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### The Healthy Boundaries of Democracy

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# The Healthy Boundaries of Democracy

PRINT

*Daniel J. Mahoney*

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Liberty and equality are the uncontested “values” of the modern world. They have been paid lip service to by all the parties, including the Communists, who did so much to smother them in the course of the twentieth century (hence the ubiquitous “people’s republics” that brought untold misery to a third of the globe). Some have even argued that we have arrived at the “end of history,” that the political problem has been solved in principle through the universal affirmation (and the eventual realization) of democratic liberty and equality. Democracy, forevermore, will be the only game in town.

“Progressive” thought is defined by the view that liberty and equality are unproblematic, and that the great task before democratic peoples is to maximize them, to make the world ever more “democratic” and egalitarian. The solution to the problems of democracy is said to be more democracy, as the philosopher John Dewey famously proclaimed at the beginning of the twentieth century. True democracy must move to the left, becoming ever more inclusive, tolerant, egalitarian, and relativistic. To realize the democratic ideal, we must reject antiquated truths and insist on extreme equality and unlimited personal choice (think “the right to choose” or the self-reinvention central to “gender theory”). In this view there is no such thing as loving democracy (or liberty and equality) too much.

What could possibly be wrong with such an uncompromising commitment to the “democratic” ideal? To begin with, progressivism (and extreme libertarianism) forgets the goods, habits, and traditions that make a free society cohere. Elsewhere I have called them the “conservative foundations of the liberal order.” These goods—healthy family life, a moral code rooted in religion and natural law, prudent and far-seeing statesmanship, the rule of law, a

respect for legitimate institutions, love of truth—were largely taken for granted by the Founders of the American republic. As the philosopher Michael Polyani put it in the 1960s, the best of the liberal tradition, including the American Founding, presupposed an “authoritative traditional framework” that could protect, nourish, and inform “the new self-determination of man.” Liberalism, properly understood, presupposes the continuity of civilization. It undermines itself if it demands “liberation” from all moral restraints.

At its best, liberalism must include a self-consciously conservative dimension. Rational self-mastery and the freedom to choose, goods cherished by liberals and conservatives alike, do not mean that individuals are radically independent, that they are completely sovereign over themselves and the world. Progressivism is that crucial moment when liberalism succumbs to an ethic of absolute autonomy, when it liberates human beings from an order of nature or justice above the human will. It is that moment when liberalism subverts itself by negating the goods that truly allow it to flourish.

Conservative-minded liberals have always appreciated the essential fragility of civilized order. As the great French political philosopher Montesquieu (widely cited by the American Founders of all stripes) already saw in the middle of the eighteenth century, the principles of democracy can become “corrupted,” and a “well-regulated” democracy can degenerate into a regime of “extreme equality.” In such a regime, liberty becomes license. Democracy can lose its soul when it “exaggerates” its principles, when it forgets the legitimate place of hierarchy, authority, and truth within their own spheres. As Dominique Schnapper argues in a brilliant new study inspired by Montesquieu’s insight (*The Democratic Spirit of Law*), in an “extreme democracy” equality risks becoming indiscriminate egalitarianism, the defense of novelty risks giving rise to the “temptation of the unlimited,” and healthy skepticism risks decaying into “absolute relativism.” As another contemporary French thinker, Pierre Manent, has put it, “To love democracy well it is necessary to love it moderately.”

As Manent shows, in the nineteenth century this insight was adopted and developed in wonderfully suggestive ways by the most astute student of democracy, Alexis de Tocqueville. Like the American Founders, Tocqueville understood the “consent of the governed” to be a precious political achievement, a hedge against tyranny and an essential element of self-government. There was no more eloquent partisan than Tocqueville of what he himself called “liberty under God and the laws.” At the same time, he saw the danger of applying the perfectly admirable political principle of consent, of choice, to every aspect of life. Authority is essential if *homo democraticus* is not to succumb to a soul-destroying nihilism or new forms of tyranny. The family, churches, the armed forces, and the universities should not be endlessly democratized or subjected to social engineering. Democracy needs “extra-democratic” institutions to flourish.

In addition, Tocqueville emphasized that there are limits built into the human condition. Democratic men and women must not hesitate to respect the truth, the moral law, and the free institutions and rule of law that they craft for themselves. Autonomy is not an end in itself. Men are not gods. We are not free to choose anything and everything. This faith in human omnipotence is one of the great illusions of democratic man. Religion, and the best secular wisdom, remind democratic man of the necessary place of limits in a life well-lived. As the great Russian writer Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn always insisted, lovers of liberty must not jettison “the golden key” of voluntary self-limitation. It is essential for our liberty—and our souls.

As we rewrite the millennial-old institution of marriage by judicial fiat, ignoring nature, tradition, and biology, not to mention the sacred traditions of the West, we risk giving way to the vice that the ancients called hubris. The most fashionable intellectual currents in our universities teach contempt for authority and confuse freedom with a perfectly arbitrary cultural and moral relativism, all in the name of democratic values. We need to return to the good sense of the Founders and to the even deeper wisdom of Tocqueville. Recovering a sense of limits and law, and a respect for old wisdom, is necessary for true liberty to flourish. How can human beings choose wisely if there are no ends and purposes guiding the exercise of freedom? “Liberty under God and the laws” is the only liberty worthy of human beings. For that we need a renewed intellectual and political appreciation of “the conservative foundations of the

liberal order.” One of the tasks of liberal education is to teach us that our liberty, however precious, is not absolute and must ultimately bow before the truth of things.

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