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What 'Hamilton' Forgets About Hamilton

By JASON FRANK and ISAAC KRAMNICK JUNE 10, 2016

ALEXANDER HAMILTON is all the rage. Sold out for months in advance, the musical "Hamilton," Lin-Manuel Miranda's remarkable hip-hop dramatization of this founder's life, is arguably the most celebrated American cultural phenomenon of our time. Reported on from every conceivable angle, the show has helped keep Hamilton on the \$10 bill and prompted a new nickname for this weekend's Broadway awards ceremony: the "Hamiltonys."

Central to the musical's power is the way it and its extraordinarily talented multiracial cast use Hamilton's immigrant hustle to explain the most important political episodes of his life. "I am not throwing away my shot," Mr. Miranda's Hamilton sings early on, and it is this motif that animates everything that follows.

In Hamilton's tumultuous life, Mr. Miranda saw the drive and promise of the immigrant story of America. Already in 1782 the French immigrant Crèvecoeur had defined "the American, this new man" as one who moved to a land in which the "idle may be employed, the useless become useful, and the poor become rich." Hamilton announces this entrepreneurial ambition early in the show: "Hey, yo, I'm just like my country/I'm young, scrappy and hungry." The night's biggest applause line, "Immigrants: We get the job *done!*," proclaims that, contra Donald J. Trump, immigrants are the source of America's greatness and renewal, not its decline.

Mr. Miranda's depiction of Hamilton as resourceful immigrant and talented self-made man captures an important aspect of his character. But the musical avoids an equally pronounced feature of Hamilton's beliefs: his deeply ingrained elitism, his

disdain for the lower classes and his fear of democratic politics. The musical's misleading portrayal of Hamilton as a "scrappy and hungry" man of the people obscures his loathing of the egalitarian tendencies of the revolutionary era in which he lived.

Hamilton mistrusted the political capacities of the common people and insisted on deference to elites. In a speech delivered at the Constitutional Convention, Hamilton praised the hierarchical principles of the British political system. He argued, for example, that the new American president and senators should serve for life. Many of the Convention participants feared the "excess of democracy," but Hamilton went much further. He wanted to bring an elective monarchy and restore non-titled aristocracy to America. "The people are turbulent and changing," he declared. "They seldom judge or determine right." They must be ruled by "landholders, merchants and men of the learned professions," whose experience and wisdom "travel beyond the circle" of their neighbors. For America to become an enduring republic, Hamilton argued, it had to insulate rulers and the economy as much as possible from the jealous multitude.

One of the musical's most memorable scenes portrays Hamilton's debate with Thomas Jefferson over the establishment of a national bank. What it doesn't convey is Jefferson's populist resistance to an economic plan that, in his view, supported the rule of commercial oligarchs who manipulated credit and currency at the expense of debtors and yeoman farmers. Instead, Mr. Miranda stages a confrontation between a hypocritical republican slave owner and an abolitionist visionary ("A civics lesson from a slaver," a scoffing Hamilton says in response to Jefferson. "Hey, neighbor, your debts are paid 'cause you don't pay for labor") that conceals as much as it reveals.

Hamilton's opposition to slavery — reflected, for example, in his being a founder of New York's Manumission Society — was not central to his political vision. The musical's suggestion that had he not been killed in the duel with Aaron Burr, Hamilton would have gone on to play an important role in the abolitionist struggle is fantasy. Even the lionization of Hamilton as the exemplar of America's immigrant ideal neglects his ultimate endorsement of the Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798, which made it harder for immigrants to become citizens while allowing their

deportation if they were suspected of disloyalty (he urged exceptions, though, for some foreign merchants and those “whose demeanor among us has been unexceptionable”). Jefferson led the opposition to this policy, and his victory in the presidential election of 1800 brought most of its provisions to an end.

Our point is not that Mr. Miranda should have offered a more balanced portrayal of Hamilton. But the aspect of Hamilton’s life he celebrates — the self-making entrepreneurialism of the American dream — cannot be fully understood without including, indeed without highlighting, Hamilton’s insistent and emphatic inegalitarianism. Hamilton and his contemporaries understood these seemingly contradictory positions as two sides of the same coin. Ignoring one side, as Mr. Miranda has done, obscures their connection both then and now.

Just as Jefferson’s republican championing of the people’s liberties depended upon his acceptance of a permanent underclass of slave laborers, so does Hamilton’s commitment to the success of the entrepreneurial self-made man depend upon his assumption that there would be a deferential political underclass to do the heavy work. Mr. Miranda’s emphasis on the contradiction inherent in Jefferson’s stance deflects attention away from the contradiction in Hamilton’s.

Hamilton, with his contemptuous attitude toward the lower classes, was perfectly comfortable with the inegalitarian and antidemocratic implications of his economic vision. One has to wonder if the audiences in the Richard Rodgers Theater would be as enthusiastic about a musical openly affirming such convictions. No founder of this country more clearly envisioned the greatness of a future empire enabled by drastic inequalities of wealth and power. In this sense, too, “Hamilton” is very much a musical for our times.

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