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### Threats on the Liberties of a Society

The New World has given rise to a new man, one eager to make himself anew and escape the confining expectations, practices and labels of the old feudal world of European society. This American is animated by values such as individualism, equality and liberty. But looming in the background are the threats posed by mass society, extremes of wealth and poverty, and a form of democratic despotism that Tocqueville was among the first to bring to light. Such threats, however, are affected by the society in which they are present, its customs, way of thinking, and history.

The idea of mass society is discussed in the topic of political associations in United States culture in Tocqueville's book "Democracy In America". The concept can be narrowed down to be described by a group of affiliated individuals that rise to control the life and societal conditions of many. It is introduced as a potential threat on the liberty and values of a society through an examination on American culture and the developed tendencies of its people to adopt the custom of political affiliation. The thought of mass society being seen as a potential threat on the liberties and values of a people is brought to light under its indirect assimilation to "mob rule" throughout its discussion by Tocqueville. Tocqueville notes that "in the United States, as soon as a party is become preponderant, all public authority passes under its control; its private supporters occupy all the places, and have all the force of the administration at their disposal". From this thought alone, it can be implied that direct

supporters of a political party in power, usually ones that helped it get to its current position, are high-earning, or well-connected, members in society, and directly assume powers of a “ruling majority” through such affiliation, controlling the aspects of their society’s daily life (Tocqueville, 525). While no violent acts take place when power is passed from a party to another, the threat of tyrannical rule still remains. The threat imposed by the idea of mass majority is seen with an increasing size and influence of such a “ruling majority” in a society. In aristocratic nations, a body of nobles becomes the natural association that is needed as a form of checks upon abuses of power by the governing body on a society. But when such a body of nobles, or elites, comes to be in direct control and influence of their society, instability is led to occur. Tocqueville argues that “if private individuals are unable to create an artificial and a temporary substitute for them, [he] can imagine no permanent protection against the most galling tyranny” (Tocqueville 526). A solution concluded for the dilemma presented is seen in the form of altering the way society handles and views opposing views to those of a party in power. An explanation as to why American society has been able to successfully avoid such problems presented by the concept of a mass society is that individuals in American society form congregations with the idea of opposition to a leading party’s ideals being to make an impacting stand against it through the acquisition of more members and support. Such congregations appear without impeding a leading party’s rule, or threatening it in any way by presenting evil consequences. While a misleading notion regarding opposition, centered around conspiracy or maleficence to the current party in power exists, “the exercise of the right of association becomes dangerous in proportion to the impossibility which

excludes great parties from acquiring the majority" as is seen in other societies" (Tocqueville, 529).

By keeping a society from assumptions of conspiracy or corruption any time a group of opposing individuals congregate, power can be easily shared between opposing parties without the risk of tyrannical rule becoming present. Such possibility of endangerment to those freedoms may be alleviated from coming into existence through ensuring a fair distribution of wealth, as well as equality, in a nation. Although it is not always possible to maintain such balance, the risk of such aforementioned threat is diminished from happening as long as the possibility of one day gaining such balance, or wealth, is not taken away from any group of individuals in that society.

Wealth extremities in a society is a subject discussed by Tocqueville that touches on general dangers brought about by inequality in a society. First, it is noted that democracy in a society grows to eliminate great differences between wealth and poverty. The instances of great wealth and extreme poverty, great learning and extreme ignorance become evened out and a much higher general standard of living becomes available. However such property of democracy does not guarantee against a slight chance of a disparity in wealth from occurring among classes. Should such inequality happen, the threat of democratic despotism along with other threats to the freedom and equality of all individuals present themselves as possible outcomes in that society. With such results, a wealthy class may obtain the chance of ruling a minority living in poverty, or a suppressed part of society living in poverty may obtain the means of carrying out selfish actions with attempts to force equality on all members of that nation by bringing down an upper class through means, such as electing a tyrannical leader

promising fair distribution of wealth among all members of that system, which endanger that people's existing values of liberty, equality, and true justice.

Democratic despotism is examined by Tocqueville as an alluding threat to the newly found American values of democracy, freedom, and societal equality. All three of these values are what distinguishes the culture from others throughout history, and are also what American society has grown to guard most highly. But as we examine these values closer, one cannot help but wonder if striving for a true balance in all of these values is indeed what is needed as a key distinguishing factor between a culture and another. Perhaps instead, liberty and societal equality only oppose each other even more the more a balance between them is looked for. Possession of these values is highly coveted by societies throughout history, but it is the failure to recognize the dangers that lust for such standards brings that introduces threats to the pre-existing freedoms and values possessed by a people, such as democratic despotism. Democratic despotism can be thought of as an undetectable cloak, covering a society, imposing numerous amounts of restrictions and rules on the people; all done with the under the false pretense of promoting its desire of true equality by preventing any one group from rising too far above the others. Tocqueville states "It is impossible to believe that equality will not eventually find its way into the political world as it does everywhere else", but he also argues that he sees only two methods for achieving such equality; "every citizen must be put in possession of his rights, or rights must be granted to no one" (Tocqueville, 159).

"Democracy In America" notes that there exists a natural thirst for equality among men; this passion combined with selfish human nature "impels the weak to lower the powerful to their own level, and reduces men to prefer equality in slavery to inequality with freedom". This

simply implies that while liberty is a high focus of a society comprised of such men, equality tends to be an even higher focus. Besides selfish intentions by individuals in a society, threats to liberty in a society also have the potential to occur in a state where the citizens are nearly the same in terms of equality. In such case, no one among such citizens becomes strong enough to engage in possible struggles with an over-imposing governing body. "Nothing but a general combination can protect their liberty. And such a union is not always to be found" (Tocqueville 107). A solution to such aforementioned dilemmas is found in examining the state of American society and the effect of its culture on the state of its values. As opposed to others throughout history that have tried to reach equality and liberty, only to end in a type of soft despotism under an absolute power; such as the French during their period of revolution, what tends to have made American society prevail against the threat of democratic despotism, is that by the nature of its circumstances, origin, and moral feelings, it has managed to put the basic freedom of individuals before selfish desires of equality at any cost.

In my judgement, the steps mentioned alongside each of the aforementioned threats do not necessary deal with such treats in a permanently adequate manner. While the ways in which American culture has approached such perils has been effective in preserving that society's freedoms, such manners of avoiding the threat of falling into tyrannical rule have been the result of that people's culture, personality, rationale, and circumstances that the society as a whole has found itself in. If a permanent and universal approach is to be guaranteed to other cultures, and even to the American culture in the future, such approach has to be proven to be effective regardless of a nation's background, history, and way of

thinking. Should it involve changing the way a society thinks, it must concretely show an effective manner of doing so while maintaining a certain harmony among a society's individuals.

#### Works Cited

Tocqueville, A., & Reeve, H. (1899). *Democracy in America* (Rev. ed.). New York: Colonial Press.