

Fear of the Majority and Pluralism as Cornerstones of Exclusion

By Arnold August, March 2012

The American Dream based on the Declaration of Independence preamble of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness (private property), the new land of innovators and those able to rise from “rags to riches” had been thoroughly amended by the debates leading to the Constitutional Convention. One of the architects was James Madison, coming from a wealthy landed plantation family and he, himself, a slaveholder.¹ Madison wrote (Number 10), in the series of documents known as the “Federalist Papers,” about

the diversity in the faculties of men, from which the rights of property originate.... The protection of these faculties is the first object of government.... From the protection of different and unequal faculties of acquiring property, the possession of different degrees and kinds of property immediately results.²

In other words, the wealthy few by birth, connections or windfall profits resulting from the war, joined by the one or two individual exceptions of “rags-to-riches” stories from among millions, are the ones who are considered to have private property rights, which are protected by the government. Madison could barely hide his fear of the majority of people when he mused about the need to build institutions to avoid a situation whereby “a majority of the whole will have a common motive to invade the rights of the other citizens ... [or] the superior force of an interested and overbearing majority.”³ Madison also tinkered with the following dilemma: on the one hand, a democracy that he paints as being unrealistic because it cannot be fully attained, taking into account that people cannot practically meet together to make decisions and, on the other hand, a republic. His papers and those of the other Federalist contributors exhibit disdain for the majority and democracy. This had a great impact on the eventual Constitution.

The notion of “pluralism,” often cited as a cornerstone of competitive, multi-party democracy, has its U.S. source in Madison’s Federalist Paper No. 10. Even though the majority had been eliminated from political participation, Madison was still concerned about factions in society. He was fully aware that the non-propertied classes, which he and the other Founding Fathers feared, could oppose as a block the minority who had access to

property. Madison acknowledged that “different opinions will be formed”⁴ as long as they are prohibited from coalescing into the majority and thus dominating the system. The only conclusion to be reached is that pluralism or different opinions are reserved only for those holding property.

¹ Beard, Charles A. 2004. *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States*. NY: Dover Publications, p. 125.

² Madison, James. 2007. “No. 10.” In Alexander Hamilton, James Madison and John Jay (Clinton Rossiter, ed.), *The Federalist Papers*. NY: New American Library, p. 78–79.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 77, 83.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 78.