



Alexis de Tocqueville

Equality and Democracy



Equality and Democracy

Tocqueville recognized that America was unique in the world, for America never had a monarchy, or feudalism, or an established church, or other privileged classes.



Equality and Democracy

The absence of these conditions, and an abundance of land made American democracy possible. It was one great agrarian middle class; and although there were also extremes of wealth and poverty, such extremes were relatively rare (at least in Tocqueville's time).



Equality and Democracy

“What is most important for democracy is not that great fortunes should not exist, but that great fortunes should not remain in the same hands. In that way there are rich men, but they do not form a class.”

--Alexis de Tocqueville



Equality and Democracy

According to Tocqueville, the American Revolution had produced a high degree of social equality among the social classes. American democracy gave considerable power to the middle and lower classes.



Aristocracy and Democracy

The other great form of society, according to Tocqueville, is aristocracy. In democracy, individuals are free to move up and down the social structure, becoming rich or poor according to their abilities and efforts.

Aristocracy, on the other hand, means that positions are ascribed and fixed for all time.

Equality in America

Tocqueville believed in the inevitable advance of democracy and equality. He believed that this advance was part of modernization.





Democracy and Equality

Democracy means the extension of the political franchise from a few aristocrats to the people. It rapidly leads to the end of legal differences in status, of noble ranks and titles, and of hereditary privileges. In short, democracy leads to equality.



Democracy and Equality

Tocqueville believed that people were becoming more equal in wealth, education, and culture. *In Democracy in America* he tried to present both the good and the bad aspects of this advance of equality based on his observations of daily life.



Family

Tocqueville pointed out that one of the first casualties of the advance of equality was the decline of primogeniture. Primogeniture is the common law that the eldest son inherits the entire estate. With its end, equality had spread to the relations between fathers and sons and among brothers.



Family

Previously, the family was held together by the bonds of property and inheritance. The eldest male would take care of the elderly so as to inherit the estate. But as this property bond fell away, it was replaced by bonds of personal loyalty and affection.



Employment

Equality also affects the employer-employee relationship. Employees are now free to sell their labor to any employer. Employment becomes a contract between individuals.



Employment

In time, the loyalties between employee and employer will be replaced by the formalized relations of contract.



Commodification

Tocqueville noted the pervasive nature of commodification in American life. Equality leads to ceaseless striving for social position.



Commodification

“As one digs deeper into the national character of the Americans, one sees that they have sought the value of everything in this world only in the answer to this single question: how much money will it bring in?”



Commodification

Equality pushes individuals to strive to stay even with her neighbors. Everyone therefore strives to achieve wealth. Farmers do not practice agriculture in the traditional sense of care for the land to assure long term sustainability, but rather as a business in exploiting their land for profit.



Commodification

Americans have keen business minds, emphasizing the practical and the applied. They have no great love of learning, art, or abstract truth. Outside of the range of practical matters American minds have developed little in terms of refinement or distinction. Creativity is essentially confined to economic competition and is mostly lacking in the world of ideas.



Commodification

“In no other country in the world is the love of property keener or more alert than in the United States, and nowhere else does the majority display less inclination toward doctrines which in any way threaten the way property is owned.”



Culture

Consequently, culture in America is somewhat middling in nature, neither attaining the high culture of European societies, nor the depths that many fear. Because there is no aristocratic tradition in intellectual endeavor, America remains a land of comfortable mediocrity.



Culture

“By and large the literature of a democracy will never exhibit the order, regularity, skill, and art characteristic of aristocratic literature; formal qualities will be neglected or actually despised. The style will often be strange, incorrect, overburdened, and loose, and almost always strong and bold...



Culture

“Writers will be more anxious to work quickly than to perfect details. Short works will be commoner than long books, wit than erudition, imagination than depth. There will be a rude and untutored vigor of thought with great variety and singular fecundity. Authors will strive to astonish more than to please, and to stir passions rather than to charm taste.”



Tyranny

Tocqueville feared that democratic equality could easily degenerate into anarchy and then tyranny. The French Revolution, with its guillotine, and the Reign of Terror which eventually led to Napoleon were fresh in his mind.



Tyranny

It is because of this fear that he strongly favored a central government with limited powers, with defined powers delegated to state and local authorities. He also advocated for a separation of powers within and between these governments, local autonomy, and religious freedom.



Tyranny

“I see clearly two tendencies in equality; one turns each man’s attention to new thoughts, while the other would induce him freely to give up thinking at all...the human spirit might bind itself in tight fetters to the general will of the greatest number...”



Tyranny

“If democratic peoples substituted the absolute power of a majority for all the various powers that used excessively to impede or hold back the upsurge of individual thought, the evil itself would only have changed its form...”



Tyranny

“For myself, if I feel the hand of power heavy on my brow, I am little concerned to know who it is that oppresses me; I am no better inclined to pass my head under the yoke because a million men hold it for me.”

--Alexis de Tocqueville



On America

“The greatness of America lies not in being more enlightened than any other nation, but rather in her ability to repair her faults.”



On America

“Born often under another sky, placed in the middle of an always moving scene, himself driven by the irresistible torrent which draws all about him, the American has no time to tie himself to anything, he grows accustomed only to change, and ends by regarding it as the natural state of man. He feels the need of it, more he loves it; for the instability; instead of meaning disaster to him, seems to give birth only to miracles all about him.”



On America

“America is great because she is good. If America ceases to be good, America will cease to be great.”



On America

“I know of no country in which there is so little independence of mind and real freedom of discussion as in America.”



On America

“In America the majority raises formidable barriers around the liberty of opinion; within these barriers an author may write what he pleases, but woe to him if he goes beyond them.”



On America

“In the United States, the majority undertakes to supply a multitude of ready-made opinions for the use of individuals, who are thus relieved from the necessity of forming opinions of their own.”



On America

“The American Republic will endure until the day Congress discovers that it can bribe the public with the public's money.”

On Morality

“He was as great as a man can be without morality.”





On Morality

“It is the dissimilarities and inequalities among men which give rise to the notion of honor; as such differences become less, it grows feeble; and when they disappear, it will vanish too.”



On Morality

“Liberty cannot be established without morality, nor morality without faith.”



On Morality

“The best laws cannot make a constitution work in spite of morals; morals can turn the worst laws to advantage. That is a commonplace truth, but one to which my studies are always bringing me back. It is the central point in my conception. I see it at the end of all my reflections.”

On Morality

“The main business of religions is to purify, control, and restrain that excessive and exclusive taste for well-being which men acquire in times of equality.”





On War

“All those who seek to destroy the liberties of a democratic nation ought to know that war is the surest and shortest means to accomplish it.”



On War

“No protracted war can fail to endanger the freedom of a democratic country.”



On War

“There are two things which a democratic people will always find very difficult - to begin a war and to end it.”



On Associations

“The health of a democratic society may be measured by the quality of functions performed by private citizens.”



On Associations

“In countries where associations are free, secret societies are unknown. In America there are factions, but no conspiracies.”



On Revolution

It is almost never when a state of things is the most detestable that it is smashed, but when, beginning to improve, it permits men to breathe, to reflect, to communicate their thoughts with each other, and to gauge by what they already have the extent of their rights and their grievances. The weight, although less heavy, seems then all the more unbearable.”



On Revolution

“In a revolution, as in a novel, the most difficult part to invent is the end.”



On Revolution

“Trade is the natural enemy of all violent passions. Trade loves moderation, delights in compromise, and is most careful to avoid anger. It is patient, supple, and insinuating, only resorting to extreme measures in cases of absolute necessity. Trade makes men independent of one another and gives them a high idea of their personal importance: it leads them to want to manage their own affairs and teaches them to succeed therein. Hence it makes them inclined to liberty but disinclined to revolution.”

On the Press

“The power of the periodical press is second only to that of the people.”





On the Press

“In the United States the majority undertakes to supply a multitude of ready-made opinions for the use of individuals, who are thus relieved from the necessity of forming opinions of their own”



On the Press

“Grant me thirty years of equal division of inheritances and a free press, and I will provide you with a republic.”



On Politics

“In politics... shared hatreds are almost always the basis of friendships.”



On Race

“I am obliged to confess that I do not regard the abolition of slavery as a means of warding off the struggle of the two races in the Southern states. The Negroes may long remain slaves without complaining; but if they are once raised to the level of freemen, they will soon revolt at being deprived of almost all their civil rights; and as they cannot become the equals of the whites, they will speedily show themselves as enemies.”

On Life

“Life is to entered upon with courage.”



On Social Forces

The Indian knew how to live without wants,
to suffer without complaint, and to die
singing”





On Social Forces

“Those which we call necessary institutions are simply no more than institutions to which we have become accustomed.”



On Social Forces

“Nothing seems at first sight less important than the outward form of human actions, yet there is nothing upon which men set more store: they grow used to everything except to living in a society which has not their own manners.”



On history

“History is a gallery of pictures in which there are few originals and many copies.”



On reform

“The most dangerous moment for a bad government is when it begins to reform.”



On family

“When family pride ceases to act, individual selfishness comes into play.”



On equality

“It is the dissimilarities and inequalities among men which give rise to the notion of honor; as such differences become less, it grows feeble; and when they disappear, it will vanish too.”



On Industrialism

“The territorial aristocracy of former ages was either bound by law, or thought itself bound by usage, to come to the relief of its serving-men and to relieve their distress. But the manufacturing aristocracy of our age first impoverishes and debases the men who serve it and then abandons them to be supported by the charity of the public. This is a natural consequence of what has been said before. Between the workman and the master there are frequent relations, but no real association.”



On Industrialism

“I am of the opinion, on the whole, that the manufacturing aristocracy which is growing up under our eyes is one of the harshest that ever existed in the world; but at the same time it is one of the most confined and least dangerous. ..



On Industrialism

“Nevertheless, the friends of democracy should keep their eyes anxiously fixed in this direction; for if ever a permanent inequality of conditions and aristocracy again penetrates into the world, it may be predicted that this is the gate by which they will enter.”



On Racism

"The first who attracts the eye, the first in enlightenment, in power and in happiness, is the white man, the European, man par excellence; below him appear the Negro and the Indian. These two unfortunate races have neither birth, nor face, nor language, nor mores in common; only their misfortunes look alike. Both occupy an equally inferior position in the country that they inhabit; both experience the effects of tyranny; and if their miseries are different, they can accuse the same author for them."



On Power

"After having thus successively taken each member of the community in its powerful grasp, and fashioned them at will, the supreme power then extends its arm over the whole community. It covers the surface of society with a network of small complicated rules, minute and uniform, through which the most original minds and the most energetic characters cannot penetrate, to rise above the crowd. ..



On Power

The will of man is not shattered, but softened, bent, and guided: men are seldom forced by it to act, but they are constantly restrained from acting: such a power does not destroy, but it prevents existence; it does not tyrannize, but it compresses, enervates, extinguishes, and stupefies a people, till each nation is reduced to nothing better than a flock of timid and industrious animals, of which the government is the shepherd."

On Social Forces

“When the past no longer illuminates the future, the spirit walks in darkness.”

