Decoding the False Missive: *The Federalist* and Epistolary Culture
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We've heard now two very fine analyses of the *Federalist* which focused on its treatment of particular political issues and which look really at the nuances of the text. I'm not going to try to do that here.

What I want to do instead is to try to offer a different optic on the *Federalist Papers* as a whole – one which I hope may be useful to you, giving you a different way to read the Papers. I want to argue for reading the *Federalist* within the context of eighteenth-century epistolary culture. And although I am going to suggest some of the implications that this approach has for reading the *Federalist*, what I really hope is that *as an optic*, as an approach, this interpretation will give you another tool for your own analyses.

Let me start by saying a bit about the scholarly literature on the *Federalist*. This literature has a bit of a split personality. On the one hand, there's the dominant view of the *Federalist*, which sees it as the most brilliant piece of political theory ever produced by Americans. The other view, which was particularly pronounced during the 1950s, questions the brilliance and even the coherence of the *Federalist*.

There's merit to both of these views. It's definitely true that the *Federalist* has been enormously influential in the US and even abroad. And it does have a real intellectual heft. On the other hand, it's also true that the *Federalist* is enormously long—almost certainly too long—that it's quite repetitious and that it contradicts itself at various points. It's also the case that it was an occasional series and that therefore much of it was directed to answering specific, local objections to the Constitution in New York rather than to elucidating general principles of political theory. I should mention that it's even possible to hold both of these views simultaneously. In his study called *The Federalist: A Classic on Federalism and Free Government*—which is now itself a classic—Gottfried Dietze argues that "in view of the want of system in the Papers, it … seems to be necessary for a writer who plans to make a comprehensive study of the *Federalist* to create such a system." (33-34) So in other words: the *Federalist* is incoherent and contradictory, but we're going to find a way to make it coherent because it matters so much that we understand it.

But there's actually a crucial piece of common ground between these opposing viewpoints: both groups, although their value judgments differ, interpret the *Federalist* as a series of expository essays. Both of them judge it as a treatise.

What I want to suggest to you today is that there's another way of reading and looking at

the *Federalist*. And that is as a document in eighteenth-century epistolary culture. This way of looking at it by no means excludes the other way of seeing it—in fact, I think they're complimentary. But I think it does lead to some differences in interpretation

What I want to do:

1. Present some of the evidence for looking at the *Federalist* as a document in epistolary culture: particularly its context, its form, and then some hints within the text itself
2. Describe eighteenth-century epistolary culture and its characteristics, focusing on two things. First, delineating the qualities of correspondence—that is, what eighteenth-century people thought was special or significant about correspondence. Second, the place of *The Spectator*, an extraordinarily influential early eighteenth-century magazine which made heavy use of letters in a printed, newspaper-like format.
3. Briefly suggest three ways that looking at the *Federalist* through this epistolary lens allows us to reinterpret it. I'll end with the famous *Federalist* number 10, written by James Madison, and its companion piece, *Federalist* 9, which Alexander Hamilton wrote.

So first, what is the evidence for seeing the *Federalist Papers* as a document in epistolary culture? Now, I think we could actually reverse that question and ask instead, Why NOT see the *Federalist Papers* as letters? After all, on the most obvious level, they do actually have two of the distinctive marks of letters: a salutation and a valediction. Each paper starts with "To the People of New York" and ends with the signature, "Publius." Of course it could be that the salutation is just pro forma, like the way one opens a proclamation with an address say, "To the Students of Paris III and Paris VII." But I don't think that's the case.

One reason I don't think that's the case is that the *Federalist* was just one of a huge number of similar newspaper series that imitated letters. A few of the more famous examples from the period of the American Revolution are John Dickinson's *Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania*, the letters of "Junius Americanus" and John Adams's Novanglus letters. Some of these series worked harder than others to imitate actual letters: some of them even had some fake introductory material or a fictionalized recipient.

Regardless of how much effort they put into simulating letters, though, these series were all drawing on a couple of English models from the early part of the eighteenth century. The most important of these was *The Spectator*, a magazine written by Joseph Addison and Richard Steele, two Hanoverian whig writer-politicians in the early part of the eighteenth century.

- *Spectator* published in London. Ran for only about a year and a half, from March 1711 to December, 1712, for 555 issues.
- Much of the *Spectator* consisted of letters: about half of the issues of the magazine contained letters, and some of the issues were composed almost entirely of correspondence. Some of this was real, but a lot of it was fictional letters

written expressly by the authors (they would often write them as though they were letters sent to the magazine by readers). The goal of these letters was BOTH to offer models of good and bad letter-writing AND to convey specific information—including arguments about politics, society and art—in the form of a letter. So there was a didactic purpose on both the formal and the substantive levels.

- The *Spectator* became a sort of manual for learning how to write in the eighteenth-century Anglo-American world. Benjamin Franklin, most famously, claimed in his *Autobiography* to have learned how to write by copying from the *Spectator*.
- And we also know that Madison was quite influenced by the *Spectator* as well: he wrote in an autobiographical note that the *Spectator* was one of the first books he had read…
- The *Spectator* also provided, more broadly, this model of making substantive arguments in the form of letters. And it's that model that late eighteenth-century American writers like Dickinson and Adams—and, I think also, the Publius authors—were imitating or at least drawing on in their newspaper series

Just a few other pieces of circumstantial evidence to link the *Federalist* to epistolary culture:

- First, Publius's use of the term "paper" to refer to the instalments of the *Federalist*
    - This was not a term in common usage in the late eighteenth-century to refer to serial publications. None of the other authors I just mentioned used it.
    - As far as I can tell, the term "paper" is unique to the *Federalist* among the authors debating the Constitution
- In most of its reprintings, the *Federalist* was published in the section of the newspaper that often included letters to the editor.
    - So it's actually, if you look at it on the page in the original, often surrounded by other letters, both actual and artificial.
- Last, some of the *Federalist* papers were actually based on or drew on letters that the Publius authors had written
    - Large portions of *Federalist* 10 are drawn almost verbatim from a letter that Madison had written to Jefferson.
    - If you look at the Madison-Jefferson correspondence, many of Madison's letters are precisely the sort of fairly long, discursive analyses that he produced in the *Federalist*. In other words, Madison's *Federalist* papers read a bit like the politically substantive parts of his letters to Jefferson, stripped of the beginnings and endings, which tended to be more personal.
    - They were even written a bit like letters: i.e., in great haste. Sometimes Madison or Hamilton would be finishing a paper as the first part of it was being set in type at the newspaper.

So I think, all in all, that the evidence pretty strongly suggests a link, or rather a couple of links, between the *Federalist* and epistolary culture.

If this is true, why did it matter? To figure that out, we need to spend a moment

examining what was special about epistolarity for eighteenth-century people. How, in other words, was writing a letter different from writing something else?

- The first thing to bear in mind is that a letter is part of a dialogue. This means:
    - Directed at a known / specific audience (usually)
    - Adapted to the needs and opinions of the other / correspondent
    - Shaped primarily by *response of the other*, not by concerns for internal consistency
- Both because it was part of a dialogue, but also because that's simply how letter-writing was done, politeness and civility were very important in correspondence
    - You always had to be extremely civil with your correspondents
    - That differs sharply from expository writing—that is, essays or treatises. In those, one could be quite aggressive towards other writers—even make ad hominem attacks.
    - One of the things that made the *Spectator* special was that it tried to carry over that sense of decorum and politeness into the world of substantive discussion, into the world of the essay
        - The *Spectator*, avowedly, wanted to convince people to have the kind of harmonious, productive, *gentlemanly* communication that one had in letters more broadly
- Last, and this is also I think quite significant for thinking about the *Federalist*, there was no presumption in letter-writing of completeness or comprehensiveness
    - Letters were avowedly occasional—they were written for a specific moment and purpose
    - There was no shame in a letter in correcting oneself, expanding on a previous thought, or revising a prior claim. Only in expository writing was one supposed to really get it right the first time.

In this case, how does an epistolary reading change our view of the *Federalist*?

- Will suggest three possible ways in which epistolarity matters.
- My goal is to be suggestive rather than exhaustive -- there are many other ways to see the impact of epistolarity on the *Federalist*.

1. Changes our view of the <u>coherence or consistency in the *Federalist*</u>, with particular reference to the discussion of the Senate.

- With due respect to the traditional historiography, looking for consistency in the *Federalist* may not be the best idea
    - As correspondence, it wasn't intended to be consistent (at least not primarily)
    - Its goal was to answer objections, engage in dialogue, etc., with out necessarily laying out a complete, consistent case for the Constitution
- By the same token, looking at the *Federalist* as letters makes it possible to overlook its obvious incoherences and inconsistencies
- Case of the discussion of the Senate: *Federalist* 62-64
    - Partly written by Madison and partly by Jay
    - Very different approaches in Jay's texts and in Madison's. Although not explicitly contradictory, they do at least suggest different viewpoints

        - Look in particular at the different ways that Jay and Madison try to convince the reader that the Senate will not become corrupt.
    - Which is not to say that there's no place for studying consistency in the Federalist
        - There is a basis for looking at the *Federalist* as a consistent text, since Hamilton, by publishing it, suggested that he wanted it to be seen that way
        - After 1800, it became a kind of sacred text. And like any sacred text, it has to be interpreted/treated as though it were consistent
        - But if one wants to trace consistency in the *Federalist*, it's a question of reception history – i.e., a study of how people have read it – rather than a study of contemporary meaning.

2. Epistolary approach helps us see Publius as a moderate
    - Compared to other Federalists on national scene, although it is rarely discussed, Publius was fairly moderate and respectful of the Antifederalists
        - Aside from some nasty remarks in the first paper, he mostly treats their arguments with respect and gently corrects them.
    - Publius's positions were also moderate within the New York ratification debate
        - "…fewer than half the essays printed [about the Const, on both sides] were serious discussions of the Constitution of the sort found in The Federalist…or the Letters from a Federal Farmer. Satire, sarcasm, and verse were the contributions of many writers." (De Pauw, *Eleventh Pillar*, p.99)
        - "Almost a third of both Federalist and Antifederalist articles were devoted to ad hominem attacks, either on prominent members of the opposite party, or on opposing scribblers" (Ibid., 100)
        - "The [Federalist] essays, seventy-six of which were published before the New York election, stood out in the newspapers of the time the way "The Waste Land" would stand out in a high school literary magazine." (Ibid., 105)
    - Why this relatively consensual position?
        - There were many reasons for this -- personalities, context, etc.
        - But its grounding in epistolary (rather than expository) form may have something to do with it as well; epistolary genre (as mentioned) was supposed to be consensual and polite

3. Allows us to partially rethink the meaning and place of *Federalist* 10
    - As mentioned, *Federalist* 10 based on a letter.
    - But *Federalist* 9 covers much of the same material and takes quite a different view
        - Hamilton sees a confederacy as advantageous because it will allow the federal government to suppress internal dissent and subversion. He emphasizes the advantages of military force.
        - Madison emphasizes the *importance* of internal division and indeed sees it as one of the crucial advantages of a confederated government. He dismisses the possibility of internal forces being used against members states.

- This inconsistency can be resolved the same way as the discussion of the Senate, by arguing that these papers were simply intended as loosely-joined letters, rather than as a systematic treatise
- An even more satisfying way to read the gap between *Federalist* 9 and 10 is to see it as a self-correction—or rather, as we now know, a correction of Hamilton by Madison in his first contribution to the series. This was, as we've discussed earlier, not permissible in expository forms. But there was no problem with doing it in an epistolary format.

Conclusion
- Offering a different / alternate way to approach the *Federalist*
- Not suggesting that this way of looking at it is necessarily more correct than the more common approach of seeing it as a document in the expository mode
- But this alternate approach can a) resolve some of the tensions within the expository approach and b) bring out some crucial points about the *Federalist* (such as its moderation) that tend to get lost in the other approach
- Even if you're not convinced by the particular epistolary angle that I've stressed here, there's still utility in taking seriously the internal gaps and disagreements in the *Federalist*, rather than trying to write them off or explain them away. I think it gives you a richer sense of what the text is and how it works.

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