

Interpretation

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Interpretation

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Inquiries: Patricia D'Allura, Assistant to the Editor,
INTERPRETATION, Queens College, Flushing, N.Y.
11367-0904, U.S.A. (718)520-7099

James W. Ceaser, *Liberal Democracy and Political Science* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 242 pp., \$29.95.

WILL MORRISEY

Liberal constitutionalism makes an independent and institutionalized political science possible. If liberal constitutionalism is the only such regime, political scientists cannot sensibly pretend to neutrality with respect to its perpetuation. To preserve their own independence, they must not forget the political grounds of independence.

There are several ways to forget this. Since the late nineteenth century many political scientists have aspired to free their work from 'values,' which they believed 'subjective' and 'culturally relative.' This 'value-free' political science remains embedded in academia, but many of its practitioners now retire unreplaced by like-minded scholars. The younger political scientists are frankly 'normative.' Coming in many varieties—neo-Marxists and feminists may be the most numerous—almost all may be described fairly as socialists or left-liberals. From their ranks come academic politicians who caucus for 'a new political science.' Armed with the slogan, "Everything is political," they commit themselves, and attempt to commit the universities, to partisan 'causes.' In reaction to this partisanship, the more traditional scholars deplore what they call the 'politicization' of the university and call for the continued academic freedom to be uncommitted. Their effort deserves admiration; given the atmosphere on some campuses, it is even courageous. But traditionalists remain vulnerable to the partisans' pet terrier of an argument: There's no such thing as an apolitical university; you cannot not choose; you're either doing something to liberate students from the insidious tentacles of banality that discipline the bourgeois order, or you're not. The old Left used to dismiss all others as 'objectively pro-fascist'; the new Left does much the same thing while avoiding objectivist or scientific language. This makes new-left agitation no less strident than its predecessor, but gives it a decidedly more moralistic sound. Traditionalists try to explain that there's more to life than manichean action and polemic calling itself 'theory,' but they finally resemble the political candidate who decries his opponent's stand as 'simplistic.' You know he's going to lose. Perhaps real life will come to his rescue eventually. And perhaps academic traditionalists will be remembered as honorable Catos of pedagogy by some embattled minority of the future. Perhaps that minority will win, if fortune does not favor some new enthusiasm.

"I have been struck by how many of the criticisms of liberal democracy made today in the name of justice have lost connection with a systematic treat-

ment of political systems” or regimes, writes James W. Ceaser. “It is political philosophy without political science” (p.4). Fascinated by change, by metaphors of flow, resentful of structure (when was the last time you heard the word ‘rigid’ used descriptively, not pejoratively?), political scientists moralize without recourse to regime theory. The protections afforded by liberal democracy lull its beneficiaries into undue optimism; protectedness comes to seem a given, something easily preserved even if the structure of liberalism gets kicked down. Ceaser seeks to interest political scientists in what had been the core of their own science, emphasizing, perhaps tactfully, not so much the need of political scientists for liberal democracy as the need of liberal democracy for political science of a certain kind.

Beginning with the basics, Ceaser describes American liberal democracy as the combination of two “sets of ideas” supposed “incompatible” by political writers before Americans combined them (pp. 8–9). Constitutionalism—the protection of rights, limited and deliberative government—had seemed to depend upon the social foundation provided by the great estates, as argued in the writings of such philosophers as Locke and Montesquieu and of such statesmen as John Adams and Gouverneur Morris. By contrast, popular rule or democracy “emerged from a different tradition”: “It hearkened back to democratic republics such as Athens and Florence, although the modern variant added the crucial idea of equality of people founded in natural rights” (p.9). Constitutionalists feared that demagogues would overthrow a democratic constitutionalism in the name of democracy; democrats feared that pretended constitutionalists would corrupt the government and finally the people themselves, destroying the citizen virtue upon which decent government depends. The founders solved this problem by devising a constitutionalism “founded on the principle of natural equality”—“the revolutionary idea that certain basic rights attached in principle equally to all individuals” (p.13). The practical principle of representation, not direct or ‘participatory’ democracy, defends the theoretical principle of natural equal rights by reinforcing the rule of law and deliberation instead of the rule of force and passion.

Ceaser agrees with such scholars as Thomas G. West and David Epstein, who argue that *The Federalist* does address the need for citizen virtue and civic education. But he notes that *The Federalist* does not contain “anything remotely approaching a *systematic* exploration of the question of citizenship” (p.15, italics added). For this, scholars turn to other writings of the founders. *The Federalist* concerns primarily the American national government, not American governments, and not government as such. Alexis de Tocqueville, “the first major political philosopher, inside or outside of America, to actually observe and study liberal democracy,” and also “one of the select group of major theorists who can be called a ‘friend’ of this regime” (p.16), concerns himself with understanding how American mores interact with American institutions and laws on the local and state, as well as the national level.

The mores that support liberal democracy are . . . not always either simply liberal or simply republican. Nor are the methods for inculcating its mores always derivative from either republican or liberal [constitutional] models. The analysis of liberal democracy, where it does not require a new vocabulary altogether, calls for a most careful use of liberal or republican terms in order to avoid confusing one part with the whole. (P.18)

Although some scholars (Richard Hofstadter, Martin Diamond in some of his writings) describe liberal democracy as “a kind of self-regulating equilibrium,” Ceaser leans toward the axiom that the price of liberty is eternal vigilance or “constant superintendence” (pp.19–20). Certain mores must be cultivated in order to maintain liberal democracy, even if this cultivation does not involve the “extraordinary efforts in character formation” seen in the small, ‘virtuous republics’ of the Antifederalists (p.22).

The complex, compound character of liberal democracy requires more “political knowledge” on the part of the citizens than other regimes (p.22). Further, the dual nature of this compound tends to produce educated citizens who prefer one element of the regime over the other. We are usually either ‘liberals’ (now called ‘conservatives’) or ‘democrats’ (now called ‘liberals’). Partisan infighting “leaves little time or energy for investigating the question of the needs of liberal democracy as a whole” (p.23). Liberal democracy elevates its opponents “to the very highest positions of honor in the intellectual world” because such persons do “speak passionately for *one* of the regime’s own basic principles” (p.23, italics added). Ideology may be defined as the inflation of one principle into a system; Ceaser candidly writes that he does not want “to turn political science into an ideological instrument” but rather to turn political science away from such misuse without turning it toward the illusion of ‘value-free’ political science (pp.24–25). A nonideological but principled political science can be a friend of liberal democracy—*independent and critical without being destructive.*

Tocqueville shows how this can be done. He is “‘our’ political philosopher,” despite being a Frenchman: the philosopher of our age, who understands the choices our age presents between despotisms ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ and liberal democracy; the philosopher of our regime, “the political theorist *par excellence* of liberal democracy”; the philosopher of our nation, who wrote about Americans in order to describe liberal democracy (p.26). Oddly, Tocqueville has “few adherents,” remaining “the coffee-table philosopher of American political science; he is displayed in polite company . . .” (p.28). Ceaser puts Tocqueville to work, “explor[ing] Tocqueville’s understanding of the underlying character or structure of liberal democracy and of the role he envisaged for political science within this regime” (p.29).

Beginning with the form of our government, Tocqueville finds the realistic alternatives for America to be democratic tyranny and democratic liberty. Because the citizens themselves are at liberty to define the happiness they pursue,

and because they are fallible, serious mistakes in theory and practice can be made. Citizens can choose 'soft' despotism in the pursuit not of equal natural rights but of equal conditions and entitlements. Religions and educational institutions can be captured by this materialist egalitarianism. Political scientists can resist or assist this tendency; they can resist it by "tak[ing] care that the idea of explanation that governs their conception of knowledge does not diminish people's belief in the freedom they possess" (p.32). Political scientists should express causality in 'if-then' terms, enabling citizens to see the likely consequences of proposed policies without bringing them to some form of fatalism.

Fatalism tempts intellectuals in liberal democracy because they see beyond the formal division of government and politics from society (religion, culture, economics); they see that while society has been 'depoliticized' in the direct sense, it nonetheless has important implications and consequences. Intellectuals often react to this by attempting to 'lay bare' the realities of 'bourgeois society,' showing how society 'determines' the political structures. Tocqueville also considers "the legal or formal separation between the public and the private realms" to be "secondary and derivative." But he "does not take the step of dismissing the formal liberal principle as merely fictitious or as a cover for some more sinister design." In this he practices "the kind of political science practiced by Aristotle and Montesquieu" (p.34). Both government and society rest on "a deeper foundation" (p.33), a "prior and more fundamental arrangement" (p.34), a "certain political culture" (p.36).

Real freedom requires an actual power in society to resist the state and a will among the citizens to limit government and protect rights. The power and will do not miraculously appear as a consequence of the mere act of assertion of an abstract principle; they must be promoted. How to achieve the human qualities and the social arrangements that work over time to support the formal principle of limited government is one of the major questions for political science. (Pp. 35–36)

Political science, Ceaser argues, should be part of the "tutelary power" of the political culture, "inserting itself into the society on the strength of an appeal to reason" (p.37), an appeal directed primarily to those who actually govern society, set the tone of society—not only or even mostly public officials, but also clergy, poets, scientists, and others. "To the extent that political science is unable" to do this, "other modes of thinking" will (p.39). These modes of thinking most likely will not lead to an adequate understanding of liberal democracy. Tocquevillian political science does:

Political science as an enterprise working on behalf of liberal democracy seeks to induce the leaders of each major area of the society to consider the relationship of their activity to maintaining the regime; political science is a perpetual gadfly for liberal democracy. As a part of liberal education, it aims to inculcate a way of reasoning that makes students conscious of the connections of private activities to the maintenance of a regime. As a research or academic enterprise, it seeks to

supply some of the general answers to to this question, or at any rate to set an agenda for their discussion in different contexts. (Pp.39–40)

Just as Aristotle and Montesquieu could accurately describe various regimes while thoughtfully preferring some to others, so Tocqueville can describe the existing and potential forms democracy can take in the modern world, preferring liberal democracy to the others.

Ceaser next considers traditional political science in contrast to twentieth-century political science. Twentieth-century political science calls the act of exerting power “the irreducible unit of politics” in the family, the social organization, and the state (p.42). Traditional political science refuses to concentrate its attention primarily on efficient and material causes; it concerns itself more with formal and final causes—with regimes, and particularly (for Aristotle) the best regime. In addition to considering the best regime, the traditional political scientist studies three interrelated subjects: historical sociology (the analysis of “place”: the character of a people, its stage of development); general political science (analysis of regime types and of what maintains or undermines them); and analysis of specific regimes in a specific context (e.g., American politics, Iranian politics).

Historical sociology concerns a people’s physical environment, its mores (the “most important” factor[p.45]), its laws and institutions, and its history or formative experiences. Taken together, these constitute “the dominant reality a legislator faces in a given situation”; as such it “does not fully bind human action” (p.46). “Proceeding with due regard for the genius [of a nation] is a major part of political prudence, and it in turn has an important bearing on political ethics” (p.47). Although Montesquieu “at times comes close to suggesting a total, autonomous science of development” of nations, with no room for genuine freedom (p.219, n.25), Tocqueville does not go so far. Tocqueville’s view more nearly resembles that of Charles de Gaulle, who speaks of a statesman who “realized all the possible in taking his part in the inevitable” (*La France et son armée* [Paris: Librairie Plon, 1938], p.57).

General political science concerns regimes, those ways “of ordering a society expressed in terms of who rules, according to what end or principle, and dominated by what sentiment or passion” (p.52). More ‘abstract’ and more “elusive” than historical sociology (p.53), general political science does not predict so much as it enables its students to understand “the full range of possibilities” in political life (p.56).

The effort to maintain any regime involves discovering and cultivating, not the specificities toward which it inclines—for these are often what leads to its destruction or degradation—but the specificities that promote it. Liberal democracy, as one of the more complex and heterogeneous regimes, can benefit from drawing on a number of different regime principles. It has something important to learn from the calm and orderly calculations of interest of modern

commercial liberalism, the virtue or communitarianism of small republics, and the sense of individual pride of European aristocracy. (P.56)

Liberal democracy needs statesmen who risk their lives, fortunes, and sacred honor and citizens who will respond to such statesmen. No one simple regime can appeal to all of those goods; a comprehensive political science will understand the simple regimes and their feasible combinations.

Particular political science, the study of alternative regimes in a specific place, today suffers distortion. The overappreciation of applied historical sociology and the depreciation of general political science make it impossible to abstract lessons from the past, to generalize intelligently. 'Abstract' becomes a sort of curse-word. Extreme particularism is all history and no real theory; most recently its 'theory' is a 'hermeneutics' of 'deconstruction' that "stress[es] the idea of [cultural] differences just when the differences are becoming less pronounced, at least in the West" (p.64). By refusing to take abstractions seriously, 'hermeneutics' undermines prudence and makes it impossible to understand concrete changes clearly. Radical historicism makes real history incomprehensible to historians and citizens alike. The world becomes impossible to understand *or* to change. History takes the direction opposite to that expected and desired by historicists. The many schools of twentieth-century political science—behaviorism, 'rational choice,' the 'new normativism,' etc.—fail to "maintain liberal democracy" (p.93) because they share the usual historicist emphasis on change instead of structure, relativism instead of stable moral and political principles. Even those political philosophers who give some appearance of taking rights seriously end in moral relativism and political irrelevance. (Of John Rawls and Robert Nozick Ceaser remarks tersely, their "books are all about justice, but hardly ever about real political regimes" [p.96]. He might add that finally they aren't about real justice either, only preferences and assertions or 'values'.) When you ignore regimes and assert your will, you end in utopianism. Traditional political scientists, judging policies by each regime's standards and each regime by the higher standard, namely, the fulfillment of human nature, understand that "what sustains a regime will not in every instance be the same as what promotes human development" simply (p.98). Therefore, "the maintenance of political regimes"—themselves necessary for human survival and development—"exact[s] a price in the world of moral concerns" (p.99). This moral realism does not appeal to the self-assertive utopians among contemporary historicists. But because regime types are not "arbitrary constructs" (p.104)—utopians wish they were—contemporary political scientists "have retreated . . . deeply into the ivory tower" (p.106), eschewing the traditional "interest in training students for practical careers" and instead "reproducing political scientists" (p.107). Robert Dahl's work exemplifies the 'new normativism.' In his hands, this becomes a "project of creative myth-making in which standards from outside the American tradition are smuggled in

and elevated to the highest status” (pp.118, 122). Brushing institutions aside, Dahl hopes for “a progressive growth in consciousness to the point at which we can transcend conflict by embracing the warmer unity of a more egalitarian order”—“a flight from the realism of the greatest part of our tradition and a rejection of the sterner qualities of the human spirit that have helped to build and sustain our constitutional republic” (pp.141–42).

Tocqueville contended that America had so far “met the challenge of the modern age not despite, but in large measure because of, the minimal influence of contemporary doctrines of political thought and the absence of intellectuals to spread them” (p.144). The doctrines of rationalism and traditionalism, associated in Tocqueville’s day with the French Revolution and the writings of Edmund Burke, respectively, both undermined the conviction that human beings can effectively deliberate and choose with respect to public policies. But there was an exceptionally important choice to make: “not between the old order and democracy but between democratic despotisms and liberal democracies” (p.153).

Traditionalists had led the way in identifying and exposing the homogenizing and despotic tendencies of modern philosophic thought. Tocqueville accepted their critique, but he rejected their ultimate standards and doubted the efficacy of their methods for combating philosophic ideas. Unlike the traditionalists, Tocqueville upheld theoretical reason at the same time that he attacked the reason of his contemporaries, and he defended the intellect at the same time that he attacked the modern intellectual. His critique of rationalism was thus carried out in a different spirit and with a different aim than that found in traditionalist thought. (P.156)

Because “political structures and institutions do far less in the way of embodying specific ideas or beliefs than they do in forming mental habits”—“the character or way of thinking that prevails in society”—Tocqueville promoted a political science that would work not through some new ideology (thinking from general ideas to the particulars) but from particular policies and local institutions up to general ideas and national institutions (p.157). Political participation on the local level, “within the citizens’ own experience,” rewards “the mode of reasoning of the pragmatic form of rationalism” (pp.161–62). Such activity will also give local governments the strength to serve as intermediary institutions between individuals and the national government. Citizens will develop “a sense of their *power* to defend their rights”; Tocqueville’s “final standard is not the natural in the organic sense, but rather nature and natural right as discovered by human reflection on the world”—first of all in its particulars—“and its possibilities” (p.162). This evidently “combine[s] the concerns of the Federalist and the antifederalist (and Jeffersonian) traditions in American political thought” (p. 164). Tocqueville also combined “rationalist liberalism” with the “traditional religion” without which “despair and paralysis” or “dangerous pseudo-religions” (especially “the mind-set of the modern intellectual revolu-

tionary . . . who infused politics with repressed spiritual feelings”) would take hold (pp.166–67). He insisted that genuine religion could coexist with a humbled rationalism—or better, a reason that no longer contorts itself into an “ism.”

Entering its third century, the American regime now has a powerful intelligentsia; communications media are more centralized (though probably less so than they were ten or twenty years ago); jurisprudence “has become a battlefield on which various philosophical schools contend” and, “in the name of promoting rights” through an activist judiciary, government exercises “far-reaching authority in society” (p.172). With “the collapse of any meaningful doctrine of federalism” American national government commands centralized power unprecedented in our history (p.173). Doctrines of historical inevitability, most recently a “new historicism” that praises liberal democracy only to undermine it unintentionally, posit a “fatalism” that “erodes liberal democracy’s foundation in the view that human actions can make a difference” (p.175).¹ Of these dangers, Ceaser particularly deplores the assaults on the United States Constitution made by scholars and judges who are in various ways disciples of Woodrow Wilson, the American statesman who combined Hegelianism and democracy. Ceaser describes the advantages of traditional American constitutionalism, ably defending it against partisans of parliamentary abrogation of the balance of powers. In doing so Ceaser gives his readers an example of a Tocquevillian political science at work in the service of an Aristotelian sense of justice.

In *Liberal Democracy and Political Science* James W. Ceaser speaks as a political scientist to political scientists, showing how civic education can also form part of a liberal education in modernity. It is a book of uncommon clarity and common sense for a profession in need of both.

NOTE

1. Specifically, Ceaser offers a telling and succinct critique of Francis Fukuyama’s article “The End of History?” (*The National Interest*, No. 16 [Summer 1989], 3–18). In addition to his criticism of the fatalism supposed by Fukuyama, Ceaser observes that Fukuyama “obscures the fundamental choice for modern times that Tocqueville presented between a regime of political liberty and a new kind of regime (a soft despotism) in which people might believe themselves free, but in which in reality they would have abandoned the conditions in society that could promote significant human action” (Ceaser, p. 175).