



Horyzonty Polityki  
3(4)/2012

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## **The Future of American Democracy\***

### *Summary*

Drawing on Aristotle this paper contrasts two conceptions of liberty – one, as ‘ruling and being ruled in turn’, the other as ‘doing what one likes’. It claims that America can be said to have had two foundings. The first was that of the Puritan settlers who adopted the notion of self-government and self-restraint; the second, ‘official’ founding was heavily influenced by the social contract philosophy of Locke who understood government as existing only to secure our rights and advance our individual freedom. Unlike the first understanding it does not seek to foster conditions in which our souls are educated in self-government. The author concludes that the future of American democracy will

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\* This essay is based on a lecture delivered at Jesuit University Ignatianum in Krakow on May 25, 2011. I wish to thank Fr. Wit Pasierbek and Dr. Paula Olearnik for their invitation and encouragement, and the Ignatianum students who attended my seminar on the American political tradition in May and June, 2011.

depend on which of these two conflicting conceptions becomes the dominant understanding of America's liberty.

**KEYWORDS**

Liberty, American Democracy, Self-Government, Radical Individualism, Locke, Tocqueville, Aristotle, Human Anthropology

**PRZYSZŁOŚĆ AMERYKAŃSKIEJ DEMOKRACJI**

*Streszczenie*

W pracy tej, oparłszy się na Arystotelesie, przeciwstawiono sobie dwie koncepcje wolności: pierwsza oznacza „rządzenie i bycie rządzonym”, druga „czynienie tego, co się chce”. O Ameryce można z kolei powiedzieć, że kraj ten ma dwa fundamenty. Pierwszy z nich to purytańska idea „samorządzenia” i „samokontroli”, drugi zaś – to „oficjalny” akt założycielski, poważnie obciążony przez Locke’owską filozofię umowy społecznej, w której rządzenie pojmuje się jedynie pod kątem zabezpieczenia praw i zwiększenia przestrzeni indywidualnej swobody. Inaczej niż u purytanów, nie ma tu mowy o tworzeniu warunków dla kształcenia duszy w kierunku jej „samorządzenia”. Konkluzja autora zawiera się w sądzie, iż przyszłość amerykańskiej demokracji zależy od tego, która z tych dwóch spornych koncepcji będzie wyznaczać dominujące rozumienie amerykańskiej wolności.

**SŁOWA KLUCZOWE**

wolność, amerykańska demokracja, samorząd, radykalny indywidualizm, Locke, Tocqueville, Arystoteles, antropologia człowieka

I have been invited address the question of the “future of democracy in America”, a daunting topic, and one that may deserve a question mark at the end of the title. I would like to discuss this topic by reflecting on the nature of democracy itself, and to ask whether even today America is “democratic” in certain important respects. I am fearful that it may becoming less democratic every passing day – as I understand that word – which is why I suggest that a question mark is needed at the end of the title of my remarks, “The Future of Democracy in America?”.

Let me begin at the beginning – with Aristotle, of course. In Book 6 of his great work, *The Politics*, we find the only time he describes the principle of democracy to be liberty, and provides two understandings of liberty by which democracies can be guided. The first way in which liberty can be manifested in democracy echoes Aristotle's consistent definition of *citizenship*, which he describes numerous times in the *Politics* as "ruling and being ruled in turn". By this definition, liberty is a form of *self-rule*, the sharing in rule by citizens in which one is ruled by laws that are self-made. This is a special definition of liberty, calling upon the widespread presence of virtues that are required by self-government, including moderation, prudence, and justice. To be "ruled and be ruled in turn" is also to live in understanding of Aristotle's great and hard teaching, that "man is by nature a political animal", that we are only fully human when we live in political communities in which we learn to govern our basest impulses and aspire to attain our human *telos*, our end, to the greatest extent possible. By this definition, democracy is the most idealistic regime of all, the one that aspires to the greatest possible extension of virtue to all citizens; but, by this same definition, it is also most demanding and perhaps least achievable, since it requires a special set of circumstances, above all a special kind of schooling in citizenship, that permit the widespread flourishing of the arts and practice of self-government.

The other way in which the principle of liberty manifests itself is what Aristotle describes as the ability "to live as one likes", for, he notes that some democrats say that it is preferable "to be ruled by none, or if this is impossible, to be ruled and rule in turn". Outwardly this form of liberty can look the same as the first version of democracy – for, it involves the appearance of ruling and being ruled in turn. But its principle of liberty is not based upon the embrace of self-rule, especially citizenship, as the essence of liberty, but instead the *acceptance* of the appearance of rule as a *second-best* option. Aristotle describes a situation in which, by this second understanding of liberty, our deepest desire is to "live as one likes", which, for the ancients, is the very definition of tyranny. However, realizing that no one of us can achieve the condition of all-powerful tyrant, we agree instead to the second-best option of living under democratic forms. In such a condition, we outwardly exhibit the

appearance of citizenship, but such democrats harbor a deeper desire to “live as one likes”. Such democrats have the souls of tyrants.

Aristotle’s distinction is worth keeping in mind, because today most democracies are *liberal democracies*, and thus, have the principle of liberty at their heart. However, liberal democracies are often content to fudge the difference between the two definitions, and often implicitly accept the second definition of liberty to be fundamental. America is a nation that is a perfect portrait of the tension between these two definitions. It was founded first by Puritans who articulated almost verbatim Aristotle’s first definition of liberty. This was the founding of America so admired by Alexis de Tocqueville during his visit to the United States in the early 1800’s, who in Chapter 2 of the first volume of *Democracy in America* quoted these lines from one of America’s earliest Puritan intellectuals, Cotton Mather:

I would not have you mistake your understanding of *liberty*. There is a liberty of corrupt nature, which is affected both by men and beasts, to do as they want. This liberty is inconsistent with authority and impatient of all restraint. This liberty is the grand enemy of truth and peace, and all the ordinances of God are bent against it. But there is another form of liberty, a *civil*, a *moral*, a *federal liberty*, which is the proper end of all authority. It is the liberty for that only which is just and good, and for this idea of liberty you are to stand with the hazard of your very lives<sup>1</sup>.

Tocqueville noted that this understanding of liberty informed the practices of the citizens in the townships of New England, even long after the dissolution of the closed and confining Puritan communities of the 1600s. By the time Tocqueville visited America, he witnessed this kind of liberty – the practice of “ruling and being ruled in turn” – in vibrant forms of local self-governance throughout New England. He wrote that what he saw there was an admirable combination of “the spirit of liberty” and “the spirit of religion”, one in which the spirit of liberty was moderated by the truth of our condition under God, and in which religion supported the practices of political liberty. Tocqueville admired especially the spirit of common

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<sup>1</sup> A. de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 2 Vols. Translated by H.C. Mansfield and D. Winthrop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), I.ii, p. 46.

good that pervaded the New England townships and the rich fabric of associations that populated civil society. He praised these forms of “local freedom” and especially the educative force of active civic engagement which, he wrote, drew people “from the midst of their individual interests, and from time to time, torn away from the sight of themselves”. Through what he called “the arts of association”, citizens were “brought closer to one another, despite the instincts that separate them, and brought them to aid each other”. He called the local townships and associations “the great schools” of democracy, inculcating a spirit of healthy democratic orientation toward a common good. Through civic life – that ancient practice of “ruling and being ruled in turn” – Tocqueville observed that democratic citizens “learn to submit their will to that of all the others and to subordinate their particular efforts to the common action”<sup>2</sup>. Through the activity of political life, he wrote, “the heart is enlarged”.

If America was founded according to a spirit of liberty that encouraged the practice of Aristotle’s first understanding of democracy, centered especially on the practice of self-government among citizens, America also had a subsequent Founding in which the second understanding of liberty dominated. This is the Founding that drew especially upon the understanding of the social contract philosophy of John Locke, and informs the core documents of the American government such as the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. According to Locke, by nature human beings are born free into a State of Nature in which law and government are absent. Our natural condition is one of complete freedom and lawlessness, and only in order to escape the “inconveniences” of the State of Nature do we form a contract and abridge our natural freedom. To live under government and law is a *second-best* option: the *first best* option would be for *everyone else* to abide by the terms of the social contract while *I* would be free to transgress against those terms. (Gyges) But, being informed by reason as well as constrained by law, we abide by the terms of the contract in spite of our inner desire to “live as we like”.

By this Lockean understanding, government exists only to secure our rights and to advance our individual freedom. It does

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2 A. de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, II.ii.7, p. 497.

not seek to foster conditions in which our souls are educated in self-government, and thus Locke – following Hobbes – rejects the ancient idea that there is a *summum bonum* or a *finis ultimus*. We are authorized to define our own conception of the good (or to reject the idea of any such conception), and the role and purpose of government is to provide the conditions, as far as possible within the bounds of civil peace, that allow the full flourishing of individual freedom. Thus, while law is most fundamentally an unnatural imposition on our natural freedom, increasingly under such a government, the law will be increasingly oriented to expanding the sphere of personal liberty. Citizenship as a practice of self-rule is replaced by a definition of democracy dominated by a belief in personal freedom and autonomy. The only shared belief is that individual freedom should be expanded to the greatest extent possible, and government becomes charged with providing the conditions for that expansion.

Unsurprisingly, there is a tension if not outright contradiction between these two understandings of liberty. For the first understanding of liberty – “to rule and be ruled in turn” – liberty to “live as one likes” is a contradiction to the idea of liberty in conformity with a conception of the human good. Its libertarian leanings, stressing the choices of individuals, proves destructive to the institutions and practices that are essential to an education in ordered liberty. The second understanding of liberty understands the first to be illiberal, based upon a conception of human good that confines the liberty of individuals to choose their own life-style. It demands liberation from the confines of restraining customs and laws, arguing that individuals should have the fullest freedom possible to chart their own life path. Yet, as contradictory as these two understandings of liberty are, they have both deeply informed the American self-understanding. They combined in a powerful coalition during the Cold War especially, presenting a common front against the collectivism and atheism of Communism, which they both opposed for different reasons. They have co-existed, if uneasily, for much of American history, perhaps in even salutary ways restraining the excesses of the one while correcting the other’s deficiencies. But, much evidence today suggests that they are undergoing a long-term divorce.

## II. THE GREAT DIVORCE

What Tocqueville describes in *Democracy in America* is the co-existence of these two forms of liberty, but predicts a slow but steady advance of the second understanding of liberty – “the live as one likes” – in place of the first, “ruling and being ruled in turn”. If he sees great evidence of civic practices in America of the 1830s, he also detects tendencies in democracy that will incline it, over the long term, toward an understanding of liberty in which people will seek to “live as they like”. He predicts the rise of individualism and the decline of civic engagement and mutual responsibility for the fate of fellow citizens, and, as a consequence, foresees the rise of a centralizing State that will take on many of the functions and duties that would once have been part of local practice. Many recent studies of American civic life seem to confirm Tocqueville’s prescient conclusions. Studies ranging from books such as Robert Bellah’s *Habits of the Heart* to more recent books on civic participation and American religion by Robert Putnam confirm that Americans have become more individualistic and self-oriented over time. At the same time, Americans have become less prone to be engaged in the activities of civic life and regard such activities to be interferences on their individual freedom. By one measure then, we are “more democratic” – more free to pursue our individual ends. By another measure, we are *less* democratic, less apt not only to participate in civic life, but less willing to entertain the idea of a common good and to moderate our self-interest in the spirit of common weal. There are fewer and fewer informal spaces in which the civic art of “ruling and being ruled in turn” can be trained and exercised. And, as Aristotle would observe, without practice, civic virtues will atrophy and weaken.

Tocqueville also warns Americans that they are self-deceived if they believe that democracy can survive if it defines itself in an increasingly exclusive way as “living as one likes”. Americans, he suggests, come to take for granted their inheritance of practices and institutions in which the civic arts can be learned and exercised. However, without consciously attending to their continuation, over time they will be weakened and abandoned in favor of individualism and “living as one likes”. Today we see growing evidence

of weakening relationships and ties throughout American society, from bonds of community and neighborhood, to the ties of family life, to declining religious adherence<sup>3</sup>. Many of those ties are today discarded or abandoned in the belief that they restrain individual freedom, but what is neglected is the way that their presence has been the necessary training ground on which the arts of civic self-rule were learned. Their abandonment – in the name of democratic freedom – today imperils democracy itself. In the name of individual freedom, we increasingly abandon the aspiration of self-rule.

For this reason, Americans must be confronted with a difficult question: is it possible that its victory in the Cold War over the great threat of Collectivism may yet prove to be a pyrrhic victory, if it be the case only two decades later we see growing signs that American society is no longer capable of self-government? Was the health of liberal democracy over-stated in comparison to its vicious 20<sup>th</sup>-century ideological rivals, with its own inherent weaknesses today coming more fully into view? I believe the great challenges now facing the United States – economic, political, social and otherwise – are more than merely a passing crisis, but are manifestations of this deeper question whether a democracy based upon the ideal of “living as one likes” can survive. Evidence of the ruins of this belief are all around us. In our financial crisis we see the evidence of a set of behaviors in which greed and self-interest dominated a concern for the common weal. In our current debt crisis we see evidence of the way in which our obligations to future generations have been traded for today’s comforts. In our growing partisan divide we see the expression of raw interest that neglects our greater civic obligation to seek out the common good. In our high levels of divorce and the practices of serial monogamy, we see evidence of a self-serving definition of our most central relationships. In our massive over-consumption of resources we see evidence of selfishness that neglects the consequences of our actions upon the globe and upon future generations.

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3 R. Putnam, *Bowling Alone* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000); R. Wuthnow, *Loose Connections* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).



### III. THE PARTIES TODAY

What would fascinate Tocqueville the most about America today is not only the evidence of the truth of his predictions, but how there persists at least a residue of the older understanding that democracy requires for us to “rule and be ruled in turn”. In our two political parties we see evidence of both definitions of democracy, the on-going presence of the internal contradiction that has been present in America from its earliest moments. In our Democratic Party – the party of President Obama – there are two simultaneous tendencies. There is, on the one hand, the belief that concerning lifestyle choices – especially regarding matters of human sexuality – there should be no limits upon personal and individual autonomy. This Party especially has become the party that defends nearly unlimited access to abortions, as well as advancing a re-definition of marriage away from its grounding upon one-man – one woman. This Party denounces and even ridicules arguments about the need to promote the traditional values that sustain family life and a culture of modesty and self-restraint. At the same time, this Party also calls for restraints upon the Market, arguing that free markets encourage the vices of greed, produce indefensible forms of inequality, and lead to the degradation of the environment. In a speech delivered in 2009 at Georgetown University, President Obama cited the gospel of Matthew, chapter 7, verses 24-28, calling for America and the globe to build the economy not upon sand, but upon rock that could withstand the rains and floods<sup>4</sup>. When it comes to economics and the environment, the Democratic Party cites the Bible to encourage an embrace of morality, but in personal choices of lifestyle, it denounces such invocations as oppressive and authoritarian.

Alternatively, our Republican Party – which in recent elections took over the lower house of Congress – defends personal morality, particularly pertaining to family life and sexual matters. The Republican party has opposed the license to obtain abortions without limit, and has tirelessly sought limitations upon its practice. For this reason, for many decades many Catholics switched their historic

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<sup>4</sup> <<http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-economy-georgetown-university>>.

allegiance from the Democratic Party to the Republicans, though their vote has recently tended to be closely divided. The Republican Party has promoted policies that they argue support “family values”, including encouraging the support of traditional marriage, encouraging the formation and maintenance of families, and seeking policies that favor a moralization of our family lives. At the same time, they have tirelessly defended an unfettered free market system that places greed, acquisitiveness and materialism at the heart of its endeavors, that encourages hedonism and the sexualization of our popular culture, and which has produced titanic levels of material inequality in our nation.

I think it is fair to say that at the heart of each of these parties is a self-contradiction, an incoherence at least *in theory*. However, I would argue, too, that this contradiction has tended to be resolved *in practice* in favor of that form of liberty that promotes a culture of “living as one likes”. While the Republican Party has been successful in promoting a free market system, they have not been very successful in their encouragement of their program in “family values”. And, while Democrats have been successful in advancing the cause of freedom in personal lifestyle choice, they have been less successful in advancing a moralization of the economic system. In each case, the “Lockean” part of their agenda has undermined the “Aristotelian” part of their platform. And, in practice, the Republican promotion of unbridled free markets has led to the undermining of family stability, while the Democratic promotion of unbridled personal freedom has encouraged a broader hedonism that informs our economic lives. To “live as we like” increasingly undermines the institutions and practices that train us to “rule and be ruled in turn”.

I believe that Catholics in America intuitively understand this contradiction, and for this reason have split their votes between the two Parties in recent years, gravitating between one and the other. What’s remarkable is that two- to five-percent movement that typically decides American presidential elections has tended to be essentially the Catholic vote, moving between its commitment to a more moral personal culture and a more moral economy. The next time you hear that the election will come down to one or two “swing states”, it almost always involves the Catholic portion of those States. Yet, it could also be concluded that, in attempting to

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shore up one or the other commitment of the two parties, they end up undermining another aspect of their core commitments.

On this point, I believe Poland can be of great assistance to the future of democracy in America and the world. For, at the end of the twentieth-century, it was leaders in the Solidarity movement and Pope John Paul II who articulated the argument that the true choice facing the world was not between collectivism, on the one hand, and radical individualism, on the other, but between a true and false understanding of the human anthropology – human nature. This is a false dichotomy that Americans have come to accept over the years, even though neither party fully accepts the terms of the debate. America remains imperfectly a nation of Lockeians, tending as the years pass to dissolve the institutions and practices that chasten the tendency to “live as one likes” and promote the practice of “ruling and being ruled in turn”, showing evidence of becoming more individualistic in our practice with each passing year. The future of democracy, in America and everywhere, depends on correcting this tendency toward a flawed definition of democracy, and re-learning the ancient art of “ruling and being ruled in turn”.