

Alexis de Tocqueville and the Uneasy Friendship between Reason and Freedom

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A Science of Freedom

Free persons and societies depend on the confident exercise of human reason. Our capacity to gain significant understanding of ourselves and the world, and our ability to take actions that improve our lives and society, are worthy of some pride. Despotism flourishes when people are convinced that reasonable people can accomplish little through their own efforts. Alexis de Tocqueville (1805–1859) worried that individuals in modern democracies will allow their freedoms to fall fallow in the belief that irresistible historical forces govern their lives. It was an audacious variety of rationality that engendered this fatalistic attitude, however. “New kinds of slavery” follow, Tocqueville finds, when reason becomes “insolent” (*OR* 300n53; see also *DA* 641, 662; *Rec.* 62)¹ Having divined our collective destiny, Enlightenment thinkers derived an imperative to realize it through ambitious innovations in social engineering. Those who claimed to be qualified sought authority to execute this plan.² Unimpressed by ordinary

¹ Page references to Alexis de Tocqueville’s principal works are cited in this chapter as follows:

DA *Democracy in America*, trans. and eds. Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

OR *The Old Regime and the Revolution, Volume One*, eds. François Furet and François Mélonio, trans. Alan S. Kahan (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

Rec. *Recollections: The French Revolution of 1848*, eds. J. P. Mayer and A. P. Kerr, trans. George Lawrence (New Brunswick: Transaction Books, 1987).

² For significant treatments of Tocqueville’s criticism of rationalism in politics, see Raymond Aron, *Main Currents in Sociological Thought: Volume One* (London and New York: Routledge, 2019); Richard Boyd and Conor Williams, “Intellectuals and Statesmanship? Tocqueville, Oakeshott, and the Distinction between Theoretical and Practical Knowledge,” in *Alexis de Tocqueville and the Art of Democratic Statesmanship*, eds. Brian Danoff and L. Joseph Hebert, Jr., 117–36 (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2010); James Ceaser, “Alexis de Tocqueville on Political Science, Political Culture, and the Role of the Intellectual” *The American Political Science Review* 79, no. 3 (1985): 656–672; Peter Augustine Lawler, *The Restless Mind: Alexis de Tocqueville on the Origin and Perpetuation of Human Liberty* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1993), and “Tocqueville on Pantheism, Materialism, and Catholicism,” in *Democracy and Its Friendly Critics: Tocqueville and Political Life Today*, ed. Peter Augustine

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personal and political liberties, they promised emancipation and equality (especially equality!)³ for all, armed with the rectitude and certitude that only a truncated conception of human nature can bring.

In pre-Revolutionary France, the abstract theories of intellectuals who had little actual political experience paved the way for rationalistic ideologies and political institutions premised on them (*OR* 197). Democratic souls, Tocqueville observes, make recourse to general ideas and causes in explaining the world. They imagine that systems are readily transformed by the imposition of abstract principles and universal rules (*DA* 411, 415), without being particularly solicitous of specific persons or complex particulars (*DA* 456-57). Proceeding apace from the top, the reconstruction of society shall penetrate the foundations of society (*OR* 196-97). French philosophes were hostile toward the biblical tradition, yet their ideologies affirmed absolutes and resembled religious crusades (*OR* 99). Their followers who sought power exhibited a “rival’s pride” toward God and a “parvenu’s pride” toward human beings (*OR* 300n53).

Tocqueville is a modern liberal,⁴ whose ideas are largely informed by Aristotle. He recognizes that politics should not be mistaken for what is highest in human beings. As political animals, exclusion from political participation is dehumanizing, but so, too, is being totally dominated by political priorities. We are also rational beings. Philosophical or scientific inquiries

Lawler, 31-48 (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2004); Jacob T. Levy, *Rationalism, Pluralism, and Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Daniel J. Mahoney, “Tocqueville and Socialism,” in *Tocqueville’s Defense of Human Liberty: Current Essays*, eds. Peter Augustine Lawler and Joseph Alulis, 177-202 (New York: Garland Publishing, 1993); Pierre Manent, *Tocqueville and the Nature of Democracy*, trans. John Waggoner (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996); Harvey C. Mansfield, “Tocqueville on Religion and Liberty,” *American Political Thought* 5, no. 2 (2016): 250-276; Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop, “Tocqueville’s New Political Science,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Tocqueville*, ed. Cheryl B. Welch, 81-107 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Joshua Mitchell, *The Fragility of Freedom: Tocqueville on Religion, Democracy, and the American Future* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995).

³ Ralph C. Hancock, “The Modern Revolution and the Collapse of Moral Analogy,” in *Democracy and Its Friendly Critics: Tocqueville and Political Life Today*, ed. Peter Augustine Lawler (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2004), 56.

⁴ See Levy, *Rationalism, Pluralism, and Freedom*, 212.

inherently exceed politics and cannot be subordinated to political purposes without serving prejudice and power rather than truth. Tocqueville's political philosophy recommends distance between politics and philosophy for the sake of both—or rather, for our sake, as thinkers and actors.

Politics and philosophy have an uneasy friendship because reason and liberty are indispensable to each other and yet in tension. Intellectual integrity and discovery require freedom, and freedom requires reason so to avoid descending harmfully into licence. Excessive rationalism, however, is the enemy of freedom of action and thought alike—both in the minds of those who adhere to it, and in the lives of those subjected to it. Human beings reach their potential only through responsible voluntary action, in imperfect circumstances with incomplete information, in association with others who are likewise imperfect but free and reasonable, settling for results that are less than ideal. Political rationalism assumes thoroughgoing responsibility for setting things straight in a way that relieves individuals of responsibility for developing the qualities of mind and character needed to live well themselves. It pretends knowledge of what is, and what is to be done, saving individuals the need to judge and act for themselves. Scorning negotiation and compromise, the techniques of rational experts require only acquiescence and compliance.

Like Aristotle, Tocqueville maintains that political science should both study and benefit society.⁵ Tocqueville holds that the preservation of human liberty requires a new political science to correct the pretentious and contentious science behind the French Revolution (*DA* 7, 12), which threatens to dominate modern democracies moving forward. Enlightenment rationalism is

⁵ Mansfield and Winthrop, "Tocqueville's New Political Science," 81.

actually a partisan perspective that disregards and suppresses aspects of the human condition. It pretends to be aloof and objective, but its motivations are more psychological than purely logical.⁶ Its preoccupation with techniques of control and central planning renders human beings childlike, dependent and irresponsible. For the sake of achieving systemic justice, it is systematically unjust toward individuals and destructive of their communities.

Freedom distinguishes men from beasts. It brings citizens into contact with each other. It directs people toward goods beyond those of the body (*OR* 88). An emphasis on freedom reminds us that society exists for the sake of people, not vice versa. Emancipating people from the burdens of deliberation, judgment, and action may seem well-intended, but it abolishes the distinctions between us and beasts,⁷ who can be kept as pets but are often only chattel or prey. The more Enlightenment rationalism succeeds at approaching its goals on its own partial terms, the more distorts us. Risk, uncertainty, conflict, and disorder come along with freedom, but denying or ducking them is untenable and detrimental.

On the French Question

The Old Regime in France collapsed from within well before the Revolution finished it off, Tocqueville argues (*OR* 162-63). A vast and centralized administrative entity, headed by a royal court abetted by a priestly class, its regime was short on politics properly so-called. Having surrendered and abandoned their traditional responsibilities, the old aristocrats had become mere oligarchs, or as Tocqueville calls them, “a caste” (*OR* 156). Withdrawing from public life, they retained their socioeconomic status by convention alone. Politically inept, arrogant, and indolent,

⁶ Lawler “Tocqueville on Pantheism,” 35.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 45.

unable to justify their own privileges, they delegitimized themselves (*OR* 117-18, 222).⁸ Peasants gained land ownership opportunities but on unequal terms with aristocrats. Evidence of arbitrariness abounded in the form of exceptions and privileges, while “the most natural and necessary guarantees for all citizens” were not secure (*OR* 179). People had many grievances but neither political experience nor dependable recourse (*OR* 158, 182). Feudalism was neither abolished nor intact; political obligations dissolved but their odious material residue remained. A bureaucratic class performing the tasks of public administration beneath the dignity of aristocrats supplanted them, and they became dependent on its favor. Upon Revolution’s arrival, France was populated by apolitical people at all ranks. The men of action who led the Revolution or ruled in its wake were people in whom the virtues of the active life had not been cultivated by custom or profession (*OR* 162-63). They relied mainly on theories and speculations propelled by vision and determination (*OR* 196-97, 200, 202).

What noble forms of responsible freedom and greatness of spirit Tocqueville attributed to the old aristocracy at its best were ancient history. The Revolutionary movement “slaughtered” and “alienated” the nobility (*OR* 173), eliminating the possibility of establishing a stable mixed regime. Vacillating between republican absolutism and sundry autocracies during Tocqueville’s lifetime, French politics neither nurtured nor rewarded statesmanship. Despite its “faults and prejudices,” Tocqueville advises post-Revolutionary France to look toward the Old Regime to recover “a little of their greatness” (*OR* 179). Men then exhibited love and faith toward God and king and were less enamored with coercion. Too proud to casually abuse their responsibilities, they desired glory and to be worthy of it (*OR* 179). Even the lives of the peasants in the Old

⁸ See Levy, *Rationalism, Pluralism, and Freedom*, 216-17.

Regime were less regulated and regimented than the subjects of the Republic or the Emperors (*OR* 114, 131, 179, 183, 192).

If Tocqueville romanticizes the old aristocracy, it is only to correct the prevailing calumnious caricature of it. He exhorts people in democratic times to live in a fashion befitting dignified free persons. But those who have not known freedom are most easily made to spurn it. The conjunction of reason and freedom can only be learned truly by being lived; but lacking that, instances of it from the past are better teachers of it than abstract systems of thought promising it in the future. If Tocqueville doesn't praise democracy enough it's only because it already enjoys an abundance of vocal partisans (*DA* 400). He harbors no illusions about the possibility of restoring aristocracy (*DA* 666).

Uniform, centralized, and calculated statecraft emerged before the Revolution thanks to the theories of the physiocrats. During Tocqueville's time, the doctrines of Auguste Comte epitomized this approach to governance.⁹ The very goal is to render prudence, debate, and judgment unnecessary. These frameworks form the basis of modern theories that emphasize material interests and prescribe and delimit action in terms of what a rational person would do, without needing to consult or persuade actual people—then ruling everybody so they'll behave accordingly. Tocqueville sees these attempts to transcend politics as an "immense public evil" (*OR* 208; cf. *DA* 408) that tramples upon human nature. A positivistic approach that treats economics as king is practically heaven-sent for popular dictatorships, rejecting limited government in order to do whatever they declare materially necessary in the name of the people.

⁹ See Auguste Comte, *System of Positive Polity* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1875), 2. Tocqueville never explicitly acknowledges Comte in his writings. See Aron, *Main Currents*, 201.

After the disorder and disappointment of the Revolution, people began to search for a new master.¹⁰ Through several rapid alterations of regime, centralized schemes for public administration found immense opportunities for continuity and growth (*OR* 245). “[L]ike some rivers go underground only to reappear” as “the same stream between different banks” (*OR* 85), the centralizing tendencies of pre-Revolutionary France rapidly resurfaced and continued to flow in what followed. People clamored for the state to do what they could not do for themselves (*DA* 88), thanks to what they had done to themselves, not understanding that what had been done to them previously left them ill-equipped to accomplish what they initially envisioned. Under the Old Regime, administrative centralization had already eroded the authority of noble lords and made provisions for the poor a micromanaged, nationalized operation (*OR* 121, 123). Generally seeking policies “equally applicable over the entire kingdom” (*OR* 123), according to Tocqueville, “the government already exchanged the role of sovereign for that of guardian” (*OR* 124), well before later regimes expanded and consolidated matters.

Democratization and the Authority of Science

The French Enlightenment spawned a larger literate population. Its intellectualized elite regarded it as its responsibility to assume ruling offices rather than create the conditions under which the French people would learn self-rule.¹¹ The people were furthermore seen as in need of major renovation to become suitable for enlightened society (*DA* 188, 340; *OR* 245). As a scholar and a statesman, Tocqueville observed multiple attempts to implement rationalistic

¹⁰ Auguste Comte, *The Positive Philosophy of Auguste Comte*, trans. Harriet Martineau (New York: Calvin Blanchard, 1855), 6, 36.

¹¹ Mansfield, “Tocqueville on Religion and Liberty,” 265.

systems after the Old Regime fell. His political science endeavors to explain why theirs necessarily fail (*Rec.* 68).

Little effort is required to convince souls conformed to democratic mores that inequalities are unjust. That principle is easy to apply, and it gratifies. To them, expertise in the applied science of equality is an exception; they who possess it may enjoy legitimate advantages and authority. But equality is a quality of the relationships between people. Tocquevillian political science is concerned instead with the qualities that people themselves possess, and how they acquire them, rather than with conforming people's souls to the exigencies of a theoretically preferable system. Happily, the system that promotes personal self-development and self-interest properly understood encourages and rewards sociability and interdependency (*DA* 502, 648). Modern systems that focus instead on society as a whole turn people into solitary and dependent individuals (*DA* 641). Tocqueville's political science theorizes on the basis of empirical evidence, observing the effects of beliefs, behaviors, customs and institutions on people's lived lives,¹² offering practical counsel regarding these. It looks to inform particular communities of people about the conditions under which they are better able to govern their own lives. It's concerned with the justice of treating people as human beings—as responsible agents capable of engaging in reasonable and decent voluntary action—not as units to be coordinated in achieving some ideal configuration. Efforts to engineer justice systematically treat actual human beings unjustly, as less than they are or should be. Regarding people as beings of a sort that they are not in order to attempt to transform them into beings they cannot and oughtn't be by means that won't work, however much we wish they would and however hard we try, is unscientific.

¹² Tocqueville's method principally attends to what he calls the "social state." See *DA* 45.

Tocquevillian political science recognizes that causal factors in society are irreducibly complex, whereas tidy rationalist theories demand parsimony. They have a certain destination in mind, even if the manipulations they enjoin are vast, endless, and require constant retuning. Tocqueville knows you can only understand the present and predict the future with an appreciation of past ideas and arrangements (see *Rec.* 66). Enlightenment rationalism, zealously meddling in the present to realize the future, thinks the only reason to look to the past is to disavow it (*OR* 106). One can imagine the socialist leaders of Tocqueville's time, inheritors of eighteenth-century rationalism—depicted as fools in his *Recollections* (*Rec.* 101)—shouting “It’s 1848!” as if that were sufficient to validate their views and propel their program forward.¹³ Democracy renders people susceptible to ideologies masquerading as science, peddling general ideas, profiting from ignorance, preying on sentiment, engaging in flattery, and raising false hopes. “[T]he intellect of democratic peoples receives simple and general ideas with delight,” Tocqueville observes, adding, “[c]omplicated systems repel it, and it is pleased to imagine a great nation in which all of the citizens resemble a single model and are directed by a single power” (*DA* 640). Modern democracy prepares people for replacing God with government, and Providence with progressive public policy (*DA* 421; *OR* 144).¹⁴

Tocqueville knows that democratic people are disinclined to heed his appeal to appreciate and cultivate nobler qualities and embrace political forms that require and respect them. Their love for equality is fanatical (*DA* 480, 513) They regard universal, indiscriminate compassion as virtue (*DA* 538, cf. 409). Distrustful of other people's freedom, democratic individuals are ready to surrender their own. They would rather be freed from responsibility than free to exercise it.

¹³ See Mahoney, “Tocqueville and Socialism,” 184.

¹⁴ See Mitchell, *Fragility of Freedom*, 228; cf. Mansfield, “Tocqueville on Religion and Liberty,” 255.

Instead of personally developing and depending upon their own reasoning skills, they would rather see society impersonally rationalized on their behalf. A diminution of humanity follows from a mutually contemptuous divorce between reason and freedom and the concomitant disdain for the virtues that require both. Rationalist techniques and technicians are inherently partial, treating people as less than the fully developed creatures they could be in order to manipulate them more easily. Whatever belongs to the human spirit that resists reengineering they disregard, discourage, and dispense with. Democratization, which Tocqueville calls providential (*DA* 6-7), gradually affects human beings so that its premises in time become increasingly plausible and its explanations increasingly accurate (*DA* 408, 410). Masses of equally weak individuals who are dependent on the constant, comprehensive care of distant massive powers really do seem at the mercy of general causes, unable to manifest meaningful agency in their lives. Tocqueville charges himself with theoretically articulating which institutions, customs, measures, behaviors, and mindsets must be maintained in practice to ward off democratization's advancement toward its furthestmost ends.

Incorporating aristocratic qualities or proxies into the institutions of a democratic order and values of a democratic people is like trying to introduce elements of a mixed regime. But all regimes desire to see their principle proved altogether right by having it thoroughlygoingly realized in practice, democracy included. Mixed regimes are hard to keep because the few and the many alike are always each trying to seize absolute power over the whole. Technocratic democracy is freakish because it allows both sides to do so apparently simultaneously. From the perspective of the social engineer, whether he fancies himself a philosopher or policy-maker, mixed regimes look too messy, unfinished and impure. They look *irrational*. Whereas they depend on *phronesis*, modern social science is *techne* dressed up as *episteme* (see *DA* 199, 291)

What passes for prudence among political engineers is only cleverness and shrewdness in disguising or denying their utmost ends for the sake winning partial victories that keep the ball rolling down its preordained path.

Reason and Freedom in America

Democracy in America contains Tocqueville's reflections on how the American republic contains features that teach ordinary citizens how to participate in self-governance, gaining experiences that help them to combine freedom and reason in their individual lives and within their communities. American democracy was born without having to stage a revolution against an aristocratic order (*DA* 67, 485), but it happens to cultivate in Americans nobler qualities as they participate regularly in the demands of the active life. Even while they were still colonists under the authority of a distant crown, they developed many of the habits and structures of self-government that would serve them later as a republican nation.

Americans tend to be focused on material concerns in their education and everyday business, but they are attuned to non-material goods as citizens as religious believers (*OR* 206). Their regime is not formally mixed, but its federal system, separation of powers, heavy dependence on local governance, political and civil associations, and a free press get many people involved in many ways large and small (*DA* 64-65, 274). Thus, America lacks the concentrated central government and desiccated civil society of France. Tocqueville offers America as a model to the French for restoring freedom within a democratic framework. Imagine a Frenchman telling the French that they have anything to learn from Americans! At the same time, Tocqueville frets that American society might refashion itself along the lines of the French

model,¹⁵ descending into what he calls “mild despotism” should its mechanisms for moderating democratic excesses dwindle and deteriorate (*DA* 662-63).

Tocqueville’s concept of self-interest well understood stresses that it is not ultimately in an individual’s self-interest to always focus only narrowly on one’s material self-interest (*DA* 519, 522).¹⁶ Sharing the burdens and sacrifices that are associated with engaging in public life, getting involved in one’s community, participating in decision-making offices and processes, not to mention maintaining a religious association (*DA* 42; *Rec.* 65), all redound to one’s self-interest, and freedom, in the long run. These activities ennoble one’s soul too, but you have to appeal to democratic people with materialistic prejudices on terms they appreciate to get them to attend to concerns they would otherwise neglect to their detriment.¹⁷ Even if it’s questionable that every single individual’s personal self-interest is directly and measurably benefitted by attending to concerns that seem outside and above it, the overall prosperity and character of Americans generally is indirectly improved by having more people, across the country, involved in the practices of self-governance at all levels, rather than delegating those powers away. Restless activity in free association forestalls the advent of despotism (*DA* 9).

The result is a moderately enlightened general population with know-how and a can-do spirit, confident in their own abilities to accomplish great things together—even though there is always disagreement and contestation and only ever partial and temporary solutions. Americans are not great philosophers or artists, but they are tremendous businesspeople, technological

¹⁵ Hence his concern about the tyranny of the majority (*DA* 241). Remember, the majority of people are peaceful and well-meaning (*DA* 165). See also *DA* 145.

¹⁶ Mansfield, “Tocqueville on Religion and Liberty,” 264-266. On the distinction between “self-interest properly understood” and “rational calculation of self-interest,” see Richard Avramenko, *Courage: The Politics of Life and Limb* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2011), 219-220. See also Peter Augustine Lawler, “Tocqueville on the Doctrine of Interest,” in *Homeless and at Home in America*, 152-67 (South Bend: St. Augustine’s Press, 2007).

¹⁷ Manent, *Tocqueville and the Nature of Democracy*, 22, 113.

innovators, and passionate citizens (*DA* 461, 525, 528). Their skepticism regarding philosophies other than those that recommend figuring things out for oneself using one's own brains (*DA* 403) means that intellectuals lack authority among them (*DA* 46, 50). Their mindset is practical, and they are busybodies rather than passive recipients of boons. Because they get involved and pay attention, they acquire fair judgment and the ability to do business with each other, with respect to private and public matters alike. They don't rely on career scientists to tell them what to do or think. They have a free press, but they are smart enough to know that journalists are mostly vulgar "charlatans" (*DA* 189, cf. 178).

Americans are the beneficiaries of a political system of government that is not excessively systematic, devised by statesmen who understood that those occupying ruling offices—even founders—have great but nonetheless limited responsibilities. Individuals should be left free to mind their personal priorities, and future generations need opportunities make society more perfect.¹⁸ The founders cemented a system that encouraged and depended on widespread, regular political activity without trusting or exalting political powers. They were not even certain that the regime they established would last, on account of its demands and open-endedness. Freedom is inherently perilous and precariously perched, but it's more reasonable to endeavor to sustain popular liberty than to imagine we've become smart enough to forego it, especially when not everybody's equally enthusiastic about enlightened leadership. Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* is an attempt to theorize why a non-theoretical people live a preferable life in practice compared to people who adore theory and theorizers. The practices of the Americans correspond to a theoretically superior understanding of human nature—even though it, too, is flawed and partial in ways that will probably undermine it in time. By happy

¹⁸ Lawler, *Restless Mind*, 138, 153.

combination of accident (drawing on its received customs and given its environment) and design, the American regime is more theoretically sound, despite its intellectually unsophisticated population. It is even more democratic for being less theoretical.¹⁹ Why philosophize more when peoples who over-philosophize about politics live less well or fairly by comparison, in body and in spirit?

On Friendly Terms

Tocqueville recommends being reconciled to uncertain knowledge.²⁰ Modern rationalism in politics, however, is premised on the view, derivative of the premises of technologically-oriented modern natural science, that it is irrational to say in advance that anything is definitively impossible. Upon that premise, a false inference is made that it is irrational not to believe we can do whatever we put our minds to, given sufficient means and resolve. Doubting our ability—nay, our obligation—to fix the world seems not only unimaginative but complacent, and complicit with the suffering that continued imperfection brings. From the perspective of practical reason, however, the rationalist's attitude constitutes wishful thinking, both reckless and cowardly. So fearful of and frustrated with reality, it rails and rebels against it—proceeding often methodically and mechanically but sometimes intoxicatedly, but in any case, insolently. The combination of democracy and materialism, however, lends itself to adopting that faith,²¹ assuring its devotees of their righteousness. Meanwhile, the moderate person who hesitates to confess, submit to, and work toward it, looks ignorant and uncaring. Tocqueville has his work cut out for him, reminding

¹⁹ Boyd and Williams, "Intellectuals and Statesmanship?" 118-19.

²⁰ "Concerning the immense majority of points that it is important for us to know, we have only probabilities, almost. To despair of its being so is to despair of being a man." Alexis de Tocqueville, "To Charles Stoffels, October 22, 1831," in *Alexis de Tocqueville: Selected Letters on Politics and Society*, ed. Roger Boesche, trans. James Toupin and Roger Boesche (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 64. Quoted in Mitchell, *Fragility of Freedom*, 215-16.

²¹ See also Lawler, "Tocqueville on Pantheism," 45.

people that unless we acknowledge our limitations and insist on freedom—even the freedom to err, compete, and disagree—the political enforcement of the rationalistic pretence will continue to undermine the social fabric and impoverish our souls.