

THE PERIODICAL OBSERVER

Reviews of articles from periodicals and specialized journals here and abroad

Politics & Government	99	110	Religion & Philosophy
Foreign Policy & Defense	101	113	Science, Technology & Environment
Economics, Labor & Business	104	116	Arts & Letters
Society	106	119	Other Nations
Press & Media	109		

Tocqueville in the 21st Century

A Survey of Recent Articles

While Karl Marx has fallen sharply on the intellectual stock exchange in recent years, Alexis de Tocqueville has dramatically risen. To mark the 10th anniversary of the *Journal of Democracy* (Jan. 2000), the editors invited 23 thinkers to address themes from Tocqueville's classic *Democracy in America* (1835–40), in light of the tumultuous century just past.

Tocqueville did not foresee communist totalitarianism, observes historian Martin Malia, author of *The Soviet Tragedy* (1994), but he did worry about what he called “democratic despotism.” He often noted, says Malia, that “liberty . . . is prized only by the few able to prosper in the competition it engenders; equality, by contrast, is prized by the multitude, which possesses no other quality to lend its isolated members dignity. Thus the ‘never dying, ever kindling hatred which sets a democratic people against the smallest privileges is peculiarly favorable to the concentration of all political rights in the hands of the representative of the state.’”

Tocqueville attributed this vulnerability to despotism, asserts Hahm Chaibong, a political scientist at Seoul's Yonsei University, to democratic individualism, which loosens traditional family ties and, in Tocqueville's words, “saps the virtues of public life.” But America's “free institutions” saved it.

“Throughout his great work,” says Jean Bethke Elshtain, author of *Democracy on Trial* (1995), “Tocqueville insists that one cannot keep the lid on egalitarianism indefinitely. . . . He surely knew that, at some point, pressure would be brought to bear against the notion that equality of the sexes is not only fully compatible with but best sustained by distinctive and separate spheres of

operation for men and women.” In 1830s America, she says, the French visitor “saw women not only taking part in the general democratic hustle and bustle but often acting as its chief architects. The domestic flowed over into the civic, as women became authorities both within the family and . . . within their communities.”

Were Tocqueville to return today, Elshtain says, he would be “troubled, though probably unsurprised, to see women taking up the cry of democratic equality in order to go in quest of the same things men pursue—namely, economic opportunity, a kind of relentless striving, a desire for ‘more.’” He would worry that with everybody engaged in such largely individualistic pursuits, no one was left to inculcate democratic values in the young and sustain the vital institutions that form and encourage ethical and civic virtues. Many parents today, she notes, complain they do not have time for family and community, and “fear that they are losing their children to an increasingly individualistic, materialistic, and violent culture. They have glimpsed the future, and it looks a lot like the bleak world of ‘democratic despotism’ limned so brilliantly by Tocqueville.”

In recent years, many neo-Tocquevilleans have emphasized the important role that voluntary associations play in making democracy possible. Largely ignored, however, observes Seymour Martin Lipset, a Wilson Center Senior Scholar and a professor of public policy at George Mason University, has been “the fact that he gave priority to political associations (the most important of which are parties) because of

their role in stimulating other associational activity.” William A. Galston, director of the University of Maryland’s Institute for Philosophy and Public Policy, agrees, pointing out that if Tocqueville is correct, “it is a mistake to believe that civil society can remain strong if citizens withdraw from active engagement in political associations. Over time, the devitalization of the public sphere is likely to yield a privatized hyper-individualism that enervates the civil sphere as well.” While it’s true that “excessive political centralization and administrative intrusion weaken civil society,” Galston says, the idea that “civil society expands as participatory democratic politics contracts is deeply misguided.”

In Tocqueville’s eyes, America was at the forefront of a “great democratic revolution” that had been unfolding for at least 700 years and was destined to bring to Europe “an almost complete equality of condition,” like that in the New World. What was driving this revolution? “Tocqueville’s explicit answer . . . is the hand of God,” says Francis Fukuyama, author of *The Great Disruption* (1999), and among the more proximate causes, Christianity was particularly important. “Tocqueville makes repeated references throughout *Democracy in America* to Christianity as the source of the belief in human equality and to the sociological impact that the Christian church had on the spread of democracy over the centuries.”

“Like [Edmund] Burke before him, and partly like [Max] Weber after him, Tocqueville thought that religion provided the ultimate support for an ethic of deferred gratification in a free society,” writes João Carlos Espada, a Senior Research Fellow at the University of Lisbon’s Institute for Social Sciences. But there was a problem, Tocqueville believed. The work ethic based on deferred gratification produces material prosperity—which gradually undermines the religious belief that justifies deferred gratification. Tocqueville knew that in an age of skepticism, religious belief was eroding, Espada says, but “he strongly opposed any sort of state enforcement of religion.” Instead, he urged that governments instill a “‘love of the future’” by showing citizens that their long-

term prosperity and that of their offspring depend on deferred gratification. In this way, he hoped, people would be “‘gradually and unconsciously brought nearer to religious convictions.’”

As society becomes democratized, Tocqueville believed, men become more equal, and more the same, notes Clifford Orwin, a political scientist at the University of Toronto. That leads them to “readily identify with one another, and with one another’s misfortunes,” and to aid their fellows, “at least in cases involving no great inconvenience to themselves.” Tocqueville saw no contradiction between individualism and compassion, Orwin says. “As men become more equal and alike, they also become more isolated and more preoccupied with their own affairs. Compassion is the sole force that naturally tends to unite human beings whom almost everything else in democracy conspires to dissociate.” Americans in Tocqueville’s day “practiced organized compassion through their voluntary associations”; today, “compassion” is made “virtually synonymous with the welfare state,” and thus is depersonalized and diluted. Those who grumble about the “nanny state” today, says Orwin, “can claim Tocqueville’s blessing.”

Since Tocqueville’s day, Orwin notes, democracies have emerged on non-Western terrain, in societies that “are not rooted in Christianity or in a tradition of respect for the individual.” These democracies “can be strikingly uncompassionate,” he says, noting that compassion is not among the virtues touted in Confucian societies.

But democracy has come to stay in South Korea, Taiwan, and elsewhere, asserts Hahm. “‘Confucian democracy’ and ‘Confucian capitalism’ are oxymorons designed to highlight East Asians’ continuing unease with individualism. Yet they are also designed to emphasize that the debates over cultural identity are taking place within, not against, the context of democracy and capitalism.” As democracy spreads to “the rest of the world,” far beyond that part of it so acutely observed by Tocqueville more than a century and a half ago, Hahm expects that “the debate over individualism and democracy will only intensify.”