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## Comments on Schneck's Reading of Tocqueville's *Democracy*

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Tocqueville characterized himself as “a liberal of a new kind,” and his intention in writing *Democracy in America* was to enlist readers in his project of preserving “liberty and human dignity” in the modern democratic world.<sup>1</sup> That project could be furthered, he said, best by those who showed themselves to be and were friends of equality.<sup>2</sup> He acknowledged that his own instincts were aristocratic, but I think he would have been dismayed at his book's being read as a recommendation of covert aristocratic rule.<sup>3</sup> That, however, is how Professor Schneck reads *Democracy*. He does so because he understands both liberalism and democracy differently than Tocqueville did. And, ultimately, he seems to favor a political alternative to liberal democracy whose possibility Tocqueville conceived of but denied. The tendency of virtually all of modern thought, Tocqueville appreciated, is to undermine the legitimacy of forms. But, for him, political and human life are impossible without them.<sup>4</sup>

It is surprising neither that Americans once read Tocqueville as if he were a liberal of their own kind nor that they no longer do so. Liberalism, as Schneck observes, purports to be a set of political principles and institutions which, taking human nature as a given, can be adapted to existing societies and cultures. Nonetheless, liberal political forms presuppose a human nature that is at once abstract and specific. The individual with which liberalism begins is an isolated being, with minimal and therefore universal human characteristics. He is equal to every other individual precisely because all are devoid of the characteristics and attachments that distinguish human beings one from another. He has

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1. Tocqueville so characterized himself in a letter to Stoffels (24 July 1838), *Memoirs, Letters, and Remains of Alexis de Tocqueville*, ed. Gustave de Beaumont (London: Macmillan, 1861), Vol. I, p. 432. The description of his project is from *Democracy in America*, ed. George Lawrence (Garden City, NY: Harper and Row, 1969), II, iv, 7, p. 699. On p. 695 he speaks of “independence and dignity.”

2. *DA*, II, iv, 7, p. 695.

3. *Souvenirs*, trans. Alexander Teixeira de Mattos (London: The Harvill Press, 1948), III, iii, p. 258.

4. *DA*, II, iv, 7, p. 699.

certain fears, interests, and rational capacities, and therefore rights. But he (or she) has no sex, race, or extraordinary abilities or disabilities, no family, social or economic class, polity, or god. That this presupposition of liberal political institutions could turn out to be destructive rather than adaptable was apparent in France from the outset because the nature and situation of liberalism's pre-political individual clashed so dramatically with the sentiments, customs, and thoughts of the inhabitants of the Old Regime.<sup>5</sup> In the United States, we were fortunate enough to remain more or less unaware of this potential until well into the twentieth century. Then liberalism became impatient with mores that continued to sanction inequalities or even differences among classes, races, and sexes, and with the inconveniences of enduring religious beliefs. We were shown just how revolutionary our founding principle—that “each individual is assumed to be as educated, virtuous, and powerful as any of his fellows,” and consequently, that he “is the best and only judge of his own interest”—could be.<sup>6</sup> Tocqueville knew that liberalism would require us to have a “politics of the lifeworld” because sooner or later it vitiates existing forms, leaving nothing recognizably human in their stead.

According to Schneck's reading of *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville's political science is intended to “design and construct” “the sentiments of citizens, their values and ideas, their way of life . . . to obtain a foundation for some desired politics,” namely, a politics that maintains or restores aristocratic rule. In reaching this conclusion, Schneck, I believe, takes three false steps. First, he exaggerates the “design and construction” involved in Tocqueville's lifeworld politics. *Pace* Schneck, Tocqueville did accept the legitimacy of modern democracy; he conceded not only its historical necessity for our times, but its intellectual power and justice as well.<sup>7</sup> But seeing that the modern political principle was destructive of existing forms and in itself contentless, he conceived of the new liberal task as one of maintaining existing institutions and mores if they could be democratized (the family, religion) and of finding democratic substitutes for those that could not be (democratic associations would replace aristocratic seigneurs). In practice, this was to be more a matter of sustaining than of constructing, much less designing. More-

5. *The Old Regime and the French Revolution*, trans. Stuart Gilbert (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1955), III, i, pp. 138-48.

6. *DA*, I, i, 5, p. 66.

7. *DA*, I, Introduction, pp. 9, 12; II, iv, 8, p. 704. See also *État social et politique de la France avant et depuis 1789* (Paris: Gallimard, 1952), p. 62. There Tocqueville calls the modern democratic notion of liberty, as distinguished from the aristocratic notion, “*juste*,” that is, just, true, and legitimate.

over, such efforts would be unlikely to succeed if they had no support in political institutions. For example, America's numerous associations, according to Tocqueville's analysis, rely on a multiplicity of newspapers to articulate and defend their views before current and prospective members. But America has so many newspapers only because political decentralization creates a need for local papers in which to take positions in meaningful political disputes.<sup>8</sup>

There is no way to get around the fact that Tocqueville wrote *Democracy in America* to interest former aristocrats like himself in the future of democracy, and he does suggest at times that such men, because of their accidental or inherited advantages and their tradition of political participation, can make important contributions to this future. To conclude from this fact that Tocqueville advocates a kind of covert aristocratic rule is unwarranted, however. Most obviously, unless liberty and dignity are ends unsuitable for democrats, Tocqueville specifies no end to which aristocrats might turn democracy for their own anti-democratic purposes. Where Schneck does find in Tocqueville's text evidence of a difference in the ways in which would-be aristocrats and democrats are expected to make their political choices, I believe he misreads. Tocqueville, for example, recommends that only a few be given a liberal education, including Greek and Latin, instead of a vocational education, and he uses this occasion to remark that ancient "democracies" were not really democratic (perhaps to suggest that so-called modern democracies need not be either?). Twentieth-century historians, relying not on Tocqueville, but on ancient sources and modern statistical techniques, have taken much pleasure in shocking us with this same observation about ancient democracies.<sup>9</sup> Democratic Athens did deny a majority of its adult male population the rights of political participation. More to the point, what Tocqueville says in recommending, as he does, that "all those who have the ambition to excel in letters" learn Greek and Latin, is that what is useful for the literature of a people is not necessarily appropriate to its political and social needs.<sup>10</sup> He himself would rather burn his own Greek and Latin books than use them to try to understand modern society.<sup>11</sup> For Tocqueville, American democracy is healthier than Euro-

8. *DA*, II, ii, 6, pp. 517-20.

9. See, for example, A. W. Gomme, *The Population of Athens in the Fifth and Fourth Centuries B.C.* (Chicago: Argonaut, 1967). Twentieth-century historians disagree on the number of citizens as compared to slaves and metics, but not on their comprising a minority.

10. *DA*, II, i, 15, p. 476.

11. *DA*, I, ii, 9, p. 302.

pean precisely because it is conducted by ordinary citizens with “enlightenment” and political experience, not by intellectuals or their minions with grand theories.<sup>12</sup> Tocqueville’s American citizen is neither Plato’s philosopher-king nor Rousseau’s Genevan.<sup>13</sup>

A more profitable reflection on the text might begin with the observation that Tocqueville does contend that the most important of American democracy’s forms—her respect for rights, her constitution, her religion—are aristocratic in origin.<sup>14</sup> These contentions are in keeping with his lament that democrats have “an instinctive contempt” for forms, as well as an insufficient understanding of their importance.<sup>15</sup> Schneck remarks, correctly, that for Tocqueville, popular political participation “cannot be arbitrary according to mere desire.” Indeed, his real dispute with Tocqueville seems to be not so much over ordinary citizens’ having fewer choices to make than do would-be aristocrats or over the former’s being denied by the latter access to all the information required to make informed choices. Rather it is that for Tocqueville, there must be choices made which, once made, are not subject to continuous review by each and every citizen. Schneck denies that Tocqueville is a democrat because he holds that “the word ‘democracy’ implies” “an open horizon of possibility.”

Tocqueville begins the second volume of *Democracy* by noting the similarity of American democrats in their contempt for authority and hatred of forms to the spirit of Cartesianism and of modern philosophy generally.<sup>16</sup> The Americans determine to take nothing—with the crucial exception of human equality—for granted, and so impose on each and every one of themselves responsibility for figuring everything out for oneself. While “preten[ding] to judge the world,” they become accustomed to seeking refuge in public opinion to pronounce on their behalf.<sup>17</sup> Public opinion, unfortunately, originates for the most part in the opinions of an often unidentifiable and always unaccountable elite. Tocqueville’s Americans are also reluctant to trust in existing institutions (“secondary powers”) to assist them in the satisfaction of their needs and desires, and so impose on themselves the burden either of satisfying these needs on their own or of creating on each and every occasion “associations” powerful enough to do so. While asserting their independence of

12. *DA*, I, ii, 9, p. 301; II, i, 4, pp. 440-41.

13. *DA*, II, iii, 15, p. 610.

14. *DA*, II, iv, 4, p. 676; I, ii, 2, pp. 174-77; II, ii, 15, p. 544.

15. *DA*, II, iv, 7, p. 698.

16. *DA*, II, i, 1, pp. 429-31.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 430.

formal structures, they in fact become accustomed to depending on the one power they know—or hope—to be great enough to rescue all of them, a strong national government.<sup>18</sup> Elections notwithstanding, a bloated bureaucratic welfare state is likely to be amenable to direction by the electorate in the same way as is a shepherd by his flock.<sup>19</sup> For Tocqueville, a democracy premised upon individual sovereignty and unmediated by forms will be at best a degrading, albeit mild, despotism.<sup>20</sup>

At worst, democracy may be transformed into one of the varieties of totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century in which citizens have been relieved of the burdens of individual sovereignty altogether. The issue at hand is what happens to democratic polities when they are confronted with an open horizon of possibility, not to individuals. But Tocqueville has much to say about the latter as well, and his remarks call into question Schneck's assertion that Tocqueville would have purchased political liberty at the expense of intellectual freedom. Tocqueville discusses and deplors ideologies resembling communism and fascism as in the first instance intellectual and psychological, not political, reactions to radical individualism.<sup>21</sup>

In Tocqueville's opinion, democrats need not aristocratic rulers, but "aristocratic" sensibilities. Among the most important of these is a respect for forms:

Men living in democratic centuries do not readily understand the importance of formalities and have an instinctive contempt for them. . . . As they usually aspire to none but facile and immediate pleasures, they rush straight at the object of any of their desires, and the slightest delay exasperates them. This temperament, which they carry with them into political life, makes them impatient of the formalities which daily hold up or prevent one or another of their designs.

But it is just this inconvenience, of which democrats complain, which makes formalities so useful to freedom. For their chief merit is to serve as a barrier between the strong and the weak, the govern-

18. *DA*, II, iv, 3, pp. 672-73.

19. *DA*, II, iv, 6, p. 692.

20. *Ibid.*, pp. 690-95.

21. These possibilities are treated in Part I of Vol. II of *Democracy*, which is on "intellectual movement." See especially chapters 7, 17, 18, 20. Only at the end of Ch. 20 (p. 496) does Tocqueville speak of political consequences. For an excellent analysis of this theme in *Democracy*, see Peter A. Lawler, "Democracy and Pantheism," *Interpreting Tocqueville's Democracy in America*, ed. Ken Masugi (Savage, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1991), pp. 96-120.

ment and the governed, and to hold back the one while the other has time to take his bearings. . . . Democracies by their nature need formalities more than other peoples, and by nature have less respect for them. This deserves most serious attention.

In aristocracies formalities were treated with superstitious reverence; our worship of them should be enlightened and well considered.<sup>22</sup>

For Tocqueville, human beings best preserve their liberty and dignity by limiting both thought and desire to make better use of the vast freedom that remains within these limits.<sup>23</sup> This the Americans do by means of their marital relations and religious practices, and in their political activities.<sup>24</sup> In Tocqueville's America, no would-be aristocrat imposes religious beliefs on the people in order better to rule them. Rather the people assume them, thinking religion to be useful. Tocqueville calls the Americans hypocrites, not dupes.<sup>25</sup> They themselves fear to confront an open horizon of possibility. Religion provides each and all with clear, simple, and not necessarily untrue answers to a few extremely important and difficult questions about what is right and wrong and why it is right or wrong. As Schneck reminds us, these dogmatic answers keep America's Cartesians from "conceiving what is rash or unjust" and enable them to resist a cowardly preference for servitude to freedom. Of these effects, we could have been made aware by the role of Eastern Europe's churches in the defeat of communism.

In a short chapter entitled "Why in Ages of Equality and Scepticism It Is Important to Set Distant Goals for Human Endeavor," to which Schneck refers, Tocqueville shows most concretely why democracy, i.e., rule by the people, cannot imply an open horizon of possibility and why political participation should not be arbitrary according to mere desire. To speak to Schneck's concerns, as well as to those of the 1992 American electorate, we can say that a politics of this sort is not merely unjust or merely degrading. It is disempowering. What can it mean to vote for "change," especially to those who said in primary exit polls that their first choice was Pat Buchanan and their second Jerry Brown? Or to those

22. *DA*, II, iv, 7, pp. 698-99. The other crucial aristocratic sensibility democrats tend to lack is a willingness to defend their liberty. That defect is to be remedied by giving them rights and a "political spirit." See II, iii, 26, p. 663.

23. *DA*, II, i, 2, pp. 433-36; II, ii, 8-14, pp. 525-41. The benefits to individuals as well as to polities are made clear.

24. I have discussed marital relations elsewhere, in "Tocqueville's American Woman and 'The True Conception of Democratic Progress,'" *Political Theory*, 14 (1986): 239-61.

25. *DA*, I, ii, 9, p. 291.

who reject both political parties and the principles for which they have long been thought to stand in favor of the (mostly unspecified) “action” of Ross Perot? If human desire is really so erratic that to attempt to stabilize or form it by means of institutions and mores is to “repress” it, then it would not be unreasonable to conclude, as Tocqueville almost does, that democratic life and politics are naturally governed by little more than chance.<sup>26</sup> Neither an electorate that behaves arbitrarily nor its elected government can take responsibility for its future or even its present in any meaningful way. Tocqueville urges democratic moralists and politicians, without relying on religion, to enlarge and thereby stabilize private and public desire by setting long-term political goals. The one such goal on which he insists is that political office come only as a reward for previous effort and proven ability, not for persuasive pandering to restless democratic desires. He knows we are unlikely to reach even this modest goal because democratic electoral politics always includes some element of caprice and therefore chance. But with the aid of well-designed political institutions and timely arguments in defense of mores that respect them, partial success may be within reach. For this reason, Tocqueville supposes that even skeptical democrats might sincerely come to hope that human beings who try their best to order their affairs responsibly will have the support of a greater than human power.

In Tocqueville’s view, the real alternatives to a liberal democracy bounded by forms—modern ideological totalitarianism and “visionless” democratic flux—are both disempowering and dehumanizing. Professor Schneck offers neither evidence nor argument against Tocqueville to reassure us that democrats can, in the face of an open horizon of possibility, live in liberty and dignity.

26. *DA*, II, ii, 17, pp. 547-59. On p. 549 especially, “chance” or the appearance that worldly success depends on chance is presented as the obstacle to responsible human effort.