

# DEMOCRATIC CULTURE IN AMERICA

By Joseph Gordon

As Rogers Smith articulates in his book, *Civic Ideals*, America is a nation that blends multiple political traditions in its civic community. Smith argues that the political elite in America create “civic myths,” or stories based upon falsehoods that combine liberal and illiberal ideals. These illiberal ideals fill in the blanks left in America’s liberal civic foundation. So, in a nation that conflates liberal and illiberal ideals, is it possible to have a commonly understood “democratic culture”? In *The Inclusion of the Other*, Jurgen Habermas argues that the rights individuals enjoy in the “private life” (liberalism), must be fought for in the “public life” (non-liberal republicanism). In other words, for individuals to live the life they see fit for themselves, individuals must speak up and have their needs and desires heard in the civic community. While Americans have competing understandings of what should be pursued in the private life and who should be allowed to participate in the American civic community, most Americans believe that their own needs and concerns should be heard and considered. To illustrate this, I conduct an analysis of a presidential campaign speech made by David Duke, a right-wing extremist and former Ku Klux Klan Grand Wizard. While he does not believe that all should be allowed to participate in the civic community, he believes that he and his supporters should have their concerns heard and considered. This example demonstrates that America does have a commonly understood “democratic culture,” even though some believe that it should not be afforded to each equally.

## Introduction

Curious about the grand “American Experiment,” Alexis de Tocqueville visited the new United States to understand the reason for their “democratic” success. Tocqueville wrote back to his native country of France in awe. He saw an egalitarian society where “democracy destroys or modifies those various inequalities” that existed in British-controlled Colonial America and continued to exist in Europe when Tocqueville wrote *Democracy in America*.<sup>1</sup> From a shared conception of liberal ideals, the United States demonstrated the possibilities of Enlightenment thought that European nations should emulate.

Tocquevillian doctrine, later expanded upon by Louis Hartz in the mid-twentieth century, claims that American civic ideals are homogenous. According to this school of thought, there is one common culture, understood by all Americans, which is liberal by nature and has been the dominant ideology since the nation’s founding. The legacy of this liberalism results in a “color-blind” society that extends common human rights to everyone. As with traditional liberal doctrine, there are no specific requirements to receive equal treatment under the law, whether it be state-sanctioned or natural. At the community level, all humans are equal, and at the individual level, all humans treat each other as equals.

From this point of departure, it is easy to conclude that all voices expressed in the “public life” should be considered equally. If all humans are equal to each other and all humans universally respect each other equally, then all voices should be heard and considered equally by everyone. But, this is simply not the case. The Tocquevillian account of “American Exceptionalism” might have been true amongst a small group of Americans (white men), but it did not extend to include everyone within its influence. So, can there be a commonly understood “democratic culture” in a society that is not egalitarian?

The United States and American culture was, and continues to be, far from equal. The fantasy of universal liberal treatment of all within America eludes most. America, a nation built on the backs of African slaves, would not have been prosperous enough to finance a secessionist revolution from an empire that treated the white colonists as sub-citizens. Even as George Washington led ragtag militias in defense of Thomas Jefferson’s famous claim that “all men are created equal,” both men held hundreds of African slaves in shackles at their Virginia plantations. Neither men freed their slaves after America’s victory.

Illiberal treatment of individuals within America’s reach extended far beyond African slaves. The forced removal of Native Americans from their ancestral lands demonstrates another instance of unequal treatment. Deadly relocation efforts and horrendous living conditions on the reservations nearly wiped out Native Americans on genocidal levels. “Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness” did not, and continues to not, apply to them.

Asian Americans are another group subjected to illiberal America. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and Japanese Internment during World War II demonstrate how many white Americans did not want to give Asians the ability to access membership in liberal America. Many white Americans today want to keep Asian Americans from gaining full membership in liberal America by “othering” Asian Americans based upon their cultural differences, whether real or perceived.

Women have also been excluded from liberal America. Considered property of their husbands through most of the nineteenth century, women were and continue to be second class citizens to their (white) male counterparts. While American women have made great strides in recent history, women continue to be subject to illiberal America, only earning 81 cents to the dollar their male colleagues make for doing the same job, as well as colliding into glass ceilings in many industries and in politics.

Today, illiberal America continues to affect varying identities within its reach. Black Americans continue to face systemic racism that is embedded within the fabric of America. From the lasting consequences of redlining to mass incarceration caused by the “War on Drugs,” Black Americans are still excluded from liberal America.

Like Black Americans, Latinx Americans are also barred from liberal America. Aside from the racism and bigotry that Latinx Americans face today, non-citizen Latinx Americans who are in the United States for work do not experience the same general welfare as citizens. America has decided not to give non-citizen Latinx Americans universal human rights that citizens of the United States enjoy, which is contrary to liberal doctrine.

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1 Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. by J.P. Mayer (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1969), 131.

Liberal America, a nation that is blind to membership, would treat all humans equally as long as they are within her borders. This is not the case with Latinx Americans.

Illiberal America also affects Americans with identities that may not necessarily be visible, such as those in the LGBTQ+ community. Until recently, matters concerning this community were scarcely discussed because members identifying as LGBTQ+ were considered deviant from the American norm, and thus unimportant, or even worse: threatening. This has changed in the past decade and a half as the LGBTQ+ community has made enormous strides towards equality. But, equal treatment in America for the LGBTQ+ community is far from sight considering legislation like the North Carolina Bathroom Bill and continued animus toward this community.

As we can see with the examples above that are far from exhaustive (pardon the exclusion of religious persecution; the list is far too long), America is not monolithically liberal. America does not afford universal rights to all within its influence. The Enlightenment liberal dream that all can enjoy “life, liberty, and property,”<sup>2</sup> that all will morally “act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in any other person, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means”<sup>3</sup> does not exist in America. The Tocquevillian assessment of an egalitarian society that results from a democratic system only applies to a select few white men.

As outlined above, most Americans are subject to illiberal America. In *Civic Ideals*, Rogers Smith states, “relative egalitarianism that prevailed among white men (at first, moderately propertied white men) was surrounded by an array of fixed, ascriptive hierarchies, all largely unchallenged by the leading American revolutionaries.”<sup>4</sup> In other words, white propertied men that had power in the colonial period created a lower class that consisted of women, Black slaves, and Native Americans. Each of these groups had their own distinct position in the underclass and each group’s experience in illiberal America is unique. Regardless, illiberal America was established as a way for liberal (white) America to prosper because liberal America needs illiberal America for its survival. The result is a coexistence between liberal and illiberal America.

Tocqueville was wrong in his assessment that democracy destroys inequalities. Inequalities in America existed far before democracy was established and they continue to this day. The universal human respect that seems to be necessary for a democratic culture that accepts expressions of all voices does not exist in America. Membership requirements in the American polity extend far beyond basic personhood. Instead of simply being a rational actor, as would be required in a purely liberal society, American civic membership requires a certain identity to participate.

In an America that blends liberal and illiberal ideals, is it possible to have a common conception of “democratic culture,” the shared understanding amongst most individuals in America (“culture”) about participation in the civic community (“democratic”)? Rogers Smith correctly points out that the egalitarian society that would be accepting of expression of all voices in the public civic community does not exist. He is right in the sense that certain voices have been prioritized and continue to be prioritized over others in the American polity. However, regardless of the individual values each has, we would be hard-pressed to find someone in America that does not believe others, especially the government, should listen to their own voice. American democratic culture is the common understanding that as an American, the government should respond to my voice.<sup>5</sup> Whether one is a klansmember or a feminist, each believes that their government should respond to their individual needs. While a klansmember and a feminist have very different conceptions of who the government should respond to (i.e. a klansmember would think that the government should only listen to white people while a feminist would want the government to respond to men and women equally), both Americans believe the government should respond to someone, especially the individual expressing her or his own voice. Expression of voice and government responsiveness may not be egalitarian for some, but each individual believes the government should listen and

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2 John Locke, “Second Treatise of Government,” in *Political Philosophy: The Essential Texts*, ed. Steven M. Cahn, 3rd. ed. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2015), 366.

3 Immanuel Kant, “Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals,” in Cahn, *Political Philosophy*, 518.

4 Rogers Smith, *Civic Ideals* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997), 17.

5 When I mention the term “American,” I do not necessarily mean a “citizen” of the United States. I will use the term American to describe all within the jurisdiction of the United States, not just legal citizens. All legal citizens of the United States are Americans, but not all Americans are legal citizens of the United States. I will use the term “citizen” to describe legal citizens in the United States, while I will use the term American for all that are within the reach of American influence.

respond to her or him personally.

The first section of this thesis will be an intense analysis of Rogers Smith's work, *Civic Ideals*. As mentioned before, this text is a hard critique of the Tocquevillian-Hartz doctrine of a dominant liberal culture in America. Smith writes, "Liberal notions of natural rights as expounded in the Declaration of Independence and writings of philosophers like Locke make a prima facie case that all those capable of developing powers of rational self-guidance should be treated as bearers of fairly robust individual rights." Instead, many Americans have "wished to maintain white supremacy, to preserve old gender roles, to uphold Protestantism in public life, and in other ways to resist many egalitarian demands in liberal and democratic ideologies."<sup>6</sup> Smith clearly proves that America is not monolithically liberal, that "Americanism" has major illiberal elements. He says, "American politics is best seen as expressing the interaction of multiple political traditions, including liberalism, republicanism, and ascriptive [racial, sexist, etc.] forms of Americanism, which have collectively comprised American political culture, without any constituting it as a whole."<sup>7</sup> Smith's "Multiple Traditions Theory" shows us that "Americanism" is the mixing of liberal and illiberal ideals. At times, these ideals are more liberal, and at times these ideals are more illiberal. He demonstrates this through an analysis of U.S. citizenship laws by breaking down who is able to gain membership into liberal America, which, as mentioned earlier, is very exclusive.

Smith discusses how these traditions are manufactured. He claims, "political leaders need compelling stories to convince their constituents... that they are one people, and, second, that they are a people well served by following those rulers."<sup>8</sup> These stories are what Smith calls "civic myths," which are stories "used to explain why persons form a people, usually indicating how a political community originated, who is eligible for membership, who is not and why, and what the community's values and aims are."<sup>9</sup> Similar to Plato's "Myth of the Metals," these stories do not have to be based on any particular facts. The only requirement is the people need to believe in them. These stories are created by politicians to maintain the status quo and to embolden those who are at the top of the American hierarchy.

It makes sense that citizens of the United States would want to be a part of a narrative of excellence. The "colorblindness" of liberalism that rejects narratives of certain identities is far from empowering. Smith notes that "most U.S. citizens seem to have wished to hear that their peoplehood was more deeply rooted, and of more intrinsic importance."<sup>10</sup> This creates a distinction between those with membership and those without, giving the individual a sense of value. Smith writes, "It is thus unsurprising that many Americans have been attracted to ascriptive civic myths assuring them that, regardless of their personal achievements or economic status, their inborn characteristics make them part of a special community."<sup>11</sup> Through their perceived shared culture, individuals feel "distinctively and permanently worthy."<sup>12</sup> Those with membership to liberal America subscribe to these civic myths as a way to feel special and superior. The creation of membership to gain access to liberal America is a performative contradiction in itself. Regardless, an exclusive membership has been created for a select few to gain access to egalitarian, liberal America.<sup>13</sup> All those without membership do not have access to liberal America.

Smith's scathing critique of a homogenous liberal America is very important to note. The basic cultural elements of equality that are presumably needed for a functioning democracy are not evident in America. How could there possibly be a democratic culture in America without the egalitarian values that liberalism professes? At a systemic level, Smith is right to point out these flaws within American culture.

But what about at the individual level? Is there a democratic drive within each of us? This is where Smith's analysis falls short. He proves that the values and ideals of Americans can be illiberal, but he does not fully analyze

6 Smith, *Civic Ideals*, 36-37.

7 *Ibid.*, 5.

8 *Ibid.*, 32.

9 *Ibid.*, 33.

10 *Ibid.*, 38.

11 *Ibid.*

12 *Ibid.*

13 Even though citizenship to the United States has been extended to far more people today, equal access to liberal America continues to be a struggle for many Americans. Even if we assume that citizenship is granted equally to all who wish to receive it (which it is not, but this is beyond the scope of this essay), there are many people with citizenship who are barred from liberal America.

the qualities of the actors within American culture. Smith considers the intertwining of liberalism and illiberalism in America as an attempt by the political elite to fill the empty space that Lockean liberalism leaves for political gain, but he does not explain how the individual actor sees himself or herself in the American civic community. While it is true that politicians have mixed liberal and illiberal ideals, this does not tell the entire story.

To explain how the individual sees herself in the American civic community, we will turn to Jurgen Habermas. According to Habermas, the non-liberal aspects of the American civic community are not entirely based upon a narrative pushed by the politically connected. Instead, he argues that while non-liberal and liberal ideals are born separately, their fusion together in contemporary political theory is necessary for the survival of liberalism. This may seem counterintuitive at first. How can liberalism need non-liberal ideals for its preservation? It makes sense when democracy is properly classified as a “republican,” or non-liberal, ideal.

Popular sovereignty, the right of “communication and participation that secure the public autonomy of citizens,” is at the heart of democracy.<sup>14</sup> But, popular sovereignty itself is not a liberal concept and it pre-dates liberalism by thousands of years. Habermas describes popular sovereignty as a “republican” concept, where the rights of the members “owed their legitimacy to the ethical self-understanding and sovereign self-determination achieved by a political community.”<sup>15</sup> In other words, the rights of the individuals within the political community are determined by what the people in that community think is appropriate. Liberalism, on the other hand, specifically Lockean liberalism, understands the rights of the individual as transcending, intrinsic, and inalienable. Simply put, all individuals are in possession of equal rights that cannot be taken away. Liberalism and republicanism are at odds with each other, but they exist together in the American political community. In order to establish the rights of the individual (private “liberal” rights), the individual must participate in the civic community (public “republican” rights). But, to participate in the public civic community, the individual must possess the right to do so. This is why Habermas concludes that republicanism and liberalism “mutually presuppose each other in such a way that neither human rights nor popular sovereignty can claim primacy over its counterpart.”<sup>16</sup>

While Smith is not wrong to claim that the mix of liberal and illiberal ideals is a political creation, this does not entirely explain the interaction of liberal and non-liberal ideals in the American civic community. Americans understand themselves as rights-bearing individuals in the private life, individuals who are free to pursue what they believe is appropriate for themselves. When this is restricted, individuals in the American civic community believe that their own personal voice should be heard and considered as a rights-bearing person. While this concept might be an “American Tradition” that derives itself from civic myths created by politicians, the interaction between the public and private person within each individual is essential and common amongst Americans. In order for the individual to secure her personal, private rights, she must participate in the public civic community. This is why Americans with vastly different civic ideals believe that their own personal voice should be heard and considered. Not all Americans believe that other voices should be heard equally to their own; rather, most Americans believe their own voices, and the voices of their advocates, should be heard and should receive a response from others, especially from the government.

Americans share a common procedural conception of “democratic culture” at the individual level. While there are different conceptions of who should speak and who should be heard, there is a common understanding that “my” voice should be heard. Americans “exercise their civic autonomy in order to specify clearly which interests and standards are justified,” as Habermas explains.<sup>17</sup> This is exemplified through the Tea Party, Indivisible, and Black Lives Matter movements today. In the past, we see this with the Chicano/a and Black Civil Rights movements of the 1960s and the Seneca Falls Convention that happened more than 100 years earlier. It is American to actively want to voice needs and desires with the intent of being heard and responded to. To demonstrate that even Americans with the most illiberal ideals believe that their voice should be heard, I will wrap up this essay by analyzing a campaign speech made by former Ku Klux Klan Grand Wizard David Duke.

## Section One: On Liberalism and American Civic Ideals

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14 Jurgen Habermas, *The Inclusion of the Other* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1998), 258.

15 *Ibid.*

16 *Ibid.*, 261.

17 *Ibid.*, 265.

## Philosophical Foundations of American Liberalism

According to Louis Hartz, the grand “American Experiment” is rooted in Enlightenment liberal thought. In *The Liberal Tradition in America*, Hartz claims, “a society which begins with Locke, and thus transforms him, stays with Locke, by virtue of an absolute and irrational attachment it develops for him.”<sup>18</sup> In other words, America, which Hartz claims is rooted in Locke, will dogmatically support his doctrine. Support for Lockean liberal thought is exemplified by the fact that 91% of Americans at least somewhat agree with the statement that they are proud of their constitution, while a staggering 71% of Americans strongly agree with that statement.<sup>19</sup> With such wild support for Lockean institutions, it is important to understand what exactly Lockean thought is.

The concept that all “men” are equally given “unalienable Rights,” which consist of “Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness,” is derived from Lockean thought. Jefferson uses Lockean thought to outline what rights are naturally given to “men” that are prior to any established government. These rights cannot be taken away by governments because governments are “instituted among men” who already have natural rights, giving “men” the power to “dissolve all political ties” from a government that restricts those rights. Not only should we look at where Locke finds natural rights, but we should also consider how he finds them.

In Chapter II of the *Second Treatise of Government*, Locke asks us to imagine a world without politics. Locke writes, “To understand political power, right, and derive its original, we must consider what state all men are naturally in.”<sup>20</sup> He asks the reader to think of “a state of perfect freedom... [a] state also of equality.”<sup>21</sup> In other words, Locke wants us to disembodied ourselves from our current situation and think of a state of being with no government. This hypothetical situation is the “State of Nature,” what the human experience would be like prior to government establishment. The “State of Nature” is not lawless; there is the “law of nature to govern it, which obliges every one: And reason, which is that law, teaches all mankind, who will but consult it, that being all equal and independent, no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty, or possessions.”<sup>22</sup> In other words, because all “men” are equal within the “State of Nature,” no person is allowed to deprive another of his basic existence, which is life in a state of complete freedom. Any restriction of these equally endowed rights is against “man’s” nature.

From the “State of Nature,” “men” came together as equal agents to establish governments to protect their natural rights. As Locke explains, “in his own judgment, it was not good for [man] to be alone, putting him under strong obligations of necessity, convenience and inclination, to drive him into society.”<sup>23</sup> In the interest of preserving the natural rights of man, “the community comes to be umpire by settled standing rules, indifferent, and the same to all parties.”<sup>24</sup> In other words, men give up certain freedoms, like the ability to punish their injurers, by agreeing to certain standards within society. This is the formation of the “Social Contract”; when “any number of men have, by the consent of every individual, made a community, they have thereby made that community one body, with the power to act as one body.”<sup>25</sup> Unanimous consent within the political body is necessary when establishing and maintaining the “Social Contract.” Members within a society must agree to rules that could possibly restrict their natural rights; otherwise, natural rights found in the “State of Nature” must not be restricted.

In Locke’s liberalism, the natural rights of all humans, the rights that make all humans equal, are not given to them by government. Rather, these rights are the by-products of the conditions found within the “State of Nature.” This makes natural rights pre-political: rights that governments cannot take away unless all within a governing polity consent to restrict those rights. The philosophy behind Jefferson’s Declaration of Independence clearly follows this logic. As Britain restricted certain property rights through forms of legislation—most famously, taxation without the colonist’s representation (consent) in Parliament—Jefferson used Lockean language to describe

18 Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America* (New York, NY: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1955), 6.

19 Robert Dahl, *How Democratic Is The American Constitution?* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001), 36.

20 Locke, “*Second Treatise of Government*,” 365.

21 *Ibid.*

22 *Ibid.*, 366.

23 *Ibid.*, 374.

24 *Ibid.*

25 *Ibid.*, 376.

the unjust actions of the British government. For Jefferson, the purpose of government is the protection of these pre-political rights, the natural rights of humans found in the “State of Nature.” Government is not supposed to pick winners and losers by determining what is the proper way to live to reach a certain end; in other words, the government is not meant to endorse one particular interpretation of the “good life.” Instead, government is meant to be an “umpire,” a passive figure that only intervenes when an individual’s rights are infringed upon by another. Lockean liberal government is meant to endorse pluralism and coexistence of multiple ways of life, so long as they do not infringe upon another individual’s rights. However, the government created in America does not do this for all Americans. We can trace some of the problems we face back to Locke’s point of departure.

The issue with Locke’s philosophical point of origin is evident in the work of other liberal thinkers. The contemporary political theorist John Rawls has a similar starting point to Locke. In *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls lays out “principles of justice for the basic structure of society... [a] conception of justice which generalizes and carries to a higher level of abstraction.”<sup>26</sup> Rawls’ theory is not meant to outline one specific conception of the good. Rather, it is meant to act as guidance for “free and rational persons” to define their “fundamental terms of association” without bias.<sup>27</sup> To do so, Rawls creates the epistemic starting point of the “Original Position,” where the individual does not know their own position within society. This is done by putting the self “behind the veil of ignorance,” where the individual does not know “their own particular case and they are obliged to evaluate principles solely on the basis of general considerations.”<sup>28</sup> In other words, Rawls asks the reader to remove the self from its current situation by removing all particularities that give the individual self its identity. Rawls’ “Original Position” is similar to Locke’s “State of Nature” in this way, which Michael Sandel argues is quite problematic.

Sandel critiques Rawls’ assumption that humans are “unencumbered selves,” individuals who are entirely “free and rational beings” who can pick and choose all aspects of their identity. Sandel argues that individuals cannot disembodiment from their selves by shedding away all that creates their identity. He asks whether “we can view ourselves as independent selves, independent in the sense that our identity is never tied to our aims and attachments?”<sup>29</sup> In response to this question, Sandel writes, “I do not think we can, at least not without cost to those loyalties and convictions whose moral force consists partly in the fact that living by them is inseparable from understanding ourselves as the particular persons we are—as members of this family or community or nation or people, as bearers of that history, as citizens of this republic.”<sup>30</sup> The individual’s identity and how the individual understands the “self” is locked within the individual’s situation. What is happening around the individual will influence their moral decisions, even when the individual tries to remove herself from her surroundings.

Like Rawls, Locke requires the reader to partake in a thought experiment in which the individual must disembodiment himself from his current situation to see what rights are found in “nature.” This is not possible, which we can see when we analyze Locke’s interpretation of the “State of Nature.” Locke’s understanding of the “State of Nature” is rooted in the societal norms of his time, which is exemplified by placing the “man” as the primary unit of analysis.<sup>31</sup> In other words, Locke asks us to imagine a world before society was created, yet when Locke does so himself, he incorporates socially constructed gender hierarchies into his description of a pre-political world. An individual cannot separate herself from her own identity to find the abstract point of view needed to determine what is “natural.” Locke’s identity, which is deeply rooted in his time and place, demonstrates that there is no “unencumbered self” that can detach himself from his current situation.

So, in a hypothetical situation like the “State of Nature” or Rawls’ “Original Position,” there is a normative element to the outcome of the hypothetical that is based upon the societal norms the actor is within. This is important to note because the natural rights that liberal governments are created to promote and defend are not natural at all and are biased towards certain parties, like propertied men in Locke’s liberalism. So, liberalism—specifically liberalism in America—does in fact push a certain normative framework, or a certain idea of the “good life.” This is contradictory to the understood purpose of liberal thought, the concept of transcending human rights that all hold in common, which governments are meant to protect without interference in an individual’s pursuit

26 John Rawls, “A Theory of Justice,” in Cahn, *Political Philosophy*, 917.

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid., 927.

29 Michael Sandel, “The Procedural Republic and the Unencumbered Self,” *Political Theory* 12, no. 1 (1984): 90.

30 Ibid.

31 John Locke, “Second Treatise of Government,” 365.

of their purpose. For Locke, this is only true amongst propertied men, who, in his time, were primarily white.

## American Civic Ideals

In the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson asserts, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”<sup>32</sup> The foundations of America began with these liberal words, that basic rights transcend all humans no matter their membership in society. But, American civic ideals are not purely liberal. Many illiberal institutions and norms (like Jim Crow laws and Japanese internment, to name only a couple) have been a part of American civic history. Rogers Smith discusses this American phenomenon in his book, *Civic Ideals*. Smith argues that the American civic community does not have monolithically liberal ideals; rather, “Americanism” is a mix of “Civic Traditions” that are made up of liberal, republican, and ascriptive (illiberal) ideals.

Before we begin to analyze Smith’s work, I would like to define the rather broad and ambiguous term, “civic community.” Smith frequently uses this term when discussing his analysis of American civic ideals, yet he does not explicitly define it himself. Since the American civic community will be a focal point of my essay, I will infer what I believe he means and add elements that I believe are important. At the beginning of chapter 1, Smith defines and discusses what he means by the term “citizen.” Smith states, “The word citizen derives from the ancient Greek and Roman city-states, and, as Aristotle famously argued, in its strict sense it originally referred only to those men who had some share in the political life of their polis, not to all who lived there.”<sup>33</sup> In other words, a “citizen” is an individual who has membership in a group of other individuals that participate in the political workings of the state. Not everyone has access to membership into the civic community, like in ancient Athens, where “slaves, resident aliens, and women were not true citizens” and could not participate in the political life.<sup>34</sup> Membership in the civic community does not exactly mean legal citizenship as outlined by American law. Rather, membership in the civic community is given to those who are allowed to participate in the discussions that determine the laws and practices of the state. I acknowledge that this definition of the “civic community” remains broad. This is intentional due to the wide range of ways individuals can participate and interact in the civic community, as well as the many ways the civic community can impact the lives of the individuals within the state, whether they are members of the civic community or if they are barred from it. As we now turn to Smith’s analysis of the ideals within the civic community, or what Smith calls, “civic ideals,” keep in mind that participation in the civic community is not limited to formally established institutions that are outlined in the Constitution of the United States, like voting. Participation in the civic community can be informal, like protesting in the streets or composing politically motivated music. Political voice can be added to the civic community’s discussion in many different ways, giving the individual a wide variety of options to have their needs and wants heard and considered.

We begin with Smith’s critique of Hartz who “saw conflicts in American history, but they were in his view all conflicts within liberal boundaries.”<sup>35</sup> “They believe that the cause of human equality,” Smith writes of Hartzian Americanists, “is best served by reading egalitarian principles as America’s true principles, while treating the massive inequalities in American life as products of prejudice, not rival principles.”<sup>36</sup> Smith further clarifies this strand of political thought: “democratic commitments [are] the culture’s core values... with ‘severe but episodic exceptions,’ tolerance has been the American ‘cultural norm.’”<sup>37</sup> Except for infrequent aberrations throughout American history, Hartzian scholars argue that Americans uphold their liberal civic ideals. “Racism appears only as white self-interest,” Smith writes of the Hartzian school of thought, “not as one of America’s constitutive, fundamental ideological components.”<sup>38</sup>

The Hartzian assessment of the American civic community would classify institutions like slavery as

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32 Thomas Jefferson, “The Declaration of Independence,” in Cahn, *Political Philosophy*, 1091.

33 Smith, *Civic Ideals*, 14.

34 Ibid.

35 Ibid., 20.

36 Ibid., 27.

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid.

aspects of America that did not fit properly into the American narrative and “had to be eliminated.”<sup>39</sup> The dominant liberal ideals of Americans would not allow a practice like slavery to continue. Smith disagrees with the Hartzian assessment that illiberal aspects of American society should be reduced to mere “episodes” of illiberalness. This does not properly explain why America would have such anti-liberal aspects within its civic community throughout its history. American civic ideals must have had elements within them that would support such illiberal practices, but these elements did not originate from liberalism like some scholars believe.

Smith also argues against the claim that the illiberalness of America is a result of liberalism. “[I]nequalities are held to be inherent in the liberal ideas,” Smith writes of this school of thought, “as well as liberal social and economic institutions that are still said to form the core of American life.”<sup>40</sup> In other words, the legacy of Lockean liberalism carries with it racism and prejudice that are at the core of this philosophy and cannot be separated from it. Egalitarian values espoused by liberal thought are, and can only be, supported by the exploitation of those who are not a part of the civic community, or as many enlightenment liberal thinkers suggested, were not capable of being part of the liberal community. This means that embracing liberal ideals will result in illiberal practices that seem contradictory to liberalism itself.

This may seem like a good explanation for the illiberalness of American civic values. If liberal America is rooted in Lockean thought, the contradictions would make sense! Locke derives his natural rights of an egalitarian society from its foundations of the “State of Nature” where “all are in a state of equality,” unless if you are a woman or a person of color. Locke’s liberal thought is rooted in illiberal conceptions of the world, which would make his philosophy prejudiced. Therefore, the bigoted actions of some in America are within the bounds of Lockean liberalism. But, Smith does not buy this argument. Instead, he sees both liberal America and illiberal America as “intertwined but relatively autonomous systems of ideas and practices,” or in other words, America has a unique fusion of liberal and illiberal civic ideals.<sup>41</sup> It is not liberalism that causes illiberal things to happen. Liberalism, especially Locke’s liberalism, leaves space for illiberal ideals to be included due to the inherent vagueness of liberalism’s aim.

From his philosophical point of departure, the “State of Nature,” Locke allows the reader to fill in the blanks of who is actually considered “rights bearing,” or, in other words, completely human. Locke vaguely argues, “God gave the world to men in common... he gave it to the use of the industrious and rational.”<sup>42</sup> For Locke, this excludes women and people of color from being “rights bearing” individuals because they lack “reasoning” capabilities; thus, they are not entirely equal. He most likely disqualifies these groups of people because he is an embedded individual within his societal time and place. So, this leaves the question for future generations of readers of Locke to determine who qualifies as a bearer of natural rights. On the grounds that all are “equal in the State of Nature,” who is included in the “all”? Is it just those who qualify as “industrious and rational,” or do these rights extend to more individuals?

When Thomas Jefferson used Lockean thought as a template for the Declaration of Independence, he wrote that “all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights.”<sup>43</sup> Yes, Thomas Jefferson believed that all men were created equal, but one must first qualify to be a “man” to be equal. For example, men of African descent were not included in Jefferson’s proclamation, but his reasoning for leaving African slaves out was not the same as Locke’s. Jefferson faced political pressures to unite the colonies against the British crown and needed to make concessions for the south. Jefferson excluded Black men from “all men” for political reasons, while he and the rest of the white colonists (the “all”) fought against a government that restricted their “natural rights.” We can see in this instance liberalism working together with illiberalism. This example shows us that liberalism does not create illiberalism, rather liberalism leaves room for illiberalism. Politicians and the politically-connected fill this space with what Smith calls the “civic myth.”

Similar to Plato’s “Myth of the Metals,” also known as the “Noble Lie,” the “civic myth” is a tool used to create unity amongst a certain people. Smith describes it as “a myth used to explain why persons form a people, usually indicati[ng] how a political community originated, who is eligible for membership, who is not and why,

39 Ibid., 20.

40 Ibid., 28.

41 Ibid., 29.

42 Locke, “Second Treatise on Government,” 372.

43 Jefferson, “The Declaration of Independence,” 1091.

and what the community's values and aims are."<sup>44</sup> A narrative that connects a people together is needed in a nation like the United States that has "many people whose political history, religious or political beliefs, ethnicity, language, or other traits" differ.<sup>45</sup> Thus, a civic myth can be used to unify a diverse group of people that live within the state's boundaries by binding liberal, non-liberal, and/or illiberal civic ideals together.

A civic myth can also be used to unite one group within the diverse populace to separate itself from the rest within the state. Smith says, "Leaders are therefore likely to invoke any and all preexisting senses of common identity they can that will also support their own rule, such as widely shared languages, ancestries, cultural customs, religion, suitable doctrines of 'natural' group identity, and histories of oppression (as either conquered or conquerors)."<sup>46</sup> Leaders will use a common identity amongst a group of people to form a community within the larger community. Within the smaller community, there may be liberal principles of equality, but not all have access to membership within this community if they do not share in the common identity.

What unites this community does not have to be real; the story only needs to be convincing. Smith articulates, "As Plato suggested long ago, the stories of civic identity fostered by political elites are virtually always false or at least highly dubious."<sup>47</sup> A false narrative might be more compelling and stronger than a narrative of truth. Tales that embellish heroes that succeeded in riveting events are stories people want to believe in, especially if that hero is their ancestor. This is important to remember as we turn now to look at the American civic myth. How does the American community bind itself together? Who is allowed to have membership within the American community? Does it choose a common identity that transcends all Americans, or one that is exclusive?

The American civic myth is rooted in Jefferson's interpretation of Lockean liberalism. Smith explains, "the principles of liberal individual rights and democratic republicanism in America's Revolution all made these traditions central resources for the creation of an American Civic Community."<sup>48</sup> The American civic myth promises "a free, peaceful, diverse yet tolerant, and prosperous community."<sup>49</sup> It gives the individual "personal independence from many repressive structures."<sup>50</sup> Finally, it ensures a "civic life that is expressive of one's personal dignity, responsive to one's concerns, and shared with sturdy, loyal peers."<sup>51</sup> These civic qualities derive from Jefferson's justification of America's independence from Great Britain, which is based on what Locke thought was the proper role of government. The principles that America was founded upon, that government should protect the "natural" rights of individuals, form the common culture that Americans share. How Americans conceive of the government protecting these rights differs. Some believe the government should be as hands-off as possible and should only mediate discrepancies between two private parties, while others believe the government should do what it can to enhance the rights of the individual. Regardless, Americans believe that the government should not impede these intrinsic rights that all humans share. This will encourage a vibrant civil society that will allow people who have differing interests and purposes to co-exist.

This is the civic myth Americans believe in, a myth that is not rooted in truth. "The liberalism of the Declaration of Independence," Smith writes, "includes the unproved but sanctifying claim that men have individual rights 'endowed by their Creator.'"<sup>52</sup> As discussed earlier, Locke's liberalism is built upon a flimsy foundation where rights are found in "nature," a pre-political "state." To avoid infinite regress, Locke uses the authority of God as a philosophical backstop to validate how humans obtain these rights in "nature": "For men being all the workmanship of one omnipotent and wise Maker."<sup>53</sup> Jefferson continued Locke's weak justification of "natural" individual rights as inalienable rights given to all by their "Creator." Smith continues, "The claim of popular sovereignty—taken to imply that the people as a whole ever do engage or ever have engaged in extensive public deliberation on an egalitarian basis in order to resolve directly any concrete issue of public life—is also a

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44 Smith, *Civic Ideals*, 33.

45 Ibid.

46 Ibid., 32.

47 Ibid., 33.

48 Ibid., 35.

49 Ibid., 36.

50 Ibid.

51 Ibid.

52 Ibid.

53 Locke, "Second Treatise on Government," 366.

myth.”<sup>54</sup> In other words, the American people and their collective will as equals have never and will never be a driving force of change. “Political decision making is in reality almost always more a matter of elite bargaining than public deliberation,” says Smith.<sup>55</sup> He says that this is true even in cases when Americans do decide to participate in the political process.<sup>56</sup> But, the vast majority of the time, the American public is disinterested in the political process as evinced by dismal turnout rates during elections. This leads Smith to conclude, “the liberal and republican traditions stressed in standard accounts of American political culture are themselves not simply rationalist political doctrines, but also civic myths.”<sup>57</sup>

Aside from the fact that the American civic myth is based upon falsehoods, Americans do not uphold the principles of the narrative. To ensure that the participation and practice of certain activities do not infringe upon the rights of others, liberalism can “militate against the claims of private religious, familial, and cultural groups, as well as personal conscientious choices.”<sup>58</sup> Liberalism does not actively work against these things, but these entities may be undermined “to contribute to common civic endeavors,” like the freedom to practice one’s own religion, or the ability to love whomever one wants to love.<sup>59</sup> It can be frustrating to witness something that one does not believe in or is staunchly against morally. This is why “many Americans have instead professed to feel more deeply obliged to such groups than to democratic public life.”<sup>60</sup> Some Americans would rather “maintain white supremacy, to preserve old gender roles, to uphold Protestantism in public life, and in other ways resist many egalitarian demands in liberal and democratic ideologies.”<sup>61</sup> The egalitarian liberal values that create the American civic myth transcend all within these sub-communities. But without membership, one is excluded from equal treatment. Membership within these sub-communities may also be based upon a “myth,” as well. Regardless, these communities give the individual a sense of worth that feels real enough to reject opposing ways of living and civic values that, in theory, would be inclusive to differing conceptions of the good life.

It is difficult to find individual personal worth within a liberal society. Smith explains that “[l]iberal morals demand that individuals show themselves to be industrious, rational, and self-reliant, usually via economic productivity.”<sup>62</sup> America is a society that values the productivity of its members. So, Smith writes, “in times of economic distress, especially, many Americans have found it hard to meet those standards.”<sup>63</sup> During these times of economic distress, we can see individuals move away from inclusive liberal values to exclusive illiberal practices. Whether it is blaming the Chinese for taking away good railroad jobs in the 1800s or blaming Mexican immigrants for “stealing the jobs” of hard-working Americans today, inclusive liberal values are put aside during times of economic strife. Instead of finding personal worth through economic production, individuals turn to communities that are exclusive based upon specific identities, like race, gender, or nation, to name a few.

I am not necessarily suggesting that pride in identity is bad. For example, it is common and even empowering for individuals to become friends with those who have gone through similar lived experiences. This activity becomes illiberal when individuals put that identity ahead of the liberal political community that treats all identities equally. An example of this is biased hiring practices. Liberalism does not care what the individual does in their private life so long as it does not infringe upon the rights of others. Once the activities cross over from the private life to the public life while interacting with others is when it conflicts with liberal ideals. The favoring of specific identities within the American civic community is a common occurrence because Americans lack a collective civic identity beyond that of an inclusive liberal community that values productivity, which can make it difficult to unite in trying times.

But this is the point of liberalism; a liberal society will not, or at least should not, endorse any specific identity. Smith says, “liberal and democratic republican political ideals have offered few reasons why Americans

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54 Smith, *Civic Ideals*, 36.

55 Ibid.

56 Ibid.

57 Ibid.

58 Ibid., 37.

59 Ibid.

60 Ibid.

61 Ibid.

62 Ibid.

63 Ibid.

should see themselves as a distinct people.”<sup>64</sup> These ideals lack distinguishing characteristics that give the American identity its worth and value. There have been examples in America’s past when many Americans came together in favor of a liberal and inclusive society, like in our nation’s founding against the British crown or in the abolition of slavery. But, as Smith points out, “the defenders of those causes argued positively for political institutions that they believed could and should be embraced by any people, not especially by Americans.”<sup>65</sup> Revolution leading to divorce from tyranny and the eradication of the institution of slavery were not uniquely American causes. America certainly has its own unique history due to the certain circumstances that led to the fight for freedom and emancipation, but these were causes that were bigger than just America.

“It is thus unsurprising,” Smith writes, “that many Americans have been attracted to ascriptive civic myths assuring them that, regardless of their personal achievements or economic status, their inborn characteristics make them part of a special community.”<sup>66</sup> Civic myths that place the individual within a narrative of struggle and success of a specific community are powerful and give the individual a sense of purpose. Individuals can find their sense of worth from a vibrant history of excellence instead of obtaining it through endeavors and accomplishments that give the individual worth in liberal societies. These narratives “have often helped many in less powerful positions to feel part of a larger, more enduring whole of intrinsic worth that will still flourish after they have perished.”<sup>67</sup> These individuals feel satisfied by continuing the mission of fulfilling their community’s prophesized destiny. The civic myth is a powerful tool that can empower and create unity amongst a group of people. This power has been abused in the past by those who wield it.

Political leaders and those at the top of “prevailing social arrangements” in America have used ascriptive civic myths to gain power and maintain the current social structures to stay in power. According to Smith, “[v]arious political parties and factions have certainly mixed liberal, republican, and ascriptive conceptions” of the American civic myth.<sup>68</sup> This is done “to gain political leverage against their opponents... [b]ecause inegalitarian ascriptive Americanist accounts of the nation’s civic identity thus can make being American seem natural, providentially favored, and a sign of superior worth.”<sup>69</sup> It is politically expedient for people in power to use these civic myths that blend liberal ideals and illiberal ideals to gain and maintain power. As individuals try to find their own worth, those who have the power to create the American narrative abuse it for what they believe is good.

Liberal and illiberal America are manufactured by those who have the power to shape its narrative. In the space that Locke’s liberalism leaves for interpretation, those who are in the position to author the American civic myth create a narrative that serves their own conception of “the good.” They create rules and interpret laws in ways that help maintain the hierarchy that put them there, while also appealing to the sub-community they represent. In America, those who are in power have primarily been white, propertied men and America’s past has reflected the needs and wants of these individuals. As we look at the development of liberal and illiberal America, we can see laws and rules passed in order to maintain this power structure and their specific conception of the good life.

### **The Blending of Liberal and Illiberal Ideals in America**

Smith finds “[i]t striking that Americans structure access to their civic identity via terminology and institutions that harken back to political systems their Revolution was meant to overthrow.”<sup>70</sup> An example of terminology that Smith finds absurd is the “naturalization” of citizenship. In feudal states, “subjectship to the political ruler under whom one was born was believed to be natural—sanctioned by divine will and rationally discoverable natural law.”<sup>71</sup> In other words, those who were born within the bounds of a certain kingdom would “naturally” become a member of that feudal state. It was common belief that feudal monarchies were given their authority

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64 Ibid., 38.

65 Ibid.

66 Ibid.

67 Ibid.

68 Ibid., 39.

69 Ibid., 39.

70 Ibid., 13.

71 Ibid.

through “divine” powers and thus were “naturally” able to determine who had the right to membership within their community. This conception of membership was challenged by American revolutionists who held Lockean beliefs that all men held certain rights that were pre-political. An individual would not need to be “naturalized” within the bounds of America to hold these inalienable rights. Yet, as Smith points out, “most people still acquire American citizenship, implying allegiance to the United States government, not by their consent but through an accident of birth, as in feudal England.”<sup>72</sup> Even those who obtain citizenship in ways other than birthright are still considered “naturalized.”<sup>73</sup> Access to all the benefits that come with American membership is still determined by feudal standards. Equal rights are only given to those who have membership, which is difficult to obtain in America because it requires much more than mere consent to be governed. These illiberal means of obtaining membership into liberal America are, as Smith points out, contradictory and very problematic.

Smith points to citizenship laws as proof of an illiberal America. Instead of the Hartzian doctrine that defines the American civic community as the “readiness to embrace egalitarian, liberal, republican political values,” Smith suggests a “quick overview of American citizenship laws” will show us that this understanding of American membership does not “give due weight to inegalitarian legal provisions that have shaped the participants and the substance of American politics.”<sup>74</sup> These illiberal aspects of the American civic community are not just surviving pieces of feudalism or from “pre-revolutionary institutions” that survived the American transformation, as “naturalized” citizenship may suggest. As Smith points out, “feudalism did not include chattel slavery, race-based immigration and naturalization restrictions, ineligibility of women and the foreign-born for the highest political offices, segregation.”<sup>75</sup> Instead, much of illiberal America became a part of the civic community after the birth of liberal America.

Liberal America and illiberal America developed along with each other, leaning more liberal at times and more illiberal at other times. Smith explains that “American civic history has been far more serpentine.”<sup>76</sup> Some periods brought “great eras of democratizing American civic reforms.”<sup>77</sup> For example, Smith points to the “Civil War and Reconstruction epoch, and the civil rights era of the 1950s and 1960s.”<sup>78</sup> Other periods brought about illiberal aspects of America, like in 1882 after the Chinese Exclusion Act barred Chinese immigration. Until this point, “The U.S. had no racial or ethnic restrictions on immigration.”<sup>79</sup> Or in the early 1900s when most African-American men once again became disenfranchised after they had received the right to vote in the 1870s during reconstruction.<sup>80</sup> These illiberal aspects of American civic history are not by-products of a pre-liberal America. Instead of viewing America as a nation that began with illiberal civic ideals that is slowly becoming more liberal, America is a nation that develops liberal ideals, while it concurrently creates and defends illiberal ideals. American civic history has experienced plenty of eras where liberalism was at the fore, but these eras have not been sustained. Instead, the course of liberalism in America ebbs and flows, with some periods that are liberal and some that are illiberal, occasionally even developing side by side.

This brief look at America’s past shows us the mixing of American civic ideals. Through the use of “civic myths,” America’s political elite were able to create narratives that pushed certain agendas for their benefit, resulting in the establishment of laws that created and maintained certain hierarchies. The political elite created the multiple traditions that are present in the American civic community and these traditions have come to life through legislation. But, does Smith’s analysis tell us the whole story? The next section will take a closer look at the individual in the American civic community and how the actor understands himself or herself within it.

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72 Ibid.

73 Ibid.

74 Ibid., 15.

75 Ibid.

76 Ibid., 16.

77 Ibid.

78 Ibid.

79 Ibid.

80 Ibid.

## Section Two: On Democratic Culture

### In Search of a Common Democratic Culture

Smith's analysis of the intertwining of liberal and illiberal civic ideals is compelling. As he notes, "Most liberal democratic positions are less effective than ascriptive views of civic identity in fostering beliefs that a certain group is a distinctive and especially worthy 'people.'"<sup>81</sup> Liberalism alone lacks the empowerment that identity-based illiberal civic ideals foster. Illiberal aspects of the American civic community give its actors worth while they exist in a society that is only meant to be an umpire of the rules. Americanism blends these illiberal ideals that a people has worth based upon its unique self-understanding with liberal ideals, creating a sense that "my" worth and rights cannot be infringed upon by others.

This is done intentionally through the use of "civic myths" created by politicians and those who hold power in the American political system in order to maintain their power. Civic myths are "crafted by elites to meet two basic political imperatives... First, aspirants to power require a population to lead that imagines itself to be a 'people'; and, second, they need a people that imagines itself in ways that make leadership by those aspirations appropriate."<sup>82</sup> In other words, through the use of civic myths, tales that are primarily based upon falsehoods, politicians can create unity amongst a people by binding them with a manufactured commonality. The civic myth is the tool used by the politically powerful in America, used to unite and mobilize individuals that may have nothing in common except for their placement within a grand, yet false, narrative.

From this we can conclude that Smith understands the American civic identity, the civic culture that is shared amongst its members in the civic community, as a political creation. This culture did not organically grow and manifest itself in each American. Instead, it was crafted carefully and often deviously to unite individuals within the civic community, sometimes as a way to create solidarity amongst all members in the community, but more frequently as a way to pit one group against another group in an inegalitarian fashion to either establish or uphold power structures. American civic myths have empowered certain groups within the civic community to believe that their place within it is important. Depending on which civic myth we look at, the narrative may make certain individuals believe that their worth is greater than other individuals within the civic community who do not have a place in their story.

But, how exactly does the individual agent understand herself within the American civic community? Just because a civic narrative places Individual A as more important than Individual B does not necessarily mean that Individual B believes that narrative and takes it as truth. What role does the individual have in determining American civic ideals and the laws that are created from these values? There are institutions in the American political system that encourage participation, like frequent elections and free speech laws meant to protect political dialogue. But, do Americans want to participate within the democratic system? Or in other words, do Americans see themselves as democratic agents that want to engage in the civic community to produce laws that reflect their own values, or do the competing American civic ideals create disunity in how Americans see themselves as political participants?

To answer these questions, we will turn to Jurgen Habermas. Instead of Smith's conclusion that political elites create narratives that blend illiberal ideals with liberal ideals as a political tool, Habermas argues that modern liberalism requires a coexistence with non-liberal, or what he calls "republican," ideals like popular sovereignty, which allows individuals to advocate for their basic rights in the private life through participation in the civic community. How each individual goes about advocating for their rights in the civic community differs, but each individual believes that their needs and desires should be heard and considered when they are voiced. The American Civic Community through Jurgen Habermas

Before we dive into this section, there are a few terms I would like to clarify and define. The first term I would like to define is "democratic culture." An ambiguous term that could mean anything from the frequency with which Americans participate in elections to Americans identifying as democratic agents, this term is meant

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81 Ibid., 6.

82 Ibid.

to be broad and rather encompassing. To explain what “democratic culture” is, I will use Jurgen Habermas’ explanation of “popular sovereignty,” an intrinsic quality of democracy that can be simply broken down to rule (sovereignty) of the people (popular), as “democratic culture’s” foundation. Habermas describes, “The principle of popular sovereignty is expressed in rights of communication and participation that secure the public autonomy of citizens.”<sup>83</sup> In other words, popular sovereignty is the involvement in the political system through voicing individual or collective needs and desires to the civic community as public persons. Simply put, the individual has a say in what the laws and norms will become. This does not mean that the members of the civic community directly decide what actually becomes law. We could define this as “direct democracy.” Instead, “democratic culture” is the desire to be a part of the lawmaking process when an individual believes they need to express their voice and be heard. This could mean directly deciding what becomes law, but it could also mean the desire to influence lawmakers of the civic community through communication of needs and wants. This is a democratic “culture” because it is a commonly shared concept amongst most Americans and it gives the individuals within the culture a shared identity. In *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, Charles Taylor writes about identity as “a person’s understanding of who they are, of their fundamental defining characteristics as a human being.”<sup>84</sup> Identity that derives from culture allows individuals to understand who they are and their role within a community. In this case, “democratic culture” creates the shared identity of most within the American civic community, which outlines the individual’s place within this specific space. The shared identity does not have to be reciprocal. In other words, Individual A does not have to believe that Individual B shares in the identity of a participant in the American civic community. What matters is that both individuals see themselves as participants, that their own voice has value and that their own needs and concerns should be heard and considered by the government.

There are many ways that Americans can express their political voice in the civic community. It can be done through formal means, like voting in elections or communicating with a lawmaker through phone calls or writing letters. Expressing political voice can also be articulated in informal ways, like protesting in the streets, writing politically motivated literature, or creating art and composing music that conveys a political message. These are all means of expressing voice in the civic community.

Popular sovereignty, and in this analysis, “democratic culture,” falls under another term, “republicanism.” I will define and explain this term through Habermas as well. In chapter 10 of *The Inclusion of the Other*, “On the Internal Relation between Law and Democracy,” Habermas describes “republicanism” as “human rights owed their legitimacy to the ethical self-understanding and sovereign self-determination achieved by a political community.”<sup>85</sup> Through democratic means of popular sovereignty, the people have a say in determining the outcome of the laws and the specific identity of the political community. Habermas writes, “Republicanism, which goes back to Aristotle and the political humanism of the Renaissance, has always given the public autonomy of citizens priority over the pre-political liberties of private persons.”<sup>86</sup> Republicanism is an ancient concept that dates back to classical Athens, where members of a civic community were granted the ability to communicate and contribute to the outcome of decisions that are made in the public, political life. Individuals in the civic community were allowed to participate in the political discourse with very few restrictions for those who were considered members. Republicanism and popular sovereignty is frequently referred to as the “freedom of the ancients,” meaning that the ancients were free to participate in the decision-making processes in the civic community. What was determined by the rule of the people became law.

Republicanism is the establishment of human rights through “sovereign self-determination.” Self-determination republicanism creates the rights of the people in the civic community through popular sovereignty. In other words, those within the civic community secure their place in it by expressing their needs and desires. Those within the civic community must voice their opinions as a way to determine the trajectory that the community will take. The placement of the individual as an active participant within the civic realm gives the individual their personal worth.

83 Habermas, *The Inclusion of the Other*, 258.

84 Charles Taylor, *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994)

85 Habermas, *The Inclusion of the Other*, 258.

86 *Ibid.*

Republicanism creates the rights of the people, while liberalism is meant to guard the intrinsic rights that all people inherently have. Habermas explains, “Liberalism, which goes back to John Locke, has invoked the dangers of tyrannical majorities and postulated the priority of human rights.”<sup>87</sup> Classical liberals saw the dangers that resulted from mob rule of the people and wanted to establish rights that “were supposed to provide, from the very start, legitimate barriers that prevented the sovereign will of the people from encroaching on inviolable spheres of individual freedom.”<sup>88</sup> In this analysis, republicanism’s popular sovereignty—and therefore democratic culture—is not an element of liberalism. Rather, liberalism is meant to defend individuals from republicanism and the rule of the people. Instead of defending the rights of individuals to participate in their civic community—that is, the unrestricted ability to communicate needs and wants in the public life—liberalism defends the private rights of the individual from the restrictive actions of an overreaching government seeking to interfere with private pursuits. Liberalism keeps individuals from forcing their normative ends onto others by not allowing discourse about private matters in the public civic community. But, how did we determine the norm that private matters should not be discussed in the public life in the first place?

Habermas begins to answer this question when he says, “classical liberties (self-determination as public persons) are co-original with political rights only if we state more precisely the thesis that human rights legally enable the citizens’ practice of self-determination.”<sup>89</sup> In other words, the creation of the civic community that is driven by self-determination creates the civic community that has equal civic rights. “These rights, which are meant to guarantee everyone an equal opportunity to pursue his or her private conception of the good, have an intrinsic value, or at least they are not reducible to their instrumental value for democratic will-formation.”<sup>90</sup> In other words, the equal rights within the civic community derive from the human rights of liberalism, but these rights are developed simultaneously with self-determination in the public life. Habermas calls for a balance that must be reached between the right for an individual to pursue his or her preferred ends in the private life and the opportunity the individual has to determine the direction and values that define the civic community.

We can see the liberal ideal of protecting intrinsic human rights and the republican ideal of self-determination working simultaneously in Jefferson’s Declaration of Independence. He writes that “it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another [*italics added for emphasis*].”<sup>91</sup> The “one people” of America has the power—that is, the sovereignty—to grant and take away the authority of a government if it no longer protects their basic human rights. Governments in classical liberal doctrine receive their power to rule from the individual people and from the people’s decision that they would be better off in some formation of a commonwealth. The people determine that this is the best option to ensure their rights are not violated. This demonstrates a paradox in Lockean liberalism that is also evident in the American situation; liberalism is a doctrine meant to defend the individual from “tyrannical majorities,” but a general will of the people is needed to determine when it is appropriate to separate from illiberal rule and establish liberal government. In this instance, Smith could argue that Jefferson’s mixing of liberalism and republicanism is a civic myth meant to empower the colonists by describing separation from Great Britain as “our (the colonists) revolution.” Habermas, on the other hand, argues that the two are inseparable.

Liberalism and republicanism work side by side and interact with each other. When describing the relationship between private and public autonomy, Habermas states, “in order to establish a legal code it is necessary to create the status of legal persons who [are] bearers of individual rights.”<sup>92</sup> In other words, the people of a state must determine the basic laws of the state. This includes the laws of a liberal state. In government formation, the basic tenants of the state must be determined by the general will of the people. But, Habermas also points out that “without basic rights that secure the private autonomy of citizens there is also no medium for legally institutionalizing the conditions under which these citizens, as citizens of a state, can make use of their public autonomy.”<sup>93</sup> Simply put, basic rights must be given to each member of the state to allow each individual

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87 Ibid.

88 Ibid.

89 Ibid., 260.

90 Ibid.

91 Jefferson, “The Declaration of Independence,” 1091.

92 Habermas, *The Inclusion of the Other*, 260.

93 Ibid., 261.

to participate in the will formation. A basic right in this situation could be the right to vote. Proper will formation that takes account of all individuals in a state can only be established with rules and norms, like one person equals one vote. But, these basic rights cannot be established without a people determining them in the first place. “Thus private and public autonomy,” Habermas concludes, “mutually presuppose each other in such a way that neither human rights nor popular sovereignty can claim primacy over its counterpart.”<sup>94</sup>

Popular sovereignty and self-determination are integral parts of contemporary liberalism. When applying Lockean liberalism to a real situation, like Jefferson did, government does not form from the “State of Nature.” Assumptions that are made when establishing the “Social Contract” that creates government from the “State of Nature” are no longer applicable. In a contextualized situation, individuals are no longer completely autonomous beings. Individuals are embedded within their situation, whether the individual enjoys their specific profession, is part of a family, or is a member of a community, big or small. Individuals become attached to these aspects of their life and continue with them even if it is not rational to do so. An individual’s family, profession, or community gives identity and worth to the individual; these aspects of life are not present in the “State of Nature” thought experiment. The “State of Nature” is no longer relevant in state formation and in the initial establishment of laws when it takes place in a specific situation. There is no need to imagine how a government would be formed in a pre-political world if the situation is not in that time and place. This leaves massive space in Locke’s theory, which Jefferson and later contemporary theorists filled with republican values of self-determination. Republicanism is now an irreplaceable component of liberalism, born separately, but fused together when applied in context.

So, how does the fusion of self-determining will formation (democracy) with liberal conceptions of basic human rights play out in the American polity? We can find the answer to this question through Habermas: “This mutual presupposition expresses the intuition that, on the one hand, citizens can make adequate use of their public autonomy only if, on the basis of their equally protected private autonomy, they are sufficiently independent; but that, on the other hand, they can arrive at a consensual regulation of their private autonomy only if they make adequate use of their political autonomy as enfranchised citizens.”<sup>95</sup> Here, Habermas formulates a balance that is needed in contemporary politics regarding basic principles of autonomy in a free society. On the one side, members of a civic community are only able to participate in the public life if they are protected equally as private persons with basic human rights, while on the other side, members of a civic community can only come to an agreement about what constitutes a basic right while participating in the public life. This means private persons must participate in the public civic community both to advocate for what can be done in the private life and to maintain their right to participate as public persons.

There are many examples throughout American history of private persons coming into the public civic community to advocate for their rights in the private life, like the Black Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, as well as the Women’s Suffrage movement. There are contemporary examples, as well, like the Black Lives Matter movement, the conservative Tea Party movement, and the Women’s March movement. And it would be wrong to exclude the demonstrations made by white supremacist movements across America, from Charlottesville, Virginia, to Laguna Beach, California. These movements have used many different tactics to participate in the public discourse from protesting in the streets to showing up to the polls in large numbers to vote on election days. The participation of these groups in the public civic community as advocates of their own conception of what is good in the private life maintains, and in certain cases like Women’s Suffrage, creates their right to be a participant in the public discourse.

#### Democratic Culture in America

The issues these groups listed above advocate for are vastly different, demonstrating the wide range of civic ideals within America. In contemporary America, there are groups participating in the same civic community fighting for an egalitarian America, while there are groups that want to maintain racial hierarchies that have been in the structure of American society since its founding. It is clear that American civic ideals are not uniform and they will most likely continue to differ into the future. So, without consent on common civic values, does this mean that Americans cannot share in a common democratic culture? While these groups have vastly different visions of what American society should look like, there is an important similarity between the groups: they all

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94 Ibid.

95 Ibid.

believe that their voice should be heard. Whether we look at the egalitarian feminist or the inegalitarian white supremacist, they both believe that their concerns should be considered. These groups want to practice self-determination and want to decide the future trajectory of their nation by participating in the public discourse that allows them to voice their needs and wants.

To clarify, not all Americans who choose to voice their concerns in the American civic community believe that everybody should have an equal say in the public life. In fact, there are many Americans who believe that certain people within the United States should not be heard, or not be considered as much as the speaker's own voice. Whether advocating to restrict the voices of others, or advocating for equal consideration of all voices, both actors believe that their own voice is valuable and should be considered. The person voicing his or her own opinion does not need to believe that all voices should be considered. All that matters to the individual voicing their own opinion is that their voice has worth and should be heard.

One would be hard-pressed to find an American who does not believe that their voice should be heard and considered when determining the future path of America. While there are no survey results that explicitly say that Americans want their voices to be heard by the government, nor are there any surveys that even ask the question in the first place, there are clues left behind in other survey data collections. In the 2016 General Social Survey (GSS), a section on "Political Efficacy" asked questions like, "Agree or disagree: I don't think the government cares much what people like me think" and "Agree or disagree: People like me don't have any say about what the government does."<sup>96</sup> Interestingly enough, almost half of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed to both of these statements. While these results might explain political apathy since almost half of Americans believe their government does not care about their needs and concerns, they also prove that Americans believe that the government should listen to and respond to the people, or at least listen to and respond to their own voice. These two questions and the rest of the survey are based upon the assumption that the government should listen to the people and that the people should be heard by the government when voicing their needs and concerns. Until an explicit survey question like "Should the government listen to me" or "Should my personal voice be heard and considered by the government" is asked, this assumption that the government should listen to "me" is interesting to consider. Now, we will turn to a concrete example of democratic culture in action by examining a person who holds values that most would say are quite undemocratic.

#### An Extreme Case of Democratic Culture: David Duke

To demonstrate that Americans want their voices heard and considered, we are going to examine a speech made on March 7, 1992 by David Duke in Plymouth, Massachusetts while he was running for President of the United States. David Duke, the former Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan and a former representative in the Louisiana state legislature, is a well-known white supremacist. Clearly, Duke's vision for America is far different than most mainstream candidates. He is worried about how the future generations of the "very same people that landed here in Plymouth will now find themselves as second class citizens in the nation they created."<sup>97</sup> Duke worries that white heritage in America is being overlooked by new and emerging cultures that had been oppressed in the past. He wants to reclaim "white greatness" and re-establish an America that puts white people first. He also discusses the problems our nation faces dealing with "homosexuals"<sup>98</sup> "I think it makes sense to discourage that kind of behavior," Duke says.<sup>99</sup> "I miss the free country you can do what you want behind closed doors... What she or he is doing in their private dominion, I don't care. But, I don't want bad examples for my children and we've got to get some decorum in this country and some sense in this country."<sup>100</sup> Duke wants to maintain a nation that prevents individuals with differing sexual preferences from living their lives freely in public in the name of "decorum." He wants to keep "homosexuals" from voicing their needs and desires in the civic community by restricting their actions to the private life. Duke is arguing to restrict the rights of participation for LGBTQ+ Americans in the public life and create a civic community that prioritizes the needs of white Americans over other

<sup>96</sup> "2016 General Social Survey," SDA: Survey Documentation and Analysis, April 6, 2017, <https://sda.berkeley.edu/archive.html>.

<sup>97</sup> David Duke, "Duke Campaign Speech," Filmed March 7, 1992, <https://www.c-span.org/video/?24884-1/duke-campaign-speech>.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

racism. While Duke calls for very unequal and illiberal civic ideals that would exclude certain individuals from accessing the American civic community, he advocates for his own freedom to participate and voice his needs and desires in the public life.

At the beginning of his speech, Duke compliments his supporters and suggests that their effort “shows you that Americans will not stop fighting for their basic liberties and one of the liberties in this country is the right to run for office and the right to vote for the candidate of our choice.”<sup>101</sup> In other words, Duke is drawing from the anger that he and his supporters feel about not having a representative in government to advocate for their positions. Duke and his supporters feel that their voices have been suppressed in the name of “political correctness” and that his supporters deserve a candidate who is not “politically correct but politically right” to represent their voices in the civic community.<sup>102</sup>

Duke, who may not be telling the entire truth about the “right” to run for office (most forms of political office have age requirements and foreign-born citizens who are protected by the Bill of Rights do not have the right to run for President), he does make an important point about the feeling of right when discussing expression of needs and desires in the public life. It is not anyone’s right to run for and hold office in the United States—rather, it is a privilege to do so—but the way the American representative system is designed makes fringe groups feel as though their opinions are not heard when decisions are made regarding policy and the general direction of the country. Without a representative to advocate for their positions, those who support these positions do not feel like they have a voice in the American civic community. White supremacists and David Duke supporters can protest as much as their hearts desire, but they do not have a vote in the actual legislating procedure.

This is why David Duke emphasizes the importance that he is on the ballot representing the needs and desires of the white supremacist community. His supporters, the people who are part of the white supremacist community, now have an option they can vote for that will put their community needs first. This community can directly vote for someone who will represent their needs and desires, giving them the ability to determine their own future. Duke expresses the relief that the white supremacist community feels now that they have an option and are not restricted to mainstream candidates. Duke emphasizes self-determination, that his community deserves this opportunity to have their voices represented in the lawmaking process. He believes that his community has been suppressed for too long in the public life and that their voices deserve to be heard, even though their voices are demanding others be silenced. Duke believes that his voice and the voices in the community which he will represent have value, while other voices do not.

The David Duke example is not a case of a radical appropriating words from mainstream groups in order to garner support. David Duke shows us that no matter what the individual believes in, like what the future trajectory of America should be or what constitutes the “good life,” Americans want their own voice heard and responded to by others, especially the government. The core concept of self-determination expressed by Duke can be used for different ends. Similar to David Duke, John C. Calhoun advocated for “the rule of concurrent majority” so the slaveholding south could have a greater voice in determining the future of America.<sup>103</sup> In his article, “The Reassociation of Ideas and Purposes,” Stephen Skowronek points out that Lani Guinier, an American civil rights theorist, used the concept of “the rule of concurrent majority” to “maximize the political clout of former slaves.”<sup>104</sup> While the ends and values of John C. Calhoun and Lani Guinier differed immensely, they both believed that the minority in a certain political system should not have their voices silenced by the majority. In other words, they believed that the voices of the minority deserved to be heard and considered in the civic community.

So, no matter who the individual is and how the individual sees other people in the civic community, whether the others belong there or the others should have their voices restricted, the individual believes that their own personal voice has worth and should be considered. David Duke shows us that there can be competing civic ideals in America—for example, some individuals believe in egalitarian ideals while some individuals do not—yet all individuals believe that their needs and desires should be heard and considered. No matter what civic ideals the individual believes are right for the American civic community, the individual believes that their voice should

101 Ibid.

102 Ibid.

103 Stephen Skowronek, “The Reassociation of Ideas and Purposes: Racism, Liberalism, and the American Political Tradition,” *The American Political Science Review* 100, no. 3 (August 2006): 385-401.

104 Ibid., 386.

be listened to.

## Concluding Thoughts

America has multiple civic traditions and is a nation that blends liberal and illiberal ideals. The Lockean liberal foundations the American civic community is built upon left space for people like Thomas Jefferson to add non-liberal elements to Locke's theory, so it could better fit the context of the situation. Rogers Smith argues that the political elite fill that space with illiberal values to obtain power or maintain already established power structures. The political elite create "civic myths," tales that are made from falsehoods, that give the individuals of a certain community greater worth than individuals who do not share the community's common identity. This can help politicians mobilize their base in times of economic hardship. Since Lockean liberalism gives individuals their worth based upon their productivity, individuals find their worth in sub-community identities, which politicians are not afraid to use for their own political gain.

The intertwining of liberal and illiberal ideals provoked by the political elite has seeped into the ideals of the average American. Members of the American civic community certainly have differing civic ideals, but Americans see themselves as both private persons and public members of the civic community. As Jürgen Habermas articulates, to have rights as a private person, basic rights that are defended by liberalism, the individual must voice their needs and wants as a public person in the civic community, exercising their ability to determine the trajectory of their civic community found in republicanism. In our contemporary world, liberalism and republicanism (a non-liberal ideal) coexist together. To obtain equal rights for all in the private life (liberalism), individuals must express their needs in the public life (republicanism). To reiterate, not all Americans believe that everyone should have equal rights in both the public life and the private life. Yet, in a civic community that has differing conceptions of who is allowed membership and who should be allowed to contribute to the public discourse, Americans believe one thing in common. Americans think that their own voice should be heard and considered when discussing matters in the civic community. Whether the individual is a Black Lives Matter advocate or David Duke, Americans believe that their voice is important and should be heard.

This study has created theoretical groundwork that can be expanded upon with empirical research. Given the limited time and resources of this study, I could not conduct and include surveys and interviews that would prove or disprove my theory. But, a future study could do so by simply asking the question, "Should the government listen to and consider my needs and concerns when I choose to voice them?"

This study was purposefully limited to the American situation because of its unique history and culture. In future studies, it would be interesting to look at the civic communities of other nations that have a vastly different situation to American society. It would be fascinating to compare the democratic culture of America to other nations after an in-depth analysis.

Finally, another way to extend this study would be to consider the contradiction found in the American civic community. An actor who wants to keep certain members of the civic community from expressing their needs and desires while the actor expresses his needs and desires in the civic community is paradoxical and it would be interesting to inquire further about this contradiction.

The application of Habermas' theory of the public and private person to the American situation allows us to look at the individual in a different way. Rather than merely considering the values the individual holds in the civic community, we can now consider the way the individual understands the self in the public life. There is not a clear universal civic ideal that all Americans understand as the "right," while all discussions about the "good life" take place from that common ideal. But it is clear that most Americans understand their own place in the civic community and most Americans believe that their concerns are just as important, if not more important, than the person next to them. Instead of sharing common ideals, Americans share a common identity because Americans understand themselves as agents with concerns that are worthy enough to be heard. This is significant for theorists in search of a commonality between people who have fundamentally differing ideals within a certain situation and is significant for the average American looking to find harmony in society.

## **Acknowledgments**

First, I would like to thank my friends and family for all of your support throughout the writing and editing process. A large thank you goes out to my good friend, Jeremy Goodwin, who was always there when I needed to bounce ideas around. I sincerely appreciate our friendship. I would like to give a special thank you to Professor Terri Bimes and Professor Eric Schickler. Both of you challenged me throughout the writing process to make this essay better and I thank you for that. Finally, an especially major thank you goes out to Professor Paul Martorelli. Our frequent discussions pushed me to think harder and dig deeper. Thank you for believing in me and this project.

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