

The Inevitable Danger of Faction in James Madison's Formulation of Society

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Abstract:

This study based on the *Federalist No.10*, one of the most significant political papers of American history written by James Madison, discusses about the cause of factions, which was seen as an unavoidable threat of democratic society. Madison believed that the diversity and liberty of democratic society allowed citizens to follow their different interests, and the majority rule pushed people who had a mutual goal together for a bigger voice to influence the government decision. The three elements were essential and necessary to the democracy, so the factions derived from them were inevitable.

Keywords: Faction, James Madison, the *Federalist Papers*, American political philosophy.

1. Introduction

In the 1780s, James Madison was in his non-violent fight for the newly drafted Constitution against the “antifederalists” by debating in the newspaper. Focusing on how to establish the republic, which was seen as the chosen political system of the new nation, the first thing Madison emphasized was the danger of factions. A faction, in Madison's view, was a social group that oppressed the rights of others for their priority. He designed a series of political theories to control the effects of factions, but James Madison insisted that factions would inevitably occur in any society promising its citizens of liberty, because human beings were by nature different in many ways and therefore have divergent interests.

Known as one of the founding fathers of the United States of America and the author of the Constitution and the Bill of Rights, James Madison's political theories and reverse of positions are popular topics to the scholars. As a Federalist, Madison was writing with Alexander Hamilton and John Jay to support a powerful national government and prevent the separation of each of the discontent states by shifting powers from them, but he were soon became political enemies with Hamilton because Madison accepted the call of antifederalists to champion civil liberties, states' rights, limited government and a strict construction of the Constitution with amendments. In fact, he was a flexible centrist focusing on the compromise between the federalists and the antifederalists, in other words, the balance between the majority rule and the minority rights.

2. Secondary source discuss

To such a famous political philosopher, historians are interested in the sources and influence of Madison's profound ideas. In the time of Enlightenment, the mainstream of philosophers was to believe that rationality would guide people to build society better, but some of them did not expect that and had a more negative view. Mark G. Spencer wrote a paper to summarize some of the influential opinions from Madison scholars to argue to what extent Hume, the Scottish Enlightenment philosopher impacted Madison in the definition of faction. Douglass Adair, “the first historian to excavate this ground in depth” as Spencer described, put forward that the concept of factions Madison written in *Federalist No.10* originated from Hume's political essays. Madison and Hume both believed that the threat of factions took root in the human nature and arose the irrational animosities among people. But Edmund S. Morgan argued that Hume was not that important to Madison's ideas,[1] they just found a similar problem in history and reality but had different understandings from their distinct concerns, because Madison believed that further diversity could become the solution to the danger of factions, and emphasized that Hume's answer of uniformity was “impracticable”.[2]

Spencer also gave his opinion: “In his political thought, Madison employed ideas he derived from Hume. But Madison's borrowing was neither of an unreflective sort nor without variant”.[1] Spencer pointed out that Madison read Hume's writings at an early age and quoted them in

his papers. They both agreed that extreme factions would be destructive to society, while Hume focused on the religious factions and virtually affirmed the positive effect of toleration, Madison extended that into the political consideration.

About the reality Madison was facing to when he was writing the *Federalist Papers*, Jeff Broadwater wrote a paper discussing the “Madison Problem” and his obscure political position should be “to approach it as a problem in constitutional law”. Broadwater sorted the difficult process of Constitution-making and believed that Madison’s thought had changed and compromised to the political reality at that time: he found and “reconcile himself to what he saw as the defects of the Constitution”.^[3] To ensure extensive support to the voting of the Constitution, Madison had to considering about the concern of his opponents and affected by their fear about the “majority tyranny” from a powerful government, which inspiring his papers of factions.

3. Primary source analysis

3.1 Methods

The information of Madison’s reference and experience are important in the researches of his theories, however, to understand the actual view and logic of Madison himself, there still need a return to his original text. Madison had gave a certain explanation about why the cause of faction could not be removed, the way he chose words, the methods he used to raise a series of ideas and advance the reasoning showed his potential views of humans and were worth researching intensively. The *Federalist No.10* gave us a window into Madison’s minds and the audience could be mostly affected by listening to the voice from James Madison in person.

3.2 Analysis

The faction, at first, in Madison’s writing, was born in the nature of human beings. All men are created equal, but different in their talents. “The diversity in the faculties of men from which the rights of property originate”, in other words, because of the dominant influence of economy to the whole society, the distinct careers based on different abilities and their unequal positions in the economic structure would divide people into different classes in the society, and form various interests and sentiments. To the diversity, Madison discussed about that could be destroyed “by giving to every citizen the same opinions, the same passions, and the same interests”, but which was “impracticable” because the democratic government had the responsibility to protect the properties of citizens, including the diversity and inequality of that. The unity of

thought could not be achieved from their objective origins because the intervention to that would be seen as a feature of tyrannical rule.^[2]

Then, based on the different interests, finite resources and complex social relationships, the unavoidable clashes of interests happened everywhere and every time. To maintain the peaceful environment for the remote development of society, the Enlightenment philosophers proved that the public goods should be raised above all the private interests because it was in the interest of all. That was the answer of rationalism, however, Madison believed that the reason of humans was fallible, and could be easily affected by the passion from their self-love. The instinct of people to love themselves made them fall into animosity towards those who were competing with them. The struggle for incompatible interests, or just irrational jealousy attracted people to pursue the priority which allowed them to oppress “heretics” without respecting their equal rights as equal humanity. Madison used negative words to describe this phenomenon:

So strong is this propensity of mankind to fall into mutual animosities, that where no substantial occasion presents itself, the most frivolous and fanciful distinctions have been sufficient to kindle their unfriendly passions, and excite their most violent conflicts.

The integrity of humans was too weak to resist the temptation of consuming passions and immediate interests, and the reason was not always helpful to correct the judgement to the way of common interests. When Madison designed his ideal republic government, he presupposed that it had to face to the worst situation that everyone was selfish and aggressive for their private interests. So he considered that should be a powerful mechanism to protect people from the danger of each other.^[2]

What brought people together was the principle of majority rule in any kind of democratic government. A democratic government, according to its definition, should be formed by people or their representatives. This principle also led to the assumption that the decisions made by the government should be decided by majority voting as well, so to control the superior power of government for specific interests, people needed to gain support and votes from others. People who were in similar status would tend to be united for their mutual interests and passions, and the resonance of the collective was so strong that the mutual animosity would be inflamed to adverse to others whose interests were different with theirs. That was the formation of factions, and “the most numerous party, or, in other words, the most powerful faction must be expected to prevail” because they got the most of votes. Although he clearly understood a predominate faction consisting the majority would be willing to sacrifice the public goods

and the rights of minorities for its ruling interests and animosity, Madison insisted that such danger still confirmed to the form of democratic government, and the liberty of people to choose which factions they wanted to attach and who could be their representatives was a crucial right of citizens, which was essential to political life and the legitimacy of democracy.[2]

4. Conclusion

Overall, Madison believed that the factions were nourishing from the liberty and diversity of human beings, and both of them were indispensable to the democratic society, which made the cause of faction unavoidable too. People who had different positions and demands in society tended to show animosity toward each other because of the clash of interests, and it was also free, viable and necessary for them to unite as factions and elect the representatives in the government for their mutual interests.

This is an analysis of Madison's logical arguments about the inevitability of factions. In *Federalist No.10* he showed that factions would emerge wherever men had diversity and liberty, and one of the important goals of government therefore was to limit the effects of faction. This was an enormous innovation in the history of political thought, and guided his actions as a statesman as well. Madison corresponded to the need of his political oppo-

nents, like he was concerned about the rights of minorities as a member of the majority in society. While waiting for the ratify of the Constitution, he drafted a series of amendments to protect the freedom of speech, press, religion and other civil liberties, and the reservation of certain powers to the states, which brought about a separation among the antifederalists and those moderates chose to follow him. Because Madison knew that the conflict between their factions was an indispensable part of political life in his ideal republic government, so the balance of compromise should be necessary for the cooperation and remote good of the whole. In the guidance of such a spirit, Madison successfully gained maximum support from different states and factions to prove the passing of the Constitution and the Bill of Rights, which became the significant foundations of American polity and the milestone of civil rights protection.

References

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