

Emily Pears: *Cords of Affection: Constructing Constitutional Union in Early American History*. (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2021. Pp. xi, 300.)

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Emily Pears's *Cords of Affection* begins with a dispiriting survey of the current state of American democracy. The evidence adduced to paint the portrait of decline is by now familiar but remains alarming nonetheless. Surveys consistently show that only a small portion of the American public trusts the federal government, and that polarization, the pandemic, widespread protests, and an attempted autogolpe have combined to undermine faith in American institutions and democracy more generally. Scholars and political commentators have offered a variety of solutions, ranging from institutional reform to abandoning liberalism altogether. But Pears suggests our present problems are an iteration of the original problem confronted by the founding generation, which undertook the challenge of forming a nation out of widely disparate political communities. The statesmen of that generation thought the challenge could be addressed by encouraging political attachments, or those "patriotic sentiments and beliefs that connect individuals to their institutions of government" (11). A premise of the work is that an examination of the founding-era perspective on the importance of political attachments, along with analysis of early efforts to cultivate those attachments, can yield useful information about how we might lower the temperature of our contentious contemporary politics.

The project undertaken in *Cords of Affection* is mostly historical in nature, as Pears endeavors to analyze the ways political actors in the past thought about and encouraged attachments to political institutions. The second chapter provides an overview of founding-era perspectives on the necessity of attaching citizens to political institutions, especially those of the new federal government, and Pears usefully distills from this analysis three primary approaches to the problem as reflected in founding-era thought. Each of the next three chapters provides case studies to better specify how each approach works in practice. Chapter 3 fleshes out the logic of the "utilitarian mechanism," an approach that aims to secure institutional loyalty by providing material benefits to citizens, and explores its real-world efficacy by analyzing the internal-improvements programs spearheaded by John C. Calhoun and Henry Clay. Chapter 4 focuses on the "cultural mechanism." This approach develops political attachments through a process of "cultural construction," which relies on finely honed historical and educational narratives designed to encourage in citizens a sense of nationalism that, in turn, biases them in favor of national institutions. The chapter illustrates this mechanism primarily by analyzing select statesmen's use of cultural technologies—language in Noah Webster's case, historical narrative for George Bancroft, and oratory and rhetoric for Daniel Webster—to define and weave throughout everyday civic life a specifically American national political culture that fastens citizens

to national institutions. Chapter 5 explores the “participatory mechanism,” an approach that supposes that active participation in the political process, along with the civic engagement that attends it, will habituate citizens instinctively to trust their institutions. The chapter presents Martin Van Buren’s vision of political parties as exemplary of this mechanism, focusing in particular on Van Buren’s hope of using local party activity as the first link in a chain that ties citizens to national political institutions. It also explores various efforts to establish a national program of civic education that would encourage participation in the political process beyond merely casting a vote. Finally, the work’s concluding chapter takes a broader view of these three approaches, comparing the strengths and weaknesses of each and suggesting what we in the present might learn from these past efforts to bind citizens to the regime.

*Cords of Affection* offers a valuable thematic analysis of a problem peculiar to diverse democratic societies, namely, how to achieve meaningful political stability in a nation that contains so much variety in interests and identities. The book’s overview of the founding era is especially useful in explaining how this issue was treated as a matter of first instance by the statesmen of that generation. They understood that even the most homogeneous nations must deal with the irrepressibility of humans’ natural diversity, but the challenge was especially vexing for the United States because it must be addressed using noncoercive means that remain consistent with both respect for individual rights and the principles of popular government. And while they believed that carefully crafted institutions could mediate the many competing demands a diverse citizenry inevitably places on government, *Cords of Affection* persuasively argues that they understood that even the wisest institutional arrangements must have the support of citizens to function properly. The work’s case studies add valuable insight to how each of the three main mechanisms for encouraging institutional attachments works in the real world, and Pears includes sharp assessments of the problems and possibilities associated with each. With regard to the utilitarian mechanism, for example, Pears uses the internal-improvements programs to highlight the difficulty of providing benefits to citizens in exchange for institutional loyalty. General benefits (roads, canals, etc.) reach many citizens but precisely because their benefits are diffuse, they are a poor way to facilitate attachments. Targeted benefits (constructing federal buildings in specific locales) more reliably encourage attachments, but only among the fraction of the population that directly benefits from them. Pears’s analysis of Van Buren’s vision of political parties is another standout case study, one that offers novel insights into how political parties can help unify citizens behind national institutions.

The book succeeds as a treatment of an important theme in the history of American political thought and development, but it is perhaps less persuasive in selling political attachments as a viable practical solution to the challenge of securing stability in a diverse democracy. A more convincing case would

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include the soundness of the institutions themselves as a mechanism for encouraging institutional loyalty. The work does not overlook this possibility. In fact, Pears explicitly acknowledges that the quality or justness of institutions may influence individuals' willingness to defend them, but she nonetheless insists that for political attachments to serve their stabilizing function, citizens must remain committed to the institutions even when those institutions are unjust or otherwise defective (13). The book thus acknowledges and then entirely discounts the empirical reality that bad institutions undermine institutional attachments. This position reflects an implicit assumption, evident at times in the work (e.g., 20, 22), that institutional critiques are rooted almost entirely in dissatisfaction with policy outcomes that conflict with one's self-, group-, or party-interest.

This would surprise those political scientists whose research finds that individuals are more accepting of adverse outcomes if they were reached through fair institutional rules and procedures (see esp. the work of Tom R. Tyler). Individuals view good institutions as ends in themselves. This is not a new insight; indeed, many among the founding generation recognized on some level that institutions must play a significant role in generating their own support. To insist that citizens must be attached to their institutions when those institutions are substantially responsible for undermining institutional attachment is to simply reframe the problem as the solution. This critique is perhaps unfair, like complaining that an apple is not a banana, inasmuch as Pears's book is concerned with understanding how Americans thought about political attachments in the past rather than systematically advancing a prescription for what ails us in the present. In any event, if this is a weakness of the work, it is not one that diminishes its overall value or the significance of its contribution. *Cords of Affection* is of particular interest to students of American political thought and development, but it is accessible enough to engage a broader audience.

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