

Interpretation

A JOURNAL OF POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

Spring 1994

Volume 21 Number 3

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libraries and all other institutions \$40
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Postage outside U.S.: Canada \$4.50 extra;
elsewhere \$5.40 extra by surface mail (8 weeks
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Payments: in U.S. dollars AND payable by
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Composition by Eastern Composition, Inc.,
Binghamton, N.Y. 13905
Printed and bound by Wickersham Printing Co.,
Lancaster, PA 17603

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Interpreting Tocqueville's "Democracy in America." Ken Masugi, editor (Savage, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1991), xii + 526 pp.

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The new book of essays on Tocqueville edited by Ken Masugi, *Interpreting Tocqueville's "Democracy in America,"* is a collection of original articles, most of which were prepared for a conference sponsored by the Claremont Institute for the Study of Statesmanship and Political Philosophy and held in 1985, the sesquicentennial of Tocqueville's masterpiece. The idea for the conference and for the book was to pay homage to Tocqueville. All of the contributors acknowledge a debt for Tocqueville's remarkably persuasive demonstration that the problem of despotism has not been solved or rendered passé by the victory of contemporary democratic thought. Despotism is still possible, in fact all too likely, in a form that may accommodate itself to democratic conditions and prejudices. Nevertheless, for many of the contributors, Tocqueville is like a friend in whom one may find some reason for disappointment the better one gets to know him. Masugi's own introduction states quite clearly a quarrel with Tocqueville, and that quarrel is resumed in several of the contributions, most fully by Thomas G. West and the late John Adams Wettergreen. To state it most broadly, the quarrel is that Tocqueville concedes too much to circumstances, i.e., to the roughly egalitarian social state that has been produced by the movement of history, and correlatively, Tocqueville appears either to soft-pedal or implicitly to deny that there are any transhistorical principles, of *natural* human rights, that can be known and used as the basis of a genuine statecraft. Perhaps the shortest formula for the criticism would be to say that Tocqueville bows too much to the contemporary fact of equality and not enough to the timeless principle of equality.

The enormous outpouring of Tocqueville scholarship in recent years has had at least one general consequence for which we can all be grateful. It has shown that Tocqueville has to be appreciated as a *political* thinker; he means to be giving instruction to "the legislator." *Democracy in America* can no longer be read as a historical interpretation of nineteenth-century America, and Professor Aron's treatment of Tocqueville as a harbinger of modern sociology seems quite dated today. Nevertheless, Tocqueville does present his "new political science" in terms that insist on being relevant to and even limited by contemporary social conditions. The social state of equality and the historical movement in the direction of further equality throughout Christendom are facts to which

he would have us be reconciled. To that extent, he does at least appear to move in the direction of contemporary social science and away from the more commanding procedure of, say, Aristotle or Montesquieu, who consider a whole range of possible circumstances and show us which is most conducive to their notion of what is ideally best. Equality is a fact just like some revelation of divine Providence, and Thou Shalt Not Question Whether It Deserves To Be. From the fact of equality as the social state derives a major, ambiguous consequence. Equal human beings love equality. It is, at least in the public realm, the single dominating passion to which everything else is reducible.

There are, though, two forms of the love of equality which differ primarily in the mode through which the passion is acted upon. The nobler form of the love of equality is acted upon in common life, when self-governing citizens shoulder their civic duties in direct collective action. In this form the love of equality elevates the ordinary person to "the rank of the great." In the absence of such active common life, however, the love of equality is "debased"; public spirit sickens into jealousy and "leads the weak to want to drag the strong down to their level." By offering to take care of people, especially against the pain of jealousy, a new form of despotism can come into existence which is softer than in former ages but more insidious because more thoroughly enervating of any potential resistance. The solution Tocqueville offers depends on there being the right kind of social and political institutions through which equal citizens can develop stronger-souled habits. Such institutions are by no means self-sustaining, however. Ultimately everything depends on mores, and good mores in turn point to a need for religion, a civil religion, whereby our social duties are reconciled with the Will of God. If we reflect back to the beginning of Tocqueville's work, it is quite clear that the "providential" character of democracy is itself a tenet of the civil religion. Tocqueville, therefore, intends his own book to be an example of how one must allow one's public duty to determine what is to be said about religious matters.

Masugi has organized the essays in his book into three groupings: "Tocqueville and Political Thought," "Tocqueville and Politics," and "Tocqueville and Mores." One of the major questions that comes up in the first part has to do with the sources of Tocqueville's thinking; specifically, how deeply was he indebted to Rousseau? The contributors to this section are not all of one mind on this issue. Jean-Claude Lamberti implicitly opposes the connection. Catherine H. Zuckert thinks that the connection is important, but she asserts that Tocqueville must oppose Rousseau at the critical point regarding Rousseau's civil religion (p. 134). Wilhelm Hennis, however, intends to show that Tocqueville's work operates wholly within the orbit of Rousseau's understanding of human freedom; and though he does not refer to Rousseau by name, Bruce James Smith's description of Tocqueville as a "Liberal of a New Kind" points in the same direction. In the opinion of this reviewer at least, Hennis' and Smith's essays fully decide the issue, but even if someone else might dis-

agree about that, it is surely the case that what Hennis and Smith show about Tocqueville's departure from classical Lockean Liberalism is grist for those most strongly worded and sweeping criticisms of Tocqueville in Part 2 of Masugi's book, "Tocqueville and Politics."

Naturally, there is a range of opinions among the six essays in Part 2 just as there is in the book as a whole. James T. Schleifer argues that Tocqueville and Jefferson share a very considerable measure of agreement regarding human nature and the meaning of freedom, even though Tocqueville sees more clearly and more deeply into the dangers of the tyranny of the majority. John Marini also shows how Tocqueville went beyond any of the American framers in his understanding of a specific problem of democratic society, the danger of the "new despotism" of centralized administration. Professor Marini's careful and searching discussion of this too often oversimplified theme contributes strongly to the value of this volume. James W. Ceasar offers some very sensible observations about our contemporary democracy that suggest how Tocqueville may have underestimated the role of the intellectual in his analysis of democratic political culture.

The other three essayists in Part 2 are closer in agreement with one another and with the editor of the volume. They all contrast Tocqueville and the framers of the American regime and they all find that Tocqueville suffers in the contrast. Thus Edward C. Banfield writes of "The Illiberal Tocqueville," taking him to task for his criticism of materialistic individualism in democracy. Banfield argues that with the benefit of hindsight we can see that "It is the values of (Tocqueville's) saintly grandmother, not those of the despised moneymaker, that supported the Nazi regime, that are exploited by the Soviet one, and that fire the fanaticism that is endemic in much of the third world" (p. 253). Banfield says that Tocqueville would have done better to follow the likes of Mandeville and Adam Smith, who saw that good institutions can preserve freedom through the checking and balancing of petty passions more reliably than attempting to elevate or enoble the passions.

If Banfield attacks Tocqueville in the name of a sort of self-interest liberalism, the heavier artillery is fired by West and Wettergreen, who attack him for misunderstanding the principle of the equal right of all human beings at birth to liberty as proclaimed in the Declaration of Independence and refined through the statesmanship of Abraham Lincoln. According to West, Tocqueville misses something insofar as he considers equality primarily as a fact of the social state and the object of a vague, fundamentally ambiguous, passion. He misses the fact that equality, properly understood, is a fundamental principle of right. As such, it entails its own defense of the rights of the minority and is therefore the best and indeed the only ultimate bulwark against tyranny of all forms, egalitarian tyranny included. Moreover, West argues that Americans in general understand this about equality; we know the basic goodness of our regime better than Tocqueville, despite his insightfulness. Therefore Tocqueville has been proven

wrong in thinking that the love of equality among the majority of American citizens would pose the greatest dangers of tyranny. "If America today stands on the edge of despotism, it has been brought there not by the people corrupted by equality, but by politicians imbibing the doctrines of intellectuals" (p. 169). We suffer from a willful, sophisticated distortion of what equality meant to our framers. What is most needed is a return to the core of their original understanding. Tocqueville, because of his abstraction from natural rights and his equivocal endorsement of equality as a fact with which we must do the best we can, is not the beacon for these times.

In a similar vein, John Adams Wettergreen says that Tocqueville misinterpreted the real danger of modern despotism and obscured the solution. Wettergreen takes Tocqueville to task for his fears regarding the enervating effects of modern industrialism. In fact, argues Wettergreen, we have less to fear from industrialization than Tocqueville supposed, and the reason is that human nature is stronger than he supposed. This is ultimately because a corollary of the equal right of all human beings to freedom is that human beings have natures strong enough to be capable of self-government and not to yield it easily. Therefore, the problem of modern despotism is not due to anything so soft, so mudlike, as a debased form of the love of equality. Wettergreen refuses to grant that human beings are turned into cows or sheep under contemporary democratic conditions. Despotism remains what it always has been, something hard. All that changes is the fashion of its velvet glove. And because he thinks this, Wettergreen insists that the contemporary friends of freedom must "prepare to give moral and economic reasons" (p. 238); appeals to interest are insufficient and attempts, like Tocqueville's, to redirect passions are beside the point. The "moral and economic reasons" Wettergreen means are the same ones West points towards: Adam Smith's capitalism and Abraham Lincoln's reading of the Declaration of Independence.

West and Wettergreen intend their chapters to expose something of Tocqueville's thought which they are convinced is unflattering. This is fair enough, but it is not necessarily the case that everyone who shares the suspicion, or even the conviction, that Rousseauan radicalism lies at the heart of Tocqueville's sobriety would consider it as a discredit. Professor Hennis, as I have indicated, is a case in point. At the deepest level, the issue here is whether the classical liberalism of Locke, however "refined" by Lincoln, can withstand Rousseau's massively weighty critique (cf. *Social Contract*, especially book 1, chapters 3–5). Is it true, as Rousseau charges, that liberalism's attempt to preserve a viable appeal to natural rights *in* society ends up with an untenable compromise between the despotism of tacit consent and the anarchy of active resistance? If Rousseau's critique of liberalism is sound, then it is probably the complaints of West and Wettergreen, and Banfield too, that are beside the point—or at least they point in the direction of an issue that requires more direct treatment.

One of the implications of the criticism of Tocqueville for his implicit Rousseauism in Part 2 of this collection is that Tocqueville may have overestimated the importance of mores. For Tocqueville, mores are of fundamental and decisive importance ultimately because the difference between the “noble” love of equality and the “debased” form is altogether a question of mores. To put it in other words, what Tocqueville and Rousseau mean by freedom is altogether a question of mores. Masugi has his own misgivings about this feature of Tocqueville’s thought, but that does not prevent him from recognizing its prominence. The third, and longest, section of his book, on mores, contains some fine contributions that add substantially to its value. Some of these essays, like William D. Richardson’s on Tocqueville’s treatment of race in America or William Kristol’s on the education of women, intend mainly to explain some aspect of the *Democracy* that is particularly subtle or complex. Other contributors, like Delba Winthrop and George Anastaplo, raise the question more explicitly of the adequacy of Tocqueville’s analysis; their chapters both concentrate on how self-interest is said to operate among equal persons. Ralph C. Hancock writes a fine statement that shows how Tocqueville tried to appropriate Christianity to his own purposes and how, given subsequent developments, his project may have fallen short.

The observation made by both West and Wettergreen that goes farthest towards joining an argument on the philosophical grounds of Tocqueville’s book is that Tocqueville has in fact given a somewhat distorted picture of the sort of despotism modern nations would have to fear. Our experience of the latter part of the nineteenth century and especially the first half of the twentieth shows us that modern despotism is not necessarily the soft thing that is produced by a debased love of equality among people at large. Nazism, fascism, and Soviet communism were more openly hard and cruel than Tocqueville thought likely. They were also, in a perverse way, more intellectual. These monstrous regimes are apotheoses of modern ideas. If Tocqueville’s analysis of the proclivities of mind and heart of people living under equality of conditions is relevant to our understanding these modern despotisms, then it has to be granted that that analysis is but partly true.

Of all the contributions to this collection, the one that presents the most satisfying effort towards re-examining what Tocqueville says about the effect of democracy on thought is the superb piece in Part 1 by Peter Lawler on “Democracy and Pantheism.” Lawler reads Tocqueville to hold that “The core of democratic thought or theory is the use of reason to destroy allegedly illegitimate or oppressive distinctions. This destruction in thought is both caused by, and is the cause of, democratic political action” (p. 96). Therefore, the systematic view of all things that democracy inevitably tends towards is pantheism. Pantheism is a great danger for Tocqueville, since, in his words, it “destroys human individuality.” The friends of freedom ought to unite in their opposition to it. Lawler is persuaded, though, that if the democratic tide is as pervasive

and powerful as Tocqueville says it is, then to resist pantheism is probably hopeless. Ultimately, the repudiation of distinctions of rank among human beings as being arbitrary, which produces democracy, entails the repudiation of the distinctiveness of human being as such as similarly arbitrary. Lawler writes, "Tocqueville indicates that partisanship on behalf of man's greatness or freedom as something which is choiceworthy for human beings in its own right is fundamentally a product of pride. . . . It is 'something one must *feel* and logic has no part in it.' This 'feeling' is not the most powerful cause of animation for most human beings. Consequently, the project of Tocqueville and others who 'appreciate the nature of man's greatness' is an aristocratic one; to oppose as far as possible with 'art' the 'natural' direction of democratic thought and practice" (pp. 118–19). This way of putting it makes the project look desperate, hopeless, and even recklessly irrational. From this one can see, incidentally, how someone like Professor Banfield would be wary of a connection between Tocqueville's own thought and the specific character of twentieth-century despotism.

Lawler would surely not quarrel with the observation that his own reading of Tocqueville's argument is much gloomier than Tocqueville presents it. Maybe this is because, as Richard Herr is quoted as saying elsewhere in this volume, Tocqueville is "temperamentally incapable of stating a pessimistic conclusion explicitly" (p. 253 n. 78). Then again, maybe not. Tocqueville does assert that pantheism has a certain charm for democratic citizens which derives from their tendency to think in terms of very general ideas; this is a habit of their minds which stems from the ease with which they think of themselves and each other as pretty much equivalent. It is not so clear as Lawler takes it to be, though, that Tocqueville thinks that democracy itself derives from reason's own tendency to dissolve arbitrary distinctions. Nor is it so clear that Tocqueville concedes implicitly and ultimately that pantheism is the real truth of democracy. Might not Tocqueville actually think that at the heart of democracy is the non-rational idea of humanity as locus of freedom and greatness? Might he not actually think that the energizing idea of the indefinite perfectibility of man, which he sets up in contrast to enervating pantheism, is even closer to the truth of democracy than is pantheism (cf. *Democracy in America*, vol. 2, part 1, chap. 8)?

Today we live in a world in which our political life has been very much penetrated by philosophy, and philosophy has been politicized into ideology. The democratic tide is suffused with the modern philosopher's demand for a universal and homogeneous society. This being so, then it would seem that our necessary task today is to revive the honor of philosophy—not this philosophy or that, but the genuine activity of philosophizing, for what else is there that could reveal ideology in its true ugliness? Grant that this is not the task to which Tocqueville commends our attention; still, we may turn to his observations regarding the proclivities of democratic citizens' minds and hearts in order

to help ourselves think about whether our task is even possible in democracy. If Tocqueville is the sort of proto-Hegelian that Lawler reads him as being, then Tocqueville makes our prospects look very dark. If, on the other hand, Tocqueville can back up his statement that the love of equality admits of a “nobler” form whereby the weak need not “want to drag the strong down to their level,” then we may take more heart. We may thank the editor and the contributors to this volume for redirecting our attention to Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America* and for the appreciative but also critical reading that they have brought to bear.