
The character of the American founding has produced an interminable debate. Hence scholarship has taken several approaches. The major interpretive traditions include the progressive school of Charles Beard; the liberal interpretation given its most emphatic statement by Louis Hartz; the republican interpretation of scholars such as Gordon Wood; the feminine, forgotten, and forced-founders approach highlighting the contributions of Americans once neglected in scholarship; and the “unionist paradigm” posited by David Hendrickson. Suggesting the incompleteness of these interpretations, Alin Fumurescu’s *Compromise and the American Founding* presents fresh insight on the founding by exploring the intellectual history of compromise and how the willingness—or unwillingness—to compromise has been connected to competing notions of “the people.” Underlying much political conflict in American history, Fumurescu suggests, is the dynamic of competing conceptions of the people.

As indicated by its subtitle, the book’s point of departure is the neglected notion of the people’s “two bodies.” In the first understanding, “the people” is viewed as “a collection of equal individuals, ruled by a majority of wills.” In the other, “the people is a corporation, hierarchically structured, ruled by reason for the sake of the common good” (2). The former understanding supports the social-compact theory regarding the origins of society, while the latter supports the governmental compact between the people and its rulers. The first understanding secures individual rights and interests while the latter is a corporatist compact undertaken for the benefit of the whole. This “foundational double helix” is largely responsible both for American politics’ adaptability and successes, Fumurescu argues, and also, however, for a persistent confusion between the two understandings of the people. In fact, under the generic label of “contract/compact theory” many scholars have followed some of the less careful voices of the American Revolutionary generation in conflating the social compact among equal individuals to enter society with the political compact between the rulers and ruled (85–86).

Noting that his analysis is “not about the American founding per se but about the founding of the American people,” Fumurescu privileges the often overlooked Puritans as laying the groundwork for the dual notion of the people (10, original emphasis). The Puritans were a covenanted people. On the one hand was a horizontal covenant among their members to form a church and a political community; on the other, a vertical covenant between each church and God, which was politically reflected in the covenant of church members with their elected leaders. Their application of the paradigm of the people’s two bodies allowed them to conceive of the people horizontally as individuals equally entitled to agree on forming a new people and to establish a government, and vertically as electing an aristocracy of merit entrusted with governance. These two notions correspond to the social and political compacts respectively. With secular modifications, this “bidimensional covenant” was the Puritans’ chief legacy to subsequent generations (65). Not surprisingly, although the Puritans were willing to compromise among their own members, they refused to do so with outsiders. Fumurescu aptly quotes Perry Miller, “When … Puritans turned to the theory of contract, it was only in part to protect their rights against absolutism,” for it also justified “subordinating individuals to the state, once the ideals of the state had
been rightly conceived” (33). The Puritans’ unwillingness to compromise in the face of perceived threats to their identity truncated their political viability and with the Great Awakening they were finally splintered.

Succeeding chapters (e.g. “The Uncompromising Patriots” and “The Compromising Confederates”) provide a rich exploration of the legacy of the people’s two bodies for conflict and compromise in subsequent American political and religious history, to which the limited space allotted here cannot do justice. For example, that the Constitution for generations came to be understood as “the greatest of all compromises” is because its ambiguous language regarding “the people” successfully formalized the paradigm of the people’s two bodies. The notion that elected representatives were a natural aristocracy of the virtuous endured well into the eighteenth century, and the author shows how patriots made appeals to both the social and the political compacts. Reviving the forgotten notion of the people’s two bodies, this book demystifies much of the seemingly contradictory notions of individualism and the common good in the political philosophy of the founding—once identified by scholars as liberalism and republicanism. As well as the nature and history of compromise, this work sheds light on contemporary debates on elitism and populism. Future scholarship would do well to incorporate its insights into the precarious balancing act between the people’s two bodies.

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Ever since James Cone published his Martin and Malcolm and America (1991), scholars have been familiar with the argument that over time the views of these two iconic figures in the classic phase of the African American freedom struggle converged. The wider public, however, has tended to retain the media-fed framework that stresses the dichotomy between Martin, the nonviolent integrationist, and Malcolm, the black nationalist critic of nonviolence and advocate of armed resistance. Joseph has aimed his work at this wider public at a time when mass resistance to racial injustice provides a compelling context for understanding the continuing demand for dignity and full citizenship for African Americans.

Across ten chapters, Joseph offers a largely familiar story. His title offers a clue to his interpretive bias. The revolutionary life of Malcolm, with its demand for radical dignity (25–54), blazes the trail and ultimately shapes Martin’s demand for radical citizenship (55–80). The sharp incisive critique and stern militancy of Malcolm is the sword that can elicit concessions from white America, and Martin’s compassionate appeal for interracial friendship and espousal of American values serve as a shield for the movement’s militancy. By the time of his break with the Nation of Islam, Malcolm had become more appreciative of King’s ability to bring pressure to bear on America to advance the cause of African American citizenship. Simultaneously, by 1965, Martin was becoming more aware of the need to nurture African American dignity which the systemic racism of northern ghettos denied. He also appreciated that Malcolm was a comrade in arms in the quest for human rights, and that white liberals rarely delivered on their promises in full.