

JAMES MADISON: ENLIGHTENED OR REPUBLICAN?

James Madison is known throughout the world as one of the Founding Fathers, the Fourth President of the United States and he is praised as the Father of the Constitution. In order to promote the Constitution in 1787-1788 he co-wrote several papers which are now known as the *Federalist Papers*. The other authors of these papers are Alexander Hamilton and John Jay. Some of Madison's most read papers are *Federalist 10* and *Federalist 51*, these are so well known because they shed a light on two important aspects of the Constitution.¹ *Federalist 51* describes how it is important to split the government up into three branches, Executive, Legislative and Judicial. *Federalist 10* shows the danger of factions within the government, as these factions will not act in the interest of the greater good. How did Madison come to these topics? By whom was he influenced? Many historians have argued that his ideas are an extension of the European Enlightenment. However, others, like Bernard Bailyn and Gordon Wood, have described him as a follower of the republican ideology. This essay will sketch how Madison's papers were influenced by different scholars of the Enlightenment period and how the papers could be described as republican ideology. At last, it will defend the view that Madison's *Federalist 10* and *51* fit more into the European Enlightenment philosophy than they fit into the republic ideology.

Madison was born into a wealthy family, which made it possible for him to go to Princeton University. Because of this education, he came into contact with many of the great philosophers of the Enlightenment, for example Hobbes, Machiavelli, Locke and Montesquieu.² When Madison came to the conclusion that the Articles of Confederation had failed, he studied various sources to find a solution for this problem. According to James Conniff, San Diego State University, these studies were influenced by the Scottish Enlightenment.³ Roy Branson also underwrites this vision, saying that the Headmaster of Princeton, Witherspoon, had just come from Scotland himself.⁴ Witherspoon influenced Madison quite a bit, as the curriculum of Princeton was mostly made up of Enlightenment philosophers. Conniff mentions that the ideas of these writers could not be applied directly to the American case. It was more a matter of modification and adaptation.⁵ This is exactly what Madison did in his *Federalist* papers. He used ideas of Enlightenment writers and transformed those ideas into ideas that would work for

¹ Robert Montgomery 'Federalist Papers 10, 14 and 51' in: B.A., Lesh & P. Finkelman *Milestone Documents in American History: Exploring the Primary Sources That Shaped America* (Dallas, 2008), 257.

² James Conniff, 'The Enlightenment and American Political Thought: A Study of the Origins of Madison's Federalist Number 10', *Political Theory* 8:3 (1980), 383-386.

³ *Ibid*, 395.

⁴ Roy Branson, 'James Madison and the Scottish Enlightenment', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 40:2 (1979), 235-250.

⁵ Conniff, 'The Enlightenment and American Political Thought', 383.

the American case. However, Madison was sometimes not linked with certain Enlightenment theories. According to Branson, Madison was not linked with the theories of social developments in the Scottish Enlightenment because of the misconception that Madison was inherently against factions. That is a misconception as Madison did provide a positive description of factions in *Federalist 10*, acknowledging their importance just like Scottish Enlightenment thinkers did.⁶ All this makes it clear, just as Branson and Conniff say, that Madison was indeed influenced by European, in particular Scottish, Enlightenment.

On the other side of the coin are the historians who consider Madison's papers a reflection of republicanism. Republicanism here is referring to the ancient republics of Athens, but also refers to the Italian city states of the Middle Ages. Gordon Wood and Bernard Bailyn are the two most profound historians to be named here. Wood also incorporates the Enlightenment in his argumentation, saying that it 'in turn transformed classic civic Republicanism'.⁷ Wood identifies this civic duty as the heart of republicanism. Bailyn will say that the republican tradition brings people together, in order to make a fist against a central government. Both argue that citizens should never trust a politician or party, as they will always abuse their power in favour of themselves. This is contrast to above, where Branson argues that there is some good in factions. Both Bailyn and Wood deny that because of the human nature to gain more power for himself. Republicanism of the Enlightenment period relied heavily on the classical republicanism according to Wood, but rejected parts of it because these republics were so small that their structures could not one on one be copied in America. Like the ideas of the Enlightenment these structures had to be adapted in order to work for the American cause. In both *Federalist 10* and *51* republics play a key role in Madison's argumentation, as it is the form of government that Madison proposes for the United States.

In *Federalist 10* Madison shows that a republic and democracy are different and that the cure for the problems of democracy is a republic. He tells us that the two biggest differences are: 'first, the delegation of the government, in the latter [the republic], to a smaller number of citizens elected by the rest; secondly, the greater number of citizens, and greater sphere of country, over which the latter may be extended'.⁸ Madison uses democracy in its purest form here, thus government for the people, by the people, no representation. In a republic, there is representation, making it able to control a larger amount of citizens. Madison argues that in order to

⁶ Branson, 'James Madison and the Enlightenment', 246-247.

⁷ Gordon Wood, 'Classical Republicanism and the American Revolution', *Chicago-Kent Law Review* 66:1 (1990), 30.

⁸ James Madison, *Federalist Papers No. 10 & 51*, (New York, 1788), 3. Available at: <https://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=false&doc=10&page=transcript> [Last Accessed 24-10-2019]

prevent factionalism in a republic, there must be an extensive group of representatives.⁹ This group will then hopefully make sure that the people's will is followed. This idea is also found with Enlightenment writers, especially with John Locke. As stated above, Madison is for a republic with an extensive group of representatives, however he also notes that when the number of citizens that a representative represents becomes too large, they will be rendered less acquainted with their local citizens.¹⁰ Thus, Madison argues, while a republic is probably the best form of government available for the United States, its representatives should not represent too big a group of citizens. The republican form might be best according to Madison, but in his reasoning we see that Enlightenment ideas dominate his argumentation.

Both *Federalist 10* and *51* have been influenced by Madison's time at Princeton. In *Federalist 51* Madison uses Montesquieu's idea of the separation of powers telling us that 'members of each department should be as little dependent as possible of those of the others'.¹¹ Madison also points out that when constructing a government 'you must first enable the government to control the governed; and in the next place oblige it to control itself.'¹² These writings can be seen as an extension of Montesquieu's theory. According to Conniff, Madison favoured a strong government and in order to achieve a strong government there should be a strong executive, but most importantly: direct election of Senators by district and some form of popular vote for governors, this would all be necessary to keep all branches of government independent of each other. These demands come from Madison's deep interest in republican forms, which he already had before writing the *Federalist Papers*. Madison's research into republicanism was impressive. He looked into the historical background and cited several Enlightenment writers, including William Temple and Montesquieu.¹³ In the end, Madison had used Montesquieu's separation of powers to promote his own views of a stronger government.

Concluding, Madison used many sources from the Enlightenment to make his case in favour of the Constitution. While historians like Wood and Bailyn argue that these sources are in essence republicanism, one could also argue to see more resemblance with European Enlightenment. Ideas like Montesquieu's separation of powers and Locke's social contract can be identified in Madison's *Federalist 10* and *51*. Because of Madison's deep interest and studies into republics, the argument could again be made in favour of republicanism. However, these studies again show how much Madison builds upon the European Enlightenment, citing sources

⁹ Madison, *Federalist Papers No. 10 & 51*, 3.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., 4.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Conniff, 'The Enlightenment and American Political Thought', 394-395.

like William Temple and again, Montesquieu. Lastly, the foundations for all these thoughts lay in Madison's time at Princeton University, where the main curriculum mostly existed of Enlightenment philosophers. Thus, Madison is to be seen as an extension of European Enlightenment into American Society.

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