

Alexis de Tocqueville: Does Liberty Follow from Democracy? John D. Wilsey

This lecture will consider the life and times of Alexis de Tocqueville, as well as what he meant when he talked of American democracy. We will also explore the ways in which Tocqueville's observations and prescriptions remain eminently useful to us today, nearly 180 years after he completed his classic work.

Life and Times

1. Who was Alexis de Tocqueville?
 - 1.1. born 1805; died 1859
 - 1.2. born into an ancient, yet moderately wealthy, aristocratic family
 - 1.3. suffered greatly in the Revolution
 - 1.3.1. great grandfather, aunt, other relatives executed during the Reign of Terror
 - 1.3.2. father and mother imprisoned awaiting execution, but barely survived
 - 1.4. entered law school, became a *juge auditeur* (apprentice judge) in 1827 at Versailles
 - 1.5. met his travel companion Gustave de Beaumont, as well as his wife, at Versailles
2. Why did Tocqueville come to America?
 - 2.1. Tocqueville served under Charles X, but in July 1830, Charles was deposed in the July Revolution and succeeded by Louis-Philippe, his cousin
 - 2.2. all public officials had to take an oath of loyalty
 - 2.3. no win situation
 - 2.3.1. family was among the Legitimists
 - 2.3.2. his career path and advancement were uncertain
 - 2.4. interested in prison reform—way to kill two birds with one stone
 - 2.4.1. travel to America where the concept of the penitentiary was being tested
 - 2.4.2. could advance his career by writing a book and escape pressures mounting at home to conform
 - 2.5. Tocqueville and Beaumont secured official commissions from the Ministry of the Interior in February 1831, departed France on April 2
 - 2.6. primary interest—study republican example in America
 - 2.6.1. identify lessons derived from American experience with revolution, democracy, for the benefit of French
 - 2.6.2. p. 14—“I sought there the image of democracy itself...”
 - 2.7. primary audience—French
 - 2.8. wrote as an aristocratic outsider
 - 2.8.1. not an uncritical admirer of democracy
 - 2.8.2. did believe that democracy was providentially supplanting aristocracy over the centuries in a world movement directed by God
 - 2.8.3. sought to find out if there were “means of rendering it profitable to mankind.”
3. What was America like?
 - 3.1. arrived May 9, 1831; departed America on February 20, 1832
 - 3.2. Andrew Jackson finishing his 1st term
 - 3.2.1. Indian Removal underway (1830-1838)—Creeks, Chickasaws, Cherokees, Seminoles, Choctaws
 - 3.2.2. Nat Turner Rebellion, 1831
 - 3.2.3. Nullification Crisis, 1828, 1832

- 3.3. Boundaries of the US
 - 3.3.1. westward expansion
 - 3.3.2. slavery becoming a major issue—half slave, half free
- 3.4. much more religious culture than we are used to
 - 3.4.1. Second Great Awakening underway
 - 3.4.1.1. democratic religion
 - 3.4.1.2. growth of Methodists and Baptists, among many other groups
 - 3.4.2. growth of voluntary associations
 - 3.4.2.1. American Bible Society
 - 3.4.2.2. American Home Missionary Society
 - 3.4.2.3. Sunday School Union
 - 3.4.2.4. Temperance Society
 - 3.4.2.5. New York Anti-tobacco Society
 - 3.4.2.6. various anti-slavery societies
 - 3.4.2.7. local societies, some with very strange names: Ladies' Association for the Benefit of Gentlewomen of Good Family, Reduced in Fortune Below the State of Comfort to Which They Have Been Accustomed
- 3.5. All this historical background is necessary if we are to think historically about Tocqueville's project
 - 3.5.1. he entered and exited a particular moment in the American experience that is long gone
 - 3.5.2. consider change over time, context, causality, complexity of history
 - 3.5.3. Tocqueville not a prophet, did not see himself as a prophet
 - 3.5.4. His America is not the object of our aspirations—it is gone forever
 - 3.5.5. Nostalgic thinking about nineteenth century America is futile and misses the point of the book
- 4. Democracy, Equality, and Liberty
 - 4.1. While we want to think historically about *Democracy*, there is still much to learn from it
 - 4.1.1. every American should read it, but read it keeping in mind the things we've mentioned, but also how he uses his terms
 - 4.1.2. we think of democracy and liberty as synonymous, but not Tocqueville
 - 4.1.3. *Democracy* is an exploration of how to preserve liberty against despotism
 - 4.1.4. Three key terms: equality, democracy, and liberty
 - 4.1.4.1. equality
 - 4.1.4.1.1. social, economic, and political mobility, not sameness
 - 4.1.4.1.2. fading hereditary/aristocratic privilege
 - 4.1.4.1.3. widely shared education, egalitarian ideas about religion, social relationships, institutions
 - 4.1.4.2. democracy
 - 4.1.4.2.1. often synonymous with equality, especially when in the context of society
 - 4.1.4.2.2. also a political dimension—sovereignty of the people, majority rule, broad suffrage, etc.
 - 4.1.4.3. liberty/freedom
 - 4.1.4.3.1. primarily a moral liberty—human beings are born free and responsible for their actions and choices
 - 4.1.4.3.2. also in terms of particular liberties—liberty of the press, of assembly, of religion, of voluntary organizations

- 4.1.4.3.3. in active terms, seen in a “public spirit” in the New England townships
 - 4.1.4.3.3.1. everyone has a stake in the flourishing of the town
 - 4.1.4.3.3.2. balance between public and private interests
 - 4.1.4.3.3.3. secured by manners, informed by religion
- 4.1.5. but democracy and equality are at odds with liberty
 - 4.1.5.1. people will trade their liberty for equality
 - 4.1.5.2. equality yields instant gratification, while liberty’s goods are hard won and take time to realize
 - 4.1.5.3. equality yields materialism, which yields selfishness, which yields centralization, which yields democratic despotism
- 5. How Liberty can be Preserved in a Democracy
 - 5.1. Three particular aspects of citizenship from Tocqueville that apply directly to “seeking the welfare of the city”
 - 5.1.1. Public spirit
 - 5.1.2. Voluntary associations
 - 5.1.3. Formation of manners, which in turn, undergird the laws
 - 5.2. Public Spirit (vol I, ch 5)
 - 5.2.1. Public Spirit in the Townships of New England
 - 5.2.1.1. Tocqueville found that the freest people in America lived in the towns of New England
 - 5.2.1.2. he found they exhibit a unique public spirit—they had a vested interest in the flourishing of their community
 - 5.2.1.3. each person in the town had a strong attachment to it, not just because he was born into it, but because he saw himself as a member of it, and that it was worth the time and energy spent in caring for it
 - 5.2.1.4. “there is no surer guarantee or order and tranquility, and yet nothing is more difficult to create”
 - 5.3. Public Spirit drawn from power and independence of the town
 - 5.3.1. people are naturally drawn towards power
 - 5.3.2. NE towns had power and independence, which were key in producing active citizens
 - 5.3.2.1. without power and independence, people are merely subjects
 - 5.3.2.2. the power and independence of the towns were limited, to be sure, but the power and independence of the towns were nevertheless real
 - 5.3.2.3. in contrast to the county, the state, and the federal government, the town is at the center of the “ordinary relations of life”
 - 5.3.2.4. local interests are closer to the people than the interests of the county, state, and federal governments
 - 5.3.2.5. local interests also give the people the most practice at exercising power—and this exercising of power is limited in scale
 - 5.3.2.6. power is distributed widely among the population
 - 5.3.2.6.1. greatest number of people exercise themselves in the interests of the locality]
 - 5.3.2.6.2. power is not centralized in the town, but divided up among the citizens
 - 5.3.2.6.3. patriotism strongest at the local level
 - 5.3.2.6.3.1. government is suited to local tastes, chosen by themselves
 - 5.3.2.6.3.2. government emanates immediately from the people who chose it

- 5.3.2.6.3.3. well being of the town is directly proportional to the individual's well being
- 5.4. Public Spirit is necessary for the welfare of the city
 - 5.4.1. the opposite of public spirit is apathy, and the abrogation of authority to professionals
 - 5.4.2. Tocqueville linked freedom and power with responsibility
 - 5.4.3. the town flourished because the citizens were invested in it
 - 5.4.4. true, the towns were small, comprising only a few thousand people
 - 5.4.5. but the principles Tocqueville observed in the towns are applicable in any locality
 - 5.4.5.1. neighborhoods
 - 5.4.5.2. school districts
 - 5.4.5.3. parishes and churches
 - 5.4.5.4. local municipalities within a metro area
- 6. Voluntary Associations (vol II, bk 2, ch v)
 - 6.1. Kinds of voluntary associations and their effects
 - 6.1.1. "Americans of all ages, all conditions, and all dispositions constantly form associations."
 - 6.1.2. economic, political, religious, moral, large, small
 - 6.1.3. for all sorts of purposes
 - 6.1.3.1. to found hospitals
 - 6.1.3.2. seminaries
 - 6.1.3.3. inns
 - 6.1.3.4. prisons
 - 6.1.3.5. churches
 - 6.1.3.6. mission work
 - 6.1.3.7. literacy
 - 6.1.3.8. form schools
 - 6.1.4. "Wherever at the head of some new undertaking you see a government in France, or a man of rank in England, in the United States you will be sure to find an association."
 - 6.1.5. In America, voluntary associations have replaced the aristocracy
 - 6.1.6. Whereas the local aristocrat might have seen to the founding of a church or a hospital, for example, in America, the voluntary association takes that role
 - 6.1.7. in doing so, the voluntary association protects the community from tyranny on the one hand, and anarchy on the other
 - 6.2. Relation of voluntary associations to liberty
 - 6.2.1. the art of pursuing in common the object of the citizens' common desires is one of the key features of liberty in America
 - 6.2.2. without associations, individuals do not have sufficient power; by associating together, they are able to help one another
 - 6.2.3. thus, associations help maintain independence from the tyrannizing of the government
 - 6.2.4. Tocqueville asserts that voluntary associations are the most important guard of civilization against barbarism
 - 6.3. Voluntary associations today
 - 6.3.1. we still associate and organize today in order to lend assistance to our fellow citizens
 - 6.3.2. the more we associate together for common causes, the more we situate power in local municipalities and the more we secure our independence from centralized government
 - 6.3.3. ministers of churches head up the most powerful spiritual voice in the city—the church
 - 6.3.4. churches made the difference in the most important moral issues of our time

- 6.3.4.1. anti-slavery movement
- 6.3.4.2. civil rights
- 6.3.4.3. today, human trafficking
- 6.3.4.4. today, religious freedom
- 7. Manners of the People (vol I, ch XVII)
 - 7.1. The meaning and role of manners of the people
 - 7.1.1. three causes which are the most important to maintaining democracy in America
 - 7.1.2. Providential circumstances of the Americans (historical, geographical, etc)
 - 7.1.3. Laws
 - 7.1.4. Manners—which are less visible than the laws, but much more influential
 - 7.1.5. Manners—customs, mores
 - 7.1.5.1.1. habits of the heart
 - 7.1.5.1.2. character of mind
 - 7.1.5.1.3. whole moral and intellectual condition of a people
 - 7.1.5.1.4. Manners are informed most, not by the laws or by public opinion, but by the Christian religion
 - 7.1.5.1.5. Religion is the most powerful intellectual influence in America, informing the manners, which influence the laws, which regulate the state
 - 7.1.6. Manners are the key to preservation of democracy in America
 - 7.1.6.1. Tocqueville thought that it was a mistake to attribute more to laws than to manners in the maintenance of democracy
 - 7.1.6.2. He considered one of his most important observations that the manners of the people do more to secure democratic government in the United States
 - 7.1.6.3. “So seriously do I insist upon this head that, if I have hitherto failed in making the reader feel the important influence of the practical experience, the habits, the opinions, in short, of the customs of the Americans upon the maintenance of their institutions, I have failed in the principal object of my work.”
 - 7.2. Formation of right manners is key to the preservation of liberty
 - 7.2.1. we in our localities are the ones who form the manners of the overall citizenry
 - 7.2.2. if we value Christian moral teaching, then those values will be reflected in our culture
 - 7.2.3. if they are reflected in our culture, then they will be reflected in the laws that govern the land
 - 7.2.4. it is the role of the churches to lead the way in formation of customs and manners, but the churches have, in many respects, ceded that leadership to mass media
 - 7.2.5. the good news is that, at the local level, it is much easier to reform manners than it is at the state or national level