

Heather Cairney

Dr. David Livingstone

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Moderating Democracies: Acknowledging the Need for Acknowledgment

Alexis de Tocqueville is fascinated by the “equality of conditions” he observes during his exploration of America but worries that individual claims to freedom will eventually slip away as the fight for equality persists. He documents these predictions in a series of essays called *Democracy in America* in which he explains both the causes for this “drift” and its inevitability in democratic societies. For Tocqueville, the fate of democracy in America ultimately rests on the will of the people and the “savage instincts” guiding its regime. He worries this lack of foresight will prevent citizens from recognizing the unsustainability of their habits, ultimately costing them their freedom over time. However, if Tocqueville’s observations are examined in combination with the insight of other ancient philosophers as well as more contemporary thinkers, we can discover ways for society to not only survive under such conditions but thrive as well. In this essay, I will apply the insights of James Madison, Karl Marx, Richard Myers, and Jason Riley to Tocqueville’s conclusions about America and discuss how this combination of philosophy can be used to moderate temptations in democratic societies. If the need for acknowledgement can be tamed in democracies the pursuit of equality can exist without being a risk to freedom.

Former US president Harry S. Truman once noted “It is amazing what you can accomplish if you do not care who gets the credit” (azquotes). For the founding fathers of America these words ring especially true as these writers went to great lengths in making sure they were not individually credited for their highly influential essays, now referred to as *The Federalist Papers*. This collection of papers is comprised of eighty-five essays, all of which outline the benefits of the newly proposed constitution, presented to the American public in 1787 under the pen name “Publius” in the hopes of winning their consent. By keeping this anonymity, these persuasive documents ended up securing them the confidence of enough

delegates to adopt the new constitution of the United States of America in 1788. However, as states began to flourish, so of course, did the list of achievements, steadily multiplying the need for acknowledgment across the country.

Aside from being seasoned politicians, some of the founding fathers of America were also, very persuasive writers, who recognized both the intelligence of the American public and their taste for realism at the time. Federalist No. 10 assesses both the inevitability and risks pertaining to factions, unveiling the remarkable foresight of these anonymous authors and their now accurately proven predictions. In this document “Publius” states that “the most common and durable source of factions has been the various and unequal distribution of property” and discusses how this inequality feeds into the division of classes across the US, presenting an ongoing issue for statesman trying to moderate these “passions and interests” (Madison). Furthermore, it explains the impossibility of curing these factions in a “pure democracy” where the will of the majority rules, realistically stating that under this regime “the causes of faction cannot be removed, and that relief is only to be sought in the means of controlling its effects” (Madison). Finally, “Publius” presents the freshly designed government, called a republic, revealing the newly proposed separation of powers in a distinct order that will seek to cure faction in America.

It is then that this bottom-up approach is laid out in more detail stating “first, the delegation of government, in the latter to a small number of citizens elected by the rest; secondly, the greater number of citizens, and greater sphere of the country, over which the latter may be extended” (Madison). The order of powers is essential in understanding the success of federalism in the US because it highlights Americas’ national respect for townships and the “patriotism and love of justice” born in these communities (Madison). “Publius” remarks that, by passing public views through a small group of citizens “whose wisdom may best discern the true interest of the country”, these views can then be “enlarge[d]” in a manner by which the entire union can benefit (Madison). Federalist No. 10 was impactful because it laid out uncomfortable truths about the nature of humans and the levels of reason and morality embedded into these individuals based on their political environments. Since the nature of these assumptions, were a sensitive topic for

citizens, it is easy to understand why the writer chose to protect his anonymity at the time. It is also, important to consider whether this lack of acknowledgment (or lack of need of acknowledgement) was the driving force behind the success of the new constitution itself and the persuasive essays that supported it.

Tocqueville too, finds a bottom-up approach to be in the best interest of free nations that support the principles of federalism and uses the state of New England to defend his argument in *Democracy in America*. Tocqueville expresses his admiration for the community spirit he observes in this state that seems to provide “unlimited” movement for those devoted to the management of it, from his perspective. The connectivity between citizens and the town is supported through the “fulfillment of duty” and engagement in political life (Tocqueville 81). Tocqueville believes it is this independence that leads citizens of this state and other states across the US, toward a greater understanding of the balance of powers and the extent of their’ rights, providing a healthy foundation for federal government to take shape. He states that “Town institutions are to freedom what primary schools are to knowledge: they bring it within people’s reach and give men the enjoyment and habit of using it for peaceful ends” (Tocqueville 73). Tocqueville believes that if townships can be first built, cared for, and maintained, then healthy federalism is more likely to blossom from this foundation, preventing federal powers from acquiring more power than they deserve. Most likely, Tocqueville would have been opposed to modern progressivism and would have found these trends somewhat threatening to the fragile nature of townships overall.

Interestingly, Tocqueville refers to factions in America as “associations” which he interprets as powerful sources of expression for citizens seeking an “intellectual bond” with others united in their opinion. He sees factions in America as positive organizations that work to strengthen the republic, untyrannical in nature and typically free of conspiracy (Tocqueville 224). Tocqueville reflects that “the freedom of association for political ends is unrestricted” and is baffled by the extent to which freedom is tolerated in America (222). He concludes that freedom of association is in fact, crucial to the success of the US regime because it provides a “vital safeguard against tyranny of the majority” which he believes to be one of the biggest

threats to an American republic at the time (223). It is interesting to now go back and think about the views and predictions about “factions” made by “Publius” in 1787 in comparison to the complimentary observations about these same “associations” made by Tocqueville only half a century later. Although Tocqueville’s European background may have influenced his ideas and experiences pertaining to associations, it cannot be disputed that the design of federalism laid out in the ratified Constitution worked to lessen the threat of factions significantly in America, or did it?

In present-day democracies it would seem, that the need for acknowledgment is outstanding. Judging by the will of the majority, acknowledging the work of others where and when acknowledgement is due, has become hugely important to most citizens and their’ respect for one another in contemporary societies. So much so, that when acknowledgment is *not* adequately acknowledged, offence can be taken easily, stirring the passions of those who hold firmly rooted beliefs about the significance of this recognition. Arguably this attitude has steadily increased since copyright laws began alongside the invention of the printing press in the 15th century and the ever-escalating consequences for plagiarism over time. In contemporary societies, this can pose serious risks for individuals who find themselves in violation of these laws, putting both their’ personal and professional reputations at risk. In many democracies, students are made aware of these repercussions early in life when citizens become students who then, attend institutions, which enforce and reinforce the importance of this, author acknowledgement to help prevent students from violating these laws. Typically, students within these regimes are presented with very specific guidelines about “proper” etiquette relating to referencing and citations which then have a major impact on “student-success” overall. It can be argued that these attitudes have even trickled into all other private and public spheres too, where citizens can be easily criticized for their’ lack of author recognition in every-day conversation. It is curious however, why government institutions in America would place such a heavy importance on acknowledgement when the very success of its union was achieved by the work of its founding fathers and their’ *lack* of need for acknowledgement, if you will.

In *Please Stop Helping Us*, author Jason Riley brings awareness to some more

contemporary dangers embedded into civic rights activism and believes liberal activism in particular does more to hurt “the black underclass” in the US than it does to help. Riley argues that oppression from society can no longer be blamed for “holding back blacks in America” and that their’ present challenges have much more to do with “values and habits” than they do with racism (33). Riley states that “today’s civil rights leaders encourage blacks to see themselves as victims” which does little but stall the growth of this group from his perspective (46). One professor from the University of California, John Ogbu, examined the black-white achievement gap in a suburb of Cleaveland, Ohio and found that the leaders who most inspired Black student in this community “were admired because of their leadership in the ‘collective struggle’ against White oppression or in the civil rights movement rather than because of their’ academic and professional success or other attributes that made them successful in the corporate economy or wider societal institutions” (Riley 46). One of the most concerning points Riley brings up in his book is how the civil rights movement in America became “an industry” and more dangerously, an industry with “no vested interests in realistic assessments of black pathology” (Riley 81). It is worrisome then, to think about the role social media has had in the magnification of these unhelpful liberal voices and how these messages, embedded with excuses, may be hurting Black people in the US. Even more disturbing perhaps, is the idea that some of these influencers are having their’ personal need for acknowledgement fulfilled by participating in activism that is only working to keep this already minoritized group down.

Richard Myers’ is another modern philosopher with valuable solutions to these deeply rooted problems. From Myers perspective, he might believe that America has come “full circle” in a sense, a nation that began as a democracy but is now moving into the direction of an aristocracy, in which the “economic status of both rich and poor is fixed” (187). He argues that in this type of a regime, neither group “give much thought to the pursuit of wealth” because eventually “the people finally get used to their poverty just as their rich do their opulence” (185). However, America is at an advantage in a sense because other European nations before it already have an aristocratic history to look back on, which means America can better predict its inevitable downfall and therefore, find method to avoid it instead. Myers suggests that a Liberal

education is one of the most logical solutions for nations that have become utilitarian in their actions and that teachers “are always the most influential models” (191). From this perspective then, the most logical goal indeed, would be to encourage more inclusive approaches to teaching and learning while preserving the impressive intellectual egalitarianism that has been built in America since 1788. Contradictory to this, it means that ancient theory and philosophy *must* remain an integral part of learning in an educational system that puts public needs first, in my opinion.

Despite these criticisms however, federalism in the United States continues to be regarded as a highly successful undertaking by most accounts and one that was extensively planned out by its founding fathers and their realistic predictions about democracy. However, the international community should take high caution before inheriting federalist principles too quickly, especially if those characteristics are traditionally uncommon to their regime. When nations adopt political instruments before they are ready in their natural development it can have detrimental consequences to the communities within them and individual claims to freedom over time. It is sort of like driving a car before learning the theory: doable, but the consequences could be catastrophic. Similarly, to when the country of Myanmar was provided with the technology of Facebook, well before it was ready in its natural development, which would later play a center role in the genocidal treatment of its Muslim Rohingya minority (Rajagopalan “How Facebook Failed the Rohingya In Myanmar”). For federalism to be successful, there must be a thoughtful and systematic application of its principles. An order that allows for its constitutional values to support the weight of the majority as well as nurture and protect against the inevitable “drift” that will threaten its own stability. Contemporary democracies must also assess the growing need for acknowledgement in their societies and critically analyze the addictiveness of this need as well as its threat to freedom over time.

Tocqueville’s predictions in *Democracy in America* are interesting statements to reflect on today due to the declining levels of freedom in the US in connection with the ever rising “equality of conditions” he contemplated. From Tocqueville’s perspective, Some might even argue that this equality of conditions, is now increasing at unmanageable rates due to the

widespread availability of media platforms, allowing equality-seeking activists to not only publicize their political opinions but gain a momentous “following” in doing so. It leads one to question whether the need for acknowledgement itself, has become the main inspiration for political participation in democracies and whether political sincerity, is even possible provided the unlimited rewards of acknowledgment offered by these, platforms in today’s world. Those highly astute to the tyrannical nature of factions can quickly foresee the possible dangers embedded into this scenario just as Tocqueville did in 1831 when he specifically reflects on the “shortage of any guarantee against tyranny” in America which he finds so “repulsive” at the time:

When a man or a party suffers from an injustice in the United States, to whom can he turn? To public opinion? That is what forms the majority. To the legislative body? That represents the majority and obeys it blindly. To the executive power? That is appointed by the majority and serves as a passive instrument. To the public police force? They are nothing but the majority under arms. To the Jury? That is the majority invested with the right to pronounce judgements; the very judges in certain states elected by the majority. So however unfair or unreasonable the measure which damages you, you must submit. (Tocqueville 294)

If Tocqueville’s quote is in fact, an accurate representation of democracy in America, it is no wonder why the minoritized are trying so desperately to be acknowledged by the government. However, if the majority, of the citizens are also endlessly defending the rights of the minoritized (who seem to never gain fair recognition), while having their personal needs of acknowledgement fulfilled, how are we to be sure the majority will not abuse its powers? Is this, the type of instability Tocqueville was referring to, that would ultimately cost citizens their freedom over time? Is it the need for acknowledgment then, which has led to the final “undoing” of societies throughout history? And if so, what can be done to prevent tyranny of the majority in the modern world, as we know it now.

Some of the most influential writing in history has arguably been achieved through author anonymity, which speaks to the effectiveness of this technique looking back. It is difficult

to say whether Karl Marx and Frederick Engels' work would have been as influential, if the public had been allowed to decipher between the contributions of the two authors in the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*. In this book, these two men share their highly controversial opinions about class struggles using highly provocative language and stark categorizations to fire up public emotion. The sharp rise in competitive attitudes over the last century could even be fairly attributed to "Marxist theory" and its influence over attitudes relating to industry and the opportunities for "growth" and participation in the world market. Assuming, that the statements made in the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* were interpreted as inevitable truths for some readers at the time, could his statements have been understood as a "green light" for those followers? The ones who were eager to take these ideations, which were so appealing at the time, and turn them into reality? Looking at it from this perspective now, it seems that our present has already been mapped out for us, by the Marxists who felt that a final utopia *was* possible. However, the technological development that has occurred since 1848, is perhaps one revolution that was not predicted at the time. Maybe the wide-spread need of recognition and acknowledgement was the "irresistible strength" that Tocqueville feared but could not yet put into words exactly during his exploration of America in 1831.

Perhaps it would be in the public's best interest to re-evaluate individual needs of acknowledgment and how this "need" may be causing unpredicted extremes in society. One could argue that America's need for acknowledge has also heightened the individual popularity of citizens who now feel the need to exercise more extreme levels of caution regarding their private property and the ways in which they protect that property. One can only imagine that these factors have only worked to add to the mistrust between citizens in the US and the deep divide that separates the final two classes. If tempers can be moderated, while logical thinking and compassionate reason are applied to the problems of class division in America, the pursuit for equality can still exist without being a risk to individual or collective freedom.

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