

Alexis de Tocqueville: Philosopher of Civil Society

An Interview between Brian Smith and Joseph E. Gorra

For many political and social thinkers, the work Alexis de Tocqueville on the nature and significance of civil society provides fertile soil for envisioning and articulating a philosophy of human flourishing under the conditions of ordered freedom. In this interview, Professor Brian Smith provides a helpful overview of Tocqueville's anthropology, his view of intermediary institutions and their significance in a humane social order, the challenge of the democratic notion of equality and how Tocqueville addresses the problem of despotism. Christians working on issues in philosophical anthropology should attend to this work with earnestness as they seek to envision the social implications of such an anthropology toward a free and virtuous society.

You have written extensively on Adam Smith, Edmund Burke, and Alexis de Tocqueville. Can you tell us about how your own interests developed in this area and what are you passionate about when you study and articulate the views of these thinkers?

I first read Smith and Burke as an undergraduate, and in them, I saw an answer to Thomas Hobbes. As an agnostic at the time without any background in the classical tradition of political thought, I found Hobbes terrifying and *needed* an answer. The tradition of social and political thinking I discovered in the Scottish Enlightenment and with Burke drew me in to the history of political thought in general. From there, in graduate school, my teachers introduced me to Tocqueville, and I found him an excellent complement to my first intellectual loves.

All three of these authors inspire me because of their defense of the ways ordinary people can join together to defend their liberty. I try to uncover ways their ideas bear on a range of contemporary problems, such as corruption, the sources of moral restraint in war, or how we sustain our morals in a commercial republic.

What are the salient features of Tocqueville's anthropology, which help to underwrite his vision of a civil society?

I think Tocqueville recognized that human beings share a set of important psychological and moral traits. We are essentially bored, restless creatures who require stability and certainty in at least some aspects of our lives in order to live well. We oscillate between furious engagement with the world and total withdrawal. We are also social creatures who need companionship, care, and love, but crave total independence. Undergirding all these characteristics is our status as essentially limited, dependent creatures that need true faith to find rest. But as many other authors (particular Augustine) note, we frequently flee from this most natural fact about ourselves. While he doesn't use the language of sin, Tocqueville emphasizes our tendency to act in immoderate, self-contradictory, prideful, and selfish ways.

Tocqueville's concept of "intermediary institutions" is central to his vision of civic life and human flourishing. Can you explain the meaning and significance of that in Tocqueville and how it is indispensable to the maintenance of liberty and social cohesion in a civil society?

Tocqueville realized that the great danger in modern, egalitarian democracy lay in our tendency toward what he called “individualism.” In the U.S., at least, we don’t normally consider this a dangerous notion. But for him, individualism implied not heroism, but a kind of retreat into isolated nothingness and an evasion of responsibility for one’s fellow man. This kind of isolation poses dangers to liberty because as lone, equal individuals, we come face to face with our tremendous weakness. We need someone or something to save us, and having denied God (isn’t God the ultimate affront to a deep belief in equality?), we turn to the state.

Intermediary institutions (clubs, local political organizations, community activities, churches, etc.) tie us – really oblige us – to our neighbors. They train us to recognize the ways we can satisfy our various needs without turning to political power to provide the goods we require. He says these associations teach the art of being free and living responsibly. Without them, we will fall out of practice at self-government.

What does the democratic notion of “equality” look like in Tocqueville and how does it differ from a contemporary notion?

This democratic notion of equality he invokes shares a great deal with many modern notions precisely because it lacks definite boundaries. That is to say, we often find it difficult to map out which spheres of life our theory of equality should extend into. It’s easy to defer to experts, but everywhere else seems to bow before the notion. This differs considerably from what Tocqueville seems to hold to be the acceptable definition of equality: political equality, or at least a formal recognition of one’s rights as a human being before the law, without any guarantee events will go our way. Unrestrained democratic equality and our modern view often go wrong because of our tendency to imagine that any “real” equality must also lead to an equality of outcome.

“Despotism” is also another important concept in Tocqueville’s work. What is it and what does it do to a civil society?

Tocqueville’s idea of despotism is a little different than what most people expect. While he recognized the possibility that the immensely violent sort of dictators we still see today would emerge, he thought that democratic societies – places where the march of equality had profoundly shaped the culture – would face a softer despotism that behaved more like a schoolmaster than a mafia boss. This regime would simply assume more and more responsibility for making decisions in our everyday lives, resulting in child-like subjects rather than citizens. Without the necessity of work, the freedom to choose, and the necessity of assuming the consequences for our failures, we have no incentive to do the hard work of building civil associations. Why not pay someone to do it? Or better still, have everyone do so through taxes?

The danger rests in this: wherever civic associations fail to act these days, someone will invariably call for the state to fill in the gap. And every time this repeats, we lose a little more practice at the art of association, and in turn, lose our liberty.

How might Tocqueville's perspective assist us in our efforts to think and act responsibly about the various political, economic and cultural challenges that we currently face in the U.S.?

Tocqueville gives us a great deal of guidance. In a limited sense, the outline he sketches of where some of our choices might lead us is useful. But I think he traces out the morality and psychology of what leads people to live well or badly quite profoundly, and this is where we can learn the most from his insights. He reminds us of the profound and long-term consequences that stem from treating adults like children, and this is a lesson we need to remember particularly now.

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