

James Fenimore Cooper's Social Views as
Portrayed in The American Democrat (In Honour
of Professor Kenji Noguchi and Professor Osamu
Osaka On the Occasion of Their Retirement)

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James Fenimore Cooper's Social Views as Portrayed in *The American Democrat*

Brian Quinn

James Fenimore Cooper is of course best known worldwide as the "frontier" writer of *The Last of the Mohicans*, which is one of the novels making up his famed Leatherstocking series, however, what is less known is that he was also a widely recognized social critic of his day. After achieving world acclaim as the first successful full-time American novelist, Cooper decided to travel to Europe in 1826 where he was accepted as an unofficial ambassador of American culture and eventually spent over 7 years there, primarily in France, Italy and England. After returning to the United States in 1833 Cooper was deeply disturbed by several tendencies. His experiences abroad had deeply influenced him and he soon became an outspoken critic of his native land. He described his misgivings in the following manner:

A long absence from home, has, in a certain degree, put the writer in the situation of a foreigner in his own country; a situation probably much better for noting peculiarities, than that of one who never left it. Two things have struck him painfully on his return; a disposition in the majority to carry out the opinions of the system to extremes, and a disposition in the minority to abandon all to the current of the day, with the hope that his current will lead, in the end, to radical changes.

(Introduction to *The American Democrat*, p.70; hereafter, all quotes are taken from *The American Democrat*, Penguin Books, 1989 edition. Please also note that the author's original spelling is used in all quotes)

Cooper's deep interest in politics as well as literature eventually led him in 1838 to write a well thought-out and systematically organized political essay, entitled *The American Democrat* in which he intended to instruct his fellow Americans in what true democratic principles really are. The event that most directly led to Cooper writing this book can be traced to a very minor incident which occurred in his rural hometown of Cooperstown, New York. After having lived away from home for over 10 years from 1826 to 1836, Cooper decided to return to his estate in Cooperstown where he had grown up. However, during his absence the local inhabitants had developed the tradition of picnicking on Three Mile Point, a scenic little projection into Lake Otsego that belonged to Cooper but had commonly been supposed to be public property. Repeated instances of damage and littering led Cooper in 1837 to issue a mild warning to the townsfolk which was then loudly resented and soon the entire town voted that the land should be made public property. The ensuing battle led to numerous court cases. It was only a trivial matter but the local presses strongly took the side of the local residents and as a way of response he wrote a novel in 1838 called *Home as Found* in which he staunchly defends his version of the entire affair and then finally published *The American Democrat* in which he philosophically voices his concerns over the tyranny of the majority. Even though the incident was only a small matter, he felt strongly that more important principles were at stake.

The American Democrat was not Cooper's first attempt at describing the American social condition. While living in Paris in 1827 he had previously written a highly idealized picture of America entitled *Notions of Americans* which was designed to defend and correct the misimpressions of America created by European travelers with an anti-American bias. It was a rather dull and uninteresting work which was not well received. In addition, Cooper had also previously tackled social criticism of both Europe and America in his travel volumes *Sketches of Switzerland* (1836) and his three vol-

umes called *Gleanings in Europe* (1838). However, none of these works had been popular either.

The American Democrat is a simply written and well organized work that is conveniently divided into 43 brief chapters that are both short and easy to understand. It appears as if Cooper had hoped that this text could even possibly be used as a text book in New York State schools. Thus it is easy for adolescents as well as adults to comprehend.

MAJOR THEMES

Cooper's return to America had demonstrated to him that the most serious threat to American democracy lay in the people themselves. The fundamental issue that most troubled him was how to control the leveling tendencies of democracy in order to protect, at the same time, the intelligent and educated elite that is obviously needed to provide leadership and direction in a society. Cooper bases his theory on the Jeffersonian belief in the natural inequality of men, and he supports the democratic order as the only one that gives the talented man a chance to rise in the world. Cooper feared that in a democratic society, if the majority can impose its will on the society, as a whole, then the intelligent elite will eventually be drowned in a sea of mediocrity, and ultimately power will fall into the hands of demagogues who can best manipulate the majority of voters. In order to offset such a tendency, Cooper argues that the will of the majority is therefore not absolute. He stresses that a majority must act under constitutional restraints in order to insure the safety and well being of the minority. In addition, Cooper states that public opinion should never be allowed to become a substitute for law. Cooper believed that restraint of the majority was as essential in a democracy as was restraint of monarchs in the European countries of the 19th century.

In *The American Democrat* Cooper also continually stresses the importance of distinguishing between truth and deception. However, as a novelist, Cooper himself was also an active practitioner of the

art of deception and make-believe when developing the storylines of his Leatherstocking tales.

Cooper has little regard, however, for political deception and states that:

Men are the constant dupes of names, while their happiness and well-being mainly depend on things. The highest proof a community can give of its fitness for self-government, is its readiness in distinguishing between the two; for frauds, oppression, flattery and vice, are the offspring of the mistakes. (*The American Democrat*, p.236)

Later in the same sense, Cooper says that in order for Americans:

...to govern themselves or others, men needed precisely that faculty which they were least likely to develop in a hurry; for the ability to discriminate between that which is true and that which is false, is one of the last attainments of the human mind.
(*The American Democrat*, p.197)

Cooper was equally suspicious of the power of public opinion to sway government action:

In this country, in which political authority is the possession of the body that wields opinion...there is a strong and dangerous disposition to defer to the publick, in opposition to truth and justice.
(*The American Democrat*, p.210)

Another great fear of Cooper's was that of the increasing power which he saw being amassed by demagogues and he sternly warned that such people were perhaps the most dangerous to a democratic society:

The demagogue is usually sly, a detractor of others, a professor of humility and disinterestedness, a great stickler for equality as respects all above him, a man who acts in corners, and avoids open and manly expositions of his course, calls blackguards gentlemen, and gentlemen folks, appeals to passions and prejudices rather than to reason, and is in all respects, a man of intrigue and deception, of sly cunning and management, instead of manifesting the frank, fearless qualities of the democracy he so prodigally professes.

(*The American Democrat*, p.155)

In Cooper's description we can perhaps see a great similarity to many leading politicians in both Japan and the United States today. Due to the great power such politicians wield over people, Cooper warned his readers that it was therefore always better not to be too trusting of a man's motives. This advice bears a striking resemblance to the character of his great frontiersman hero Natty Bumppo (also called Hawkeye or Deerslayer) who is continually on the lookout for an ambush or some secret Indian trap.

Despite all the warnings and misgivings about his native land, Cooper still believed that America's form of government was still the best yet devised by man and also thought, after traveling around Europe for seven years, that most other nations were not yet fit for the American system. However, even though Cooper admired the system in general, he still believed it to be an ongoing social and political experiment that still had to prove to the world not only that it could prosper economically and win wars but that it could also culturally thrive while protecting the arts, manners and human individuality.

Again, much like Natty Bumppo, the hero in his most famous novels, Cooper was a highly individualistic man and he passionately attacked the existence of political parties and factions:

When the party rules, the people do not rule, but merely such a portion of the people as can manage to get control of the the party...

It is a very different thing to be democrat, and to be a member of what is called a democratic party; for the first insists on his independence and an entire freedom of opinion, while the last is incompatible with either.

(*The American Democrat*, p.227)

In this clear declaration of independence by Cooper we can comprehend his belief in a man's independence as the cornerstone of his democratic vision. Cooper also believed that a strong belief in individuality, or looking out for one's own best interest would also ultimately lead to the common good:

The principle of individuality, or to use a less winning term, of selfishness, lies at the root of all voluntary human exertion. We toil for food, for clothes, for houses, lands, and for property, in general. This is done, because we know that the fruits of our labor will belong to ourselves, or to those who are most dear to us. It follows, that all which society enjoys beyond the mere supply of its first necessities, is dependent on the rights of property.

(*The American Democrat*, p.187)

At the same time Cooper was also a firm believer in universal suffrage and did not feel that voting rights should be limited just to those who owned property:

Every man who has wants, feelings, affections and character, has a stake in society.

...Property always carries with it a portion of indirect political influence, and it is unwise, and even dangerous, to strengthen this

influence by adding to it constitutional privileges; the result always being to make the strong stronger, and the weak weaker.
(*The American Democrat*, p.195)

So, while Cooper felt that property rights should be strictly protected (such as in the Three Mile Point incident), he did not believe that only those with property should rule.

Cooper had a very complex view of man. He saw mankind as being half animal and half divine. This theme is also frequently portrayed in his Leatherstocking saga of frontiersmen and Indians. Thus, since men were far from perfect, Cooper agreed that they needed to be governed. He therefore favored a form of government which had strictly limited powers and held the executive, legislative and judicial powers in balance:

No expedients can equalize the temporal lots of man; for without civilization and government, the strong would oppress the weak, and, with them, and inducement to exertion must be left by bestowing rewards on talents, industry and success. All that the best institutions, then, can achieve, is to remove useless obstacles, and to permit merit to be the artisan of its own fortune, without always degrading demerit to the place it ought naturally to fill.
(*The American Democrat*, p.107)

Cooper was also a strong defender of states rights and believed that the federal government should have strictly limited powers, with all powers not specifically mentioned in the Constitution belonging to the states. In addition, Cooper also argued for a strong President, since he was afraid of the Congress usurping too much power:

As a rule, there is far more danger that the president of the United States will render the office less efficient than was intended, than that he will exercise an authority dangerous to the

liberties of the country. Some of his powers perhaps are too imitative, and are unnecessary; that of diminishing military officers for instance. But it is a greater evil to attempt reducing them, except in conformity with the provisions of the constitution, than to endure them.

(*The American Democrat*, p.104)

Thus Cooper clearly believes that Americans had far more to fear from Congress (a body of 535 representatives) than from the President:

In this country, there is far more to apprehend from Congress, than from the executive, as seen in the following reasons: — Congress is composed of many, while the executive is one, bodies of men notoriously acting with less personal responsibilities than individuals; Congress has power to enact laws, which it becomes the duty of the executive to see enforced, and the really legislative authority of a country is always its greatest authority...It follows that the legislature of this country, by the intentions of the constitution, wields the highest authority under the least responsibility, and that is the power most to be distrusted. Still, all who possess trusts, are to be diligently watched, for there is no protection against abuses without responsibility, nor any real responsibility without vigilance.

(*The American Democrat*, pp.92-93)

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The American Democrat is obviously related to Cooper's age and also gives us great insight into the period in which it was written. It was written during the presidency of Andrew Jackson (1829-1837), yet, since Cooper himself so disliked party politics, he could be accurately described as a true independent thinker.

One of the best aspects of the book is Cooper's ability to distinguish perennial problems from the transitory. As a result we can

read the book today and suffer little from the influences of the age in which it was written. Nevertheless, a few of the ideas portrayed do seem a bit outmoded when evaluated from the modern viewpoint.

One anachronistic view was that American opinion tends to be dominated by foreign influences, since today the opposite holds true in world affairs. Another area of little significance today includes his antagonistic ideas regarding the press, which primarily seem to have been based on his bitter personal experiences after numerous attacks by the press.

RELEVANCE TO THE MODERN WORLD

Throughout the book numerous ideas as espoused by Cooper still seem very fresh and relevant to today's political arena. One example of this is his belief that one of the major virtues of the American system of government was the careful balance of powers between the executive, legislative and judicial branches.

His constant warnings against the tyranny of majority rule are also as valid today as they were 150 years ago. His words on the need to restrain majority rule are particularly well expressed:

Were the majority of a country to rule without restraint, it is probable as much injustice and oppression would follow, as are found under the dominion of one. It belongs to the nature of men to arrange themselves in parties, to lose sight of truth and justice in partizanship and prejudice, to mistake their own impulses for that which is proper, and to do wrong because they are indisposed to seek the right.

(*The American Democrat*, p.122)

Such warnings could just as well have been written in the 20th century.

Although Cooper was not completely opposed to slavery, since he did believe that men were inherently unequal, he was not sympathetic

to it. However, he clearly recognized many of its greatest problems and accurately foresaw much of the turmoil that would surface so painfully in the last 50 years:

The time must come when American slavery shall cease, and when that day shall arrive, (unless early and effectual means are devised to obviate it,) two races will exist in the same region, whose feelings will be embittered by inextinguishable hatred, and who carry on their faces, the respective stamps of their factions. The struggle that will follow will necessarily be a war of extermination. The evil day may be delayed, but can scarcely be averted.

(The American Democrat, p.222)

With the inner cities all across America literally at war today we can say that many of Cooper's worst fears have already been realized.

Perhaps Cooper's most important observation is the need for Americans to be able to distinguish between myth and reality. Cooper continually demanded from the press and government that things be described as they were instead of as they might be made to seem. In today's modern era of TV and videos it unfortunately appears that typical citizens are finding it harder and harder to clearly distinguish between myth and reality. In addition, politicians now seem to spend more time on developing an "image" than in developing policies and also hire numerous "media consultants" and "spin doctors" whose job it is to make that which is black appear white and that which is white appear black. Such constant concern with "image" would have greatly angered Cooper who believed that if you could just give people the facts, then they would usually make the right choices. Unfortunately, modern politics is often run by people who are not eager to disseminate unlimited information and instead much prefer to make decisions for us.

Even though Cooper clearly saw many of democracy's weaknesses

he never lost his firm belief in the ultimate good of democracy but he also strongly felt that the people had to be very careful to elect intelligent and enlightened leaders:

Though majorities often decide wrong, it is believed that they are less liable to do so than minorities. There can be no question that the educated and affluent classes of a country, are more capable of coming to wise and intelligent decisions in affairs of state, than the mass of a population.

(*The American Democrat*, p.113)

Cooper was also aware of the dangers of public opinion, which can so quickly change with each new political development and he strongly warned that public opinion should never be confused with well thought out law:

In Democracies there is a besetting disposition to make public opinion stronger than the law. This is the particular form in which tyranny exhibits itself in a popular government; for whenever there is power, there will be found a disposition to abuse it.

(*The American Democrat*, p.204)

Finally, his great distrust of political parties and appeal for Americans to remain independent still rings true today. Not surprisingly, unlike many European countries which have strong party support for most political functions, few Americans strictly follow the party line and many will vote for candidates from three or even four different parties at one general election. This surviving tendency would indeed make Cooper happy.

Unfortunately, his fears regarding the power of public opinion have come true. Today opinion polls are taken almost daily and they constantly make the headlines in newspapers on TV reports. Due to the great power of such public opinion polls, the number of coura-

geous leaders has severely decreased in recent years across America, while the politics of expediency seem to have increased.

CONCLUSION

What does James Fenimore Cooper have to teach us about democracy 150 years after his book was published? He still clearly teaches us that complacency, demagoguery, party propaganda and the tyranny of unbridled public opinion will result in great harm to the democratic process in America. He also teaches us not to fear a strong but enlightened leader since courage and justice is often easier for one man to find than a body of 500 men where no man takes ultimate responsibility. Cooper also teaches us not to blindly accept the information constantly fed to us, from media sources such as NHK, CNN or the BBC, but, instead, he urges us to be continually skeptical and suspicious just like his great hero Natty Bumppo in the *Leatherstocking Tales*, for we too must be constantly on the lookout for an enemy ambush (especially in the mass media). Cooper also reconfirms the importance for the majority to always respect the needs and concerns of the minority in order to make a fair and just society. Finally, he clearly warns of the need to distinguish democracy from egalitarianism. For Cooper, democracy means the opportunity for every man to reach his ultimate potential and thus eventually rise as high as he can in society. Yet, in modern America we can see many increasing trends which prefer to make all people equal rather than to let them develop their natural differences. With the numerous quota systems for racial balance at universities and companies and a growing number of programs that abolish grades so as not to discriminate against those who get low grades, we are today witnessing the so-called "dumbing down of America" which can be paraphrased as the concerted attempt of numerous liberal educators to bring all Americans down to the same level of mediocrity. This dangerous tendency was carefully forewarned by Cooper:

The tendency of democracies is, in all things, to mediocrity, since the tastes, knowledge and principles of the majority form the tribunal of appeal. This circumstance, while it certainly serves to elevate the average qualities of a nation, renders the introduction of a high standard difficult. Thus do we find in literature, the arts, architecture and in all acquired knowledge, a tendency in America to gravitate towards the common center in this, as in other things;

(*The American Democrat*, p.129)

As Cooper stresses, the problem in America today is that when no man can differ substantially from his neighbor, and majority opinion is sufficiently powerful to punish any deviator, then the freedom of American democracy is truly in danger.

In conclusion, Cooper believed that the American system of democracy was indeed the best yet known to man, but many inherent dangers still needed to be overcome in order to make the system truly successful.

Cooper firmly believed in the viability of a democratic society, but could only see it thriving in an environment that fostered culture, the arts and the unbridled freedom of expression. His vision is thoroughly valid in our modern era and his strong and steady voice still has something to teach today's generation of Americans about the meaning of democracy.

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