149). A collapse of citizenship means a loss of dedication to America's guiding ideals, a loss among both the powerful few and the people at large. It is in this Lincolnian sense that democracy has a moral problem, not merely a social or political problem. The reader should overlook a certain density, looseness, and repetition in Becker's prose. He will find significant commentary on our postmodern era (“celebrate me!” 115), some sober and independent argument (without hopes or fears of visionary innovations), and a tenacious survey of contemporary authors similarly worried.

For Becker, “ambition” means both modest ambitions and the need of a few for power, reputation, accomplishment, and distinction. Americans “have lost the ambition to be citizens” (149). He worries about a self-centered attitude among ordinary people and leaders alike, but especially among leaders. We are getting more candidates aiming merely for fame and power, or at most for some narrow cause, and a run of celebrity candidates who finance and organize electoral runs on their own. Becker, who stays away from examples, intimates some critique of Left, although mostly of Right. Candidates pride themselves on being mavericks, run against government, disdain the restraints of government, and even denigrate the public generally. Office holders develop a pompous and demagogic style. The people turn away and turn to private pleasures now hawked and indulged with the spice of self-expression. What ever happened, Becker asks, to “doing the tasks of

life well”: “being good at a job, raising a family, or being part of a community or relationship” (116)? The people in their preoccupations and freedoms are content with obeying, except for sporadic voting. The few in their ambitions rise by flattering. Leaders and people alike neglect the great cause of popular self-government with which they have been entrusted.

Still, Becker’s book is more than lament. It means especially to recover two things: a model of a statesman who could set things right—Becker’s example is F. D. Roosevelt—and political parties better at selecting such leaders and holding them accountable. But before laying out these suggestions Becker rejects three famous alternatives. He is not advocating Puritan-style community, for our morals must embrace “democratic inclusion” (19) and hence “reciprocity and equality” (29). Here Becker instances Lincoln’s mix of “moral authority” with “deep personal humility” (35). Nor can we recur to the framers’ seminal plan, which relied too much on enlightened self-interest, too little on devotion and duty. Nor will the Jacksonians or other populists do, content as they have been with self-interest democratized or with direct but merely leveling control.

What is needed is more political engagement of both ordinary citizens and “talented citizens” (133), together with reformed political parties to link the two. We need to realize especially that “esteem for ambition for greatness” is not of a “bygone era” (81). Contemporary democratic theory, one could say, should turn toward the ordinary morality that it once dismissed and even toward an exemplary peak, “the spirit of the gentleman” (81), albeit in some subordination to America’s great cause. Alexis de Tocqueville’s analysis serves Becker as introduction. Ambition “loses its force and greatness” in democratic society (75), and Americans forget in particular the importance of political liberty. Or, if they insist on liberty, they shirk reasonable and legal restraints on themselves (78). The true democratic statesman works to elevate their views: to preserve our free institutions, to encourage the educated to be candidates, and to preserve moderate religion as the “first of American political institutions” (82). Crucially, the people need noble examples as well as disciplining laws. Thus the political importance of an FDR-like figure, who mixes “democratic commitments” with the “Tocquevillian excellence of the aristocrat” (84). FDR was “the gentleman in government” (87) who opposed his class and restored the populace’s faith in democratic government, partly by promoting programs for their benefit. Becker is impressed by what we owe to aristocratic families like the Roosevelts, who at their high-minded best could produce “upstanding American[s]” (87) serving the nation and the less fortunate. Still, what of Lincoln or Harry Truman, gentlemen in a true sense and yet without conventional privilege of wealth or family? A middle class, too, can produce exemplary characters, despite the special preoccupations of the enlightened modern middle class.

Political parties still half-work, but it is important for Becker’s democratic statesman that they work better. Parties remain the usual ways to select

candidates, moderate political differences, finance and organize campaigns, and link candidate ambitions to collective purposes. But the power at the local level of ideological activists and wealthy donors now works to screen out “unacceptably moderate activists” (125). For that and other reasons, the electorate itself becomes ever more fragmented and “wildly diverse” (148). Narrow partisan agendas proliferate, especially at the state level, as does an erosion of collective control and popular confidence in government. This contributes to the erosion of citizenship. Why should *I* sacrifice for *them*? Becker’s concluding prescription: recover an understanding of authority not reflexively hostile to guidance by others and devoted to “moral equality” and the “lost ambition to be a citizen” (149). We need a liberal democratic counter-counterculture.

A big task, this. But perhaps Becker makes it harder even than it need be. Why the moral severity that rejects concern for common human “interests”—that is, the concern displayed by New Dealers as well as democratic Jacksonians and republican framers? Yes, we should encourage the self-governing side of representative democracy. Foster the local and state governments and private associations that Tocqueville rightly praised as schools of democracy. (FDR’s administrative centralization hurt these.) Still, ours is a vast and ever more centralized republic that must manage centralized businesses and diverse peoples by what unites the peoples with one another and with business. Two of FDR’s Four Freedoms concern want and fear of want, as do his most famous policies. Also, why shy away from considering the public aspects of the private sphere? That hierarchical, regulated, and often semipublic economy is the source of much citizen discipline, education, initiative, self-reliance, and self-improvement. Of course, it needs to be suitably ordered. FDR’s protection of trade unions was a crucial step in injecting more democratic self-government into the workplace and thus the country. Also, enlightened self-interest is not enough. But the old liberal morals, the morals of equal rights and thus equal opportunity, probably serve the mixture of equality and inequality that Becker seeks better than the “moral equality” he commends. The old creed of equal rights has another advantage. It summons up almost automatically devotion to the institutions and laws protecting such rights and thus devotion to duty. Let “reverence” for the Constitution and laws “become the *political religion* of the nation,” urged Lincoln when confronting vigilante justice and mob rule and again, in effect, when later confronting aristocratic secessionists. That too is a lesson worth recovering for those, like the author of this thought-provoking book, who wish “the perpetuation of our political institutions” (Lincoln, *Speeches and Writings, 1832–1858* [Literary Classics of the United States, 1989], 32).

—Robert Faulkner
Boston College

