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Ideas that Changed History

### Democracy and Communism

Karl Marx and Alexis de Tocqueville, still renowned today as two of the most influential thinkers of the modern era, held contrasting conceptions of history. They differed on the historical structure of societies; what they believed were the driving forces behind societal reforms and revolutions; and what elements of societies are useful for prolonging and maintaining them.

The two philosophers sport entirely opposite ideas concerning the system under which modern society operates and the forces which drive it. Marx's conception of modern society's system is a history of distinct class struggles that inevitably leads to an endgame: communism. He argues that in modern society, class systems are broken down into two simple categories; "Society as a whole is more and more splitting up into two great hostile camps, into two great classes directly facing each other: Bourgeoisie and Proletariat."<sup>1</sup> The bourgeoisie controls means of production and material goods for production. Marx argues that this allows them to control the economy and those who are active members of it. The proletariat is the working class people, or practically all who do not own factories or business. He claims that the proletariat, without means of production or material goods, is then at the whims of the bourgeoisies.

Society, for Marx, is then centered around the bourgeoisie constantly revolutionizing the means of production. This constant changing of the instruments of production, the needs of society, and expanding of markets to dominate "draws all, even the most barbarian, nations into

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<sup>1</sup> Marx, Karl, et al. *The Communist Manifesto*. Monthly Review Press, 1964, 159.

civilization.”<sup>2</sup> This inevitably leads to the overthrow of the bourgeoisie by the proletariat because the very nature of the bourgeoisie “supplies the proletariat with its own elements of political and general education, in other words, it furnishes the proletariat with weapons for fighting the bourgeoisie.”<sup>3</sup> This is also what Marx saw to be the driving force behind all societies. The realization of inequalities between the two classes would cause a revolution and overthrow of the oppressing class. The oppressing class would then become smaller and more equal. But eventually through controlling means of production and access to materials and information, the bourgeoisie would again begin to increase the inequalities between itself and the proletariat. Once inequalities reached another tipping point, the cycle would start again. After some untold number of revolutions which would take place in this manner, Marx believes that society would adopt communism and achieve a state of utopia.

Tocqueville’s approach to the system of modern society and its driving force is a never ending struggle for equality. This struggle leads toward further democratization and the constant need to address the new inequalities which society produces. As Tocqueville analyzed society around him, he came to the conclusion that in constructing their society, people “would insist on being equal, under a regime of liberty, if possible, or under a regime of despotism, if not.”<sup>4</sup> He envisioned that equality could only rear itself in two forms: democracy, where the society governed itself, or communism, where the ruling class dominated the rest of society through force. For Tocqueville, the driving powers behind the structure of modern society are “multiple

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<sup>2</sup> Marx, *Manifesto*, 162.

<sup>3</sup> Marx, *Manifesto*, 167.

<sup>4</sup> Eisenstadt, Abraham Seldin. *Reconsidering Tocqueville's Democracy in America*. Rutgers University Press, 1988, 11.

and complex.”<sup>5</sup> He challenged the vision given by Marx because he saw his ideology as too naïve. Marx conceptualized a simple, complete, and absolute system which determines society. Marx proposed two rival classes, with one being in power over the other, as being the nature of society. Tocqueville received claims like Marx’s as declarations of complete and absolute systems describing the intricacies of modern society. From his perspective, anyone who presented a “complete or absolute system is... almost certainly wrong or lying.”<sup>6</sup> Tocqueville believed that “any man who wants to impose such a system on his fellows by force should be considered, *ipso facto* and without preliminary examination of his ideas, as a tyrant and enemy of the human species.”<sup>7</sup>

With such a disgust for systems of society which brought about equality through the force of a ruling class like Marx suggests, Tocqueville adopted the system of society which fostered equality through democracy and liberty. His understanding of modern society was as a collective group; a multifaceted and ever-changing group subordinate to the sovereign collective which rules it. This group becomes more democratized as the sovereign state ruling it better adjusts the inequalities within the group. This structure of modern society does not reach an endgame like in Marx’s view. Instead, Tocqueville sees society as a positive feedback system. As the society becomes self aware of inequalities among its citizens, it urges itself and the sovereign state to make society more uniform. “The more complete the uniformity, the more unbearable the sight of inequality. Hence, it is natural for love of equality to grow steadily with equality itself; by

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<sup>5</sup> Schleifer, James T. “Tocqueville as Historian: Philosophy and Methodology in the Democracy.” *Reconsidering Tocqueville’s Democracy in America*, by Abraham Seldin Eisenstadt, Rutgers University Press, 1988, 150.

<sup>6</sup> Schleifer, *Democracy*, 151.

<sup>7</sup> Schleifer, *Democracy*, 151.

satisfying it, one fosters its growth.”<sup>8</sup> Because there are an infinite number of inequalities in any society, the want for equality serves as a kind of perpetual engine driving society towards uniformity. The smaller inequalities are brought to the fore and magnified. This gives the illusion that society has another problem at large and it works together to solve it.

The two philosophers also part ways when discussing what traditions are good for maintaining and prolonging a society. For Marx, the devolution of social traditions and customs is inevitable. Things like marriage, capitalism, and religion are customs that Marx sees as a hindrance on society. They slow its evolution into utopia and he does not believe they serve a concrete purpose in bonding a society together.

However, Tocqueville believes that modern democratic society and religion have a powerful relationship. “Democracy and religion both inspire instincts contrary to selfishness and individual ascension.”<sup>9</sup> He argues that religion places the object of mans desires “beyond and above the goods of the Earth .”<sup>10</sup> Democracy fosters a similar response. It places sovereignty, or a communal trust, in the greater collective of the people. Sovereignty placed in the collective people leads to each individual’s interests being of the same importance. This then forces those participating in modern society to entertain interests contrary to their own, but that are beneficial to the collective. Think of this as a societal negotiation; an individual must sacrifice some of their own interests to those of other individuals in order to satisfy at least some interests of all individuals. Thus, religion and modern democratic society both inspire self-sacrifice of the individual for an abstraction which they put trust in. Tocqueville saw this as being necessary to

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<sup>8</sup> Tocqueville, Alexis de, and Arthur Goldhammer. *Democracy in America*. Library of America, 2004, 795.

<sup>9</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy*, 503.

<sup>10</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy*, 503.

keep the bonds of society strong. He even used an analogy to God's creation of the universe and its intricacies to support his claims of complex, as opposed to simple, inner-workings of society; "God... establishes the idea of grandeur and perfection not in executing a great number of things with the help of a single means, but in making a multitude of different means contribute toward the perfect execution of a single thing."<sup>11</sup> In this analogy, God serves as the system by which society functions. It is not by Marx's conceptual system of society, society being the product of a simple system containing the bourgeoisies and the proletariats, that promotes the ideal society. Rather, it is by Tocqueville's conception of multiple complex individuals composing a sovereign system that promotes the ideal society.

Through these distinctions a clear line is drawn between Marx's and Tocqueville's historical conceptions of modern society and to which ideology each thinker relates. What they believed were the historical structure of societies, the driving forces behind societal reforms and revolutions, and what elements of societies are useful for prolonging and maintaining them create useful distinctions between the two philosophers. These distinctions are useful for societies depending on which ideology they are most centered around. For communist ones, Marx's conceptions serve as their ideological base while in free societies, Tocqueville's conceptions allow for and explain their structure.

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<sup>11</sup> Schleifer, *Democracy*, 152.

## Works Cited

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