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Tocqueville's New Liberalism

Ewa Atanassow

I know only two manners of making equality reign in the political world: rights must be given to each citizen or to no one. ... One must not dissimulate the fact that the social state I have just described lends itself almost as readily to the one as to the other of its two consequences.¹

One will never encounter, whatever one does, genuine power among men except in the free concurrence of wills. Now, there is nothing in the world but patriotism or religion that can make the universality of citizens advance for long toward the same goal ...

What I admire most in America are not the administrative effects of decentralization, but its political effects. In the United States the native country makes itself felt everywhere. It is an object of solicitude from the village to the entire Union. The inhabitant applies himself to each of the interests of his country as to his very own. ... He has for his native country a sentiment analogous to the one that he feels for his family, and it is still by a sort of selfishness that he takes an interest in the state.

Thus he has conceived an often exaggerated but almost always salutary opinion of himself. He trusts fearlessly in his own forces, which appear to him to suffice for everything. A particular person conceives the thought of some undertaking; should this undertaking have a direct relation to the well-being of society, the idea of addressing himself to the public authority to obtain its concurrence does not occur to him. He makes known his plan, offers to execute it, calls individual forces to the assistance of his, and struggles hand to hand against all obstacles. Often, doubtless, he succeeds less well than if the state were in his place; but in the long term the general result of all the individual undertakings far exceeds what the government could do.²

Alexis de Tocqueville (1805–59) was a liberal, yet, as he insisted, ‘a liberal of a new kind.’³ First among the novel facets of his liberalism was his understanding of the character of modern society and the unprecedented dilemmas it faced. Many of Tocqueville’s liberal predecessors, notably Montesquieu and Constant, considered commerce and the social reorganization it involved as that which made society modern. Against this socio-economic thesis, Tocqueville proposed an ethical–political one: not capitalism, but democracy and its core value – equality – is the defining feature of the modern age. Born into an old aristocratic family decimated in the French Revolution (his parents barely escaped the guillotine), Tocqueville was preoccupied all his life with the meaning and causes of this world-historical upheaval. Viewing the Revolution as part of a centuries-long development, he pointed to the soon-to-be-global rise of democracy as the motor behind it.

Modern democracy, for Tocqueville, is premised on the notion of the moral equality of all human beings, and the idea that no one has by virtue of origin or other qualities a precedence over any other person. Not primarily a set of political institutions, democracy is a ‘social state’, or a condition of society where status is not fixed at birth but must be acquired. Equality, in short, means social mobility: the possibility of rising – and falling – on the social ladder. It also entails a peculiar mindset characterized by the ‘ardent, insatiable, eternal, invincible’ love of equality itself.⁴ Tocqueville credited this egalitarian passion with ceaselessly revolutionizing all aspects of life: economic and political relations as well as the conceptual and moral horizon within which we moderns live. Rather than a static arrangement, democracy so understood is an ongoing process of equalization.⁵

As early as 1835, Tocqueville proclaimed the rise of a comprehensively egalitarian form of life as the distinctive feature of modernity. He believed that, once brought into broad daylight by the eighteenth-century revolutions, the principle of social equality and its counterpart – popular sovereignty – had left no politically viable or morally respectable alternatives. From then on, the primary political question was not whether but how to embody the democratic principle in political practice. Tocqueville expected this question to reach and upturn every corner of the world. From its opening pages, *Democracy in America* announced the impending global democratic revolution and called for ‘a new political science’ to illuminate and guide it.⁶

Yet if Tocqueville considered democratization ‘irresistible’, he did not view it as following a fixed path.⁷ As the first passage signals, equality is compatible

with, and may lead to, two radically different political scenarios: one that postulates universal rights and equal freedoms, and another predicated on an omnipotent centralized state that pursues universal equality by demanding the equal powerlessness of all. Not only does democracy not necessitate a liberal outcome, the drive towards ever-greater equalization makes liberty's prospects ever less certain. Tocqueville's account of the egalitarian dynamic of modernity anticipates the rise of a specifically democratic form of despotism.

To warn against this new despotism, and strengthen democracy's liberal safeguards, was the overarching purpose of Tocqueville's life and work. Wary of theoretical abstractions – another signature of his new liberalism – Tocqueville set out to explicate the promises and dangers of modern democracy by describing what he saw as its paradigmatic liberal manifestation: the American Union, then half-a-century old. Rather than defend liberty in theory, he studied it in American practice, seeking to draw portable lessons from this particular democratic experience.⁸ Published in two volumes (in 1835 and 1840), *Democracy in America* gives a comprehensive account of the American polity: its beginnings, constitution and intellectual and moral underpinnings. It also elaborates a diagnosis of democratic ills, for which Tocqueville prescribed liberal remedies.

While the first passage above gives, in a nutshell, Tocqueville's view of the nature and problem of modern society, the second offers a glimpse into his proposed solutions.⁹ If the main danger Tocqueville foresaw was the rise of an all-powerful, ever-expanding state, prefigured in the centralizing tendencies of post-revolutionary France, the set of remedies he proposed was modelled on the vibrant associational life he witnessed on his 1831–2 journey to America. Generalizing the American experience, Tocqueville argued passionately for the crucial importance of civil society for liberal democracy. He went so far as to dub the art of associating the 'mother science' on which hangs not only democratic freedom but modern civilization itself.¹⁰

Among the institutional means of encouraging association, Tocqueville highlights a decentralized system of administration. Our second passage begins with his meeting the most serious objection against such a system: that it would weaken government. In the pages preceding this passage, Tocqueville engages the partisans of centralization on their own turf by revisiting the claim that concentrated decision making is indispensable for an efficient and powerful state. Tocqueville does not deny the need for strong central power: indeed, he expressly affirms it. Yet, questioning what makes a state strong, he contends that 'genuine power' rests not in the ability to compel, but in the capacity to inspire

and sustain voluntary obedience. Tocqueville, in short, accepts the professed goal of centralization: an 'active and powerful' government.¹¹ However, while the advocates of centralization call for consolidating all decision-making capacity, Tocqueville insists on distinguishing between the state's 'administrative' and 'governmental' competencies and (as in the second paragraph of our passage) between centralization's 'political' and 'administrative' effects.

In explaining, at the outset of the section from which our passage is taken, the distinction between governmental and administrative centralization, Tocqueville readily grants that modern society cannot exist without centralized government. Pointing to the medieval principalities and contemporary German states (before their 1871 unification) as examples of a baneful lack of centralization, he maintains that strong central authority is key to a functioning economy, effective foreign policy and the rule of law. And he criticizes, later in the book, the constraints on governmental centralization embedded in the American Constitution (prior to the Civil War amendments) for preventing the Union from governing effectively and from protecting racial minorities against white majority tyranny. In this respect, though admiring the US Constitution, Tocqueville was an insightful critic of American Federalism.¹²

While conceding the need for centralized government to address issues of concern to all, Tocqueville strongly opposed what he called 'administrative centralization' – the idea that the central authority should decide all issues, no matter how local or minute – on the grounds that it was bound to weaken, not augment, state power. For, returning to our passage, real power rests in 'the free concurrence of wills' and there are only two ways to produce this concurrence. Love of country and love of God, Tocqueville claimed, are the two mainsprings of civic dedication that alone can make the 'universality of citizens advance for long toward the same goal'.

Before seeing how a decentralized system helps encourage civic engagement and 'genuine power', we should pause to reflect: In what sense is Tocqueville's advocacy of religion and patriotism liberal? Are not liberals supposed to defend individual freedom against social interference, individualism against collectivism, however justified? This is an occasion to signal another novelty of Tocqueville's liberalism: his pioneering critique of democratic individualism.¹³

Like Constant before him, Tocqueville considered individual independence the quintessential modern liberty. In his view, the desire to shape and direct one's life underpins the struggle for equality and drives it forward. Yet, a central feature of modern society, the drive for individual independence is also its

foremost danger. Encouraging an exclusive fixation on private interests and goals, thus blinding citizens to their interdependence and civic duties, it can lead to political disengagement that poses an inherent threat to freedom. Left to itself, individualism can weaken solidarity and the capacity for self-organization by making citizens forget the art of associating and of attaining common ends in common, which, for Tocqueville, is the essence of free democratic governance. At the same time, when each tends only for himself, the need for government to step in and take care of public business is bound to grow. Paradoxically, Tocqueville argued, if taken to extremes, the obsession with individual independence is likely to enlarge the government's power and tip public opinion in favour of expanding central authority. It prepares, from afar, the rise of a paternalist state that dehumanizes less by oppressing than by relieving citizens of their civic and personal responsibility.¹⁴

So how do decentralized institutions guard against individualism, big government and a self-absorbed citizenry? Decentralized administration means that local problems are addressed locally. Instead of being centred in the capital and wielded by professional bureaucrats, administrative power is scattered and responsibility diffused so as to 'interest more people in public things' (64). Distinguishing between the 'political' and 'administrative effects' of this arrangement, Tocqueville recognizes that the distinction is not clear-cut; he also concedes that there is a trade-off involved. This reflects another characteristic feature of his liberalism: for the most part, one cannot have the cake and eat it too but must choose between competing, often incommensurable goods. Tocqueville readily admits that decentralized administration may not lead to orderly procedures or well-executed public works.¹⁵ Yet, in his view, administrative imperfections are more than offset by decentralization's influence on citizens' mentality. Here, and elsewhere, Tocqueville highlights the effect 'on the very souls' of the citizens, both as an important aspect of institutional analysis and key criterion for political choice.¹⁶

In light of our second passage, the main advantage of decentralization consists in its fostering participation and, therewith, a sense of ownership and belonging. As the citizens play an active part in public affairs, they come to identify with their community much in the way they do with their family. Seeing themselves reflected in the political order, they regard it as their work and feel its successes and needs as their own. As Tocqueville claims in the next paragraph, by merging the public and private, patriotic identification enlarges the citizens' self-image and encourages trust in their own strength. Though 'often exaggerated', the

resulting self-confidence propels them into civic action. Seeing their country's interests as their own motivates individuals to work for the common good. Trusting their own capacity to produce desired change, they voluntarily exert themselves for the 'well-being of society'. The public support required for the success of individual ventures brings home the need to cooperate and promotes a spirit of solidarity. In this way, the civic pride of the Americans energizes their voluntarism and the ensuing social effort 'far exceeds what the government could do'.¹⁷

In Tocqueville's account, by stimulating patriotic attachment, decentralized institutions activate a virtuous circle: love of country elevates the citizens' self-esteem, which facilitates effective civic action. This, in turn, helps sustain the people's commitment to the democratic order and their self-understanding as being in charge. So, what Tocqueville 'admire[s] most in America' is decentralization's double impact: on the one hand, it strengthens society by diffusing energy and activity throughout the body politic; on the other, it enhances individual agency and cultivates able and confident citizens, eager to take their destiny into their own hands.

Tocqueville, as already noted, stresses the pivotal role of decentralized institutions and active citizenry for liberal democracy. Yet, while praising the 'political effects' of decentralization – increased civic participation and psychological commitment to politics – Tocqueville also points to their downside. His analysis of the psychology of civic spirit signals its problematic cognitive and moral status. Not only is the self-perception fostered by civic pride 'often exaggerated', hence irrational. Because it is premised, like a family feeling, on 'a sort of selfishness', patriotism is morally ambivalent and may, under certain conditions, turn positively menacing. Later parts of *Democracy in America* spell out the nature of this menace: sectionalism and racial pride posed existential threats to the integrity and future of the American Union.¹⁸ Thus, while insisting that decentralized institutions 'are to freedom what primary schools are to science', Tocqueville shows that they are a 'dangerous freedom' which, to be salutary, requires institutional and moral checks, as well as favourable circumstances.¹⁹

Among those checks, Tocqueville held religion to be especially important. His penetrating discussion of religion's role in modern society is one more outstanding feature of his new liberalism. As our second passage suggests, religion is another way to inspire and sustain civic spirit and 'make the universality of citizens advance for long toward the same goal'. For Tocqueville, in short,

religion has an important political function. It is not simply an alternative to civic dedication but a necessary complement to it: by establishing a shared moral horizon, religious commitment helps orient individual and collective choice and poses generally recognized limits on political action. Along with balancing political liberty and guarding against its abuses, religion also helps to strengthen and perfect freedom. Moving 'the object of human action' beyond the immediate and the material, religion calls attention to a larger horizon and a fuller notion of humanity that elevate the citizens' self-understanding and enlighten their interests. By providing, as Alan S. Kahan has argued, indispensable 'checks and balances for democratic souls', religion, for Tocqueville, plays a crucial role in sustaining political liberty and individual flourishing.²⁰

Democracy in America offers a case study for the mutually supportive relationship of religion and democracy. Yet it also cautions against extrapolating too mechanically from the American experience. Tocqueville celebrated American society for its religious pluralism, and expressly endorsed the separation of church and state as indispensable means for preserving the power and benefits of religion. At the same time, he made clear that the happy combination of faith and freedom in America was the product of a particular historical development attained in centuries-long religious and political conflicts. While pointing to the separation of religion and politics as a universal good and crucial prerequisite for liberal democracy, Tocqueville made clear that such a separation might not be easily replicated in another political and cultural context, be that of Catholic France or of Muslim Algeria or of Hindu society, which he also studied closely.²¹

Tocqueville elaborated a new liberalism to address what he saw as democracy's unprecedented challenges to liberty.²² Chief among the challenges he diagnosed is the twin danger of individualism and despotism: the dialectic of withdrawn, feeble citizens and an ever-expanding state. The remedies Tocqueville prescribed were all aimed at encouraging a vigorous civil society and self-reliant democratic citizenry, an example of which he encountered in America. Such a citizenry, he understood well, is a hard-won and inherently fragile achievement that requires delicate political balancing tailored to specific cultural conditions. In highlighting this achievement and describing in detail its institutional and moral mechanisms, Tocqueville's work exemplified the careful attention to 'time and place ... circumstances and men' he demanded in his call for a new political science.²³ He also developed a sophisticated moral psychology of liberalism: a new understanding not only of the social and political, but also of the ethical and psychological preconditions of democratic freedom.²⁴