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Alexis de Tocqueville and the American Character: The Problem of Reconciling Excellence and Consent

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Although Tocqueville was deeply concerned about the adverse consequences of democratic equality and the tyranny of the majority, he nonethless believed that the character of the American people-reinforced by America's customs, laws, circumstances, constitutional heritage, and favorable geography-would help Americans to achieve a decent, liberal, constitutional polity. Culturally, however, Americans were deficient in reconciling excellence and consent. Less friendly critics have argued that a democracy cannot reconcile excellence and consent. It is, however, possible to move beyond Tocqueville's qualified confidence in American democracy, and his reservations about the ability of Americans to reconcile excellence and consent, by arguing that there is a fundamental concord between excellence and consent, that there is significant popular acceptance and practice of excellence in a democracy, and that creative democratic leadership can advance excellence in a democratic society.

Why, in an article on Alexis de Tocqueville, should one focus on the problem of the relationship between the reconciliation of excellence and consent *and* American character? In approaching this problem, I have been stimulated by Dan Elazar's life-long, scholarly interest in the American federal and democratic system that the young Tocqueville explored on his visit to America in 1830-1831.

The reconciliation of excellence and consent was central to Tocqueville's analysis in his now classic nineteenth-century analysis of the United States, *Democracy in America.*[1] Moreover, Tocqueville believed that American character was a major key to the successful response to this problem.

The problem of reconciling excellence and consent can be framed in a number of ways: How to reconcile liberty and authority? How to reconcile liberty and large size? How to reconcile freedom and responsibility? How to ensure a safe future for the democratic principle of egalitarianism? How to avoid the tyranny of the majority? How to achieve a better quality of life in a democracy? How to achieve leadership by the best? How to achieve the successful integration of the various peoples of the United States? How to enhance social justice, peace, and prosperity?

[1]Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (1835), ed. Phillips Bradley, vol. 2, (New York: Knopf, 1946). For an excellent account of Tocqueville's visit, see George Wilson Pierson, *Tocqueville in America* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1996). Pierson's book was originally published as *Tocqueville and Beaumont in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1938). See also Andre Jardin, *Tocqueville: A Biography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Gioroux, 1988).

These are the important-and provocative-questions that concerned the young 25-year-old French aristocrat as he undertook his nine-month visit to the United States. He was very concerned with the character that would be required of Americans if they were to be successful in grappling with these questions-all of which are a variation of the problem of reconciling excellence and consent.

At the outset, let me be clear about the difficulties of generalizing about a concept such as "American character." These difficulties are real, but they did not dissuade the young Tocqueville (always appreciative of differences among Americans North and South, East and West, well-educated and less-educated, cultured and less cultured, etc.) from attempting to identify those distinctive traits that seemed to him to characterize the Americans he met, talked with, observed, read about, and studied.

It should also be equally clear that Tocqueville recognized that American character alone would not explain American success in grappling with its democratic problems. Tocqueville clearly saw that both an Old World (significantly Anglo-Saxon) constitutional heritage and a very favorable New World environment (the American frontier) would be crucial factors in explaining America's success in dealing with the key problems of American democracy.

Nevertheless, Tocqueville insisted that the character of the American people was crucial in determining the fate of American democracy. He sought, therefore, to probe whether Americans were equipped-politically, socially, intellectually, and spiritually-to make their young democracy a genuine success.

RECONCILING EXCELLENCE AND CONSENT

In the search for excellence, we must concede that frequently there are conflicts between the judgment of a few wise people and the numerical majority, between a few artistically gifted people and the opinion of the multitude. Democracy requires freedom for all, and insists that public policy be based on the consent of the governed. However, are the many aware that, although all are entitled to consideration, the many are not necessarily the wisest, most gifted, and most creative? Is there really room for what the Greeks called *arete*, or excellence, in a democratic society that gives to the people a greater voice in public judgment and societal taste than they have ever had before, or does democracy drive excellence out-in politics, in society, and in the arts? Does a democracy committed to individual realization for all, to the best of their ability, doom the creative to rebellion, the wise to silence, and the prudent to despair?

These are tough and provocative questions. They are precisely the questions that troubled Tocqueville, and that stimulated him to examine the several conditions-American character, customs, laws, circumstances, history, and geography-that would enable the right kind of democracy to endure.

Tocqueville keenly recognized that favorable circumstances-an Old World Anglo-Saxon constitutional inheritance and a favorable New World frontier

environment-encouraged a successful democratic experiment. However, he insisted that customs (clearly related to character) and laws (also clearly related to character) played the more important roles in ensuring success for American democracy-crucially, success in reconciling excellence and consent.

The young Frenchman, Alexis de Tocqueville, was a friendly critic but not an uncritical friend of democracy in America. He clearly had his doubts about American democracy's ability to reconcile excellence and consent. In his analysis, however, he sought to understand both the promise as well as the peril-both the bright and the dark sides-of the new American democratic nation.

Tocqueville saw the promise of the American democratic revolution as the promise of a prosperous, stable, peaceful, liberal society, one underwritten by religiously strong and well-educated Americans, and committed to freedom, responsible self-government, and the rule of law. The promise was of a democracy regulated by its customs and laws, a democracy wherein "the rights of society may be respected, liberty preserved, and religion honored," a democracy that would spread "a moderate amount of happiness over all men." This, for Tocqueville, was the promise of a democratic movement that was, in his judgment, "providential" and "irresistible."[2]

Politically, however, democracy was not an unmixed blessing. The quality of American democracy, the young aristocrat felt, left a great deal to be desired. In particular, Tocqueville noted a "dangerous enervating taste for equality, which impels the weak to attempt to lower the powerful to their level." He was also disturbed about "so little independence of mind and real freedom of discussion . . . in America." He observed, unhappily, the disappearance of variety and diversity in modern life, the triumph of the useful over the beautiful, and the lack of poetry and literature in the United States. He lamented the absence of "the ablest men . . . at the head of affairs."[3] Politically and culturally, he was deeply worried about democratic mediocrity and about the energetic devotion of most Americans to money-making.

Moreover, if Americans rejected aristocracy and monarchy-and a deep-seated class conscious European tradition-they, paradoxically, accepted slavery in the South, discrimination against African-Americans in the North and West, and unfair treatment of Native Americans.

Politically, Tocqueville worried that democracy might be perverted, particularly in the absence of sound, aristocratic, leadership. This prescient nineteenth-century aristocratic Frenchman reflected classical Greek fears of democracy as mobocracy (i.e., government by the many ignorant and

[2]Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, vol. 1, p. xx. For Tocqueville's fuller argument about the "Principal Causes Which Tend to Maintain the Democratic Republic in the United States," see his Chapter XVII by that title, 1:288-330.

[3]See, for example, Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 1:200.

poor in their own selfish interest, not in the interest of justice and the common good). Here, Tocqueville remarkably anticipated concerns about freedom found, for example, in Fyodor Dostoyevski's Grand Inquisitor in Book V, Chapter 5 of *The Brothers Karamazov*,[4] and in Eric Fromm's *Escape from Freedom*.[5] Tocqueville worried that democratic equality might either terminate in anarchy or lead men to inevitable servitude. He worried that the many could abandon freedom because they held it dangerous or because they held it to be impossible.[6]

Nevertheless, on the political question of reconciling democracy and decency, Tocqueville did not lose his nerve or his wits. The dangers that he saw were not "insurmountable." "The nations of our time," he wrote, "cannot prevent the conditions of men from becoming equal, but it depends upon themselves whether the principle of equality is to lead them to servitude or freedom, to knowledge or barbarism, to prosperity or wretchedness."[7] Hence, politically, and even though he was deeply concerned about the evils that might be perpetuated under the banner of equality, Tocqueville still felt that liberal constitutional democracy was possible in America. The commitment of Americans to a sound religious tradition, to Anglo-Saxon constitutionalism, to the principles of freedom and respect for law, to the novel American concept of federalism, and to local government-these commitments would facilitate the success of American democracy.

Culturally, though, Tocqueville felt there was a fundamental conflict between democracy and excellence. Simply put, he did not believe that the best qualities of an old-fashioned aristocratic regime-refinement, genius, brilliance, beauty, and nobility-could be obtained in American democracy. The choice at best, he wrote, now lay between a "democracy without poetry or elevation . . . but with order and morality . . . and an undisciplined and depraved democracy" that might become a "democratic despotism."[8]

Despite Tocqueville's aristocratic reservations about the vices of middle-class Americans, and their money-grubbing propensities, and despite his recognition of differences between northerns and southerners, he nevertheless found his model Americans to be fundamentally educated, moral, liberty-loving, energetic, and capable. On the bright side, generally, Tocqueville thus saw Americans as soundly democratic and egalitarian in their political, social, and economic character. They were committed to freedom, constitutional government, popular sovereignty, and the rule of law. Americans rejected aristocracy and monarchy. There was no peasant

[4]Fyodor Dostoyevski, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Constance Garnett (New York: Modern Library, n.d.), bk. 5, pp. 255-274).

[5]Eric Fromm, *Escape From Freedom* (New York: Avon Books, 1941, 1965)

[6]Some critics have noted that the title of Tocqueville's book might well have been *Concerning Equality in America*. See Bradley, *Democracy in America*, pp. xxv, note 21.

[7]Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 2:334.

[8]Tocqueville devotes chapter 6 to "What Sort Of Despotism Democratic Nations Have To Fear." See *Democracy in America*, 2:316-321.

class in America. They were strongly religious and moral. They believed in religious freedom and the separation of church and state. They were energetic, reasonably well-educated, and caring.

On the dark side, however, Tocqueville recognized that, politically and socially, the principles of democracy and equality were not respected for African-Americans and American Indians. (He said little or nothing about the disenfranchisement of American women.) Most Americans in southern states accepted the ugly reality of slavery. African-Americans, even if free in northern states, were discriminated against throughout the United States, and American Indians were treated badly. Culturally, Tocqueville saw most Americans as mediocre, easily flattered, and not up to the highest aristocratic standards of beauty and taste.

OTHER CRITICS OF POPULAR RULE AND JUDGMENT

It is valuable here, for purposes of contrast, to compare Tocqueville to other critics of the character of ordinary men and women, and of the possibility of reconciling excellence and consent. Tocqueville was a friendly critic, but not an uncritical friend. Other critics have been much less kind. They have called attention to the evidence-from Moses through Marx, from Plato to the present-that suggests the impossibility of reconciling excellence and consent, politically, socially, or culturally. Strikingly, two main threads run through this "evidence": (l) mistrust of people, and thus their character, and (2) the assumption of a political or intellectual elite that knows what is best.

Consider, they argue, Moses and the Children of Israel in the wildnerness, after their escape from their bondage in Egypt. The people of Israel are frightened, fickle, anxious, resentful, naive, stubborn, sinful, and rebellious. Moses must conduct a continuous battle to discipline and civilize them in order to lead them toward a higher ethical religion. Moses was a great leader, teacher, and prophet. However, was he not, these critics ask, also an authoritarian magician, or, at best, a divinely empowered dictator, far removed from the principle of the consent of the governed?

Consider Plato. In the Socratic dialogues, the masses-*hoi polloi*-are ignorant, self interested, jealous of their betters, hostile to the rich, mercurial, materialistic, short-sighted, cruel, and susceptible to demagogues and tyrants. They put Socrates to death. They cannot really endure his ceaseless searching for the good life, the fully examined life. They are enticed by demagogues and tyrants who appeal to their worst instincts. Consequently, argues Plato, for their own good, they should be led by philosopher kings-and queens.

Consider Dostoyevsky's Grand Inquisitor. The Grand Inquisitor maintains that people are "feeble," "weak," "rebellious," foolish," "vile," "base," "vicious," and "worthless." They reject freedom at any price. Their troublesome consciences can only be held captive by "miracle, mystery, and authority."[9]

Consider Karl Marx's communist heirs. They reveal little fundamental confidence in the people. The working class is supposed to be the great source of value, but the definition and implementation of the excellent communist life is not left to the masses. The masses must be led by an elite-the Communist party, a group of zealous professional revolutionaries who know what is best for the people. Thus, the communist formula leads from the dictatorship of the proletariat through the dictatorship of the party through the dictatorship of the politburo to the tyrannical dictatorship of big brother Joseph Stalin or big brother Mao Tse Tung.

Consider even the wise, gentle liberal, John Stuart Mill. He, too, has his doubts about the compatibility of excellence and consent. As an intellectual aristocrat, Mill maintained that the few have the proper standards whereas the many threaten to debase those standards. Hence, one must, Mill argued, rely on freedom to safeguard the creative minority. Mill advocated proportional representation and plural voting to safeguard excellence, creativity, and the creative minority against the tyranny of the majority. Moreover, Mill sadly confessed, in an immature and backward land, even despotism might be justified.

It is easy for those who claim to possess *arete*, or excellence, to abandon the battle to reconcile excellence and consent, and to give up efforts to encourage the kind of human character capable of achieving such reconciliation. It is easy to retreat into snobbery. It is easy to withdraw from the hustle and bustle of the *agora*, the marketplace of ideas, the center of social and cultural life, the political arena. It is easy to sanction authoritarian notions in politics or in arts and letters.

It is easy to accept, uncritically, the modern argument of a critic such as Jose Oretega y Gasset in his biting indictment of mass democracy, *The Revolt of the Masses*.[10] This is the indictment that argues that popular government does not lead straight to the republic of taste and talent, to the triumph of virtue and beauty, to the government of sense and statesmanship. Rather, Ortega argues, the revolt of the masses, with or without totalitarian dictatorship, produces the dominance of popular government devoid of the aristocratic virtues that have made Western civilization great. The crude materialistic appetites of the masses, their lack of aesthetic and cultural standards, the ascendancy of quantity over

[9]Dostoyevski, *The Brothers Karamazov*, bk. 5, pp. 262, 264, 265, 266, 268, 271. For my own critique of the Grand Inquisitor's argument, see, "Some Reflections on the Grand Inquisitor and Modern Democratic Theory," *Ethics* 67 (July 1957): 249-256. I argue (p. 253) that "balance, sufficient responsibility, democratic leadership, and governmental moderation" "underwrite the success of the democratic experiment." I conclude (p. 256) that the "sobering realization that democracy is by no means inevitable serves to emphasize the need to maintain a healthy and functioning pluralistic society in the interest of freedom and democracy."

[10]Jose Ortega y Gasset, *The Revolt of the Masses* (1932) (New York: Mentor, 1950). For a response to those worried about rule by the masses via majority rule, see my *The Revival of Democratic Theory* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1962), pp. 117-131.

quality, the tyranny of the majority-in a word, the barbarism of the masses-these portend the decline and demise of Western civilization.

Tocqueville-in contrast to Jose Ortega y Gasset and other adverse critics-provides more hope for American democracy in its efforts to reconcile excellence and consent. However, can we move beyond Tocqueville's qualified assessment of American character and the American democratic experiment?

BEYOND TOCQUEVILLE

In my own response to the problem of reconciling excellence and consent, I would like to highlight three relevant points. The first point relates to the fundamental concord between excellence and consent; the second, to the significant popular acceptance and practice of excellence in a democracy; and the third, to the creative possibilities of democratic leadership.

First, there is, in theory, no inevitable conflict between democratic philosophy and the principle of excellence. Despite the sometimes unreflective, crass, and hedonistic appetites of the many, democracy and excellence are not inevitable mortal enemies. Indeed, there are grounds for believing that they are, fundamentally, harmonious. Theoretically, democracy is committed to a natural aristocracy because it is dedicated to the idea that each person should have the opportunity, and be given the consideration, essential to realize the best in herself or himself. Excellence, like potentiality, is unknown until expressed. Consequently, democracy requires that the path to excellence be kept open to all. Genuine opportunity for all and equality of consideration are essential to the birth, growth, flowering, and identification of excellence. Excellence may be an actual possession of a minority, but the recognition of the excellent must be based on their achievements. The identity of those seeking entry into the community of excellence is not knowable except through testing. This is why all individuals must have the most favorable conditions for nurturing their potential for excellence. The French in 1789-in the revolution that both troubled and stimulated Tocqueville-recognized this when they insisted on the "career open to talents." Of course, the dynamic American, democratic, open society-nourished by the frontier, and uninhibited by feudal restrictions of wealth and birth (as Tocqueville clearly recognized)-operated generally, if not invariably, to reward merit. Thus democracy, because it both encourages and facilitates the demonstration of excellence, cannot be opposed to superior achievement in any of the many fields of human endeavor: in government, in social life, in economic enterprise, or in the literature, the sciences, and the arts.

Second, in practice, the concept of excellence has a strong and popular base in a democracy, and that base, however limited, is expanding. Time and space do not allow me to develop this theme in all fields. Consequently, let me focus only on two highly significant fields: sports and science. In the United States, for example, there is no doubt about the popular

enthusiasm for excellence in sports and the popular appreciation of science. Both science and sports have deep roots in American social mores, and science, of course, is now intimately linked to national survival, competitiveness, and prosperity. Moreover, sports have a profound sociological effect upon the American community at various levels, from baseball to bowling to bridge, and in major ways influences and is influenced by the humanities and the social sciences.

In making this argument-in Tocqueville's spirit-I do not ignore the pressures that build up in a democracy against excellence. I do not overlook literary, musical, cinematic, and pornographic trash, or political trash. Many conditions militate against excellence in politics and ethics, in education, in literature, and in the arts. I merely note, in response, that the Bible will outsell the latest trashy bestseller and that Beethoven will outsell the latest trashy musician.

Moreover, the continuing battle against mediocrity can be fought with the assistance of creative democratic leadership at all levels of society. For his insistence on such creative democratic leadership, we are indebted to Tocqueville. Such leadership, for its success, as Tocqueville again perceived, must rely on the good sense-the good character-of the American people.

To this third and final point I now turn.

Of course, it is one thing to encourage the discovery and identification of excellence, and another, democratically, to place the excellent in conditions of rightful authority. But it has been done. Tocqueville rightfully emphasized the creative leadership of the American constitutional founding fathers. With the help of all those committed to excellence, it can be done more regularly and successfully, despite the current sceptics who bemoan the morass of current political leadership.

Pericles was one such democratic leader committed to excellence. His democratic model of the *polis*, the small Greek city-state-although disturbingly limited by contemporary American standards of democratic citizenship-can still provide us with inspiration in reconciling excellence and consent.

"It is true," Pericles observed, "that we are called a democracy, for government is in the hands of the many and not of the few. But while the law secures equal justice to all alike . . . the claim of excellence is also recognized; and when a citizen is in any way distinguished, he is preferred . . . not as a matter of privilege, but as the reward of merit."[11]

Thomas Jefferson is another illustration of a democratic philosopher-king. He too recognized that it was a vital mission of a democratic society to select, train, and place a nation's natural aristocrats in positions of leadership. This is why Jefferson was so dedicated to that democratic educational ideal that has now become the heart of the American system.

[11]Pericles, Funeral Oration, in Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, trans. Richard Crawley, (New York: Dutton, Everyman's Library, 1936), bk. 2, ch. 37.

In the twentieth century, another American leader reminded us that democracy appreciates both poetry and elevation, that a democracy must be dedicated to excellence in all realms of human endeavor, and that its very spiritual salvation demands the reconciliation of excellence and consent. In a remarkable speech at Amherst College, a month before he died, president John F. Kennedy, reminded us:

> "When power leads . . . [people] toward arrogance, poetry reminds . . . [them] of . . . [their] limitations. When power narrows the areas of . . . [our] concern, poetry reminds . . . [us] of the richness and diversity of . . . [our] existence. When power corrupts, poetry cleanses. For art establishes the basic human truths which must serve as the touchstone of our judgment."[12]

And President Kennedy concluded:

> "I look forward to an America which will not be afraid of grace and beauty . . . an America which will steadily enlarge cultural opportunities for all our citizens . . . an America which commands respect not only for its strength but for its civilization . . ."[13]

Is the American character up to the test of reconciling excellence and consent, freedom and responsibility, liberty and authority? In *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville thought that Americans had a fighting chance to do so. More than 165 years later, Americans are still struggling with the problem of reconciling excellence and consent, but they have demonstrated that such reconciliation is, if not perfect, reasonably successful in many areas, and capable of further expansion.

[12]Speech at Amherst College, 26 October 1963, in *Public Papers . . . of John F. Kennedy*, 1963 (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1964), p. 817.
[13]Ibid.