

The racial attitudes of Mill and de Tocquville

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In this essay I will examine the racial attitudes of famed political authors John Stuart Mill and Alexis de Tocquville in light of the conception of racism as laid out by George M. Fredrickson in his book "Racism: A Short History". By Fredrickson's definition, racism is not, as the common conception may hold, based solely on skin color, nor eye or hair color, nor any other genetic, inherited, biological factors; notions of race can be also be built upon linguistic, religious, or otherwise cultural, non-biological differences (3, 7-8). But just holding such notions of 'race', be they biologically or culturally defined, is not enough to constitute racism. Fredrickson most succinctly sums up his notion of the concept of 'racism' on page five of the eponymous book: "It is when differences that might otherwise be considered ethnocultural are regarded as innate, indelible, and unchangeable that a racist attitude or ideology can be said to exist."

In other words, it is not merely the feeling that "you are different from me and I strongly dislike you for that" which constitutes racism; Fredrickson calls that merely xenophobia (from Greek, meaning a fear of the different, alien, or other). Rather, racism only exists in the feeling that "you are *innately* and *permanently* different, and thus are *innately* and *permanently* inferior"; a sense of biological or cultural determinism which inalterably classifies people as fit for different social strata, or in some cases, as unfit to exist at all (6). With that concept of racism laid out, let us now examine the racial attitudes of de Tocquville and Mill, and see whether or not those racial attitudes, as elitist as they may seem to us in contemporary society, are in fact racist by Fredrickson's definition.

In *Democracy in America*, Chapter XVIII, Alexis de Tocqueville describes the plight of the Native Americans and of the black slaves in the United States as it stood in 1830, particularly as regards the orientation of these groups towards the process of 'civilization'. Civilization, as de

Tocqueville seems to understand it, involves settled life, as in cities and towns, and as opposed to a nomadic, wandering life (**2nd subsection, paragraph 13**); but more importantly, de Tocqueville's concept of civilization involves industry, self-discipline, and hard work driven toward progress and development. This conception of civilization is, quite importantly, not something that is exclusively white, European, or Western, nor even something which all whites have; it is not merely synonymous with white, European, or Western culture. It is not even something which the more affluent European social strata have more of; in fact quite the opposite. (**2nd subsection, paragraph 16**) To de Tocqueville, not all white people are civilized, and the particular examples he gives are the European aristocrats (his own peers) and the slave-holding plantation owners of the American south, both groups which live lives of leisure and disdain the industrious, disciplined labor that is necessary for civilization, looking down upon it as something which is beneath them, fit for lower classes or slaves.

As regards the non-white races in America, de Tocqueville appears to have great sympathy for the 'Negro' and 'Indian' as he calls them (e.g. **1st subsection, paragraph 7; 2nd subsection, paragraph 10**), and it seems that even though he calls them uncivilized, he does not hold them as altogether lesser people, neither inherently nor even incidentally. Most importantly, he sees both groups as civilizable in principle — that is, the Indian and the Negroes could, if given the appropriate opportunity and with sufficient cooperation on their part, become civilized — and thus by Fredrickson's definition he is clearly not racist, for whatever differences there are between whites and non-whites are not held to be fixed and unalterable. However, he does hold both non-white races in America to be at present uncivilized, and he is highly pessimistic about their fates in the face of the march of civilization across America, which de Tocqueville sees as an unstoppable force which both Indians and Negroes, for their respective reasons, face great challenges in becoming one with.

The Indians he sees as akin to his own peers in France, the aristocratic nobility. By his

description both the Indians and the French aristocrats are energetic and proud peoples who prefer to spend their time hunting and fighting, who very much disdain the boring, monotonous labor of industry, which they see as indignant and demeaning. **(2nd subsection, paragraph 16)** .

It is for this reason that de Tocqueville considers them uncivilized — the aristocrat and the Indian alike. Also for this reason, he foresees that the Indians will continue to resist the process of civilization, despite their capability of it **(2nd subsection, paragraph 22)**, much as many of the European aristocrats have; and that this resistance will be their downfall, as the civilized life is far more productive than the uncivilized one. In emphasis of this latter point, de Tocqueville relates the tale of his trip down the Ohio river **(3rd subsection, paragraphs 16-25ish)**. On one shore lay the slave-state of Kentucky, which as a slave state was largely uncivilized (in this sense of being full of productive, self-driven activity), and thus Kentucky lay quiet, sparsely populated, and still mostly forested. Meanwhile on the other shore lay the slave-free state of Ohio, where the entire populace was forced to work for their living (having no recourse to slave labor), creating a far busier, more industrious land with many populous urban areas simply bustling with productive activities. This evident difference in productive capacities renders the civilized U.S. settlers and the government backing them far more powerful than the hunter-gatherer societies of the Native Americans, and thus if the latter refuse to civilize themselves, they will be, if not defeated in outright conflict, then at the least out-competed for natural resources by the expanding United States civilization **(2nd subsection, in entirety)**. Looking back on the nearly two centuries of history since de Tocqueville's writing, it seems unfortunate that this prediction has come true, and the native populations of North America are now largely displaced from their lands, having been pushed further and further west as the United States civilization progressed; and likewise, it seems that those of their numbers who have survived have indeed adopted the ways of civilization, as many of the natives of Mexico and California took up the Spanish ways and became a part of their civilization.

Just as with the Indians, de Tocqueville seems to have sympathy for the plight of the Negros, speaking quite poorly of the conditions of slavery in which they live (**1st subsection, paragraph 7**), and holding that the black slaves could, if freed, become civilized and thus fully the equals of the whites who at the time were their masters. Further, he holds that this situation would, if successfully brought about, be for the benefit of blacks and whites alike. However, as with the Indians, de Tocqueville sees very little hope for the future of the Negros, despite their potential for civilization. As de Tocqueville sees it, since percentage of black slaves the southern states greatly outnumbered that of the northern states, the freeing of southern slaves gives rise to the problem of the masses; the concern that equality will bring with it the downfall of society to the lowest common denominator, or worse, the upheaval of society as the masses use their newfound power to exact revenge upon their former masters. For, if merely future generations were set free, as was the practice in the northern states, the great many slaves still in chains would begin to realize their plight, and such apparent inequality will drive them to revolt. Alternatively, if all were set free immediately, they would find themselves as a class wholly deprived of all wealth and property, the whole of it being owned by their former masters; and so destitute and poor, yet granted newfound political power, the blacks of the south might use that power to take what they lacked from their former masters by force. The only alternatives to these scenarios, de Tocqueville claims, are either the complete separation of the two races, which he deems impossible due to the sheer numbers of people involved; or the complete intermingling of the two, which he finds highly improbably due to the sheer repugnance that the white feel toward the blacks (**3rd subsection, paragraph 40ish - 48**). Thus it seems to de Tocqueville that the slave states in American face the uncomfortable dilemma of plunging their society into ruin if slavery is abolished, or of maintaining the immoral system of slavery in place. Fortunately, unlike with the Indians, this prediction of de Tocquevilles has not been borne out, and since the time of his writing slavery has been abolished from America, the former slaves have taken up

occupations alongside their former masters, and as de Tocqueville foresaw in the case of this unlikely event, it has been for the benefit of both black and white alike.

In the final analysis, it seems to me that de Tocqueville is not at all racist. He speaks sometimes in ways that today would imply racism, for instance calling white people more intelligent; but by context he seems to me to be speaking of education as a matter of cultural influence, rather than of intelligence as an innate capacity, as evidenced by his comparison of the “savage culture” which children of mixed European-Indian heritage inherit from the Indian side with the “intelligence” (i.e. education) they get from their European side. **(2nd subsection, paragraph 21)**. Further, though he does paint large demographics with a very broad brush, portraying whites, Indians, and Negroes as homogeneous groups, that sort of sweeping generalization is acceptable for the sort of broad analysis he is doing. Likewise, his approach lacks the ‘emic’ touch of modern anthropology, failing to capture the viewpoint of the Native Americans and black slaves themselves, and thus presenting an inevitable European aristocratic bias; but this is not a particular failing of de Tocqueville himself but rather one of the anthropological method of his day, which always examined foreign cultures from the outside, rather than from within the cultural context. What is most important in the end is that de Tocqueville does not paint the ethnic groups he examines as inalterably inferior, even though he depicts them as generally in need of certain cultural changes (namely, civilization), and even proposes great challenges for their accomplishing those changes. But as he allows for the possibility of those changes occurring, de Tocqueville is not, properly speaking, a racist.

Let us turn now to John Stuart Mill, who also concerns himself with the relation of civilization to the various races of the world. To Mill, civilization is most importantly understood as a prerequisite for self-government **(Rep Gov, Ch IV, par 6)**, in that the self-discipline that is core to civilization solves the problem of the masses. That is to say he believes that a populace which is not so self-disciplined will decay into social and economic ruin if

discipline is not imposed from outside (**Rep Gov, Ch I, par 9**); and so in order to warrant allowing people to be free from such external imposition of discipline, those people must be able to discipline themselves — in other words, they must become civilized. Thus, as democracy “lowers the eminences” to the common level, civilization must “raise the plains” of that common level, lest the process of democratization merely lower everyone altogether and bring that society to ruin.

As regards race and civilization, Mill does not see this self-discipline as a distinctly European characteristic. According to Mill, Europeans are merely historically lucky to have become civilized; they were the right people in the right circumstances at the right time. Were it not for the fortuitous history of the Roman Empire (with its emphasis on law and order), the Germanic barbarians who brought it down (with their love of liberty), and the rise of Christianity (with its notions of an absolute authority beyond Earthly powers), Europeans would not have had the necessary concepts and attitudes to become civilized of their own accord. Further, Mill holds that Europe is still (at the time of his writing) not completely civilized, with vestiges of barbarism still lingering in the old feudal structures; and further, that this process of civilization is not manifest destiny for the western world, but could still be stalled or even reversed by conservative interests, if liberal-minded people are not careful. Thus Mill seems not to be essentialist in his notions of civilization, holding that it is simply a certain (superior) way of life which is not inherently European, but potentially open to anyone; and so by Fredrickson’s definition, Mill cannot be called a racist. However, Mill does have a rather condescending attitude toward the incidental characteristics of non-European races, and as a consequence of those attitudes he prescribes what most today would consider ghastly political policies of colonial despotism in the name of progress, improvement, development, and ultimately, civilization.

Though his ultimate goal in his prescribed policies is to bring freedom to these uncivilized peoples, he holds that the freedom thus aimed for is a better kind of freedom than that which

they currently enjoy. While Mill is thought of in contemporary times as the bastion of liberty, he also places great emphasis on the ‘improvement’ of societies; for it is only in an ‘improved’ society, i.e. a civilized one, that liberty leads to further improvement, rather than social stagnation or decay; and Mill holds that, if necessary, liberty can be initially withheld from a people in order to ‘improve’ them to the point that liberty will do them well. **(Rep Gov, Ch I, par 9)** Mill speaks of many non-Europeans as “races in their childhood”, and holds that they thus ought to be treated as children — with the civilized white people in the role of the parents, of course. And so, just as parents are expected to command and discipline their children until those children have developed good habits, eventually growing old enough to be let free to manage their own lives, Mill believes that it is permissible, in fact even right, that a civilized people should conquer and dominate an uncivilized one until the latter has developed the self-discipline to govern themselves freely.

Thus while Mill is not racist by Fredrickson’s definition — and I am inclined still to consider Fredrickson’s definition of racism as sufficient — he is highly discriminatory in another way, and Fredrickson himself does seem to allow that this sort of attitude, while not racist, may be an “attitude that often creates conflict and misery” (Fredrickson 7). Myself, while I will agree with Mill as far as the analogy of ‘uncivilized’ (undisciplined) people with children goes, I would argue that that parallel reflects as much on the way that we ought to treat children as it does on the way that we ought to treat less-civilized peoples. Namely, I believe we ought to treat children the same as we ought to treat everyone else: offering them our protection, aid, and guidance where they will accept it, and otherwise leaving them to learn on their own, even from their mistakes, only stepping in to stop them from harming others or from utterly destroying themselves. Applied to international relations, this approach would allow us in the civilized world to trade with ‘uncivilized’ peoples; to send (non-coercive) missionaries and the like to exchange ideas with those peoples (even so far as arguing that those people ought to adopt our

ideas, though those arguments must stand or fall on their own rational merit of course); and even to intervene in foreign political affairs, to the extent of defending some group from an aggressor, or liberating an oppressed people from despotic rule (if some portion of the population is in fact, by their own admission and by liberal standards, being oppressed, and our intervention is both warranted by our own standards and welcomed by those we seek to aid). But outright conquest and despotic rule, even in the name of some greater good, I find morally unjustifiable.

Furthermore, I find that Mill takes an unnecessarily race-oriented approach to his analysis of who is or is not civilized, or rather, who ought or ought not to be assumed as civilized; granting the blanket treatment of all Europeans as civilized (even as he acknowledges that they in fact are not), without offering the same benefit-of-the-doubt to non-Europeans. Thus, while I cannot rightly call Mill a racist per se, I do strongly disapprove of many of his policies toward non-European peoples in his historical context, and toward 'uncivilized' people in abstract.

Works Cited:

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