

Winner of the 2006 PCCBS Book Prize

Victoria Kahn, *Wayward Contracts: The Crisis of Political Obligation in England, 1640-1674* (Princeton, 2004)

The second biennial PCCBS Book Prize was awarded to Professor Victoria Kahn of U.C. Berkeley at the 2007 annual meeting. The prize committee – comprising Barbara Shapiro (chair), Constance Jordan, and Jeffrey Auerbach – presented the following citation in making the award:

Victoria Kahn's prize-winning *Wayward Contracts: The Crisis of Political Obligation in England 1640-1674* (Princeton University Press, 2004) gives us a new and richer conception of what constitutes the political contract by analyzing its pre-modern development in the decades before John Locke's *Treatises on Government*. Arguing that earlier seventeenth-century discourses of contract engage twinned but also antagonistic ideas: on the one hand, the covenant, predicated on the exercise of the human conscience, and on the other, the contract, grounded in the presumption of valid self-interest, Kahn illustrates the creation of a new and chiefly secular political subject. Neither wholly bound by the strictures of natural law nor fully energized by personal ambition, Kahn's subject is situated at the confluence of the ancient traditions of the church and the feudal order, and the emerging systems of private ownership and market economies. This subject does not blink at recognizing how essential a part passion plays in creating relations between persons and political entities; he or she does not shy away from recognizing the basis of a contract in the feeling words of a promise, a commitment, an agreement to serve or preserve. With Hobbes's *Leviathan* and Milton's *Paradise Lost* as evidence, Kahn characterizes this subject a "man of feeling." His society, no longer organized by customary norms and practices validated by time-honored experience, produces and is in turn produced by linguistic events that make use of the imagination as a constructive faculty of mind. He is distinctly different from the Lockean subject of modern liberal theory, a subject that Kahn terms "thin," attenuated by a kind of hyper-rationalism. The subject of *Wayward Contracts* is rather "thick" – made rich and fat and weighty by all kinds of defining personal connections and commitments to his human community. Kahn concludes by answering the disdain with which today's liberals (or so-called liberals) are so often greeted. In a salutary move, Kahn asks for a restoration of the possibilities open to the historically justified pre-modern liberal subject – possibilities that address the well-being not only of the individual but also the community at large.