

The Collapse of the Republic

Philosophers have known for quite some time that when a political philosophy is inadequate, it will show itself conceptually inadequate first, and then ultimately collapse its concrete instantiation. We saw this in Leninist Russia in 1989, and we are now seeing it here in America. Ours took a little longer to catch up with us, because the capitalists kept it pasted over with various profiting schemes. In this way of seeing the issue, the problem is not capital *per se*, but the fact that the philosophy of democracy that has been practiced since the 1980's (some would say as a result of the 1960's) has failed. The point of this reflection is to underscore the failed philosophy that is now resulting in the failing of the American republic.

First, the philosophy of liberalism became that of neoliberalism. This movement was not intended nor foreseen by the Founders or those who influenced their thinking. Liberalism has devolved into neoliberal radical individualism, which combines a desire for the unfettered freedom to do what one wants—especially economically—without interference from any other entity, with a complete rejection of the notion of community or the common good. This philosophy does not even approximate the liberty for which our Founders fought.

To begin, let us examine the thoughts of one of the early staunch defenders of liberty, John Locke, a philosopher to whom the Founders regularly referred for their views on this subject. In his *Two Treatises of Government*, Locke defines liberty very carefully *not* as the freedom to do what I want, but rather as the freedom to be my own person within the confines of what Locke calls “the Law of Nature,” otherwise known as “reason” (*Second Treatise*, chapter II, n. 4; n. 64). Locke goes on to define “reason” as the mode of cooperation between people. So right away we can see that any claim to personal freedom has the distinct limit of harm to others. When my actions deprive others of their ability to live their lives in a similar fashion, I have overstepped the reasonable bounds of liberty. Locke summarizes this notion by saying that humans are in the state of liberty, not license. In other words, we cannot do whatever we want, without taking into account the good of others, and then support it by appealing to our personal freedom.

For Locke, then, liberty has little to do with fulfilling our desires. Rather, there is an ethical limit that liberty allows us to see and voluntarily follow. Thus, for Locke, liberty has a distinct moral dimension to it. It is that notion Locke discusses of “seeing and voluntarily following” that limit to liberty, that leads to the rejection not only of material acquisitiveness, and that “fulfill your desires” philosophy Locke explicitly condemns as animalistic, but of modern corporate conservatism. Reformed liberals understand these limits to liberty and are willing to embrace them. This is defined as limiting liberty by deference to the notions of equality and to the common good.

Next, let us look at what one of the most prominent Founders of this country has to say on the subject. James Madison, writing in *Federalist Paper* n. 10, states explicitly that radical freedom without constraints is bound to result in an unrestrained greed, euphemistically called by Madison “the rage for paper money.” Madison thought that this was far and away the greatest threat to democracy, and we are living in exactly the type of era Madison feared might bring an end to this great democratic experiment.

Madison rejected straight ethical appeals to greedy people who wanted government to cater to their greed. Thus, it does no good to appeal to equality and to the

common good, decidedly liberal values. His idea was that an appeal to proper values was bound to fail, on two grounds: first, morally enlightened statesmen will not always be at the helm of the ship of state. We have seen this over the past eight years in particular. Second, rational and thus ethical motives seldom prevail over immediate and personal interest. We need ethical values “plus” something else.

His solution to preventing this possible takeover of government by radically self-interested people was a government of “checks and balances,” so that it becomes impossible for such a rage for money to break the republic apart. Notice, however, that Madison was solely concerned with a *majority* of people allowing greed to overcome them. He was not concerned with a *minority* of such people running the government. The reason, he figured, was that if a minority of greedy thugs attempted to create this government to their own liking and economic interests, the mechanism Madison called “the republican principle” would keep them from succeeding at their designs. This principle simply means that the people would vote the greedy officials out of office.

By now we know, of course, that Madison was wrong about this. He was wrong on two counts. First, the republican principle has not succeeded at having our government overtaken by capitalism’s self-interested greed of a minority of the population. Second, his idea that the government of checks and balances would prevent this from happening, has failed utterly in the face of the hard push of monstrous amounts of cash and benefits being placed before our representatives in government.

So Madison’s greatest fear for the republic has come to pass, and come to pass because his solution for preventing it has proven to be inadequate. So the question now before us is this: if an erudite and brilliant Founder’s solution has failed, where do we turn?

We will reflect on that question next week.

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