

---

# 4 How to Profit from Nonprofits Tocqueville on Associations

DELBA WINTHROP

What would Tocqueville have to say about nonprofit advocacy and democracy? He might have been too astonished by the question to say a word. The Americans he describes never advocate doing anything that is not for profit. His America is the home of self-interest and, above all, of the doctrine of self-interest well understood. But, as most everyone knows, although he has nothing to say about “nonprofits,” he has a lot to say about “associations.”

Some of what Tocqueville has to say about associations sounds so familiar that it hardly bears repeating, whereas other aspects of it may strike us as irredeemably dated. In his *Democracy in America*,<sup>1</sup> published in two volumes in 1835 and 1840, he calls for a “new political science . . . for a world altogether new” (*DA I* Intro p. 7). Presumably, this new world was his world; not surprisingly, he speaks to the issues and parties of his time. Yet his world, both the America he visited in 1831–32 and the post-revolutionary France to which he returned, is not so different from our own. There are, to be sure, differences of historical development and, most obviously, of scale. But it is still worth considering whether his observations and recommendations might be adapted to our present situation, and if so, in what spirit.

In our world, Tocqueville is now the darling of conservatives. Some like his firm endorsement of the doctrine of self-interest well understood; others, his appreciation of the value of religion in public life; and most, his strictures against big government. He is respected by liberals or progressives and by others on the left for his acknowledgment of the justice of equality (no small point), his recommendation of more community and more participation, and his recognition of the place of compassion in a democracy. I do not know how the generality of avowedly nonpartisan bureaucrats and policy analysts tend to regard him, but their opinion of him could hardly be worse than his of them: He denies the possibility of nonpartisanship and reserves some of his most strident rhetoric for attacks on them. That being said, he does entrust some of his most important instruction, including his most comprehensive and sustained analysis of associations, to those who guide democracies formally and informally—to “legislators,” that is, those who fashion governments, and to moralists and philosophers. Lawyers, at least American lawyers of the 1830s as he portrays them, could not hope to find better press even in an American Bar Association publication. It is, however, easy to find something supportive of one’s position and flattering to oneself in Tocqueville while overlooking his reservations and criticisms. Conservatives should notice that Tocqueville’s embrace of self-interest well understood is not

quite heartfelt and that he shows it to be inseparable from a commitment to democratic political institutions. Those on the left should see that his doubts about compassion are almost as grave as the ones he expresses about excessive reliance on experts and on government in place of associations. And all of the above should reflect on Tocqueville's observations on ambition and pride—qualities they often exhibit, which their theories and policies rarely accommodate.

Tocqueville, to repeat, does not speak of “nonprofits,” or even of “interest groups,” for that matter. But it is hard to think of anyone who uses the term “association” more frequently or more broadly than he does. With eye-catching exaggeration, he calls just about every grouping of two or more people an association—from a marriage to the human race, and between these, a private club, a business venture, a temperance society, a political party, a township, a nation. In addition, he contends that there is an art of association, even a science of it. Yet as one might suspect, given the diversity of collections of people he is willing to term associations, he has no simple, straightforward teaching on association and associations. Nor does he have much to say about some issues that may be of urgent concern to many contemporary readers—for example, about how associations affect the substance of public policy—because it is just this sort of issue that is of little concern to him in *Democracy*. He cares about associations insofar as they benefit the hearts and minds of human beings who live in democratic societies.

I leave Tocqueville's controversial discussion of “the conjugal association” and his curious remark about the human race for other occasions. Here I shall focus on four issues: First, what does he mean by an “association” and what purposes does he think the activity of associating serves in a liberal democracy? Second, how or why are the Americans he describes as adept at associating as they are? Third, what is distinctive about his view? And finally, what, if any, is the present relevance of this view? I limit my remarks almost exclusively to *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville's best known book today, and within it, to his characterizations of American associations.

## What Is an Association?

At first glance, Tocqueville is more helpful in calling attention to the range of associations found in American life than he is in specifying the characteristics they share. “Not only do they have commercial and industrial associations in which all take part, but they also have a thousand other kinds: religious, moral, grave, futile, very general and very particular, immense and very small” (*DA* II 2.5 p. 489). Americans also have political associations, not just parties and pressure groups, but numerous “permanent associations created by law”—local governments. And they have moral and intellectual associations.

The broad outlines of Tocqueville's picture of American associations are probably familiar: One may suppose that economic and social associations will emerge readily, because Americans are both materialistic and compassionate. These will allow people to meet daily needs they could not meet on their own. Yet because these associations must be created by spontaneous efforts, they tend to be haphazard and temporary. Even when successful, they involve risks and often bring only modest ben-

---

efits. They tend to focus on provision for relatively short-term and often narrowly conceived needs. They are useful because they serve real needs and because they enable associates to perfect techniques they might employ in associating for other purposes. But with their substantial risks and limited gains, these associations may fail to inspire individuals to make the efforts required to maintain them, especially when it appears that needs might be met in some other way—for example, by government.

Less obvious and potentially more valuable, in Tocqueville's view, are the associations Americans form for moral and intellectual ends. In order to bring to the public eye new or uncommon sentiments and ideas, individuals support one another, persuade others, perhaps even change mores and ultimately laws; thus "the heart is enlarged, and the human mind is developed" (*DA II 2.5*, p. 491). The temperance society, which at first amused Tocqueville, is illustrative: Ordinary citizens set to educating their fellows about the evils of drink, combining forces to make a public example of their sobriety (*DA I 2.4*, p. 181, *2.5*, p. 215, *2.6*, p. 232; *II 2.5*, p. 492). Their uniting over a *moral* concern might also temper democracy's greater intoxications, individualism and materialism (see *DA II 2.3*, *2.10*). In addition, the issues raised indirectly by their activity, the relative merits of modes of governance and the hierarchy of human goods, are, arguably, intellectual as well as moral issues.

Such associations would be difficult to maintain without a readily available means to air the unpopular sentiments and ideas they often stand for, and in Tocqueville's day, this was a newspaper (*DA II 2.6*). A newspaper enables one person to articulate a sentiment or thought shared by other readers, thereby giving encouragement to each, and it provides a forum in which they might debate and persuade. The felt need for many forums and for the vitality of a free press, Tocqueville contends, depends in turn on political associations, especially local governments (*DA II 2.6*). Among citizens who take a hand in local government, one might expect to find some who have an interest in public affairs as well as in their own private concerns. It is they who feel the need to keep up with the little matters of the day and to have a quick and easy means of exposing and being exposed to a range of opinions about them.

When citizens have the habit of associating, the vitality of political associations should be relatively easy to sustain. These, in turn, are indispensable because only they make clear to all the greatness of what is at stake—the government of society. Among political associations Tocqueville includes governments, especially local governments, as well as political parties. The New England township is a "primary school" of freedom (*DA I 1.5*, p. 57); political associations such as parties are "great schools, free of charge, where all citizens come to learn the general theory of associations" (*DA II 2.7*, p. 497). A political association "draws a multitude of individuals outside themselves at the same time; however separated they are naturally by age, mind, fortune, it brings them together and puts them in contact. They meet each other once and learn to find each other always." Here citizens are forced to figure out what is necessary to organize common efforts. Individual will and reason are pooled to advance an interest that is shared, but nonetheless still recognized as partisan, or partial. Thus, one's own interest is neither sacrificed nor unreflectively identified with the interests of all. To promote a political association's goal effectively, we might suppose, some thought must be given about how to link its partial interest to a more general interest, or at least about how to persuade a democratic majority that this merits

---

attention. Political associations are free schools: free because they teach the habits of freedom rather painlessly; schools because they employ and impart reasonable expectations about what makes freedom possible for individuals and communities.

Thus Tocqueville's Americans, by participating in a vast array of associations, become accomplished in an art and a science of association. They may thereby gain an ability to meet more of their shared needs without the aid of a strong central government. This, in turn, may prepare them to preserve their freedom against government, should that ever be necessary. Furthermore, in exhibiting the range of sentiments and ideas democracy can foster, their own sentiments and ideas may broaden. Finally, each participant learns to subordinate his or her will to common purposes, as members of a free community should. Especially in political associations, which aspire to the formidable goal of governing society, each participant comes to see just how worthwhile success at associating can be.

Tocqueville does not spell out what makes a group of people an association, as distinguished from a mob. Later, I shall consider in greater detail what I take to be his most instructive model of an association, the New England township. Provisionally, I can specify some general characteristics shared by the associations he describes: First, at the core of any association will be a shared idea or sentiment and a determination to publicize and promote it. Second, association members are able to *subordinate* their own wills and reason to that shared end, without *surrendering* these to any person or persons. Third, besides approving of the idea or sentiment promoted, participants will be attracted to an association because they see it as potentially independent and strong, and thus worthy of their efforts on its behalf. Fourth, associates will appreciate that they have an *interest* in furthering the shared goal, yet they will value association not just as a means to advance an interest, but as an outlet for ambition and as a source and object of personal pride. Fifth, a widespread perception of associations as advantageous in these ways and a willingness to act on the perception are largely matters of habit and taste; expediency and rational calculation, alone or together, will not accomplish this. Finally, all democratic associations ultimately serve the common human causes of independence and dignity.

Before considering in greater detail why associations work so well in Tocqueville's America, it is necessary to say more about one of the most obvious aspects of *Democracy in America*: its seemingly exaggerated rhetorical emphasis on associations.

### The Purposes of Association in Liberal Democracy

Tocqueville expresses admiration, even astonishment and amusement, at the facility with which Americans associate and at the ubiquity and variety of their associations (*DA* I 1.2, 2.4, 2.6; II 2.5). Americans are all but born with a determination to associate; schoolchildren at play apply the rules of association to their games (*DA* I 2.4). But, on reflection, why should Tocqueville find this so remarkable? After all, isn't this what people who live together do? "To associate" is, in the most fundamental sense, to make oneself a part of a society. Human beings as we find them are, as a rule, born into families, political communities, and often religious communities. So why would Tocqueville make so much of association, as if it were always a more or less contrived or self-conscious activity? This is a question to which I shall return.

At the base of the association that comprises America, as well as of all partial associations within it, Tocqueville finds the "dogma of the sovereignty of the people."

In nations where the dogma of the sovereignty of the people reigns, each individual forms an equal portion of the sovereign and participates equally in the government of the state.

Each individual is therefore supposed to be as enlightened, as virtuous, as strong as any other of those like him.

Why therefore does he obey society, and what are the natural limits of this obedience?

He obeys society not because he is inferior to those who direct it or less capable than another man of governing himself; he obeys society because union with those like him appears useful to him and because he knows that this union cannot exist without a regulating power (*DA I 1.5*).

In the United States, the dogma of the sovereignty of the people is not an isolated doctrine that is joined neither to habits nor to the sum of dominant ideas; on the contrary, one can view it as the last link in a chain of opinions that envelops the Anglo-American world as a whole. . . . [T]he generative principle of the republic is the same one that regulates most human actions (*DA I 2.10*).

Here, however, is a complication: The same principle that Tocqueville, in the first volume of *Democracy*, refers to as the dogma of the sovereignty of the people (*DA I 1.4, 1.5, 2.10*) he speaks of in the second volume as “Cartesianism” and “individualism” (*DA II 1.1, 2.2*). The politics Americans practice, he thus suggests, is suffused with, if not actually derived from, a philosophic doctrine. His second volume is an exploration of the likely *practical* consequences of this philosophic doctrine, of its effects on reason and sentiment, and consequently on habits or mores, and thereby on politics. It is especially this study that brings to light the burdens under which all liberal democratic associations operate and the urgency of an art and science of association to sustain them.

The Cartesianism Tocqueville’s Americans practice (without necessarily having studied Descartes) is a habit of mind by which each of them attempts to reach all conclusions *de novo*, abjuring the authority of tradition and the value of habit, believing only in their own ability to do things better (*DA II 1.1*). The individualism they laud is a “reflective” sentiment, prompted by an “erroneous judgment” (*DA II 2.2*). Although similar to the sentiment of self-love or self-preference, it is not so much a sentiment as a conviction that one should (and can) live one’s life without paying serious attention to anyone but oneself, one’s family, and one’s friends.

The doctrine of the sovereignty of the people means that any reasonable person consents to live as a member of some polity with laws and obligations of various sorts, accepting these as legitimate and authoritative. Political and associational life should then become habitual, so to speak “second nature.” But that is not what happens in the democratic practice Tocqueville depicts. The very doctrine meant to justify association in fact tends to erode everyday opinions and habits of sociability. Each act in each aspect of life comes to be referred to the pretension that each person is capable of a rational determination of his own interests. In thought and sentiment, we constantly recur to a “natural” apolitical, asocial state, only to have to remove ourselves from it yet again. No wonder Tocqueville thinks he has to make such a big deal of associations!

---

The worrisome scenario of individualism Tocqueville sketches is one of equal and independent individuals, preoccupied with their own well-being, tending eventually, while remaining equal, to become weak and dependent. Forbidden by democratic dogma to acknowledge any intellectual authority, they are tempted to seek refuge for their own unsure judgment in an anonymous and unaccountable “public opinion.” Having learned to insist on both material prosperity and equality, they are resentful of unequal prosperity and become suspicious of unregulated undertakings, all the while remaining restive in the face of their unattained goals. Ever aware, however vaguely, of their own unfulfilled desires, priding themselves on their love of equality, they easily develop compassion for their fellows in need. Yet this very compassion reminds them of their own neediness and may further intensify their own sense of weakness. The inclination to surrender one freedom after another to the only entity that seems powerful enough to provide for the needs and desires of all becomes ever more pressing. However much adherents to the dogma of the sovereignty of the people may value democratic participation, they yearn for benefits they can have readily, without the bother of participation. So they are easily tempted to abandon efforts on their own behalf to a “mild despotism” exercised by “school-master” administrators. Such a government may be competent and effective. But its deepest appeal lies in its promise to make individuals secure and to promote their happiness, while relieving them, Tocqueville says sarcastically, of “the pain of living” and “the trouble of thinking” (*DA II 4.6*). In doing so, it may gradually “rob each of them of several of the principal attributes of humanity” (*DA II 4.7*). Thus the tendency of individualism to invite mild despotism threatens worse than a loss of political freedoms, as if that would not be lamentable enough.

From his *Americans*, Tocqueville claims to have learned how to “combat” individualism (*DA II 2.4, 2.8*), and thereby to steel resistance to the lure of mild despotism. To this combat, they bring an art and science of association, and they wage it by means of a doctrine of self-interest well understood and free political institutions.

## Self-Interest Well Understood

Tocqueville’s *Americans* like to think of themselves as individuals, able to figure things out for themselves and to tend to their own affairs with as little regard as possible for the opinions and concerns of others. Yet they sometimes bring themselves to cooperate with one another by means of a “general theory,” made famous by *Democracy in America*, which Tocqueville calls “self-interest well understood” (*DA II 2.8*). The theory maintains that one’s own interest is, as a rule, best secured in pursuing a general good. Beginning with an affirmation of the propriety of self-interest, it attempts to turn self-interest against itself. It would persuade individuals to sacrifice at least some of their private interests for the sake of preserving the rest. In this, it is an improvement on self-interest poorly understood, a strict utilitarianism which reasons that “the useful is never dishonest.” American moralists do argue that virtue is useful, and they do encourage one to think that one always does and should prefer oneself. But they also insist that part of one’s interest consists in realizing that one’s “particular interest is to do good.” (*DA II 2.8, p. 501*)

---

This becomes the basis of a moral doctrine universally accepted in America. Having learned the doctrine, Americans take to explaining everything they do by means of self-interest. To do so, Tocqueville says, is to do themselves an injustice. It is also to contradict their doctrine by honoring it above their interests, or to demonstrate that honoring something above oneself and one's interests is in one's interest.

Tocqueville affirms self-interest well understood as the moral doctrine best suited to modern democratic times. It is "clear and sure," and by "accommodating" to human weaknesses (*DA* II 2.8), it easily gains wide acceptance and effectively improves the general level of behavior. As we have just seen, however, it is neither complete nor altogether self-evident. Nor is it likely to produce true or lofty virtue. What is to be said in its favor is that it aims at keeping individuals strong and responsible. In the end, the doctrine may "form . . . citizens who are regulated, temperate, moderate, farsighted, masters of themselves." It may thus provide a substitute for virtue, instilling habits of virtue without requiring elevated motives of generosity or pious self-forgetting.

Tocqueville offers this doctrine as a replacement for the aristocratic and religious moral teachings of the Old World. But as he foresees, in the new democratic world, the more likely alternative to a morality of self-interest well understood is a habit of compassion. Compassion, literally an ability to feel what another person feels, is in fact an ability to imagine that one could find oneself in the same situation and would experience the same feelings as the other. In a democracy, where all are presumed to be equal and alike, each should be able, as we would say today, to "identify" with all others. In particular, when Tocqueville's American sees someone else in need, he fancies himself in the same sort of need, so he readily comes to the other's aid. His compassion is not at odds with his self-interest. Indeed, it relies on it. A "sort of tacit and almost involuntary accord is made between them according to which each owes the others a momentary support which he himself will be able to call for in his turn" (*DA* II 3.4).

Why might Tocqueville prefer the doctrine of self-interest well understood to compassion? Consider the "almost involuntary" and the "momentary" in the remark just quoted. Compassion, even more than self-interest well understood, requires individuals to feel alike in their *neediness* and their *weakness*. Can individuals who feel needy and weak be counted on to assist one another effectively, even with the best of intentions? Can they be supposed able and willing to sustain cooperation after the *moment* of great need has passed? Compassion is more likely to increase than to diminish the temptation to succumb to a mild despotism. While the doctrine of self-interest also runs a risk in raising awareness of neediness, it stresses the importance of attending to one's own needs in a responsible way. Yet it, no less than older moral doctrines or the newer democratic inclination to compassion, may prompt aid to others. Although it demands a voluntary sacrifice of some of one's interests, it still respects the existence, if not the urgency, of these other interests and therefore of a possible amplitude of mind and heart. Besides, in resting its demand on a general rule, it gives a reason for continuous mutual assistance, hence for associations.

These associations, grounded as they are on the doctrine of self-interest well understood rather than on generosity, piety, or compassion, cannot quite be seen by

---

Associations, Laws,  
Policies, and Political  
Institutions

Tocqueville's Americans as "nonprofits" or purely altruistic associations—even when they perform charitable acts or serve charitable ends. They are, however, compatible with their doctrine of the sovereignty of the people and with democratic self-government. But to this end, free political institutions and the habit of participating in them are needed to show citizens what useful things they can do for themselves by combining their efforts.

For Tocqueville, what we now refer to as "voluntary associations" are an indispensable supplement to government in a democracy. But they are not a substitute for it. He is a critic of "mild despotism"—big government, not all government. In fact, he concedes that "the sovereign must be more uniform, more centralized, more extended, more penetrating, and more powerful" in democracies (*DA* II 4.7). It nonetheless matters very much how this sovereign's power is structured, whether and how it is divided among "secondary powers." A well-structured democratic sovereign can enable and encourage citizens to do more for themselves through associations, while for that reason allowing government to do what it must do more effectively.

Tocqueville appears to distinguish sharply between "civil" and "political" associations. In the first volume of *Democracy*, his distinction refers to effects. The chief political effect of all associations is that they form a bulwark against the tyranny of the majority (*DA* I 2.4). In the second volume, which is supposed to treat their effects on civil life, the distinction between the types is maintained by discussing them in separate chapters (*DA* II 2.5 and 2.7, respectively) and by emphasizing the different ways in which they sustain association. Civil associations teach citizens *how* to associate by getting them in the habit of doing so. Political associations teach the *why* by showing them the importance of associating, and they thereby impart a taste for doing so.

In the end, these distinctions do not amount to much. First, the graver threat to democratic freedoms turns out not to be majoritarian tyranny, but mild despotism. In any case, either is averted as much by civil associations as by political (*DA* II 2.5, 4.5, 4.7). Second, when Tocqueville recommends to governments that they permit as much association as possible even while hoping to limit political associations, he notes that not only does banning the latter hamper the prosperity of the former, but also that citizens often have trouble distinguishing between permissible civil associations and impermissible political ones (*DA* II 2.7). Indeed, Tocqueville himself has this trouble when he includes as examples of the prodigious *political* activity of Americans the building of churches and the creation of temperance societies (*DA* I 2.6), which he elsewhere cites as examples of *civil* associations (*DA* II 2.5). And if civil associations are supposed to teach the habits needed for effective association, the township, surely a political association, does this as well (*DA* I 1.5). Only political associations, however, impress or inspire citizens with the importance of making this effort. Finally, at the core of any association is a determination to promote an idea or sentiment (*DA* I 2.4; II 2.5, 2.6); and ideas—not to mention the habit of formulating and articulating them—often have both political and nonpolitical significance. Thus it is hard to find an essential difference between the two kinds of association. Both are means of democratic self-government. We might surmise that the chief purpose of the apparent sharp distinction is to persuade governments that perceive political associations as threats to their power to permit associations of any sort.

---



That civil as well as political associations are means of self-government which supplement or, to some extent, replace government as ordinarily construed can be grasped in thinking through Tocqueville's numerous remarks about intoxication and temperance societies. When democratic citizens associate to make a display of their own abstinence in the hope of encouraging temperance in others, they behave, he notes, as an aristocratic lord once might have done for those who looked up to him (*DA* II 2.5, 2.7, 4.6). In this example, both the association of ordinary, equal democratic citizens and the aristocratic lord rely on an informal mode of governing that is meant to work primarily by shaping mores. This is an alternative to more authoritarian methods of discouraging intemperance found in early American Puritan legislation and in post-Revolutionary American and French bureaucratic regulation (*DA* I 1.2, 2.4, 2.5, 2.6; II 2.5).

The association or "secondary power" Tocqueville discusses in greatest detail is the New England township. Townships (local governments) are unlike other associations insofar as they are "permanent associations created by law" (*DA* I 2.4; see also II 2.6). In this depiction of the township, some participation is said to be obligatory, although it is compensated (*DA* I 1.5). Participation in civil associations and in most other political associations (for example, political parties and "interest" or "pressure" groups) is, in contrast, voluntary, even when the urgency of doing so is manifest. Yet while Tocqueville stresses the dependence of townships on law, he also notes that, of all associations, their formation is the most natural or spontaneous—as if he agreed, at least to this extent, with Aristotle that man is by nature a political animal (I 1253a2, 29). Thus the township represents the extremes of deliberation and compulsion on the one hand and spontaneity on the other, within which other associations will fall.

If politics, in the form of the township, is ubiquitous or all but natural, township *freedom* is "rare and fragile" (*DA* I 1.5). Where it is found, it is here that the force, the spirit, of a nation's freedom resides. This freedom is rare and fragile in part because it owes its existence neither to interest nor to reason. To the contrary, a "civilized society" will be "revolted" at the sight of its often bumbling efforts. Rather, township freedom lives in mores, which in turn are often born of circumstance and require time to take hold. But insofar as these mores can be sustained by laws or at least by legislative forbearance, the township and its freedom do depend on a sort of legislative art.

The "art" with which Americans keep the township vital consists of concentrating and then "scattering" its power (*DA* I 1.5). In Tocqueville's idealized America, the federal Constitution and especially New England state constitutions respect township autonomy to a considerable degree, if not completely. Hence the township retains powers that have a real impact on people's daily lives. It is responsible for schools, for example. Moreover, because the township retains "force and independence" it not only treats matters of interest, it *excites* interest and attracts ambition, thereby becoming home to affection (*DA* I 1.5). Holding local office can be an attractive goal that is within reach of ordinary citizens and hence a suitable objective for generalized ambition. At the same time, offices are numerous and diffuse, so this potentially dangerous political passion becomes at worst harmless and at best beneficial. In the New England township, citizens elect their officers, make common decisions in frequent town meetings, and then execute the decisions through the

---

township's many short-term elective offices. For the most part, holding office means performing specific duties mandated by law or executing constituents' will, but office holders can also take personal responsibility to act on their own initiative.

The township is a "primary school" of freedom. While attending it, one acquires the habits of freedom and the taste for its exercise (*DA I 1.5*). The township deliberately confounds the duties of citizenship with the rights of citizenship; one learns through practical experience that rights, duties, and political order are coextensive. In this way, citizens acquire the habit of exercising democratic freedoms as responsibly as they can, even if they cannot always do this with great efficiency or perfect justice (*DA I 1.5*). That township government is inefficient and the source of occasional injustices is neither ignored by Tocqueville nor a reason for him to condemn what it does accomplish. Township freedom gives citizens an *interest* in self-government. And it piques, then moderates ambition. It thus makes both self-government and the township's well-being objects of *pride*, and this, in turn, gives rise to patriotism.

In the United States the native country makes itself felt everywhere. It is an object of solicitude from the village to the entire Union. The inhabitant applies himself to each of the interests of his country as to his very own. He is glorified in the glory of the nation; in the success that it obtains he believes he recognizes his own work, and he is uplifted by it; he rejoices in the general prosperity from which he profits. He has for his native country a sentiment analogous to the one that he feels for his family, and it is still by a sort of selfishness that he takes an interest in the state (*DA I 1.5*).

So here is the doctrine of self-interest well understood, prompted by law, suffused with ambition and pride, and inscribed in habit.

## The Art and Science of Association

*Democracy's* longest, most focused discussion of associations and of the art and science of association is found in the section explicitly devoted to democratic *sentiments* (*DA II 2*). This section is also the one in which the term "art" occurs more often than elsewhere in the book, and the one in which Tocqueville directly lectures democracy's formal and informal authorities. It is here that he elevates the Americans' seemingly fortuitous facility for association to an "art" of association and the shaping of an inclination to it to a "science." He speaks of "laws that rule human societies" (*DA II 2.5*), of a "general theory" of association (*DA II 2.7*); of "relations," even "natural" and "necessary" relations, of "hidden knots" to be discovered (*DA II 2.5, 2.6, 2.7*). He attempts "proofs" and "demonstrations" of his points. So here, to be sure, is grist for the mills of "governments"—for politicians and policymakers, as well as for political and social scientists, ethicists, even philosophers. But given the context—sentiments—we may infer that in this grist is the advice that their political science heed the sentiments of democratic citizens, first to know them and then to inform them.

In fact, Tocqueville suggests that the science of association presupposes the art and that the art is, in turn, discovered in political practice. Only once in *Democracy in America* does Tocqueville specify that an aspect of American democratic practice could not even be conceived of without having been witnessed. That aspect

---

is the extraordinary proliferation of local political activity (*DA I 2.6*). The fact that Americans actually know how to associate makes it possible to conceive of an art or science of association; their free, voluntary activity is not its consequence but its presupposition.

In order to sustain and promote this activity, however, Tocqueville has to argue to democracy's public authorities on behalf of associations. All governments, he holds, even popular ones, strive to maintain, if not to enlarge, their spheres of power. Modern governments especially seek ever newer, ever more efficient, more "rational" or "progressive" ways of doing this. And this quest may appear to be facilitated by a sort of political science of which Tocqueville is critical. Yet no government, however rational and efficient, however powerful, could ever hope to substitute itself for civil society and all its activities. So governments must tolerate, and should welcome, "civil" associations. Tocqueville's science purports to demonstrate to governments that they are rarely threatened and usually strengthened by permitting associations of *all* sorts—political as well as civil. Pushing this point further, he suggests that civil associations are best fostered by decentralizing governmental power itself, by fashioning meaningful institutions of local government (*DA II 2.6*).

## Tocqueville's Understanding of Association in His Context

Let us now return to the issue of Tocqueville's seemingly exaggerated rhetoric in speaking of American associations. Were it not for the intellectual context in which Tocqueville writes, his exaggeration would seem even sillier than it does. The America Tocqueville describes and the France he called home did and still do draw from a more or less common fount of political theory. That fount is liberalism.

Tocqueville's politics are liberal. He, no less than other liberals, champions rights, government by consent, and limited government—as might be inferred from his affirmation of the principle of the sovereignty of the people. And he, perhaps even more than others, appreciates the strength and dignity that attach to responsibilities when they are freely and knowingly assumed. He does, however, begin *Democracy in America* by calling for a new political science, and what this means is not perfectly clear. How significant are his departures from liberal theory, what direction do they take, and what, if any, is their practical significance?

Liberalism rests on a contention that human beings are not naturally political. Our natural condition is one in which free and equal individuals have a right to virtually everything and no moral, political, or social responsibilities to or bonds with anyone. (Hence the primacy of self-interest in American and democratic political and moral thought.) However appealing this condition of freedom and equality might at first seem, given human nature, desirous and restive as it is, and given the absence of all limitations on rights, our natural condition would in all likelihood be quite fearful—full of "inconveniences," as John Locke has it (1.13.), and "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short," as Thomas Hobbes more candidly puts it (13). So each individual, making a rational calculation of how best to secure his or her life, liberty, and property, consents to surrender his autonomy to a society and government he himself institutes to provide this security. More to the present point, the theory's initial assumption of natural associability requires that not just society and government,

---

but *all* human associations be understood as conscious human constructions. These originate either in law, which is in principle universally consented to, or in voluntary agreements among particular individuals.

Tocqueville, in describing America, never traces the politics of “the New World” to a prepolitical, presocial natural condition of mankind.<sup>2</sup> Instead, he starts his analysis of liberal democracy with its hopeful principle of the sovereignty of the people and looks to its practice. In reflecting on what this practice may become, however, he sees the principle of the sovereignty of the people being transformed into “individualism.” The term describes the thoughts and feelings of human beings who might just as well have learned to conceive of themselves as residents of a state of nature.

In *Democracy in America*, one finds no systematic analysis of the philosophy that underlies liberal politics. In Tocqueville’s study of French political history (*The Old Regime and the Revolution*), however, the principle of individualism is traced to the misguided designs of eighteenth and nineteenth century intellectuals. It was they who drew the political consequences of this philosophy and thereby inspired the Revolution of 1789, the revolutions that followed from it, and the socialism it later spawned (see also *DA* II 1.1).<sup>3</sup>

Here he reveals the real intention of the theory of the state of nature. These later intellectuals articulated to the public the aspiration, first formulated by the philosophers, to rationalize human life. Society was to be vastly simplified and the resources of expertise and power centralized, whether under a monarchy or under an emerging egalitarian order. All traditional institutions and customs that had once sustained social inequalities and had later come to appear arbitrary and unjust were to be abolished. To these ends, the authority of organized religion, the nobility, and local political bodies, of all “secondary powers” or existing associations, was to be sapped or destroyed and replaced by a centralized bureaucratic government. Democratic political freedoms were not the priority. Tocqueville’s overuse of the term “association” in *Democracy* may be understood as a response to liberal theory’s exaggeration of individual autonomy. So, too, his “science” of association may be intended to counter this pseudo-science of governmental centralization.

How, in the end, might one compare Tocqueville’s “science” of association to the political science of his predecessors? I have argued, among other points, that for Tocqueville, the difference between political and civil associations is not as essential as it first seems. As a rule, liberals stress the distinction between political and civil (or non-governmental), between public and private. This they do because they do not wish to acknowledge that there may be *political* goods beyond those of the preservation of a rational legal order in which life, liberty, and material prosperity for each citizen is best secured. They do not insist that there are no other human goods, perhaps even higher goods, which political order may make possible; they observe only that the rank order, even the existence, of these goods are highly controversial and may not admit of rational demonstration. Should there be other or higher goods, liberals say, it is appropriate that governments allow individuals or individuals who constitute themselves as members of *civil* associations to pursue these goods; governments must not pursue them directly on behalf of citizens. For liberals, the political association is a precondition, not an object of human aspirations to anything beyond or above security and freedom. When Tocqueville says that what is distinctive about political

---

associations is that their undertakings are “great” (*DA II 2.7*), when he appears to include himself among those “enamored of the genuine greatness of man” (*DA II 1.7*) and among friends of “freedom and human greatness” (*DA II 4.7*), he goes beyond most other liberals in averring politics to be no mere minimal good, but an expression of human dignity and the vehicle for the most ambitious and admirable worldly striving (see *DA II 2.17*). For all his aversion to big government and his fondness for associations, he is in the end a passionate defender and an ardent admirer of political life, *properly structured*. In this connection, we should also recall that Tocqueville and his readers operate in a Christian, as well as a liberal, world, in which religion provides its own ranking of human goods. Tocqueville, though not a believer, also distinguishes himself from most other liberals in almost invariably showing respect for Christian sensibilities. Yet he himself views religious beliefs and institutions, with other associations, as means by which big government can be kept in its place.

Tocqueville expects that politics for the indefinite future will be democratic. His fear is that, liberal theories notwithstanding, political practice will be illiberal—his famous “mild” or “democratic” despotism. He finds the root of this sort of illiberal democracy in the theories of eighteenth and nineteenth century intellectuals and their lovely simple, comprehensive designs for society *as a whole*. Not only are such schemes necessarily abstract, but their very scope makes it difficult to perceive how human affairs might be influenced by individuals exercising political freedom. All such comprehensive views that might capture the popular imagination are likely to be similarly defective, Tocqueville thinks. He deplores democracy’s tendency to excessive reliance on “general ideas” and contends that this faulty and potentially dangerous democratic thinking can be corrected only by practical experience (see especially *DA II 1.3, 4, 7, 20*). Everyone thinks most clearly and fruitfully about what he or she can be made to take an interest and a part in, and therefore come to know well.

Tocqueville wants to extend the sphere of human concerns beyond the small circle fostered by individualism. But what, in the modern world, is the extent that corresponds to the *polis* envisioned by pre-liberal philosophers like Aristotle as the political community in which man has a natural home? Aristotle’s *polis* was larger than Tocqueville’s New England township and smaller than the United States, even in the 1830s. Moreover, one might ask, as does Tocqueville (*DA I 2.5*), whether it is reasonable to expect an average democratic citizen to think about a comprehensive national political good in the way Aristotle hoped that a prudent statesman or a philosopher might. If Aristotle had had this expectation, he too might have been an advocate, not a critic, of democracy. In sum, Tocqueville departs from both his liberal contemporaries and his classical predecessors. He departs from the latter in a way they could have respected.

Tocqueville, as a liberal democrat, conceives of and characterizes associations in a way appropriate to the new democratic world. His political association is distinguished by the greatness, the ambitiousness, and the pridefulness of its undertaking, not by the comprehensiveness of the good it aspires to. An emphasis on greatness, he permits us to infer, is in part necessary to inspire citizens to overcome feelings of impotence and apathy to which their new world disposes them. It is also the case, however, that his own concern for human greatness goes far deeper than mere rhetoric. Whether this concern is premised upon a precise and coherent understanding of the human soul on a par with Aristotle’s, for example, is an inquiry for another day.

---

## Tocqueville's Understanding of Association in Our Context

Does Tocqueville's notion of "greatness" entail a proper regard for *bigness*? In what respects might the new world in which his political science is meant to operate no longer be ours? Almost everything about our world now seems bigger in scale, more complex, less amenable to direction by individuals and the associations in which they would exercise democratic freedoms. Associations themselves now often seem beyond the control of their general memberships. Few Americans live in localities governed by town meetings (though to be fair, Tocqueville knew this to be the exception rather than the rule even when he visited in the 1830s [DA I 1.5]). Some, however, are at least on occasion aroused to attend an open meeting of a school board or zoning commission. As of 2002, over 34 million Americans were members of the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP), and for most of them, participation in the association does not go beyond signing a check to renew their membership and keeping track of the discounts this entitles them to. The vast majority do not actively participate and whatever pride in membership they have can be displayed on a bumper sticker. Nor do they appear to regret what may be lost. Yet even AARP was founded by one retired teacher who had an interest and a determination to make her point. That initiating and sustaining associational activity seems to be—and is—more difficult does not mean that it is impossible.

In his own time, Tocqueville insists, governments were becoming more centralized and technocratic, more minute in their regulations, more intrusive in citizens' daily lives, more jealous of other social powers and eager to assume new responsibilities, and consequently, less nurturing of citizens' capacities to hold officials accountable in a meaningful way (DA II 4.5, 4.6). They were ready to supplant, even to supplant, associations of all sizes and sorts: charitable, educational, religious, financial, and industrial (DA II 4.6). He acknowledges that this centralization has to be seen chiefly as a product of the ideas and sentiments of democratic peoples, not of the ambitions of particular governments or of historical circumstances (DA II 4.3). So he would probably not have been surprised if democratic associations too eventually became subject to internal pressures of the same sort.

Tocqueville intends his dire predictions of extreme centralization to instill in democrats a "salutary fear of the future that makes one watchful and combative" (DA II 4.6). What has to be combated, he thinks, is not just the individualism that associations may ameliorate, but the notion that democratic peoples are at the mercy of one or another "insurmountable and unintelligent force" (DA II 4.8). We live in a bigger, more complex world in which it is harder not only to maintain the kind of associations Tocqueville advocates, but even to trace reliably all the forces that impinge on them. Nonetheless, it may still be possible to recall the way in which he analyzes and defends them and to have similar arguments available for use whenever choices, however small, about associations are to be made—by policymakers, policy analysts, political partisans, or individual citizens. Obstacles posed by complexities of scale are not necessarily insurmountable. Laws, tax regulations, association by laws, and public opinion can still be formulated or modified with a view to sustaining and promoting citizens' interest and pride in associational activity. Precisely how this might be done will be a matter of circumstance. But were one to assess

---

choices in the spirit of Tocqueville's advice, there might still be much profit to be gained from "nonprofits."

- NOTES
1. Many of my remarks are based on the introduction to the 2000 edition by Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop.
  2. Tocqueville does at times characterize the American West as virtually presocial (see, especially, *DAI* 1.3), but more often he stresses the fact that America's settlers brought with them not only their Puritan religion but also an intact moral, political, and social order (*DAI* 1.2). And while he discusses colonial legislation and then state and federal constitutions at some length, he is strikingly silent about the Declaration of Independence, which contains the clearest, most concise statement of America's debt to liberalism's teaching about the origins of legitimate governments.
  3. See, especially, *The Old Regime*, III.3.

- REFERENCES
- Aristotle. [c. 323 B.C.] 1984. *The Politics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Hobbes, Thomas. [1651] 1994. *Leviathan*. Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett Publishing Company.
- Locke, John. [1689] 1960. *Two Treatises of Government*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Tocqueville, Alexis de. [1835, 1840] 2000. *Democracy in America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- . [1856] 1998. *The Old Regime and the Revolution*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
-

