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# Barducci's Hugo Grotius and the Century of Revolution, 1613-1718

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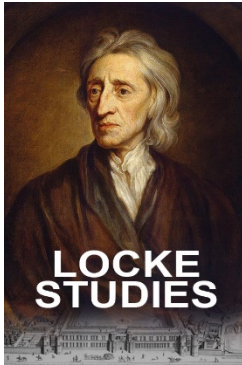
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## **Review of *Hugo Grotius and the Century of Revolution, 1613-1718* by Marco Barducci**

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### *Abstract:*

A review of Marco Barducci's recent book *Hugo Grotius and the Century of Revolution, 1613–1718* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

*Keywords:* Grotius, Hobbes, property, sovereignty, empire

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**Barducci, Marco. *Hugo Grotius and the Century of Revolution, 1613–1718*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017. 222 pp. \$90 (hbk). ISBN 9780198754589.**

**Reviewed by DENNIS KLIMCHUK**

Readers of the current A-list canon in the history of Western political philosophy will likely encounter Grotius only through his eighteenth-century continental European critics. Rousseau argued that one could not find a method of reasoning more favourable to tyrants than Grotius's (*On the Social Contract*, trans. Cress [Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987], 189), and Kant lists him among the "sorry comforters" of those who claim a right to engage in offensive war ("Toward Perpetual Peace," trans. Gregor, in *Kant: Practical Philosophy* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996]), 326). Dig a bit, and we find Grotius a degree or two of separation from seventeenth-century English entries in the canon, for example via the first of Locke's *Treatises of Government*, through its subject, Robert Filmer, to Filmer's *Observations concerning the Original of Government upon Mr Hobbes's Leviathan, Mr Milton against Salmasius, and H. Grotius' De jure belli ac pacis*.

Keep digging, and we find Grotius throughout the breadth of the debates about the central political issues and principal preoccupations of political philosophers in seventeenth-century England. So shows Marco Barducci in his excellent study, *Hugo Grotius and the Century of Revolution, 1613–1718*. Barducci carefully assembles and analyzes Grotius's impact on and place in discussions of sovereignty and the right of resistance (chaps. 1–2), republicanism (chap. 3), the relationship between the church and the state (chap. 4), church government (chap. 5), property (chap. 6), and empire (chap. 7).

Some common themes of Grotius scholarship, we find, are vindicated in the details. Richard Tuck's oft-cited claim that *De Iure Belli ac Pacis* is "Janus-faced, and its two mouths speak the language of both absolutism and liberty," (*Natural Right Theories* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979], 79), for example, is borne out in detail through chapter 1, which traces Grotius's deployment by defenders of absolutism (both quite and less well-known) and chapter 2, which traces a similarly broad presence in the work of English defenders of the right to resist unjust government. The ambivalence of Grotius's views—and perhaps also his apparent willingness to exploit that ambivalence as the occasion required—is likewise illustrated in a particularly telling (true) story Barducci recounts in his treatment of the uses to which Grotius's accounts of private law were put by him and others in arguments concerning trade and international relations. In a dispute over international trade between the English East India Company and the Dutch VOC, represented by Grotius, the English representatives appeared to draw on the arguments of Grotius's still-anonymous short work, *Mare Librium*, against its author. The English claimed, true to the work's name, that the seas were free, that is, that they were free to travel where and trade with whom they wished. Grotius replied that this right was overridden by agreements the Dutch had already entered into, to which the parties were bound by the natural law obligation to keep one's promises (172).

That story had already been told (see W. S. M. Knight, “Grotius in England: His Opposition There to the Principles of the *Mare Liberum*,” in *Transactions of the Grotius Society* 5 (1919), 18–19); here and throughout the book one of Barducci’s contributions is having assembled an authoritatively comprehensive body of existing scholarship into a compelling narrative. But his aspirations and contributions go well beyond that. Barducci seeks to defend the bold claim that “Grotius was one of the most important, if not the most important, political thinkers of the ‘century of revolution’” (198). What makes this claim bold is that the ‘century of revolution’ names a period in English history, coined but slightly differently delineated by the historian Christopher Hill (*The Century of Revolution, 1603-1714* [London: Nelson, 1980]).

Barducci’s argument is that Grotius’s significance is revealed if we look at things the right way. The subtitle of the book is “Transnational Reception in English Political Thought.” This stakes two methodological claims. The first, “transnational,” explains itself. Barducci represents himself as in part responding to Hill, who, on his reckoning, acknowledged but under-appreciated the role of non-English writers and thinkers in shaping English political thought and history in the century of revolution (2–3, 186).

“Reception” will take a few more words. It’s helpful to draw a contrast with “influence,” which names a relationship between a writer and their audience that is narrower on two measures. First, the claim that A influenced B, or that B was influenced by A, casts B in a passive role. One motivation for adopting the language of “reception” is that receiving is something one must do and may do in more than one way. This points to the second measure: investigating how a writer was received invites looking for a much broader range of actions and events than would looking for traces of their influence. Barducci quotes with approval a catalogue from Michael Baxandall (without implying that it is closed): one might, in receiving it, “draw on, resort to, avail oneself of, appropriate from, have recourse to, adapt, misunderstand, refer to” (*Patterns of Intention* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985], 59) a source (14).

This promises to significantly expand the material on which an historian might draw, and not just because this is a broader list than would be gathered under the measure of “was influenced by.” It also permits more forgiving standards of proof. Proof that A influenced B, unless A expressly grants it or reveals it through explicitly discussing or citing B, is, arguably, hard to come by. Barducci directs us to Quentin Skinner on this point. Skinner argues that proof that some argument of B’s shows the influence of A’s work (in the absence, again, of explicit acknowledgement) requires: “(i) that B is known to have studied A’s works; (ii) that B could not have found the relevant doctrines in any writer other than A, and (iii) that B could not have arrived at the relevant doctrines independently” (“Meaning and understanding in the history of ideas,” in *Visions of Politics Vol. 1: Regarding Method* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002], 75–76). (i) and (ii) are often not satisfied in many relationships commonly described in terms of influence, Skinner argues; he adds that it’s not clear how (iii) could ever be shown.

Tracing reception in its various forms is less demanding. One might worry that it is shown too easily, that it is vulnerable to the sort of scepticism Skinner directed at claims like B “anticipated” a claim of A’s. Barducci, however, is careful and methodical in his analyses, and cautious in the conclusions he draws from them. An example: after

reviewing the often explicit use of Grotius's work by absolutist writers in England, Barducci sums up by saying that, while "[t]he analysis made so far enables us to affirm that Grotius significantly contributed to the English vocabulary of absolutism," nonetheless, because he was often named and drawn upon along with other theorists of absolutism, "it is difficult to establish exactly what English authors actually thought of his doctrine of political obligation, and what they found in it so fit for their purposes" (40). His measured approach makes the work all the more valuable for historians.

One quibble is worth mentioning, however, in part because it will be of particular interest to readers of this journal. There is one point on which, it seems to me, Barducci is less cautious, namely the question of Grotius's relationship to Locke. He often characterizes Locke's arguments as "re-elaborations" of Grotius, in general (12) and, in particular, concerning punishment (59) and property (189). I'm not persuaded that Barducci has marshalled the evidence for these quite bold claims. The links are for the most part indirect. Though Locke pretty clearly quoted Grotius (without attribution) at least twice in the *Essays on the Law of Nature* (ed. Von Leyden [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1954], 111, 205), Barducci's main evidence for Grotius's impact on Locke's accounts of punishment and ownership in the state of nature is the resemblance of their arguments. I'm not convinced the resemblance is strong enough to support the claim that here Locke "re-elaborated" Grotius. I think there's reason to cast the relationship as Barducci casts that between Grotius and Hobbes: if we think of Grotius's and Locke's accounts as pictures "when observed from a certain distance their framework and subject may look similar, [b]ut the closer we get to them, the more their details look different" (15). For example, while they share the idea that we all possess a natural use-right, they part ways on the conditions of moving from it to private property, and do so on a significant point of difference, namely the relationship between scarcity and property. On Grotius's account, only things that are moderately scarce are candidates for private ownership; on Locke's a condition of that candidacy is a certain degree of abundance (else the proviso that one must leave as much and as good for others could not be satisfied).

This is just a quibble because Barducci does not always put the point so strongly. He is often more cautious, as in his argument that "Locke's insistence on labour as a form of legitimization of property rights can therefore be understood as an adaptation of Grotius's theory to the peculiarities of English settlement in North America (168; see also 189)—which really casts the claim as a point of reconstruction. In the main, the Grotius-Locke link is drawn by Barducci in this way; for example, in his claim that we can best understand Locke's account of the right to resist unjust governance as his solution to the "Grotian problem" of finding a reconciliation between a ban on private warfare and a limited right of rebellion (chap. 2).

But if recourse to the methodological advantages of searching for Grotius's *reception* in seventeenth-century England does not settle the question of his relationship to Locke, that does not make *Hugo Grotius and the Century of Revolution* any the less strongly recommended reading for anyone interested in Grotius or English politics and political philosophy in the "century or revolution"—or, indeed, for those interested in the relationship between Grotius and Locke. This is an excellent book, scholarly, engaging, and enlightening.

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