

George Kateb, *Lincoln's Political Thought*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 2015. xiii + 236pp.

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In *Lincoln's Political Thought*, George Kateb brings forth a highly engaging and distinctive perspective on one of the most studied figures in world history. Often ruthlessly logical, sometimes controversial, frequently tantalisingly elusive, Kateb's analysis of Abraham Lincoln's motives and ideas is a gripping read, even for a non-scholarly audience.

There are a number of key issues that this particular book raises, and it is quite refreshing to note that Kateb goes easy on political jargon or overtly technical terminology. His portrayal of Lincoln as a president balances, at times precariously, between deep admiration and tangible frustration at the impossibility of neatly summarising Lincoln's personality. Whilst the main thesis at the heart of the book is stated by the author almost immediately: Lincoln was a champion driven by "moral commitment to human equality" and his entire life and thought manifest this, the portrait of the "Great Emancipator" in this book is highly complex, and, on a couple of occasions, bordering on being less likeable than one might be conventionally comfortable with (ix).

Kateb starts his attempt to comprehend the nature of the forces driving Lincoln's spirit by setting out a vivid picture of the general socio-political climate at the time, which, as he states, was a situation that could be described as "most terrible in American history"(1). It is emphasised that this particular era was marked by an unprecedented number of ferocities and violence. Though to a historian scientifically analysing the past Kateb's reaction may seem amusingly over-sensitive, as he declares that "...the period must be addressed – the gorgon must not paralyze us," his subsequent reflection on the state of society in Lincoln's day is indeed precise, clear and powerful (3). He overturns the widespread notion that slavery was in some ways to be seen as a mystical "curse," sweeping both whites and blacks into a maelstrom of pre-ordained tyrannical misery, by cuttingly logical argumentation. However, as per his analysis of Lincoln's persona, Kateb suggests that Lincoln was aware of the idea of a grander force being at play in directing the events at the time, and indeed he did employ this idea to reach across to his audience. Further on, in a manner that is more reminiscent of a literary than a strictly historical or political

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academic approach, Kateb reflects on the notion of seeing the entire role of Lincoln and his historical background through a lens of tragedy, focusing in particular on the “aesthetic value” and mythologizing of Lincoln’s death. Though this dips a toe into a more inter-disciplinary territory, it is a fascinating topic that begs an entire monograph, or perhaps a thesis, to itself.

One particular character trait of Lincoln that Kateb finds particularly complex to deal with, is the difficulty to contain him as a personality within defined and clear boundaries. Whether he is speaking of Lincoln’s writing style, which appears as a quintessence of minimalist aesthetic – laconic on the surface, yet laden with numerous meanings becoming apparent on repeated readings, or of his attitude towards a topic as controversial as the doctrine of military necessity, Kateb admits that “you cannot pin Lincoln down” (39). We might then comment that this constitutes a large part of Lincoln’s timeless appeal to the popular imagination which takes him far beyond the realm of politics.

The least comfortable passages within Kateb’s book probably come from a chapter dedicated to the analysis of Lincoln’s stance towards race and human equality. It does feel rather shocking to be presented with a view of the “Great Emancipator” sharing some of the blatantly racist attitudes of the time. This is quite the most controversial moment in Kateb’s analysis, and the idea that perhaps the modern concept of colour-consciousness as a negative trait was not fully developed in Lincoln’s day, does not annihilate the bitter aftertaste.

To conclude, upon finishing Kateb’s book we are left with still more questions on various facets as to what constituted Lincoln’s real thought. Yet one argument is clear: be it the preservation of the Union, the abolishment of slavery, or the amendment of Constitution, Lincoln should be perceived as a revolutionary figure in that he managed to subvert, order and holistically rebuild an entire political system which was before essentially flawed and illogically organised.