

The Necessity of Preserving Aristocratic Relics in Democratic Nations

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Alexis de Tocqueville declares in the introduction to his *Democracy in America* that a “new political science is needed for a world itself quite new” and identifies “the great problem” of his time to be “the organization and establishment of democracy in Christian lands” (*DA*, pp.12, 311). The defining characteristic of this “great democratic revolution” is the passion to expand equality, which he claims is something fated and “too strong to be halted” (*DA*, p.12). To better comprehend the democratic revolution underway in the Christian lands, Tocqueville sought to understand the “inclinations, character, prejudices, and passions” of American democracy, the first country to undergo this revolution (*DA*, p.11). Tocqueville claims the influence of the equality of conditions in American democracy “extends far beyond political mores and laws;” it also exercises “dominion over civil society as much over the government,” as it “creates opinions, gives birth to feelings, suggests customs, and modifies whatever it does not create” (*DA*, p.9). Even though the progress of equality is fated and too strong to be stopped, he maintains it is still possible to direct some of its movements (*DA*, p.12). Tocqueville thus argues the “first duty imposed on those who now direct society is to educate democracy; to put, if possible, new life into its beliefs; to purify its mores; to control its actions; gradually to substitute understanding of statecraft for present inexperience and knowledge of its true interests for blind instincts; to adapt government to the needs of time and place; and to modify it as men and circumstances require” (*DA*, p.12).

The democratic revolution ensuing from the passion for equality has utterly transformed the political, social, and moral world. Tocqueville, however, notices that “many of his contemporaries want to make a selection from the institutions, opinions, and ideas which sprang from the aristocratic constitution of the old society” (*DA*, p.705). Such persons would “gladly abandon” some of the institutions, opinions, and ideas from the old aristocracy while desiring “to keep others and carry them along with them into the new world” (*DA*, p.705). But he believes “such men are consuming their time and trouble in a sincere but sterile labor” (*DA*, p.705). Therefore, in order to properly respond to the new ills produced by the new political world, he asserts that “new remedies are needed,” for the remedies designed to cure the ills inflicted by an aristocratic regime are unable to cure the ills brought upon by a democratic society (*DA*, p.701). It is thus the task for democratic societies “to no longer preserve the particular advantages which the inequality of conditions had procured for men but to secure those new benefits which equality may supply” (*DA*, p.705). Some may interpret these Tocquevillian statements as implying that no remnants from aristocratic times will remain in a democratic regime. Nevertheless, if one investigates certain components of Tocqueville’s analysis of American democracy—such as his discussion on how religion, as the guardian of mores, indirectly influences American laws and institutions and how the Americans have adequately dealt with the main threat to all democratic societies, which he identifies as the spread of individualism—then he will discover the presence of aristocratic elements in American democracy, albeit modified in such a way as to make them compatible with the passion for equality that is embedded their democratic social state.

Tocqueville's Ambivalence towards the Democratic Social State

One must first recognize that Tocqueville, even though he typically praises the laws, institutions, and social conditions present in American democracy, does not assume the spread of equality is an unqualified good.¹ Rather, he states the “vices and weaknesses of democratic government are easy to see; they can be proved by obvious facts” (DA, p.231). Tocqueville also observes that “many people are ready to advertise the new benefits which democracy promises to mankind, but few are prepared to point out the distant perils with which it threatens them” (DA, p.418). As a result, he says no “man can affirm, absolutely and generally, that the new state of societies is better than the old, but it is already easy to see it is different” (DA, p.704). So one “must therefore be very careful not to judge the nascent societies on the basis of ideas derived from those which no longer exist,” because to do so “would be unfair, for these societies are so immensely different that direct comparison is impossible” (DA, p.705). Yet even with this possible danger, Tocqueville assumes the responsibility to “expose the perils which equality threatens human freedom,” for he believes “these dangers are both the most formidable and the least foreseen of those which the future has in store” (DA, p.702).

But in his critique of democracy, Tocqueville praises some elements of aristocratic societies. For instance, he recognizes that one of the advantages of aristocratic countries is the abundant presence of “rich and influential persons who can look after themselves and cannot be easily or secretly downtrodden” and whose existence “instills general habits of moderation and restraint in those in power” (DA, p.697). Tocqueville even extends praise to the positive impacts that aristocratic elements can exert in a democratic regime. First, he is “firmly convinced that even in democratic nations, the genius, vices, and virtues of individuals delay or hasten the course of the natural destiny of a people,” which is arguably more consistent with an aristocratic view of history rather than with a democratic view of history (DA, p.494).² Second, he argues that democratic societies, to a certain extent, should promote ambition, because if it is neglected, then it “may lose both its force and its greatness, that human passion may grow gentler and at the same time baser, with the result that the progress of the body social may become daily quieter and less aspiring” due to their citizens’ constant preoccupation with regulating their private lives (DA, p.632). To prevent the atrophy of ambition, the “leaders of the new societies would do wrong if they tried to send the citizens to sleep in a state of happiness too uniform and peaceful;” rather, they “should sometimes give them difficult and dangerous problems to face,” in order to “raise ambition, and to give it a field of action” (DA, p.632).

¹ Marvin Zetterbaum, in his *Tocqueville and the Problem of American Democracy* (Stanford, California, 1967), characterizes Tocqueville’s ambivalence toward American democracy as conveying a sentiment of neutrality between a democratic social order and an aristocratic social order (p.2).

² Tocqueville states that historians “who write in aristocratic ages generally attribute everything that happens to the will and character of particular men,” they will “unhesitatingly suppose slight accidents to be the cause of the great revolutions,” and with “great sagacity they trace the smallest causes and often leave the greatest unnoticed” (DA, p.493). Meanwhile, he describes democratic historians as attributing “hardly any influence over the destinies of mankind to individuals, or over the fate of a people to the citizens;” rather, they “make great general causes responsible for the smallest particular events” (DA, pp.493-494).

Third, Tocqueville encourages the study of aristocratic literature, but only by those with a natural disposition to receive instruction from it, for even though it has its own defects, it “puts in bolder relief just those qualities democratic writers tend to lack, and therefore no other literature is better to be studied at such times” (*DA*, p.476). He concludes this study “is the best antidote against the inherent defects of the times, whereas the good qualities natural to the age will blossom untended” (*DA*, p. 477). Lastly, he acknowledges the prestige that American democracy bestows upon its lawyers and claims the influence they are permitted to exercise in their government “is now the strongest barrier against the faults of democracy,” because the legal body “is the only aristocratic element which can unforcedly mingle with elements natural to democracy and combine with them on comfortable and lasting terms” (*DA*, pp.263, 266).³

Even with all the benefits that aristocratic elements can offer to democratic societies, Tocqueville is not a proponent for aristocracy, as he admits that in aristocratic societies, the “general conception of human fellowship is dim and that men hardly ever think of devoting themselves to the cause of humanity but men do often make sacrifices for the sake of certain other men” (*DA*, p.507). On the contrary, in democratic societies, “the duties of each to all are much clearer but devoted service to any individual much rarer,” yet the “bonds of human affection are wider but more relaxed” (*DA*, p.507). Tocqueville thus concludes “one cannot find an aristocracy anew in this world,” but predicts that periodically “the feelings, passions, virtues, and vices of an aristocracy may reappear in a democracy” (*DA*, pp.608, 697).⁴

The Importance of Religion, as the Guardian of Mores, in Preserving American Democracy

Tocqueville asserts the causes “tending to maintain a democratic republic in the US fall into three categories: the first is the peculiar and accidental situation in which Providence has placed the Americans; their laws the second; and their habits and mores are the third” (*DA*, p.277). Mores are defined as “the habits of the heart,” the different “notions possessed by men, the various opinions current among them, and the sum of ideas that shape mental habits” (*DA*, p.287). Although a “great part of the success of democratic government” in the US results from “the good American laws,” Tocqueville argues the strictness of American mores, which have been formed by their country, race, religion, and other factors, has contributed the most to the success of American democracy (*DA*, pp.307, 595). In fact, he became “convinced that the luckiest of geographical circumstances and the best of laws cannot maintain a constitution in despite of mores, whereas the latter can turn even the most unfavorable circumstances and the worst laws to advantage” (*DA*, p.308). But he regards the “importance of mores as a universal truth” and remarks that “it occupies the central position in his thoughts” (*DA*, p.308).

Religion in American democracy, according to Tocqueville, “directs mores, and by regulating domestic life, it helps to regulate the state” (*DA*, p.291). But to be precise, he declares the indirect influence of religion to be one of the most important causes helping to preserve American political institutions (*DA*, p.542). Even with this qualification, he states that religion

³ Francis G. Wilson also mentions Tocqueville’s observation that lawyers form the only aristocratic element that may mix easily with the elements of a democracy in the article, “Tocqueville’s Conception of the Elite,” *The Review of Politics*, 4, no. 3 (July 1942), p.282.

⁴ Tocqueville says later that a traditional aristocratic society cannot be reconstructed in any of the Christian nations under the sway of the progress of equality (*DA*, p.695).

should “be considered the first of their political institutions,” for although it “did not given them the taste for liberty, it singularly facilitates their use thereof” (DA, p.292).⁵ The Americans have been able to reconcile the spirit of freedom and the spirit of religion because they consider religion to be the “guardian of mores, “of which mores “are regarded as the guarantee of the laws and pledge for the maintenance of freedom itself” (DA, pp.46-47). Although freedom “is found at different times and in different forms; it is not exclusively dependent on one social state,” the type of freedom adopted by the Americans was the middle-class and democratic freedom espoused by the Puritans and not the aristocratic freedom of their English forefathers (DA, pp.34, 504). Tocqueville further emphasizes the Christianity brought to the New World was democratic and republican and that all the religions existing in the US are not hostile to democratic or republican institutions (DA, pp. 36, 288-289).⁶

Moreover, the doctrine of self-interest rightly understood is applied to the religious practices of the Americans, as they believe their “religious beliefs favor freedom and public order,” because they not only “practice their religion out of self-interest but they often even place in this world the interest which they have in practicing it;” meanwhile, priests in the Middle Ages “spoke nothing but the other life” and they hardly took any trouble to prove that a sincere Christian might be happy here below” (DA, p.530). Tocqueville also states the Americans have reconciled their religious practices with their desire to pursue material prosperity, even though he claims the sublimest human faculties can be lost by engaging in the thoughtless pursuit of prosperity. To prevent this catastrophe, he posits “it is ever the duty of lawgivers and of all upright educated men” in a democracy to “raise up the souls of their fellow citizens and turn their attention toward heaven,” because there is a need for all who are interested in the future of democratic societies to get together and with one accord to make continual efforts to propagate throughout society a taste for the infinite, an appreciation of greatness, and a love of spiritual pleasures” (DA, p.543).

Religion, as the guardian of American mores, provides several key benefits to American democracy. First, Tocqueville maintains that most religions “are only general, simple, and practical means of teaching men that the soul is immortal,” which is “the greatest advantage that a democratic people derives from beliefs, and it is that which makes beliefs more necessary for them than for all others” (DA, p.544). Second, religion is useful to American democracy because as its political ties are loosened, it reinforces the moral ties that bind its citizens together (DA, p.294). Yet Tocqueville acknowledges it is not important for democratic citizens to profess belief in the true religion but that they should profess belief in religion (DA, pp.290-291).⁷ It is

⁵ Catherine Zuckert, in her article, “Not by Preaching: Tocqueville on the Role of Religion in American Democracy,” *The Review of Politics*, 43, no. 2 (April 1981), hereafter referred to as “Not by Preaching,” argues that religion “indirectly supports liberty in America in two ways” (p.264). On the individual level, religion “is one of the primary causes of the severity of mores or the self-control necessary for self-government.” On the social level, religious beliefs “underlie the notion that only constitutional or limited government is legitimate.”

⁶ Zuckert, in “Not by Preaching,” says “the egalitarian aspect of the Christian teaching” espoused by the Puritans “makes it fundamentally compatible with democracy” (p.260).

⁷ See Doris Goldstein’s *Trial of Faith: Religion and Politics in Tocqueville’s Thought* (1975), Alfred Baltizer’s “Some Thoughts about Civil Religion,” *Journal of Church and State*, 16, no. 1 (Winter 1974), Jack Lively’s *The Social and Political Thought of Alexis de Tocqueville* (Oxford, 1962), and Zetterbaum’s *Tocqueville and the Problem of Democracy* for a summary of Tocqueville’s argument about the moral effectiveness of religion in order to preserve a liberal democracy.

only important for “a religion to derive its strength from sentiments, instincts, and passions, which are reborn in like fashion in all periods of history, “ for then “it can brave the assaults of time, or at least it can only be destroyed by another religion” (DA, p.298). Thus, he urges that if “any religion has taken deep root in a democracy,” then it should be regarded “as the most precious heritage from aristocratic times” (DA, p.544).⁸

Combating the Spread of Individualism in American Democracy

Near the end of his *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville identifies one of the most serious ills produced by democracy—the spread of individualism.⁹ Individualism is defined as “a calm and considered feeling which disposes each citizen to isolate himself from the mass of his fellows and withdraw into the circle of family and friends; with this little society formed to his taste, he gladly leaves the greater society to look after itself” (DA, p.506). He claims individualism “is of democratic origin and threatens to grow as conditions get more equal” (DA, p.507). Equality fosters individualism because it “makes men independent of one another, and naturally gives them the habit and taste to follow nobody’s will but their own in private affairs” (DA, p.667). Citizens in democratic societies, due to the spread of equality, are independent and weak as they are not obliged to put their powers “at the disposal” of others, no one “has any claim of right to substantial support from his fellow man,” and they can “do hardly anything for themselves, for none of them is in a position to force his fellows to help him;” thus, they would all “find themselves helpless if they did not learn to help each other voluntarily” (DA, pp.514, 672). Furthermore, it is “always an effort” for democratic men “to tear themselves away from their private affairs and pay attention to those of the community; the natural inclination is to leave the only visible and permanent representative of collective interests, that is to say, the state, to look after them” (DA, p.671).¹⁰

Tocqueville, nonetheless, argues the Americans “have used liberty to combat the individualism born of equality, and they have won” (DA, p.511). But the liberty that defeats individualism is local liberty, because it “induces a great number of citizens to value the

⁸ Likewise, Zuckert, in “Not by Preaching,” states from “a democratic perspective, Christianity represents an accidental historical heritage,” but that Christianity can adapt to democratic conditions and produce important political effects (p.259). She argues that in democratic conditions, Christianity “provides an essential foundation for the individual and political self-restraint necessary to maintain liberal democracy, but it exercises its influence indirectly, through the wholly liberal means of public opinion in the context of a strict separation of church and state” (p.259).

⁹ Zetterbaum asserts no liberal thinker, of which he identifies Tocqueville as being such a thinker, can altogether be critical of individualism (p.61). He points out that Tocqueville “goes to great lengths to defend and encourage the positive results of the new spirit of inquiry and independence” (p.62). But he does admit that if democracy “is to fulfill the expectations that may be held of it, individualism as a social force must have its anti-societal tendencies neutralized” (p.62).

¹⁰ Tocqueville also notices that the “fear of disorder and love of well-being unconsciously lead democracies to increase the functions of the central government; the only power which they think strong, intelligent, and stable enough to protect them from anarchy” (DA, p.677). He thus supposes that all democratic peoples “are instinctively drawn toward centralization of power,” but that “this attraction is uneven,” for it “depends on particular circumstances which may promote or restrain the natural effects of the state of society” (DA, p.674). But in democratic societies, Tocqueville assumes “centralization will always be greater the less aristocratic the ruler is; that is the rule” (DA, p.678). But he does not think these “inclinations are invincible,” because he declares the “chief aim in writing this book is to combat them” (DA, p.671).

affection of their kindred and neighbors, brings men constantly into contact, despite the instincts which separate them, and forces them to help one another” (DA, p.511). Thus, the “free institutions of the US and the political rights enjoyed there provide a thousand continual reminders to every citizen that he lives in society” (DA, p.512).¹¹ The application of the doctrine of self-interest rightly understood also combats the spread of individualism in American democracy, for this enlightened self-love “leads them to help one another and disposes them freely to give part of their time and wealth for the good of the state,” and although it “does not inspire great sacrifices, every day it prompts some small ones; by itself it cannot make a man virtuous, but its discipline shapes a lot of orderly, temperate, moderate, careful, and self-controlled citizens” (DA, p.526-527).

The Americans have also defeated the type of individualism harmful to democratic societies by promoting the establishment of political and civil associations to facilitate the governing of their democratic republics.¹² Tocqueville defines an association as “simply consisting of the public and formal support of specific doctrines by a certain number of individuals who have undertaken to cooperate in a stated way in order to make these doctrines prevail” (DA, p.190). Democratic nations need associations in order to guard against the tyranny of the majority and to “prevent despotism of parties or the arbitrary rule of a prince,” for among democratic peoples, “it is only through association that the citizens can raise any resistance to the central power,” but he claims the “same social conditions that render associations so necessary to democratic nations also make their formation more difficult there than elsewhere” (DA, pp.192, 515, 686). In a democracy, an association “cannot be powerful unless it is numerous;” consequently, those composing it must “be spread over a wide area and each of them must be anchored to the place in which he lives by the modesty of his fortune and a crowd of small necessary cares” (DA, p.518). Democratic peoples, therefore, need “some means of talking every day without seeing one another and of acting together without meeting;” so hardly “any democratic association can carry on without a newspaper” (DA, p.518).

In contrast, Tocqueville argues that associations are unnecessary in aristocratic nations because “secondary bodies form natural associations that hold abuses of power in check” (DA, p.192). Associations are additionally unnecessary in aristocratic nations since “aristocratic institutions have the effect of linking each man closely with several of his fellows,” so the people living in an aristocratic age are almost always closely involved with something outside themselves, and they are often inclined to forget about themselves” (DA, p.507). In aristocratic societies, “men have no need to unite for action, since they are held firmly together,” as every rich and powerful citizen “is in practice the head of a permanent and enforced association

¹¹ Pierre Manent, in his *Tocqueville and the Nature of Democracy*, (Rowman & Littlefield, 1996) interprets this statement by Tocqueville to mean that democratic societies, in order to know liberty, “must add liberty to that equality with which it appears to be united, not so much for the love of liberty itself but to give men the sentiment of society, the sentiment that they live together” (p.24).

¹² Zuckert, in “Not by Preaching,” maintains that “institutions of self-government and the ‘knowledge’ of how to combine are not enough to produce the proliferation of associations in the US,” for common “religious beliefs are also necessary to provide the climate of trust needed to bring and keep people together” (p.271). In addition, Cushing Strout, in *The New Heavens and New Earth: Political Religion in America* (Harper & Row, 1973) observes that American religious organizations constitute some of the most important examples of the voluntary ‘moral’ and ‘civil’ associations that Tocqueville though were so important in effectively preserving freedom of speech as well as economic enterprise in the US” (pp.102-109).

composed of all those whom he makes help in the execution of his designs” (*DA*, p.514). Yet Tocqueville recognizes that in democratic societies, “associations of plain citizens can compose very rich, influential, and powerful bodies, in other words, aristocratic bodies” and that by “this means many of the greatest political advantages of an aristocracy could be obtained without its injustices and dangers” (*DA*, p.697). Yet, as Zetterbaum points out, even though associations “may fulfill some of the functions of an aristocracy,” they cannot “provide their members with the same sense of individual responsibility that was possible for at least the leaders of the aristocracy” (p.91).

Conclusion

As one can see from this analysis of Tocqueville’s study of American democracy, aristocratic elements, such as the influence that religion exercises upon the mores of the Americans, are present in American democracy. In fact, it should be recalled that Tocqueville referred to religion as the “most precious heritage from aristocratic times.” However, one must recognize the Christianity practiced by the Americans is not the Christianity practiced during the aristocratic Middle Ages. As stated previously, Tocqueville claims the Americans have grafted the doctrine of self-interest rightly understood onto their religious practices, which has caused them to almost exclusively focus on the worldly benefits they can receive by practicing their religion rather than by solely participating in religious exercises in order to derive benefits that can only be received in the hereafter, as those who lived during aristocratic times tended to approach their religious practice. Therefore, even though religion is still present in American democracy, it has been utterly transformed in order for it to be made compatible with the passion for equality that is embedded in the American democratic social state.

The other part of Tocqueville’s analysis of American democracy discussed in this paper is how the Americans have successfully remedied the ills produced by the spread of individualism by fostering the development of associations. His description of the benefits that associations bestow on American democracy, which have been referred to earlier in this essay, resemble some of the advantages that aristocratic institutions, which were organized according to the aristocratic conception of the natural order, naturally produced. Yet one should not hastily conclude that associations in the American democratic social state are relics from aristocratic regimes. Rather, an accurate conclusion to be derived from Tocqueville’s observations is that associations in American democracy are artificial organizations designed to manufacture the desirable benefits that aristocratic institutions naturally produced. Thus, from his description of how religion partially forms the content of the Americans’ mores and his argument for the necessity of fostering associations in American democracy, one can conclude that American democracy receives substantial benefits from the quasi-aristocratic elements it permits to exist within its social state. Moreover, one might conclude the maintenance of American democracy depends on how well it preserves these quasi-aristocratic elements.

Nonetheless, one may question whether the quasi-aristocratic elements that Tocqueville believes significantly contribute to the preservation of American democracy can be applied to other democratic social states. On the one hand, it appears that Tocqueville attributes the indirect influence of religion in forming the strict American mores and the freedom of association in the US as important factors that preserve American democracy. But on the other hand, he does not

assume the adoption of these institutions by other nations will enable them to develop into democracies.¹³ Instead, he argues the Americans have very likely not “found the only form possible for democratic government,” that American laws and mores “are not the only ones that would suit democratic peoples,” and that other democratic nations need not “imitate the laws and mores of the Anglo-Americans” (*DA*, pp.18, 311, 314). Even so, Tocqueville says the Americans “have shown that we need not despair of regulating democracy by means of laws and mores” (*DA*, p.311).

Tocqueville acknowledges the “American destiny is unusual” for democratic nations, because they “have taken from the English aristocracy the idea of individual rights and a taste for local freedom, and they have been able to keep both these things because they have had no aristocracy to fight” (*DA*, p.676). Consequently, he may argue that European nations advancing towards a democratic social state, motivated by the passion for equality, would likely reject the quasi-aristocratic elements that have contributed to the maintenance of American democracy due to their desire to overthrow all the remnants of aristocracy still present in their laws, mores, customs, and habits. Tocqueville would likely argue these European nations must develop their own institutions and mores that are consistent with the type of democratic social state which is compatible with their geographical conditions, laws, and mores and that will simultaneously combat the ills produced by that particular democratic social state. Tocqueville, however, remains uncertain whether the remedies the newly developing European democratic nations will develop in order to manage the ills produced by their democratic social states will be as successful as the remedies the Americans have found to correct the defects of their democratic social state. Moreover, if the European nations are not successful in developing effective remedies to combat the ills produced by their democratic social states, Tocqueville implies these democratic nations will degenerate into democratic despotisms (*DA*, pp. 690).

Even with this possibility, Tocqueville apparently argues that a variety of laws, mores, customs, and institutions might enable a democratic social state to preserve itself without degenerating into a democratic despotism. Regardless, he considers “the gradual development of democratic institutions and mores not as the best but as the only means remaining” in order for a democratic people to remain free (*DA*, pp.314-315). In order to properly manage the ills which inevitably will develop in a democratic social state, Tocqueville recommends to all democratic social states that “clear and fixed limits” be set to the “field of social power,” that private people be “given certain rights and the undisputed enjoyment of such rights, because individuals should be allowed to “keep the little freedom, strength, and originality left” to them; and that sovereigns should “try a little more to make men great,” for they should “constantly remember that a nation cannot long remain great if each man is individually weak” (*DA*, p.701). Yet he ends his *Democracy in America* uncertain of whether his advice to the new political world will be enough to prevent the onset of the democratic despotism he so feared could take root in this new world.

¹³ Catherine Zuckert, in her essay, “The Role of Religion in Preserving American Liberty,” in *Liberty, Equality, Democracy*, ed. By Eduardo Nolla (New York: New York University Press, 1992), concludes that Tocqueville “no longer believed it would be possible to preserve Christian beliefs in Europe the way they had been maintained in America,” because he observed religions in Europe “were growing weak and that the conception of the sanctity of rights is vanishing” (p.26). Tocqueville argues that, due to the weakening of religion, “mores are changing and the moral conception of rights is being obliterated.” So he concludes the idea of rights in European democratic states must be linked to personal interest because the latter “provides the only stable point in the human heart” (*DA*, p.239).

