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Making American Places: Civic Engagement Rightly Understood

Ted V. McAllister

Place is about limits and defending the importance of place is really a species of repression. There is much truth in this line of reasoning. For so many people in history, place was either such a basic fact of their lives that they never came to see it conceptually or, if they did, saw it as a sort of prison. In villages or neighborhoods all over the world and throughout history—as diverse as 15th century France or early 20th century Tennessee (or, for that matter, contemporary Afghanistan)--the experience of place has often been oppressive. It is an experience of prying eyes, leaving no privacy, no relief from the tedium of small expectation, no meaningful escape to a larger world of possibility—not even a reasonable hope of a liberated imagination to dream of other possibilities. For so many of our ancestors, place was just another word for hopelessness.

Do we really need a place in the world today? Isn't the world itself our "place"—our global community? Perhaps for previous generations, the world was too large to be a place and so they were forced to find or carve out a little space to call their own, a provincial home for protection against unruly nature and lawless strangers. We moderns are sufficiently liberated from the un-chosen restraints of our ancestors for we have largely mastered space with transportation and communication technologies. Who needs the walls of their fortress cities against the barbarians? Certainly for many, portable wealth and countless "connected" locations around the globe liberate them from any meaningful dependence on one place, one society, one polis. We have escaped the limits of geography.

This presumed liberation from physical space (or at least from connection to specific physical spaces) also suggests deeper forms of liberation, including giving ourselves to the creative urge to re-form, re-invent, our identities. In this sense, the very idea of place is restrictive. Whereas we might once have said that someone should know his place (which, beyond the racist overtones this language has taken, suggests that we ought to play roles that are given to us, that we did not choose), we

now assert that a person should find space in the world for his particular experiment in living. Because we are no longer bound by inherited roles or even strong familial or social pressures to fulfill the expectations that often come from a strong sense of place, we prefer to think of the world as a space big enough for us to find our true selves or create new selves. By mastering physical space we turn the world into metaphorical space for individual expression. Liberation from specific places also means release from bonds of social institutions like family or church. The expansiveness of this world allows us to create or join whatever social networks we choose, designing a social, political, artistic, sexual life that reaches from Little Rock to Timbuktu, from our laptop to the ether.

Perhaps the most overlooked form of liberation promised by the gurus of modern emancipation comes in the form of historylessness. Characteristically, humans have a “place” in history, the felt presence of ancestors, of inherited culture, a sense that as individuals and groups they play an appointed role in a story not of their making. But as the pace of technological, social, and cultural change reaches a certain critical point of acceleration, humans experience their environment in a way that exposes no clear dependence on the distant or middle past. The ways of our grandparents are so hopelessly ill-suited to the contemporary environment that one might well consider knowledge of history a useless form of antiquarianism. The conquest of space is also the conquest of history, if not of time. No longer bound to a specific place, one can more easily forget its history as well as ignore the history attending any temporary places one might later inhabit. We have not only turned place into space but we have abandoned history for the ever-present now. As I will argue later, to the degree that we live free from the constraints of the cultural and political spaces that we call communities and of the grounding role of history, we sever ourselves from the creative energies of richly encumbered lives. This form of liberation leads to a form of powerlessness.

Like most of the contributors to this volume, I believe that the modern liberation of the individual from the constraints of place constitutes as much a limitation as an emancipation. To put the claim bluntly, place constrains but it also empowers and a radical emancipation from place does not lead to creative freedom

but to boredom, emotional and spiritual fragmentation, and tyranny. Thus, it is important to create, preserve, improve real places for real people (not abstract individuals of indeterminate identity) to find attachments, to empower them to engage meaningfully and well with neighbors toward collective purposes, and to help them understand their particular role in the larger story of humanity. The task must be a constructive one, active rather than passive. It is not a matter of simply not getting in the way of communities but rather of thinking more positively about policies that can protect, cultivate, or create healthy places as lively habitats for families, businesses, civil society, and for citizens. To affirm that America needs healthy places and Americans need a place in the world requires an intellectual, theoretical defense of the importance of place to human flourishing but it also requires a serious reflection on the policies that fit with that philosophical and anthropological vision.

But, is it possible that Americans (those beings formed out of the uniquely American experience) love space more than place? Our cultural mythology is particularly rich with the liberating power of wide-open spaces, the awesome beauty of trackless wilderness, the adventure of the frontiersman un-tethered to place, the romance and fresh possibilities of the open road, the power of placeless space to inspire self-discovery and creativity. We are often in need of “space” to clear our heads—space to breathe when obligations make us claustrophobic. Many of us need to put space between ourselves and our loved ones, lest we lose our identity in the tight bonds of familial or communal affection. We talk about real and metaphorical space in terms of freedom, creativity, opportunity, and a profound individualism—emotionally connecting “space” with our very identities, our sense of self. It seems that without “space” we cannot find ourselves or create ourselves.

Space can also be forbidding, mysterious, dark—the source for experiences of ennui, loss, and fear. Driving through the vast open spaces of the Great Plains or the western deserts produces, in many a sensitive soul, a sense of spiritual nausea. The horizon is vast, the terrain appears unchanging, time slows down as miles go by without detectable landmarks. One can easily feel insignificant, small, meaningless in such a space—a space that bears little trace of human contact and evokes no

sense whatsoever of history. With little effort the sojourner through such spaces meditates on the formless, the timeless, on the infinite—that is, on the terror of boundlessness.

However much we need space for adventure, to create, to change, to grow, we need, perhaps even more, boundaries that give form or structure to our lives, that turn space into something knowable, safe, and that help form the very architecture that preserves memory. What is needed is an art of placemaking, for we can say with G.K. Chesterton that “Art consists of limitation. The most beautiful part of any picture is the frame.” The art of turning space into place is the art of limiting in order to create. Indeed, American history is as much the tale of placemaking as of seeking space. We Americans are peerless in the practice of this art and we have made America itself into a “place”, a huge but not boundless place that incorporates both a built environment and open-spaces into a meaningful whole. America is bound by shared history, language, cultural affinities, as well as collective purposes that emerge from democratic participation—from civic engagement rightly understood. And yet it is reasonable to argue that America is a place only because of the rich and robust nature of its many different and distinct places. Loyalty and attachment to “America” requires, in most cases, complex and almost invisible cords of affections to particular people, local institutions, and to very particular places.

In American lore, devotion to these particular places, or to the insistence of building such places, is almost as great as our myth of intrepid individuals bound for virgin land. We celebrate foundings, which, among other things, are acts of turning space into place. The Separatists (so-called Pilgrims) established order in the wilds of America with the Mayflower Compact. At nearly the same time, the Puritans created a robust social and political order on their “errand into the wilderness.” What was the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 but the imposition of order on space—the mechanism by which space can be turned into social and political places favorable to human needs? The United States Constitution was the product of a deliberate and deliberative effort to create a new political structure to help solidify a single, multifarious, coherent place. Every story of the lone frontiersman unfolds

against the backdrop of one of the greatest place-making adventures in human history—the constant settling and organizing of towns that brought order and stability to previously lawless spaces. Devotion to place was an important part of the story of the Civil War, and how it was fought. Fascination with what kinds of places we could build and what those places could do to and for us pushed urban development of the twentieth century to new heights, governed the development of the post 1945 crabgrass frontier of suburbia, cultivated the passion for building a transportation infrastructure, and informed all manner of developments made possible by the communication revolution of the last several decades. Say what you will about the American love for space and freedom, but few peoples have shown the same genius for creating places and order.

Famously, Edmund Burke argued that “to be attached to the subdivision, to love the little platoon we belong to in society, is the first principle (the germ as it were) of all public affections. It is the first link in the series by which we proceed towards a love to our country, and to mankind.”¹ Much is at stake in Burke’s claim, and what he claims goes against the trajectory of modern liberalism and the most current tendencies of American society. Burke would have us believe that a healthy patriotism is rooted in deep attachment to particular and flawed people rather than devotion to abstract principles. We must belong to something that we can experience directly, to people and institutions (and ideas or beliefs that are embodied in people and institutions) that require, daily, small acts of loyalty and reciprocity, in order to prepare us to love well and moderately something that is too large to experience directly.

Despite being among the most mobile peoples in history and despite the great expanse of space that shaped their imagination, culture, and politics, the American people have largely lived true to Burke’s dictum “to love the little platoon”—even if in America that required us to create continuously these platoons. In the abstract, one has good reason to doubt that robust localism can coexist with high levels of mobility. In this sense, Americans created something that defies

¹ Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. J.G.A. Pocock (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1987), 41.

expectations and, perhaps, is not repeatable for other cultures. The cultural reasons for this success are debatable and beyond the scope of this essay, but it is enough to marvel at the accomplishment, particularly at a time when many suspect that contrary trends pose new and grave threats to this form of ordered liberty, this species of moderated patriotism, and this kind of devotion to place that overcomes the tendencies toward dangerous and narrow provincialism.

If the ability to create, to preserve, and to improve “place” is necessary to the health of a people, then serious reflection on what we might call “the problem of place” is appropriate for citizens and policy-makers. The natural tendency of modern democracy is toward despotism. Modern democracy does not, on its own, encourage a political life and therefore does not encourage people to think of themselves as citizens. If those who advocate civic engagement mean by that phrase a deep citizen investment in the deliberations of the community about shared purposes and ends—about the kind of place they want to create together—then they will have to develop strategies that check the natural tendencies of modern democracy.

In her excellent book, *Democracy on Trial*, Jean Elshtain stresses the need for what she calls “democratic dispositions,” which include a willingness or perhaps even eagerness to act with others toward shared purposes, to compromise, to converse, and to understand one’s unique life as imbedded in a skein of relationships that help constitute one’s distinctive personhood. The maintenance of these dispositions is a necessary condition, it seems, to preserving the civic virtues of “sobriety, rectitude, hard work, and familial and community obligations.”²

What Elshtain calls democratic dispositions are, by my way of thinking, really habits that begin by “doing” and then venerating that way of doing. In other words, these are not virtues that one necessarily expects in a democracy, but rather habits that make possible the rare combination of democracy and self-reliance. These habits modify and moderate democracy, rather than express its inherent nature. The savage instincts of democracy, to use Tocqueville’s phrase, encourage people to

² Jean Elshtain, *Democracy on Trial*, (New York: Basic Books, 1995), see chapter 1.

withdraw into an intensely private world and to see the world from the narrow perspective of their own self-interest, crudely understood. Disconnected from public obligations, having come to think of individualism as a virtue, the democrat sees only his own small world of family and close associates and then the abstractions of nation or humanity—the rich world of political and civil associations in between are invisible to him.³

For Tocqueville, the logical end of democracy left to its “savage instincts” is an administrative regime that oversees infantilized individuals. In his chapter on democratic poetry, Tocqueville emphasizes that equality reorients human consciousness by destroying the middle ground between the individual and the broadest abstractions, leaving the person with something very small to contemplate—the self—and something too vast to comprehend—humankind. He tends to understand the latter in relation to what he knows about the former, but in order for this to work he must assume an abstract idea of the human; thus, being a human whose nature is universally applicable to the species, he can look inside to his own nature to understand the whole of which he is a part.⁴

Thus the un-moderated democrat—the one who lacks the democratic dispositions that Elstain so cherishes—makes a virtue out of indifference. Typically, he will say “who am I to say” how some other person should live, thus implying that he operates with an expansive openness to his fellow citizen while more truthfully he is undermining any real relationship—antagonistic or otherwise—that might require meaningful social and political engagement. So long as most “public” matters are really administrative matters, which require the individual to appeal to the government directly for redress, then there is no context

³ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. and ed. Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 7. See also the last three chapters of Volume 2 where he explores these savage instincts when unmoderated. Hereafter cited as DIA.

⁴ This description comes from my essay, “The Tocqueville Problem and the Nature of American Conservatism” (found in *Anamnesis: A Journal For the Study of Tradition, Place, and ‘Things Divine,’* Volume 1, Number 1, 2011, pp. 64-94). In that essay I explore this theme in greater depth, particularly pp. 75-79.

for robust political and civic life. Democracy, at this point, is about administration rather than self-rule, about individualism rather than self-reliance.

This un-moderated democrat will recognize few obligations to people or institutions. Confining his life to those most like himself—often in lifestyle enclaves—he has no reason to care about those who aren't like him. Meanwhile, this democrat will love humanity and will traffic in self-evident abstractions—this both establish his command of universal truths (and therefore his standing as a citizen) and provide him with the vocabulary by which to engage in political speech that requires no particular, concrete political knowledge.

The point is that democratic instincts destroys the middle ground between the individual and humanity, and the democratic dispositions about which Elstain writes are the primary means by which individuals enter into public life. If voluntary associations, mediating institutions, and robust local politics help form citizens who are capable civic virtues—who can at a minimum operate with self-interest rightly understood—then we must pay attention to how Americans form the habits of self-rule, of gregariousness, and most important, the habit of serious conversation and compromise.

Most of the conversation about this problem focuses on the decline of civil society, the decline in voluntary associations, the retreat of certain forms of religious engagement and the relative decline of local and state politics at the expense of the administrative state. But there is a very complex relationship between the institutional arrangements that allow or even foster these democratic dispositions, and the deeper social and cultural forces that give us the desire to participate meaningfully in our self-governance. To design our political world so as to encourage the growth and development of both localist politics and mediating institutions requires that people want such arrangements and that they prefer the messy adventure of self-rule to the comfortable slavery of the administrative state.

At least in the past, Americans have wanted these arrangements and have accepted self-rule as something noble. Americans have, as a result, cultivated the democratic virtues that people like Jean Elstain and Christopher Lasch have cheered even as they worried that democratic virtues are, in our day, waning. What

exempted, for a time at least, Americans from the logic of modern democracy and what has changed to make citizens less enthralled with the ideals of self-rule? Part of the answer is the decline of place, or what Tocqueville called the Native Country.

Tocqueville's first reference to "native country" in *Democracy in America* comes in the context of his examination of township freedom. He argued that freedom didn't emerge in America in the abstract, as expressed, for instance, in the *Declaration of Independence* (a document that he never mentions in his two volume analysis of American democracy). Nor did American freedom spring from the freedom of an individual in a state of nature. The most important freedom to appear in the American wilderness was political freedom—the power and latitude of citizens to govern themselves without any real interference from outside and more distant authorities. This political freedom, resting on the authority of a historically expansive franchise, allowed each town to define their own laws.

American devotion to freedom emerged from social and political life, not from solitary individuals seeking protection of what is theirs by nature. Because democracy serves as a solvent to relationships that bind individuals together through mutual forms of obligation it tends to reduce society to a loose association of individuals whose connections are products of affection, desire and mutually agreed to contract. The origins of American freedom are essential to explaining how democratic instincts were altered by circumstance.

The township, Tocqueville argued (following Aristotle), is a natural form of association, found throughout history. But, however natural the township, history knows very few cases where township freedom (the freedom to govern themselves without interference) lasted long enough to establish deep habits of self-rule and emotional attachments to their own town as a product of this self-rule. Because American towns (or at least New England towns), during a long period of salutary neglect, produced countless and distinct varieties of these self-governing communities, they also produced a patriotism attached to each town wrought by these ongoing habits of self-rule. By investing as many citizens as possible in the regular acts of town government, these towns foster a distinct sense of ownership or meaningful participation—for their citizens it was truly "our town."

The constellation of choices, of laws, of traditions, of habits that emerge from this robust form of self-rule produces something akin to the “native country.” “In this manner,” wrote Tocqueville of the multiplication of civic duties, “life in a township makes itself felt in a way at each instant; it manifests itself each day by the accomplishment of a duty or the exercise of a right.” The constant and regular action of political life gives a very specific character, look, even feel to each town. “The Americans are attached to the city by a reason analogous to the one that makes inhabitants of the mountains love their country. Among them, the native country has *marked and characteristic features*; it has more of a *physiognomy* than elsewhere.”⁵ The shape of a town, its features, its laws, its history, its way of doing things, gives rise to attachments, to the love of the particular, the eccentric, the known in ways that no generic expression of a town can produce. Most important of all, Tocqueville claims that the very particularistic character of each town, and therefore the means of producing loyalty, sense of duty, love of what is one’s own, is the product of what we might call civic engagement, rightly understood.

Civic engagement does not mean organized appeals to a distant government nor does it include any conception in which the citizens construe their relationship to the government, local or distant, in a manner similar to a client or a customer. Civic engagement rightly understood, in whatever particular form it takes, requires that citizens engage as citizens in a deliberative process in which they understand themselves to be partners in governance. Governance, in this use of the word, is not limited to, nor must it be primarily, an expression of an organized government that supplies services. Indeed, the more centralized the administrative functions of the town become the fewer the opportunities for self-government. A large administrative apparatus leaves individuals free to live largely un-connected from social and political arrangements, free to live and let live, free to cultivate a life-style. Individualists, thus produced, see no need to rely on their fellow citizens or their closest neighbors or their fellow congregants or their lodge members. The well-

⁵ DIA, 64-65 (emphasis added)

functioning administration (local, state, and federal) liberate them from mutual dependence and thereby rob them of township freedom.

Civic engagement, therefore, must incorporate a sense of self-reliance rather than individualism. Habituated to solving problems with their neighbors as those problems emerge, citizens do not reflexively turn to the administrative state when a bridge washes out, when the little league needs a place to play, when a family loses its income. Civic engagement surely includes citizens working through the political process to make changes (often to get that bridge or baseball diamond built) but it must also open up social space for other groups, clusters of volunteers, established non-governmental institutions, to solve problems. The common denominator of all such civic engagement is investing citizens in the task of governing with some or all their neighbors and the fostering of a sense of ownership that can only come from each town developing its distinctive physiognomy.

Tocqueville's admiration for the way American democracy produced countless native countries and the salutary effect of this prodigious expression of self-rule also meant, by contrast, that the risks of tyranny were great to the extent that America lost this habit of local self-rule. Freedom depends on local self-rule. At the end of his second volume, as Tocqueville anticipated what would happen if democracy were to be abandoned to its savage instinct and thereby stripped of its virtues, he placed the loss of native country as the very expression of despotism:

I want to imagine with what new features despotism could be produce in the world: I see an innumerable crowd of alike and equal men who revolve on themselves without repose, procuring the small and vulgar pleasures with which they fill their souls. Each of them, withdrawn and apart, is like a stranger to the destiny of all the others; his children and his particular friends form the whole human species for him; as for dwelling with his fellow citizens, he is beside them, but he does not see them; he touches them and does not feel them; he exists only in himself and for himself alone, and if a family still remains for him, one can at least say that he no longer has a native country.⁶

Understood this way, strong places that are distinct, that have a purchase on the attention and affection of their citizens, that engage at least a large minority in

⁶ DIA, 663.

robust self-rule (civic engagement rightly understood), are the necessary condition for the protection of American freedom. The problem we face today, as I noted earlier, is that people must want this kind of freedom, this political and civic involvement that requires them to give up individualism for communal self-reliance. Healthy freedom, at least in the American story, require places that move citizens to love where they live, to find themselves part of a local story (history), and to invest their time and energy in the evolution of a place strange, distinct and perhaps even a little weird. As Edmund Burke remarked, “to make us love our (native) country, our (native) country ought to be lovely.”⁷

⁷ Burke, 68.