

Differentness, Democracy, and Liberal Arts Education

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James Madison, principal architect of the American Constitution, argued in *the Federalist Papers* that differing political interests, what he called faction, would preserve American democracy by balancing interests against one another to prevent the tyranny of an entrenched majority.

I'm wondering what Madison might think of the present situation in American democracy.

I believe that Madison assumed a degree of commonality at the level of fundamental values would be the glue holding the nation together.

A recent essay in the *Atlantic Monthly* argued that earlier in our history those unifying values underlying American democracy came from the more or less unquestioned acceptance of an English cultural heritage. I don't here mean the language of English, but the culture of the nation of England. People who came to America were simply assimilated into a basically English cultural stream--they learned to speak English, they participated in a form of government invented by English colonists, based in the political theory of another Englishman--John Locke.

English values, shaped by Christian belief, provided a framework for managing the differentness, the faction, that Madison looked to as a safeguard against the dangers of a tyrannical majority. That largely English cultural framework is no longer in place, and today radically different value perspectives compete openly with one another, and often with little in the way of apparent points of agreement.

Here, then, is a paradox--at its origins, American democracy was predicated on the presence and even the benefit of differentness, but we have now arrived at a point of such fundamental differentness that we are in danger of losing all sources of national unity.

Preservation of American democracy is not a foregone conclusion. Our democratic form of government must be carefully preserved.

And not just any kind of democracy is the democracy that must be preserved, but one which people want to participate in, are equipped to participate in, and which enriches people's lives.

What, then, are the real challenges facing American democracy? Voter apathy? Public ignorance of important issues? Inept or self-serving political leaders?

These are all problems, but I see bigger issues threatening the concept and the actual practice of democracy.

Bigger challenges facing us are:

1. The fact of fundamental differentness among us, and
2. The failure of our political discourse to help us manage those differences productively.

If American democracy is to survive, and to provide a model for democratic government around the world, we must do two things:

1. Discover the values that unite us, that provide the starting points of constructive political discussion, and
2. Rediscover a common political discourse for productively discussing our differences.

I would like to elaborate briefly on these ideas, and then make a connection to the notion of the liberal arts.

Differentness has always been a fact of American life, but today it is perhaps *the* most volatile fact of our cultural existence.

American culture at the close of the twentieth century is characterized by differentness in language, experience, cultural heritage, and economic existence.

A recent issue of *U.S. News and World Report* ran a cover story on the issue of whether America should declare English its national language in response to the proliferation of different languages in the United States.

The Census Bureau reported in 1994 that almost nine percent of Americans were born in other countries.

U.S. News and World Report notes that 32 million Americans speak a language other than English in their home.

One third of all children in American public schools speak a language other than English at home.

Fifty-six different languages are spoken in Dade County, Florida, schools.

America has been called the first universal society, that is, the first world society in which members of every major ethnic, racial and national group are represented. More than 300 languages are spoken in America.

All of this suggests that if our democracy is to survive, we must learn to accommodate differentness in a productive way.

But our greatest source of differentness is not in language, national origin, or cultural heritage, as significant as these sources of differentness are. I believe that the major factor characterizing and dividing Americans is difference in those personal commitments we call values.

American culture today is characterized by differentness in values, and these differences often cut across differences in language, origin, etc.

Our most difficult controversies--those over abortion, affirmative action, homosexual rights, welfare, education--reveal deep divisions in the American public on the most fundamental issues of value. I'd like to look briefly at some of the specific questions and issues that divide us:

Work and Welfare

What, if anything, should be demanded of individuals as regards their working contribution to society?

Will employment carry with it a right to adequate pay and basic benefits, or should market forces alone govern such considerations?

What obligation, if any, does society have to try to assure the existence of good jobs?

Race

How is racial equity in work and education best achieved?

Should law be employed to guarantee equal access to the workplace, or should market forces alone be relied on for such balance?

Should law be used to seek racial balance in the workplace?

Sexuality, Reproduction, and the Family

What is the relationship between sexual practice and morality?

What kind of control, if any, should the state place on the expression of sexuality, on sexual activity itself, on the structure of the family?

One third of all American children are now born out of wedlock, and most of these are raised by one parent. By 2000, the figure will be one in two, and already is in Baltimore, Chicago, Detroit, and several other American cities. Predictions are that this fact will lead to even higher crime rates in the twenty-first century.

Should the state work harder to encourage young couples to marry before having children?
Should divorce be made more difficult?

Should individuals be allowed to decide to end a pregnancy?

Education

What will be the content of public compulsory education?

Will it perpetuate a particular value set, and if so, which one?

Should it be oriented toward employment or toward citizenship?

Should tax dollars be used to pay for vouchers for the purchase of private education?

Mass Media and the Arts

Should public funds be used to fund the arts?

Should entertainers and the entertainment industry be allowed to propagate destructive values and practices among young people?

How far does freedom of speech extend when song lyrics advocate killing police or abusing women?

These are all questions that at some level engage our most fundamental values, that divide us deeply, and that threaten to turn us into a nation of isolated, warring value communities.

Are they questions we can talk about with any hope of constructive productive compromise that allows us to enjoy the benefits of diversity and differentness?

Starting Points

I have looked at some of these debates and wondered where the common ground is. Where are the points of agreement, what argument theorists call the starting points of argumentation.

Some point of agreement, some common starting point of value or commitment, is essential if productive argumentation on issues of value is to take place.

Can democracy survive in the absence of common values that allow debate to take place productively?

And, though we reflect differentness at virtually every level of society, we still live as a largely segregated and increasingly atomized society.

In many American cities more than 80 percent of citizens live in one-race neighborhoods. We are not a melting pot, but a ghettoized society.

Common values derive either from a common religion, a general culture, or a common political philosophy. In the absence of such common values, productive political discourse is difficult. In the absence of productive political discourse, the survival of a vibrant democracy is challenged.

I have already noted that questions of value are at the foundation of our most intractable debates. This is significant, for we have to be able to maintain a certain kind of political conversation, based on starting points of argumentation, if we are to maintain democracy--and not just democracy as minimally defined, where everyone who is eligible gets one vote.

As we look to the future, we should envision a democracy that:

1. Affirms sources of common values.
2. Moves toward the productive resolution of differences that create animosity and isolation, and
3. Accommodates, acknowledges, and appreciates the real fact of difference.

Is the situation I have described an improving one?

It will improve only if we move toward common, rational political discourse.

In what direction are we moving? Some of the signs are not good.

We seem to be losing the forums in which people learn to talk to one another about civic matters, that is, about the health of their communities.

Involvement in civic organizations is declining.

For example, the public schools are one of the few sites of significant contact across racial and class lines in our society. But the public schools are being challenged by various alternatives. In addition, at many schools it is difficult even to muster enough parent involvement to keep a PTO going.

I recently attended a PTO meeting at a school of 700 students, perhaps a thousand or more parents--there were eight parents at the meeting, less than once percent involvement.

In addition, American culture is increasingly atomized; that is, we spend less time around people outside of our own families and small circle of friends.

According to my colleagues in sociology, Americans give less time to volunteer organizations now than in the past and are more inclined simply to write a check. The difference is a significant one, for the act of writing a check does not bring me into contact with any other people in my community. Our interest in the common good thus declines as well.

Civic organizations, volunteer organizations, community groups--these are the very places where the kind of discussion takes place among citizens that allow for the reinforcement of civic values such as concern for children or concern for the neighborhood, and they are in decline.

A political scientist I spoke with this summer noted that many legislators complain that Americans are less inclined toward reasonable political discourse now than in the past. We are more given to what he called "the discourse of rage," characteristic of many radio talk shows where callers express anger and frustration at the differences separating us, but where productive discourse is rare.

The prevailing attitude in our political debates is increasingly one of rhetorical combat, not reasonable compromise.

These observations about the absence of unifying values, deep divisions over issues of value, and the decline of political discourse leads me to a question about a kind of person rather than a new set of policies:

What kind of person is most likely to be able to make a change for the better in the situation I have described?

The person I have in mind will:

- a. Be able to participate in reasonable political discourse and
- b. Provide leadership for others to pursue the kind of political conversation that can productively accommodate differentness.

The goal we should be aiming at is to create a society in which people flourish within social networks that include people different from themselves, in which government is truly participative, and citizens feel that their voice is heard, and in which differentness is managed productively rather than becoming a destructive force that divides us from one another.

This means that we desperately need citizen-leaders who can think clearly, can approach problems with some historical and cultural perspective, and who can assist the search for common, unifying values without being constrained by their own parochialism.

This brings me to the concept of the liberal arts.

All other things that a liberal art education ought to be--preparation for life and for work--a liberal arts education (as contrasted, say, with a technical education) is one that should equip a student to be a full participant in civic life.

This means that liberal education as it intersects with democracy should:

1. Equip students to understand political issues sufficiently to think through a reasonable position on those issues.
2. Assist students to develop the qualities of personal character that allow one to enter the political discussion with others whose opinions differ.
3. Help students to enter this debate actively and effectively, advocating the position each is convinced is best, while at the same time working for livable compromise.

Liberal arts education, then, must be more than education for self--that is, education for the enjoyment of life in a free society, though it should be that. It should also be education for society--for the improvement of civic life, which means that it must be:

Education for Moral Leadership

Here are the characteristics of a liberally-educated person that should contribute to the capacity of such people to help to meet some of the challenges I have been outlining:

1. Historical and cultural awareness--A knowledge of the major events, most influential ideas, and significant cultural practices that have shaped our own and other societies. This is a source of historical perspective that is important to productive political debate.

2. Artistic sensibility--The capacity to appreciate and to practice aesthetic expression. What does this have to do with democracy? Recognizing the place of aesthetic expression in enriching corporate life, our lives in a larger community, is vital to creating a livable democracy. This democracy should be a place that is enriching to live in, and it only diminishes public life when leaders are not people who appreciate the aesthetic dimension of human life.
3. Expressive ability--Competence and confidence in the public communication of one's views. The ability to organize and advocate one's views and to apprehend the case being presented by someone else is essential to constructive, rational political discourse. We have to move beyond rage and the rhetoric of combat.
4. Rational adaptability--The ability to constructively accommodate and appreciate differences in value perspectives among people. This does not for me imply the absence of firm personal convictions; but that we have some ability to think as another might be thinking and not be threatened by this prospect.
5. Practical cooperativeness--The ability to work productively with others, even different others, toward the solution of common or shared problems. Not just a capacity for finding a problem, but for helping to solve it in concert with other people.
6. Reflective self-awareness--An examined and developed sense of one's own history and commitments. Knowing who you are and how you came to be who you are is important to thinking through your value commitments and even to testing their rationality.
7. Skillfulness in a craft or profession--The ability to contribute to the large economy through the practice of some constructive work. This is a source, I think, of potential unifying values--the affirmation of the dignity and necessity of work. Liberal education should elevate productive work and the values underlying it.
8. Ethical or moral awareness--The liberally-educated person should understand what constitutes a moral question and a reasoned, morally informed response to such a question. Thinking about and resolving differences of value requires skill in this area.

The future of democracy should not be conceived of as simply the perpetuation of participative government, making sure everyone continues to have a vote.

We should want to perpetuate a good democracy, not just a place where everyone gets to vote or even where everyone gets a job and gets to vote.

We must seek a society in which we want to live and in which people recognize that they benefit from living together and in the context of real differences.

This vision of a good democracy is going to require moral leadership from people like you, and liberal education is the best preparation I know for participation and leadership in that good democracy.

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