

The Founders, Democracy, and the Paradox of Education in a Republic

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Alexander Hamilton stated in the *Federalist Papers* that “[I]t seems to have been reserved to the people of this country, by their conduct and example, to decide the important question, whether societies of men are really capable or not of establishing good government from reflection and choice.”¹ John Covaleskie recalls this noble but challenging task by asking, “What does democracy require?” And “how do we educate citizens to conduct themselves in accord with the demands of democracy?” Our task is further complicated, he claims, because our democracy faces a crisis as it is being subverted by capitalism.

Covaleskie admits that he is not certain how to resolve the crisis and bolster democracy but proposes that we abandon the Founders’ view of democracy, which he defines as a procedural democracy that maximizes individual liberty for personal advantage while minimizing mutual obligation. He urges us to accept John Dewey’s substantive democracy, which he defines as a collective and joint pursuit of the common good. This latter view of democracy, he insists, requires particular outcomes determined for the right reasons by the community. Such a democracy, according to Covaleskie, requires that citizens be indoctrinated with traits such as altruism, diligence, and intellectual virtues.

These are challenging questions and suggestions worthy of careful consideration. In my response, I question both the appropriateness of tracing the alleged crisis to the Founder’s view of democracy and the prudence of abandoning their prescription for the establishment and maintenance of democracy. Also, I reflect upon the relationship between capitalism and democracy and ask whether there really is a crisis. Finally, I consider the relationship between indoctrination and democracy and the fundamental tension that arises between private liberty and the public requirements for political order.

THE FOUNDERS AND DEMOCRACY

It is not clear that Covaleskie’s assertions regarding the Founders are well supported. He does not substantiate his rendering of Madison’s idea of democracy and the assertion that it fails to support the common good. Let us consider Madison’s *Federalist* 10 and 51. In 10, Madison asserts that a diversity of faculties among men lead to a diversity of results. In 51, Madison speaks of a “policy of supplying, by opposite and rival interests, the defect of better motives” (*FP*, 322). Covaleskie evidently believes that Madison is promoting a policy defined by the freedom to pursue private interests and personal gain without need for public spiritedness and, for Covaleskie, this represents the heart of capitalism and not democracy. Because neither capitalism nor Madison’s democracy is clarified in Covaleskie’s essay it is an unhelpful distinction.

By opposing this characterization of Madison, Covaleskie, perhaps unaware, is echoing the view of John Rawls by implying that the distribution of valued goods

should not be tied exclusively to individual merit. Covaleskie supports public policy and legislation that does not allow persons to keep the fruit of their own labor. If this characterization is accurate, Covaleskie fails to show why persons should not retain the fruits of their own labor.

Madison was not unaware of the problems posed by property. He claimed that “the most common durable source of factions has been the various and unequal distribution of property. The regulation of these various and interfering interests forms the principal task of modern legislation” (*FP*, 79). In contrast to Covaleskie, Madison believed that the *cause* of faction, that is, the right to acquire property, could not be removed. Madison, as well as Jefferson, argued that the right to acquire property is entailed by the inalienable right to liberty. To extinguish the cause of faction would be to violate the inalienable right to liberty. Is this what Covaleskie is suggesting? The core of the issue is our understanding of human nature. Until Covaleskie demonstrates that Madison’s view of human nature is wrong, then he is no position to recommend an alternative.

By protecting the right to acquire property and a policy of supplying rival interests, Madison is not promoting uninhibited greed but instead implementing “inventions of prudence” (*FP*, 322). Madison speaks of a “landed interest, a manufacturing interest, a mercantile interest, a moneyed interest, with many lesser interests” (*FP*, 79). The problem during Madison’s time was of the agrarian interest dominating these interests. Madison was not abandoning the common good by promoting personal liberty, but, through the balancing of factions, he was attempting to prevent the undermining of the common good. He did not abandon the cause of virtue when he minimized the occasions for vice.

Covaleskie also claims that the Founders created a procedural democracy and ignored outcomes. It would be helpful if Covaleskie explained what specific outcomes are necessary for a regime to be democratic. If by outcomes Covaleskie means an equal distribution of property, finances, and happiness, then no, the Founders did not intend to guarantee such outcomes. What right, they would ask, did they have to guarantee such outcomes? What right does *any* government have to do so?

In fact, however, the Founders did design a regime inspired by an obligation to meet an outcome, namely the securing of rights guaranteed by the “Laws of Nature and Nature’s God.” Covaleskie errs in associating the Founders with the *Constitution* alone. No less a student of the Founders than Abraham Lincoln reminds us that the animating principle of equality in the *Declaration* is the “leading principle — the sheet anchor of American republicanism.” Thus this nation is dedicated to a specific outcome, those rights and conditions that stem from an allegiance to equality. At issue is the meaning of equality. Do we hold an allegiance to equality of opportunity or equality of outcome? Lincoln supported the Founders when he said, “It is the same tyrannical principle. It is the same principle in whatever shape it develops itself. It is the same spirit that says, ‘You work and toil and earn bread, and I’ll eat it.’” It seems an inaccurate statement that the principles and convictions of the Founders have not led to better democratic arrangements.

CAPITALISM AND DEMOCRACY

Covaleskie claims that our society is structured to provide strong communal support for capitalism and that schooling contributes to supporting capitalism. These claims need to be further substantiated. Assuming that his suspicion is correct, is it necessarily problematic for democracy that our nation supports capitalism and its virtues? Capitalism, broadly conceived, allows for many virtues appropriate to a free people to be cultivated, such as honesty, frugality, self-restraint, self-assertion, commitment, and justice. Benjamin Franklin remarks “those vices that arise usually from idleness are in great measure prevented. Industry and constant employment are great preservatives of the morals and virtue of a nation.”² In his *Notes on the State of Virginia* Thomas Jefferson also reflected upon the many virtues fostered through the labor for — and acquisition of — property. Are democracy and capitalism irreconcilable? Do the virtues required for each differ to such an extent that they are mutually incompatible?

A generous interpretation of Covaleskie would attribute to him some measure of a Deweyan democracy. He needs to articulate and defend this view of democracy that underlies his position. It might be the case that the crisis is generated only if we accept this view, but since it is not certain that we must accept this view, it is not certain that we are in crisis.

INDOCTRINATION AND DEMOCRACY

As noted at the outset, there is a fundamental tension between private liberty and the public requirements for political order. All regimes need to create salutary opinions of the regime through political education. It is the distinct character of our Republic that the Founders justified an accent on personal liberties unparalleled in the history of political regimes. Covaleskie recognizes the age-old problem of balancing order and liberty. How do we reconcile the need for order and the right to liberty? Covaleskie is not off base in the call for indoctrination. Indeed, Covaleskie states that unless education includes strong and consistent indoctrination in the virtues and habits of democratic life, we appear to be incapable of meeting the demands of democratic life.

He participates in a tradition of Plato, Aristotle, Rousseau, Benjamin Rush, Noah Webster, Horace Mann, and George Counts who believe that we need to create citizens. In a democratic regime, we need to create democratic citizens. At what price, though, can we justify indoctrination and non-rational strategies for creating citizens? At what price is consensus produced? Can consensus ever be true consensus if it is forced? Lastly, Can we form a citizen with public spirit as well as the capacity to question such a spirit? This is the paradox of education in a republic.³ Covaleskie’s essay provides us with the opportunity for addressing these fundamental questions.

1. *The Federalist Papers*, Number 1, ed. Clinton Rossiter (New York: Penguin Books, 1961), 33. For all subsequent citations this text will be referred to as *FP*.

2. Benjamin Franklin, “Information to Those Who Should Remove to America” (1784), *Writings*, ed. J.A. Leo Lemay (New York: Library of America, 1987), 982.

3. This expression is from Eva T.H. Brann’s book *Paradoxes of Education in a Republic* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979).