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Tocqueville on Servants, Servitude, and Impersonal Domination

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Abstract: Alexis de Tocqueville highlights a paradox at the heart of the democratic spirit. Egalitarians are allergic to markers of social hierarchy and are on the hunt to identify and abolish remnants of the old regime's entrenchment of aristocratic rank. The resulting abolition of personal hierarchy, however, does not deliver equality and freedom. Rather it inclines democrats to accept depersonalized forms of discipline at the hands of public opinion, the tutelary state, and the market economy. Tocqueville argues that the commitment to an "imaginary equality" lies at the root of the soft despotism he finds across democratized institutions, mores, and economic relationships. He develops a distinct account of the emergence of domination under conditions of formal equality. Social dependence in liberal societies does not derive from a new class of elites or the rise of capitalist economic formations. Equality is itself connected to new, impersonal forms of servitude.

Introduction

The society Alexis de Tocqueville studies in *Democracy in America* is marked by both a fierce commercial, entrepreneurial spirit and a devoted, democratic political culture. These two dimensions of American life—a market economy and a republican politics—raise the question of the more general relationship between market capitalism and liberal democracy. Recent scholarship has highlighted Tocqueville's ambivalent assessment of commercial society and suggests that he found a tension between egalitarian political democracy and the inegalitarian market society. Richard Avramenko and Brianna Wolf, for example, treat Tocqueville's account of the threat posed by the wealthy

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to democracy.[1] Gianna Englert reconstructs Tocqueville's theorization of pauperism and mass immiseration as a contradiction for a society committed to an egalitarian social state.[2] Laura Janara offers a particularly insightful treatment of Tocqueville's democratic psychology, arguing that for him, a capitalist commercial culture undermines republican self-rule.[3]

This presentation of a tension between capitalism and democracy does not fully capture what Tocqueville identifies as the common egalitarian logic that underwrites them both. There are substantial differences in this regard between Tocqueville and, for example, Karl Marx, the canonical critic of what "On the Jewish Question" terms the "two-fold life" of liberal democracy.[4] Modern citizens, on Marx's account, simultaneously inhabit a public world of democratic equality and a private world of bourgeois inequality. Tocqueville's more worrying suggestion is that these two worlds derive from the same root. A love of equality and a refusal to abide inequality lead toward impersonal, tutelary despotism in our political, social, and economic lives.

What is distinctive about Tocqueville's account is the argument that the illusory perception and public promulgation of equality produce an invisible, degrading form of dependence. He targets the consequences of refusing to acknowledge the reality of inequality in a democratic society. That refusal does not just constitute ideological blindness—an inability to recognize the facts before one's eyes. More deeply still, it reworks the character of superior and inferior and gives rise to new social relations. Tocqueville turns to the psychological dynamics of inequality in a society that repudiates hierarchy. This article takes up that psychological emphasis by reconstructing the sources and nature of the essentially impersonal forms of domination Tocqueville identifies with democratic despotism. Unlike rival accounts—especially those in the Marxist tradition—Tocqueville argues that impersonal domination is not merely an expression of economic power. The alienation and mystification of wage labor is a species of a more general form of nonagential discipline. What is most disconcerting about Tocqueville's diagnosis is the claim that a commitment to equality itself produces the new tutelary servitude. The brutalization of industrial capitalism and economic alienation is connected to the core logic and psychology of democratic equality.

The nature of equality-induced impersonal domination is most clearly visible in Tocqueville's contrast between the personal mastery of the feudal aristocracy and the abstracted servitude of a democratic society. At times this recurring juxtaposition offers an exaggerated romantic sympathy for

[1]Richard Avramenko and Brianne Wolf, "Disciplining the Rich: Tocqueville on Philanthropy and Privilege," *Review of Politics* 83, no. 3 (2021): 351–74.

[2]Gianna Englert, "'The Idea of Rights': Tocqueville on the Social Question," *Review of Politics* 79, no. 4 (2017): 649–74.

[3]Laura Janara, "Commercial Capitalism and the Democratic Psyche: The Threat to Tocquevillean Citizenship," *History of Political Thought* 22, no. 2 (2001): 317–50.

[4]Karl Marx, "On the Jewish Question," in *Marx and Engels Collected Works* (New York: International Publishers, 1975–2004), 3:160.

medieval society. That tendency may derive from Tocqueville's aristocratic prejudices but may also be read as a deliberate choice to sharpen the contrast and emphasize the distinctive characteristics of modern democracy. By rejecting rigid, formal feudal status hierarchies, democracy promises an equality it cannot deliver. Democratic institutions "awaken and flatter the passion for equality without ever being able to satisfy it entirely."[5]

At least among the citizenry of free, white men, the democratic public professes a belief in equality. "Public opinion" compels free Americans to conceptualize themselves in terms of an "imaginary equality, despite the real inequality of their conditions" (*DA* 1015). Democratic peoples do not lord over servants but hire equal employees. More precisely, democratic peoples refuse to think of themselves as inhabiting relations of personal mastery or dependence. Abraham Lincoln summarized this principle in a famous fragment: "As I would not be a *slave*, so I would not be a *master*. This expresses my idea of democracy."[6] Yet despite the abolition of feudal hierarchies, social inequality and control persist. From the class-stratifying market to prejudicial public opinion, social forces untethered to the concrete will of a superior constrain human freedom. The consequence, Tocqueville suggests, is a mystification of inequality. We live in a world marked by social hierarchy but speak in the language of civic equals. The same democratic impulse that destroys personal authority leaves citizens weak in the face of amorphous social forces. Moreover, the socially enforced belief in "imaginary equality" compels citizens to reconceptualize impersonal dependence as an expression of abstract equality.

It is impossible to read Tocqueville on Americans' love of equality without acknowledging the contradiction of chattel slavery, a juxtaposition that draws out the promise and failure of antebellum America's democratic culture. Rogers Smith[7] and Cheryl Welch[8] argue that his reflections fail to recognize the centrality of racial hierarchy within America's ideologically egalitarian society. In contrast, Jennie Ikuta, Trevor Latimer,[9] and Alvin Tillery[10] argue that Tocqueville's sensitive treatment of slavery and white supremacy anticipates more recent accounts of racial hierarchy. Christine Henderson contends that Tocqueville's rich theorization of racial and

[5]Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. Eduardo Nolla, trans. James T. Schleifer (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 2012), 316. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *DA*.

[6]Abraham Lincoln, *Speeches and Writings, 1859–1865*, ed. Don Fehrenbach (New York: Library of America, 1989), 484 (emphasis original).

[7]Rogers Smith, "Beyond Tocqueville, Myrdal, and Hartz: The Multiple Traditions in America," *American Political Science Review* 87, no. 3 (1993): 549–66.

[8]Cheryl B. Welch, *De Tocqueville* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 61–65.

[9]Jennie C. Ikuta and Trevor Latimer, "Aristocracy in America: Tocqueville on White Supremacy," *Journal of Politics* 83, no. 2 (2021): 547–59.

[10]Alvin Tillery, "Tocqueville as Critical Race Theorist: Whiteness as Property, Interest Convergence, and the Limits of Jacksonian Democracy," *Political Research Quarterly* 62, no. 4 (December 2009): 639–52.

gendered hierarchy exemplifies the majority tyranny and soft despotism Tocqueville fears will envelop democratic societies.[11]

This article follows Henderson in identifying a connection between Tocqueville's appraisal of democratic culture and his fear of a distinctively democratic despotism. It restricts its focus to Tocqueville's treatment of free, white men—the class for whom the ideology of democratic equality most clearly applied in antebellum America. Even there Tocqueville notes parallel patterns of degradation and servitude that are not exceptions to America's egalitarian spirit but the consequences of it. This article focuses on Tocqueville's account of the family, marketplace, and public opinion, sites which distill conceptual patterns of thought that mark his corpus. "Popular sovereignty" is the foundation of democratic culture: "the father of the family applies it to his children, the master to his servants, the town to those it administers, the province to the town, the state to the provinces, the Union to the states" (*DA* 633). Beginning with intimate sites of democratization models what Tocqueville sees more generally as the transition from a social world of aristocratic, personal servants to the tutelary condition of democratic, depersonalized servitude.

The article begins by outlining three conceptual motifs that guide what follows. Section 2 turns to the household, reconstructing Tocqueville's account of how democracy transforms father-son and master-servant relationships. Sections 3 and 4 take up aspects of civil society, treating the democratization of the market and public opinion. Throughout, the article emphasizes two key dimensions of Tocqueville's thinking. The first concerns the psychic character of depersonalized social control—how both the powerful and the weak are unable to coherently conceptualize their real condition. The second is the claim that transformed self-understandings of social reality further brutalize social relations. By theorizing the ideological nature of that degradation, Tocqueville identifies a connection between the belief in moral equality and consequent forms of mystified, tutelary dependence. The conclusion suggests that this distinctive treatment of impersonal domination offers an instructive contribution to debates over the nature of domination and hierarchy in contemporary liberal societies.

1. Motifs of Tutelary Despotism

An heir to the French moralist, *pensées* tradition, Tocqueville does not write systematically. It is therefore unwise if not impossible to construct a "Tocquevillian theory" of democracy. Tocqueville understands democracy

[11]Christine Dunn Henderson, "Revisiting Tocqueville's American Woman," *Political Theory* 51, no. 5 (2023): 767–89; Henderson, "Beyond the 'Formidable Circle': Race and the Limits of Democratic Inclusion in Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*," *Journal of Political Philosophy* 30, no. 1 (2022): 83–115.

impressionistically, not as a set of institutions or principles, but as what Sheldon Wolin calls a "life form."[12] Nevertheless, Tocqueville's corpus is marked by several recurring patterns of thought. The "generating fact" of equality gives the providential march of history a recognizable shape, even as contingencies temper certain tendencies inherent to a democratic social state (*DA* 4).

Tocqueville hopes that America has discovered a workable equilibrium that can serve as a model for Europe's transition to democracy. Yet his work is marked by darker premonitions about the effects of social stratification, *ressentiment*, and psychological disorientation. In these moments Tocqueville sounds like the fatalistic, monistic historians he claims proliferate in democratic centuries (*DA* 854; cf. 17). Aurelian Craiutu and Jeremy Jennings argue that this pessimism only deepened in the decades following the publication of *Democracy in America*.[13] American democracy summons forth resources—religion, associational life, participatory government—to resist its own excesses, yet these loci of liberty appear to offer little resistance to the master forces of the age. Among those forces are three of particular significance.

The first is the dialectic of democratic independence: democratic citizens are characterized by a spirit of egalitarian self-reliance, yet this spirit produces the suspicion and isolation from which a new, depersonalized despotism emerges. This inversion of equality is perhaps Tocqueville's most famous thesis and constitutes a central subject for many of the most prominent studies of Tocqueville, including those of Wolin,[14] Harvey Mansfield and Delba Winthrop,[15] and Roger Boesche.[16] Equality severs the traditional bonds of interdependence that characterize feudal-aristocratic societies. The resulting ethic of self-reliance is what Tocqueville found most attractive about American democracy. Through voluntary associations and participatory politics, democratic citizens achieve collective ends, even if moved by a self-interest "well understood" (*DA* 918). Nevertheless, active cooperation can be suffocated by a darker form of democratic individualism—a retreat from public life that leaves citizens alienated and weak. The "legitimate passion for equality that incites men to be strong and esteemed" risks being

[12]Sheldon Wolin, *Tocqueville between Two Worlds: The Making of a Political and Theoretical Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 132–48.

[13]Aurelian Craiutu and Jeremy Jennings, "The Third Democracy: Tocqueville's Views of America after 1840," *American Political Science Review* 98, no. 3 (August 2004): 391–404.

[14]Wolin, *Tocqueville between Two Worlds*, 339–364.

[15]Mansfield and Winthrop, introduction to *Democracy in America*, trans. Harvey Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), lxiii–lxvi.

[16]Roger Boesche, *The Strange Liberalism of Alexis de Tocqueville* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987), 237ff.

outmatched by the "depraved taste for equality" that demands leveling and mediocrity (*DA* 89). Isolated equals prefer equality in servitude over inequality in freedom. For Tocqueville, "the vices given birth by despotism are precisely those that equality favors. The two things complement each other and help one another in a fatal way" (*DA* 889). This development began with the centralizing state formation of early modern absolutism. Louis XIV's identification of himself with the state would be reformulated into a democratic theory of popular sovereignty. Tocqueville thus identifies the "revolutionary and democratic temperament" of the nineteenth century with the philosophes and physiocrats of the eighteenth: "Not only do they hate certain privileges but diversity itself is odious to them: They would worship equality even in servitude."[17]

Especially salient is the impersonal character of the new social dependence. Where medieval obligation was tied to the "very person of the lord," democrats become patriots, replacing loyalty to a human family with loyalty to the state (*DA* 1099–100). Private belief now depends on an abstract "common opinion" (*DA* 718). In religion, democrats abandon creedal dogmas, liturgical rituals, and ecclesial authorities, gravitating toward a pantheism that provides a simple "idea of unity" to explain creation (*DA* 758). In the economy, laborers are emancipated from feudal duties, but their material fortunes come to be dictated by mystifying market forces. Finally, and most famously, the despotic bureaucracy usurps the powers once distributed across juridical authorities. The tutelary administration governs through enervating regulations, accepted by a pacified people (*DA* 1250–52).

A second motif is the demand for formless simplicity. Democratic citizens reject symbolic markers of social hierarchy. Concretizing the theoretical commitments of the philosophes, democrats "replace the complex traditional customs that governed society … with certain simple, elementary rules, which could be deduced from reason and natural law" (*AR* 128). Rather than deal politely and delicately with one another, democrats speak with frankness and directness. Manners characteristic of aristocratic society are suspected as "puerile artifices that you use to veil or keep from their eyes truths that it would be more natural to show them entirely naked and in the full light of day" (*DA* 750). These conventions appear to the democrat as masks for subordination and hierarchy. As Mansfield puts it, citizens prefer the "formality" of democratic equality to the "forms" of aristocratic distinction.[18] The democratization of language offers a paradigmatic example of this

[17]Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Ancien Régime and the French Revolution*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 144. Henceforth cited parenthetically as *AR*.

[18]Harvey Mansfield, "The Forms and Formalities of Liberty," *Public Interest*, no. 70 (1983): 121–31.

resistance to forms (*DA* 818). In aristocratic ages, language differs along lines of class. Democrats object to such distinctions from a negative appeal to authority—none have the right to establish the bounds between courtly and demotic speech. As Lucien Jaume points out, Tocqueville constantly returns to the question: "What authority over language exists in democratic societies?"[19] This linguistic egalitarianism is meant literally, as Richard Avramenko has shown. Aristocratic grammatic precision is replaced by democratic grammatic indifference.[20] The point can be generalized, however. Simple, formal categories like "wage" or "contract" replace the complex, discriminating relations that predominated in an aristocratic regime.

The final motif is the quasi-autonomy of material and ideological equality. The material fact of mobility upends traditional, formal conventions and has much to do with the development of the American's egalitarian worldview. But an ideology of democratic equality applies even amid material inequality and stasis. Central to Tocqueville's account of the American "social state" is the dynamism of the New World. Egalitarian inheritance laws preclude the intergenerational accumulation of wealth and secure democratic stability.[21] Today's rich will be tomorrow's poor and vice versa. Money circulates rapidly, and "it is rare to see two generations reap the rewards of wealth" (*DA* 85). Europe's class distinctions led to the development of cultural identities within each social stratum. Their places set by an intergenerational chain, peasants and aristocrats understood the rights and prerogatives appropriate to their station. The emergence of the market and the opening of economic opportunity unleash a new passion for equality and independence. The mere possibility of class ascent or descent modifies social relationships, which can no longer be premised on set expectations.

The democratic ideology of self-reliance is not merely a function of economic conditions, however. A combination of political, spiritual, and economic changes produces a worldview which commands independent moral and historical force. The clearest example comes in Tocqueville's account of the ancien régime. As the middle class and aristocracy came closer in wealth, habits, and tastes, "the only remaining difference between them was a matter of rights," an inequality which came to be felt as intolerable (*AR* 79). The spirit of self-reliance emerged because of the political decline of the aristocracy, not

[19]Lucien Jaume, *Tocqueville: The Aristocratic Sources of Liberty* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 194.

[20]Richard Avramenko, "The Grammar of Indifference: Tocqueville and the Language of Democracy," *Political Theory* 45, no. 4 (2017): 495–523.

[21]Thomas James Holland, "A Revolution in Property: Tocqueville and Beaumont on Democratic Inheritance Reform," *Modern Intellectual History* 21, no.1 (2024): 23–51.

the rise of the market economy. The contractual bond of employment is partly a product of expanding economic opportunity. It is impossible for the rich man to see a servant as a permanent part of his household when that servant could end up richer than the family he serves. All economic bonds are temporary because solid social ranks have melted into air. Nevertheless, this democratic ethos persists even without capitalist dynamism. Tocqueville sees in some sectors the hardening of a permanent proletariat governed by a fixed "manufacturing aristocracy" (*DA* 984). Given the rigidity of these class dynamics, the old vocabulary of feudal mastery would seem to acquire new relevance. But propelled by the ideology of equality, exploiter and exploited alike speak as equals. It is this condition that most frightens Tocqueville: a new despotism in political and economic life that (1) lacks the vocabulary that humanized medieval hierarchical interdependence, (2) speaks of itself as a bond of free and equal citizens, and (3) quietly breeds vicious class hatred in the face of obvious contradictions.

These three motifs—the dialectic of democratic independence, the attraction to formless simplicity, and the quasi independence of ideological and material equality—recur throughout Tocqueville's treatments of democratic institutions and culture. This article draws them together to clarify an apparent paradox that runs through *Democracy in America*: democratic citizens are suspicious of inequality, yet submit to amorphous modes of discipline, which they legitimize with a language of equality. On the hunt for illicit hierarchies, democrats are susceptible to depersonalized domination at the hands of the market, bureaucracy, and public opinion. An inner logic of equality is responsible for leveling particular inequalities while mystifying and welcoming abstract, depersonalized control. This dynamic is made clear when we turn to particular sites of social life.

2. Democratic Sons and Servants

Tocqueville declares that in the United States, "the family, taking this word in its Roman and aristocratic sense, does not exist" (*DA* 1032). That remark comes amid a discussion of the way democracy refashions mores, reaching into the very bosom of private life. In these reflections, Tocqueville develops his account of gender relations—democratic, American girls and women are fiercely independent, yet they guard their chastity more fastidiously and devote themselves in marriage more completely than do aristocratic, European women. This description has prompted a wide range of interpretation and debate. Winthrop argues that by highlighting women's domestic role, Tocqueville emphasizes the superficiality of democratic politics. The private home is not simply a site of relegation, but serves as a kind of refuge

from the stultification of public affairs.[22] That framing of Tocquevillian gender dynamics rests on a strong distinction between the public and private spheres. As Cheryl Welch emphasizes, republican theory often presented women as a destabilizing source of aristocratic private corruption in the public sphere.[23]

While the contrast between public and private is an important feature of Tocqueville's democratic theory, much of his work dissolves that very distinction. As Janara persuasively argues, the interplay between equality and subjugation within Tocqueville's democratic household is emblematic of the family's embeddedness within democratic culture. Domestic subordination takes on a new, distinctive character in democracies.[24] Henderson likewise demonstrates that gendered hierarchy is best understood not as a relic of traditional or republican patriarchal mores, but as a species of the new democratic soft despotism. The choice to submit to the husband's authority is typical of the kind of coercion that proliferates in a democratic society—a tyranny that derives from the moral power of public opinion.[25]

Following Henderson and Janara in weakening a putative separation of public from private life, we find a similar dynamic characterizing the parallel transformation of sons and servants within the democratic household. Family in the traditional sense does not exist in America, Tocqueville argues, because the American family has become purely natural. Family was once a capacious social and political institution, not a nucleus of blood ties. Historically, it existed across time, knitting together the living, the dead, and the unborn. Vertically, the family reached down to include servants, whose own families served the household for generations. Horizontally, the aristocratic family was linked in an extended chain with other families who shared a similar lineage and a class identity.

The paternalism of the traditional family derives from these myriad social identities. Within the home, the father wields the juridical authority to command his dependents and the mimetic authority to model the adulthood he transmits to his children. This authority, Tocqueville argues, was political not natural. Paternalism does not derive from brute biological fact, but from a social recognition of the father's authority. The democratized family is therefore more natural than the ritualized aristocratic family. As Pierre Manent puts it: "aristocracy is on the side of convention, while democracy is on the side of nature."[26] In the aristocratic family, the father serves as the ruler of the

[22]Delba Winthrop, "Tocqueville's American Woman and 'the True Conception of Democratic Progress,'" *Political Theory* 14, no. 2 (May 1986): 239–61.

[23]Welch, *De Tocqueville*, 199–200.

[24]Laura Janara, "Democracy's Family Values: Alexis de Tocqueville on Anxiety, Fear and Desire," *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 34, no. 3 (2001): 551–78.

[25]Henderson, "Revisiting Tocqueville's American Woman."

[26]Pierre Manent, *Tocqueville and the Nature of Democracy* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996), 69–71.

home, the representative of the family to society, and the guardian of memory and identity, the "bond between the past and the present" (*DA* 1037).

The democratization of the home, Tocqueville explains, is characterized by the disappearance of paternal authority. Juridically, the father ceases to speak for his children. Fathers and sons are equal in the eyes of the law, as the father is merely "a citizen older and richer than his sons." Sons possess the "incontestable right" to assert their independence as equal citizens (*DA* 1033–35). Mimetic and moral authority also vanishes. The father no longer wields the "power of opinion" over his children, for democratic citizens are required to judge and think for themselves. Cut off from the past, the family sees no need to inherit the traditions, customs, and mores of the ancestors. The father's memories of that inheritance no longer ground special authority but are merely the charming recollections of an old man (*DA* 1037).

What paternal authority remains in America is reserved for children in their minority. As the son approaches adulthood, "the bonds of filial obedience loosen day by day" (*DA* 1033). Worries about the egalitarian subversion of the family are not new. Plato warns that democracy inverts the roles of father and son.[27] Friedrich Engels denounces the bourgeois economy for emasculating the father by turning his wife and children (with their thin fingers well suited for the industrial loom) into the family's breadwinners.[28] Resisting a more totalizing assessment of domestic anarchy, Tocqueville does not claim that father-son roles have been inverted, merely that they have been equalized. He notes the possibility of equalization leading to "anarchy and corruption," wherein the father is brought down by the elevation of his sons. Striving to please and flatter his children, the father "reduces his maturity to the level of their juvenile passions" and becomes a "vile comrade of debauchery" with them (*DA* 1038). A competitive spirit enters, for one of the drivers of American commercial energy is the son's fear of being poorer than his father (*DA* 974). Yet in his day, Tocqueville writes, the egalitarian American family has not descended into the industrial barbarism Engels found in Manchester.

As Boesche[29] and Welch[30] emphasize, Tocqueville praises the American home, especially when compared to contemporaneous reactionaries' treatment of the democratic family. Whereas aristocratic families were held together by intergenerational bonds of interest and honor, democratic ones are held together by affection and intimacy: "it is by the community of memories and the free sympathy of opinions and tastes that democracy attaches brothers to each other. It divides their inheritance, but it allows their

[27]Plato, *The Republic*, trans. Tom Griffith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 562e.

[28]Friedrich Engels, *Condition of the Working Class in England*, in *MECW* 4:436–40.

[29]Boesche, *Strange Liberalism*, 50.

[30]Welch, *De Tocqueville*, 196.

souls to blend" (*DA* 1039). The reference to inheritance recalls Tocqueville's discussion of the democratic "social state" in volume 1, where he argues that "it was the law of inheritance that pushed equality to its last stage." These laws, which belong at the "head of all political institutions," dissolved the social and political unity of the American family (*DA* 78–79). The equal division of property among sons inhibits the possibility of amassing great fortunes or great estates. Even more importantly, it severs the bond between family and land (*DA* 83).

The disappearance of the landed estate renders incoherent any idea of the family as a social institution. The honor and formality that once structured domestic family life have no place in America. Yet the freedom and familiarity with which democratic sons treat their fathers does not breed haughty contempt. Natural warmth replaces the cold rigidity of aristocratic family norms. Tocqueville recognizes the vanity of aristocratic politeness and appreciates the intimacy fostered by the fragmentation of family identity. Democracy replaces servile courtesy with "manly" sincerity (*DA* 1001). The democratization of the household "loosens social bonds, but it tightens natural bonds. It brings family members closer together at the same time that it separates citizens" (*DA* 1040).

While natural intimacy brings sons closer to their fathers, the abolition of social bonds severs the ties that united servants and masters. The traditional servant relationship disappears with the rise of the "natural" family. Feudal household authority, on Tocqueville's view, was an image of authority more broadly. The tie between lord and vassal was not of blood or nature, but a conventional chain forged over generations of mutual service. In aristocratic societies, Tocqueville explains, the master and servant classes develop as distinct societies, conjoined through a shared history and an ideology of legitimized inequality. The paradox of aristocracy is that the unbridgeable inequality between the ranks made their union possible (*DA* 1011). The closeness of master and servant derives from their permanent separation. The servant's knowledge of his permanent inferiority internalizes his experience of dependence. An unnatural hierarchy is reified by social convention. This bond reaches an obscene extreme when the servant "transfers himself entirely to his master," fully identifying with the aristocratic family he serves, sharing in its joys and sorrows. Tocqueville cannot celebrate this aristocratic domination, and he calls the servant's devotion simultaneously "touching and ridiculous in such a strange confusion of two existences" (*DA* 1012–13). For democrats, such an ideologized, de jure interpersonal hierarchy is unthinkable, as foreign to us as the conditions of feudal serfdom or Roman slavery.

Aristocratic class structures were so fine grained that even within the servant class we find complex networks of authority. The dynamics of the aristocratic home reflect the imbrication of public and private identities. All persons within the household—from father to steward to lackey—are understood not simply as individuals, but as representatives of distinct social roles.

The master is obeyed qua class, not simply qua man. The servants "revere in him, not only the master, but the class of masters. He presses on their will with all the weight of the aristocracy" (*DA* 1011). The understanding of the household as political and social produced a hierarchical intimacy no longer possible in the natural, democratic home. Servants are alienated from masters, unable to conceptualize their relationship in terms of intergenerational service and loyalty. Instead, "the servant always considers himself as a passerby in the houses of his masters. He has not known their ancestors and will not see their descendants. … Why would he confuse his existence with theirs?" (*DA* 1016). The only bond joining master and servant is the contract.

Contract translates objective hierarchy into a language of equality. What grounds reciprocal debts of service is not tradition, convention, or nature, but voluntary agreement. The bond consists in the "temporary and free agreement of their two wills. … Within the limits of this contract, one is the servant and the other the master; outside, they are two citizens, two men" (*DA* 1014). Ideologized equality forces this most explicitly unequal relationship to be interpreted as an expression of free and equal choice. An imagined equality of contract allows democrats to think in terms of mutually beneficial exchange rather than hierarchical service and dependence. This "confused and incomplete image of equality" satisfies neither the masters nor the servants:

> In the secrecy of his soul, the master still considers that he is a particular and superior species; but he does not dare to say so, and he allows himself to be drawn trembling toward the standard level. His command becomes at the very same time *timid and hard*. … He wants his servant, who is only so to speak passing through domestic service, to contract regular and permanent habits, to show himself satisfied with and proud of a servile position. (*DA* 1017–18, emphasis added)

The servants, likewise, harden against the masters: "they revolt against an inferiority to which they have subjected themselves and from which they profit. They consent to serve, and they are ashamed to obey" (*DA* 1018). The servants partly see through the absurd equivocation of their social position—linguistically and juridically an equal, but materially and objectively an inferior. Yet they are also convinced that they profit from this voluntary arrangement.

Thus, Tocqueville argues, democracy reconceptualizes two paradigmatic forms of personal subordination: the relation of sons to fathers and that of servants to masters. All parties see themselves as equals, despite occupying objectively unequal positions. The point is not to romanticize old forms of aristocratic, interpersonal hierarchy—Tocqueville recognizes the moral progress entailed with the transition to democracy. The point is to emphasize the psychic instability of democracy's egalitarian settlement. Democratizing the household is "analogous to the sad spectacle that political society presents. A hidden and internal war goes on constantly between always suspicious and

rival powers" (*DA* 1019). A new disfigurement marks a culture which speaks with a language of equality to describe a reality of hierarchy. The temporary nature of the contract linking master and servant divests the two of traditional bonds, leading to hidden class competition. The employer becomes "timid and hard," while the servant revolts internally to an arrangement he externally accepts. The new condition of servitude remains a form of domination, but the refusal of either party to view it as such depersonalizes the resulting social discipline and control. Command and obedience are replaced with contract and service.

3. From Household to Workplace

The condition of servants typifies what Tocqueville sees as a broader transformation of democratic class relations. The servant ceases to be part of the home and becomes a temporary contractor, a stranger in the household of the rich. This pattern holds true for all economic relationships. Aristocratic feudalism had no pretense of any "natural" bond connecting superior and inferior. Yet a web of social and political ties made possible a moral economy of mutual protection (*DA* 990). Offering the example of landlord-tenant relationships, Tocqueville argues that in aristocracies, "rents are paid not only in money, but also in respect, in affection and in services. In democratic countries, they are paid only in money" (*DA* 1021). Leases grow shorter, and contractual relations become temporary and estranged. In the centuries leading to the French Revolution, the aristocratic principle de facto disappeared, and aristocratic authority persisted like a tree with dead roots, easily toppled by the wind (*DA* 1022–23). This point is developed in *The Ancien Regime*, where Tocqueville argues that so long as the divide between classes reflected qualitative distinctions in rank, inequality could be tolerated. The rigidity of class separation and the formal divergence of constitutional roles legitimized feudal hierarchy. With the monarchical centralization of power in the eighteenth century, feudal lords were stripped of political authority but retained economic privileges (*AR* 79).

On Tocqueville's reconstruction, so long as the peasant was juridically subordinated to the lord, feudal dues seemed tolerable "as a natural consequence of the country's constitution" (*AR* 37). Abolishing political inequality without abolishing civil inequalities produced the class hatred that culminated in the Revolution. In the past, the lord's privileges were paired with "great burdens"—the blood tax of military service and the "responsibility to aid the indigent within the limits of his domains" (*AR* 45). But as the centralizing monarchy assumes responsibility for the welfare of the peasantry and as the lord-peasant relationship is reduced to a mere difference of wealth, the perceived legitimacy of social hierarchy breaks down.

Short-term, contractual bonds turned the "lord-peasant" relationship into the "landlord-laborer" relationship. Like domestic servants, rural dependents

experience their economic condition as a kind of homelessness. While liberated from the "petty feudal despots" of the medieval past, the peasant of the eighteenth century lived "more isolated, perhaps, than had ever been the case anywhere else in the world. His oppression was of a new and singular sort" (*AR* 112). No longer able to draw a sense of identity from an intergenerational link to an aristocratic house, the peasant lost any tie to the past and the land. As Tocqueville observes in a parallel discussion of ecclesial centralization, once someone's tie to the land is severed, "he no longer belongs to any particular place. In the land in which he happens by accident to have been born, he lives as a stranger in the midst of civil society" (*AR* 105).

Democratic citizens relate to their employers in contractual, instrumental terms. Seeing through the empty promise of emancipation, they come to hate their superiors, taking any mark of class inequality as a species of unjust, arbitrary privilege. In general Tocqueville articulates a liberal optimism about the improved material situation of laborers in the market economy. As Michael Drolet[31] and Richard Swedberg[32] have shown, Tocqueville's economic thinking is indebted to classical economists in the tradition of Adam Smith like Jean-Baptiste Say. His departure from that tradition was moral, not economic, centering on the dangerous spiritual consequences of a universalized spirit of industrial labor and materialist consumption. Unlike more radical economic critics of that tradition like Sismondi and Marx, Tocqueville does not think that market wages tend to fall to subsistence levels. He claims that a competitive labor market drives wages up, as capitalists compete to attract workers. Independent citizens refuse to settle for salaries beneath their dignity, and thus the "equality of conditions tends to lead to the gradual elevation of salaries, and in turn, the elevation of salaries constantly increases equality of conditions" (*DA* 1026).

The promise of economic dynamism and social mobility is not chimeric. America's fluid class structure is partly a product of real opportunities for upward and downward mobility. When Tocqueville speaks of an "aristocracy of money," he does not imply a static oligarchy. Poor men of talent and ambition can rise to prominence. Those at the top live in permanent fear of losing their momentary privilege: "as the social value of men is no longer fixed by blood … ranks always exist, but you no longer see clearly and at first glance those who occupy those ranks" (*DA* 996). The churn of economic activity might mitigate some of the harsher possibilities of class conflict. The servant, as we have seen, understands himself to be a stranger in the home of the wealthy because he aspires and even expects to one day acquire a fortune

[31]Michael Drolet, *Tocqueville, Democracy and Social Reform* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 36–53.

[32]Richard Swedberg, *Tocqueville's Political Economy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 32–33.

and to employ servants of his own. The corresponding psychological disorientation of the working classes—speaking in the language of equality while occupying a position of de facto subordination—might similarly be reserved for the transitional period from aristocracy to democracy. If democratic societies are as dynamic as Tocqueville insists, class antagonism of this kind may fade away with time or serve as merely passing experiences that do not deeply threaten social solidarity.

In part for this reason, Henderson emphasizes the connection between permanent status inferiority and psychological degradation. Drawing out the connection between Tocqueville's account of racial subordination—even in northern free states—and tyrannical soft despotism, she notes that because "race-based exclusions are both color-coded and rooted in (white) majoritarian mores, they are categorically different from other modalities of exclusion."[33] There is no doubt a fundamental difference between racial and class domination that centers on the contrast between permanent and temporary subjection.

Nevertheless, Tocqueville's account of the psychology of class conflict remains significant. Despite his general optimism, Tocqueville's economic commentary is marked by a darker premonition concerning the durability of class inequalities. The poor as a class remain a permanent feature of democratic society, even if the composition of that class changes with time. Returning to the quasi-autonomy of material and ideological equality described above, Tocqueville warns that at least one sector of the economy is an exception to the general pattern of rising wages in the market. In the emerging "manufacturing aristocracy," capitalists conspire to depress wages (*DA* 984). The factory relies on intensive specialization and a sophisticated division of labor. Workers in such settings cannot distinguish themselves and have no means of competing for higher wages.[34] Moreover, a career spent in one stage of the pinhead production line dements laborers, making them unsuited for any other kind of work. Specialization perfects the worker and degrades the man, turning him into a mechanized beast (*DA* 982). Factory labor creates a vicious cycle of downward mobility: "These men in general have little enlightenment, industry and resources; so they are almost at the mercy of their master," who responds to external competitive forces by reducing their wages (*DA* 1029).

Tocqueville finds in a particular sector the laws of immiseration that Marx claims will characterize the whole of the bourgeois economy. Worryingly,

[33]Henderson, "Beyond the 'Formidable Circle,'" 100.

[34]Tocqueville does not countenance the possibility of unions resisting these tendencies, but makes a suggestive comment in favor of something like worker cooperatives. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Memoirs on Pauperism and Other Writings: Poverty, Public Welfare, and Inequality*, trans. Christine Dunn Henderson (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2021), 36. Henceforth cited parenthetically as *MP*.

however, this industrial sector is the most significant for nineteenth-century America and Europe. Its dehumanizing consequences are on full display in Manchester: "From this foul drain the greatest stream of human industry flows out to fertilize the whole world. From this filthy sewer pure gold flows. Here humanity attains its most complete development and its most brutish; here civilization works its miracles and civilized man is turned back into a savage."[35]

Within the industrial aristocracy, Tocqueville sees a growing gap between the capitalist few and the laboring many. Lacking the social supports that once protected the medieval guild-artisan and the feudal dependent, the industrial wage-laborer depends entirely on market forces. The abolition of the medieval guild economy does away with guarantees of stability and plunges workers into an "uncomfortable and anarchical state" (*AR* 170). The feudal peasant was tied to his lord in a complex relation of reciprocal rights and duties. The guild-artisan likewise was formally in a position of apprenticeship and dependence, and he could rely on his superiors for support and stability. The specialized laborer, on the other hand, "depends in general on the master, but not on a particular master." Connected only by contract, the master-worker dynamic becomes purely instrumental: "the one does not commit himself to protecting, nor the other to defending, and they are not linked in a permanent way, either by habit or by duty" (*DA* 984). Industrial aristocracy shares with feudalism a clear hierarchy, yet the imaginary equality of contract abolishes noblesse oblige, leaving the workman dependent on the impersonal invisible hand.

Tocqueville is skeptical of public charity as a response to working-class immiseration. It is therefore tempting to assimilate him into a conservative or neoliberal critique of the welfare state. Friedrich Hayek, for example, invokes Tocqueville to critique a form of egalitarianism that he fears will culminate in statist dependence.[36] Gertrude Himmelfarb similarly aligns Tocqueville's economic criticism with conservative arguments for welfare reform in the 1990s.[37] There is truth in such readings, for Tocqueville insists that "any regularized, permanent, administrative system" of poor relief "will give birth to more miseries than it is able to heal" (*MP* 27). Evincing a fear of the hardening of class inequality, he warns that public charity "does not prevent there being a class of poor and a class of rich in society. … Far from tending to unite into a single people these two rival nations," institutionalized poor relief dissolves the possibility of social harmony and prepares both classes for

[35]Tocqueville, *Journeys to England and Ireland*, trans. George Lawrence and K. P. Mayer (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1958), 107.

[36]Friedrich Hayek, "Individualism: True And False," in *Studies on the Abuse and Decline of Reason* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 46–74.

[37]Gertrude Himmelfarb, introduction to *Memoir on Pauperism*, trans. Seymour Drescher (London: IEA Health and Welfare Unit, 1997).

"combat" (*MP* 19). This description of the rich and poor as "two rival nations" makes clear that Tocqueville's worry is not restricted to state-sponsored support. He fears that this class divide will remain a durable feature of any modern society. The degrading dependence on public charity mirrors the degrading dependence on anonymous market forces. These two forms of domination may even be complementary: "the manufacturing aristocracy of today, after impoverishing and brutalizing the men it uses, delivers them in times of crisis to public charity to be fed" (*DA* 984; cf. *AR* 39–45).

The degradation associated with industrialization and an emerging welfare state contributes to the atrophying of public spirit. Janara[38] and Boesche,[39] while expertly reconstructing the nature of this psychic transformation, exaggerate the degree to which Tocqueville points to a tension between democratic politics and commercial economics. In drawing attention to the symmetrical failings of public charity and the industrial economy, Tocqueville argues that the instabilities and pathologies of the private market and the bureaucratic welfare state flow from the same egalitarian source. Civic disfigurement is the perverse consequence of a particular egalitarian logic, one that turns the democratic subject inward and renders him unable to directly confront the relations of unequal, mutual dependence he inhabits. Tocqueville's guiding contrast is not state and society, but human/local and tutelary/centralized institutions. His hostility is to the pacification produced by both state and market, and his solutions revolve around the need to cultivate active ownership among the poor.

In some respects, this treatment of the flattening and disciplinary character of modern institutions parallels contemporary radical critiques of neoliberal political economy. This is perhaps most evident in Wolin's work, according to which Tocqueville shows that the market and state together produce a depoliticized form of democratic administration over a pacified people.[40] Developing a left-Tocquevillian critique of the welfare state, Wolin argues that social democracy destroys the power of marginalized subjects to resist statist domination.[41] Though Michel Foucault does not draw on Tocqueville in the same manner, an analogous anxiety underwrites his argument that the ostensibly free *homo oeconomicus* proves "eminently governable," the ideal object of governmental control.[42] At the same time, however, even as he rejects overly economistic accounts of bourgeois domination, Tocqueville's

[38]Janara, "Commercial Capitalism."

[39]Boesche, *Strange Liberalism*, 85–90.

[40]Sheldon Wolin, *Tocqueville between two Worlds*, 347–49.

[41]Sheldon Wolin, "Democracy and the Welfare State: The Political and Theoretical Connections between Staatsräson and Wohlfahrtsstaatsräson," *Political Theory* 15, no. 4 (November 1987): 467–500.

[42]Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978–1979*, trans. Graham Burchell (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 270.

diagnosis differs fundamentally from recent political interpretations of "neoliberalism," which accuse deliberate constitutional constructions of entrenching a system of economic exploitation and democratic impotence. Tocqueville does not argue that theorists, business interests, or statesmen have consciously designed constitutional institutions to protect the autonomy of the market.[43]

Tocqueville's consistent and distinctive emphasis is on the affinity between a democratic commitment to equality and a new form of degradation. The refusal to acknowledge one's social and class position fosters a new depersonalized dependence. The key feature of the modern economy is that the laborer is dominated by the class of masters rather than any master in particular. The subtlety of Tocqueville's diagnosis consists in locating the source of this structural domination not in laws of economics, but in a democratic belief in equality. Abstract equality is "like a box with a false bottom; you put the ideas that you want into it, and you take them out without anyone seeing" (*DA* 829). No longer able to publicly acknowledge inequality, neither superior nor inferior recognizes their true class position. Obscuring objective dependence distorts both parties' sense of their duties and prerogatives and thereby alters the social relationship itself. When fathers, landlords, and employers speak of their children, tenants, and employees as equals, they take leave of the traditional obligations built into their position of superiority (*AR* 115).

De jure equals but de facto inferiors acquire contempt for those who abandoned them. The contradiction between discursive equality and material inferiority breeds, Tocqueville claims, a class hatred that cannot be directly spoken of. Few will long be satisfied with the imaginary equality promised by the market. The rich treat the poor as equals in public. They refuse to openly display their superiority and "will not part without shaking hands." Beneath this pretense, however, the rich harbor "great disgust for the democratic institutions of their country. The people are a power that they fear and despise" (*DA* 288). Abstract egalitarian formulas go into the box, contempt is withdrawn but kept hidden from public eyes. The poor and laboring classes, moreover, are unable to properly comprehend their class position. Their material dependence on market forces and state welfare is tied to a psychic servitude and resentment that derives in part from their professed egalitarianism.

Tocqueville's repudiation of market-induced dependence rhymes with his rejection of state-induced bureaucratic dependence because both derive from

[43]This is importantly different from the kind of account defended by Nancy MacLean, *Democracy in Chains: The Deep History of the Radical Right's Stealth Plan for America* (New York: Viking, 2017), Quinn Slobodian, *Crack-up Capitalism: Market Radicals and the Dream of a World without Democracy* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2023), and Naomi Oreskes and Erik Conway, *The Big Myth: How American Business Taught Us to Loathe Government and Love the Free Market* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2023).

a misguided belief in "imaginary" equality. The invisible hand of the market and the tutelary bureaucracy of the state are in this regard democratic cousins. In this treatment of political economy, Tocqueville points to his central theme of democratic soft despotism. That despotism derives from a publicly professed if incompletely realized egalitarian faith. The transparent status of the personal, aristocratic servant is replaced by an ideology of equality and a reality of impersonal, democratic servitude. This servitude therefore depends on an egalitarian deference to public opinion and that same public opinion's enforcement of a belief in equality.

4. Equality and Public Opinion

The reduction of economic relations to bonds of temporary, contractual exchange generalizes the changing status of servants within the democratic home. The theoretically humanizing (though often hypocritical and abusive) ties of feudal aristocracy are replaced by an economy of de jure equality but de facto hierarchy. The second transformation within the home is also replicated across democratic civil society. Tocqueville claims that the patriarchal father's mimetic, moral authority over his children gives way to an assumption of the children's rights as equal, independent citizens. In like manner, social elites lose the moral authority they once wielded. This development is so fundamental that Tocqueville treats it at the very beginning of the second volume of *Democracy in America*. In an aristocracy, rigid, recognized inequalities lead subjects to "take as a guide for their opinions the superior reason of one man or one class" (*DA* 717). As with paternalism, this intellectual authority is conventional not natural, a consequence of social practice. Democracy rejects claims of epistemic privilege, because "as citizens become more equal and more similar, the tendency of each blindly to believe a certain man or a certain class decreases" (*DA* 718). That is precisely what we would expect from the ethic of independence Tocqueville associates with America's democratic culture. At the same time, however, just as the mimetic authority of particular persons collapses, the moral authority of an abstract "public opinion" acquires unprecedented strength:

> The disposition to believe the mass increases, and more and more it is opinion that leads the world. … In times of equality, men, because of their similarity, have no faith in each other; but this very similarity gives them an almost unlimited confidence in the judgment of the public; for it does not seem likely to them that, since all have similar enlightenment, truth is not found on the side of the greatest number. (*DA* 718–19; cf. 414)

Tocqueville is characteristically ambivalent concerning public opinion. Democratic opinion-making has some salutary effects. The introduction of *Democracy in America* associates the equality of conditions with the progress of minds (*DA* 7). A democratic orator can address the nation in a manner that

"enlarges thought and elevates language" (*DA* 868). Nevertheless, it is important to take heed of Tocqueville's premonition that equality might degenerate at the expense of these hopeful possibilities. His account of democratic epistemology shows how an admirable spirit of American Cartesianism begins by spreading a demand for citizens to "judge for themselves," yet concludes in a conformist dependence on "the idea of a single social power, simple and the same for all" (*DA* 754).

This simple social power is what Tocqueville terms the "moral power" of the majority (*DA* 416). An egalitarian point of departure implies that no particular man or class wields more wisdom than the people taken together. This is the "theory of equality applied to minds" (*DA* 404). Democratic citizens do not flatter masters the way French subjects flatter kings, yet they sacrifice their judgment to the wisdom of the majority. The slavish spirit of the courtier is universalized, for none dares criticize the judgment of the people. Americans do not give their monarch "their wives and daughters so that he would deign to elevate them to the rank of his mistresses; but by sacrificing their opinions to him, they prostitute themselves" (*DA* 423). We find here a psychological variant of majority tyranny. Private judgment is not a sure source of independence, but delivers the individual "isolated and defenseless to the action of the greatest number" (*DA* 719). In this case, the individual conforms not because of the fear of traditional persecution, but out of an awe for the apparent wisdom of the mass. When the "public governs," Tocqueville insists, "there is no man who does not feel the value of the public's regard and who does not seek to win it by gaining the esteem and affection of those among whom he must live" (*DA* 889). Not even a powerful monarch can resist public opinion. Louis XVI spoke "as master, but in reality he himself was obedient to public opinion, which daily either inspired or swept him along, and which he regularly consulted, feared, and flattered" (*AR* 156).

This purported freedom of thought and speech takes Americans from "extreme independence to extreme servitude" (*DA* 291). There is no need for violent censorship, for the supremacy of public opinion makes it unthinkable to challenge the majority's judgment in the first place. As Henderson explains, it is a mistake to strongly distinguish between institutionalized and psychological forms of majority power.[44] Tocqueville's chief concern is the subtle means by which democratic culture tyrannizes the soul. The majority tyranny described in volume 1 of *Democracy in America* is closely connected to the tutelary despotism described in volume 2. Indeed, the description of epistemic servitude in the first volume (*DA* 418) is closely paralleled by the psychic analysis of despotism in the second (*DA* 1259–61).

As Tocqueville puts it, there is "no country where, in general, there reigns less independence of mind and true freedom of discussion than in America" (*DA* 417). Within a sphere of acceptable opinion, Americans have unlimited

[44]Henderson, "Revisiting Tocqueville's American Woman."

freedom; but beyond that sphere no man dares to tread. The democratized Cartesian method ultimately counsels submission to mass prejudice. The "equality of conditions, at the same time that it makes men feel their independence, shows them their weakness," Tocqueville writes. Despite a public ideology of self-reliance, egalitarianism reveals man's dependence on his fellows (*DA* 1006). Democrats recognize their personal weaknesses, refuse to defer to proper epistemic authorities, and finally defer to the impersonal judgment of the crowd:

> As all men resemble each other more, each one feels more and more weak in the face of all. Not finding anything that raises him very far above them and that distinguishes him from them, he mistrusts himself as soon as they fight him; not only does he doubt his strength, but he also comes to doubt his right, and he is very close to acknowledging that he is wrong, when the greatest number assert it. The majority does not need to constrain him; it convinces him. (*DA* 1148)

This wariness of public opinion contrasts with the optimistic defense of intellectual freedom common among eighteenth-century philosophes. They popularized an ideal of free, individual judgment, which first emerged in the Reformation (*DA* 702–5). In so doing, these Enlightenment thinkers theorized a connection among the freedom of thought, the primacy of public opinion, and the discovery of rational truths. Dumarsais's entry on "the philosophe" for Diderot's *Encyclopedia*, for example, insists on a connection between philosophical reason and public opinion.[45] True reason, Dumarsais argues, consists in the prudent recognition of the limits of one's own capacity to judge. That limit does not imply deference to particular authorities. Instead, the entry emphasizes the necessity of conforming to the judgments of society. Rejecting an ideal of the philosopher who stands in conflict with social life, he writes that for the philosophe "civil society is, as it were, a divinity on earth; he flatters it, he honors it by his probity, by an exact attention to his duties, and by a sincere desire not to be a useless or embarrassing member of it." Tocqueville shares this description of the divinized majority, but not Dumarsais's enthusiasm: "the people are like the divinity from this new world; everything emanates from and returns to them" (*DA* 85).

In this rationalist and egalitarian reverence for public opinion, Tocqueville finds the prospect of majority tyranny. Americans believe that "enlightenment, like power, is disseminated in all the parts of this vast country. There, the beams of human intelligence, instead of coming from a common center, cut across each other in all directions" (*DA* 295). Epistemic egalitarians refuse to submit to those of superior judgment, waiting instead for the aggregative discoveries of ordinary, democratic opinions. Where the Enlightenment saw

[45]Cesar Chesneau Du Marsais, "Philosopher," in *The Encyclopedia of Diderot & d'Alembert Collaborative*, trans. Dena Goodman (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Library, 2002).

aggregation as a mark of progress, Tocqueville warns that it may constitute a slavish tyranny over the mind. Deference to public opinion leads democratic subjects to internalize prejudice and to conform to the mass. The sovereignty of the people perfects despotism, which no longer needs to coerce the body, for it touches the soul directly.

Conclusion

Tocqueville develops a remarkable and unsettling account of how the abolition of interpersonal authority offers an illusion of freedom and equality while concluding in social conformism and depersonalized dependence. A commitment to equality leads democratic peoples to refuse to understand themselves as servants or masters. Personal subjection and dependence violate the core promise of an egalitarian social state. And yet, democrats "seemed to love liberty, but it turns out that they only hated the master" (*AR* 151). They reject the personal dependence embodied by the servant relationship, but run headlong into a new servitude at the tutelary hands of the state, the despotism of public opinion, and the invisible hand of the market. Ideological conformism and alienating class conflict emerge, Tocqueville claims, from the logic of equality itself. A nation of equals refuses to acknowledge rank or privilege, yet the fact of inequality is never fully done away with. The resulting cognitive dissonance distorts our sense of social life and reworks the nature of inequality.

This account has a great deal to offer contemporary philosophical debates over the nature of domination and hierarchy in liberal, egalitarian societies. A major divide in contemporary treatments of domination concerns the contrast between personal and impersonal modes of social control. "Republican" or "neo-Roman" theorists like Philip Pettit and Quentin Skinner understand freedom as independence from the arbitrary will of a superior.[46] Elizabeth Anderson's critique of luck egalitarianism has given rise to an examination of the objectionable personal hierarchies that persist amid formal, legal equality.[47] Niko Kolodny theorizes democracy as a society in which people relate "to one another as social equals, as opposed to social inferiors or superiors."[48] These diverse accounts share an emphasis on the essentially personal nature of subordination. As Kolodny puts it, "relations of inferiority are relations

[46]Philip Pettit, *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); Quentin Skinner, *Liberty before Liberalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

[47]Elizabeth Anderson, "What Is the Point of Equality?," *Ethics* 109, no. 2 (1999): 287–337; *Private Government: How Employers Rule our Lives* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017).

[48]Niko Kolodny, "Rule over None I: What Justifies Democracy?," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 42, no. 3 (2014): 196.

between individual, natural persons. They are not relations between an individual, natural person and an artificial person, collective, or force of nature."[49]

A rival tradition argues that the essential characteristic of domination or oppression in modern liberal societies is its impersonality. Iris Marion Young's influential work theorizes domination as "structural or systemic phenomena which exclude people from participating in determining their actions or the conditions of their actions."[50] It is a mistake, she argues, to overemphasize juridical status hierarchies and the power of personal elites. Developing a form of republicanism inflected by Marxist theory, Alex Gourevitch and William Clare Roberts similarly identify domination with dependence on the impersonal structure of the market.[51] To understand contemporary unfreedom, thinkers in this vein demand that we abandon the search for the master.

Tocqueville demands that greater attention be paid to the psychological power of "imaginary equality" in constituting a source of impersonal social control and dependence. The belief in equality produces new sites of depersonalized power, from the wage contract of the market to the moral omnipotence of the majority in matters of individual judgment. The distinctive despotism of a democratic society does not emerge from an insufficient commitment to egalitarianism. He challenges contemporary democrats to consider what motivates and what is obscured by the skepticism and hostility toward personal modes of distinction and hierarchy. He warns that an exaggerated attentiveness to interpersonal inequality can blind us to the far greater challenge contemporary liberal societies face: the rise of impersonal social discipline. This Tocquevillian analysis—with its emphasis on democratic psychology—makes surprising bedfellows with some conservative and some radical critics of liberal and neoliberal political economy. Those agreements at the level of diagnosis do not, however, entail agreements at the level of prescription.

Tocqueville is at his most conservative in his insistence that deep inequalities will inevitably persist in democratic societies. He argues that democracy must find ways to conceal those inequalities and to legitimize them with a new egalitarian logic. For him, "authority must always be found somewhere in the intellectual and moral world. Its place is variable, but it necessarily has a place" (*DA* 716). When authority is concealed and democratized, it tempers

[49]Niko Kolodny, *The Pecking Order: Social Hierarchy as a Philosophical Problem* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), 89.

[50]Iris Marion Young's influential work is most associated with the theorization of structural injustice, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 31.

[51]Alexander Gourevitch, "Labor Republicanism and the Transformation of Work," *Political Theory* 41, no. 4 (2013): 591–617; William Clare Roberts, *Marx's Inferno: The Political Theory of Capital* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016).

egalitarian excesses, giving rise to responsible and even great politics. The painting of America is "covered by a democratic layer beneath which from time to time you catch a glimpse of the old colors of aristocracy" (*DA* 73). Concealed and legitimized inequality is the healthiest means of preserving a form of aristocratic distinction. For this reason, he praises antebellum America for justifying inequality in a democratic mode. Hidden but alive in lawyers, mediating institutions, participatory government, and associational life, functionally feudal forms are democratized and can thereby limit the dangers of impersonal social and political domination.

Egalitarians will be troubled by Tocqueville's insistence on the ineradicability of inequality and the need to preserve concealed forms of aristocracy. He throws cold water on the ambition of establishing a society of full, genuine equals. More dangerous still, his proposed revitalization of personal forms of distinction—even in a democratic mode—runs the risk of justifying the hierarchical relationships liberalism and democracy reject. Even if Tocqueville is right that the tutelary state and impersonal market pose a distinct threat to human freedom, they may remain improvements over the noxious status hierarchies and personal dependence that flourish in intimate, small-scale settings. Tocqueville concludes *Democracy in America* by acknowledging that whatever brilliance and virtue may have been lost with the decline of aristocratic society, democratic equality remains unequivocally more just (*DA* 1282).

Nevertheless, for conservatives and egalitarians alike, Tocqueville's warning of democracy's penchant for impersonal power has proved prescient. When inequalities are imagined away through discursive forms of emancipation, new pathologies emerge. It becomes ever more comforting to turn to egalitarian mystification—social conformism or the illusion of the contract—while ignoring the dangers of depersonalized dependence. In the market, the rich and powerful are liberated of traditional debts of service, imagining themselves the equals of the laborers at their employ. The poor and weak come to hate their condition of de facto subordination, a subordination they are unable to directly identify by name. A brutal indifference dominates the souls of the great, while a new degradation forms in the souls of the weak. Democrats wary of these sources of unfreedom must take seriously Tocqueville's disconcerting charge that the source of the problem lies with democratic psychology itself. It is consoling but perhaps naive to locate these democratic difficulties in the external workings of the market economy or the machinations of elites. The challenge becomes much more serious if Tocqueville is correct that the love of equality itself produces the new servitude.

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