

Interpretation

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Tocqueville published his two “*mémoires*” or memos on pauperism in 1833 and 1837, respectively—that is, almost as bookends to the first volume of *Democracy in America*. In them, he considers his great theme, the advance of “democracy” or “equality of conditions” and its counterpoint, the rise of a new aristocracy founded on that very social egalitarianism, an “aristocracy” or oligarchy of industrial magnates who aim at lording it over factory workers in the cities. Whereas the feudal lords of European countryside had ruled “their” peasants with a firm but often kindly hand, living with them on the same land, knowing them personally, the modern aristocrats live apart from their employees, do not know them, and think of them only as replaceable parts in factories organized rather like the machines on the shop floor.

This leads to “a most extraordinary and apparently inexplicable sight”: “the countries that appear the poorest are those which, in reality, contain the fewest indigents, while among the peoples whose opulence you admire, one part of the population is obliged to rely upon the gifts of the other in order to live” (*Memoir on Pauperism*, 1). England’s prosperous countryside contrasts with its village, where one-sixth of the people live on “public charity”; in Spain and Portugal, the countryside is impoverished but few are indigent; in France, conditions vary from province to province. Even within the same empire, “you will see proportionate growth of, on the one hand, the number of those living in comfort, and on the other hand, the number of those who fall back upon public donations in order to live” (*MP*, 2).

Tocqueville is nothing if not an ardent inquirer into social causation. One of the surprises a reader of the *Democracy* must have experienced was his reversal of the characteristic Enlightenment narrative. Voltaire and his allies ascribed feudalism and its abuses to Christianity; French Revolutionaries notoriously had replaced the Madonna and her Child with the Goddess of Reason. Unearthing the origin of equality, Tocqueville finds its root in the Christianity the revolutionaries loathed. To understand pauperism in the midst of plenty, Tocqueville goes even farther back, to the origin of human society itself.

“Behold men gathering for the first time. They come out of the forests, they are still wild, they join forces not to enjoy life, but to find the means of surviving. Shelter against the intemperance of the seasons, sufficient food—such is the object of their efforts. Their minds do not go beyond these goods, and if they obtain them without trouble, they judge themselves satisfied with their fate and doze in idle comfort,” just as “the barbarous tribes in North America” Tocqueville had visited still did. Men in the earliest societies were social *animals*, “with very few desires” and “hardly any needs other than” those felt by the animals among which they lived. They supported themselves by hunting; property ownership occurred only after they became “acquainted with agriculture” (*MP*, 3).

Now “assured of survival, they begin to glimpse that human existence offers other sources of pleasures beyond the satisfaction of life’s first and most urgent needs” (*MP*, 3). Inequality arose—millenia *before* Christianity. “One sees the spirit of conquest, which has been the mother of all aristocratic societies, spread,” based as it is on the few who possess the bodily strength and psychic ferocity to kill and risk being killed for the sake of rule over others and consequent seizure of their property (*MP*, 5).

Such men rivaled each other, attempted to conquer each other. “The barbarians who invaded the Roman Empire at the end of the fourth century were savages who had glimpsed landed property’s utility and had wanted to get its advantages for themselves.” Having softened their *moeurs* after their own vast conquests, now accustomed to “the peaceful activities of field labor” but without that level of “civilization” that would made them “capable of fighting against the primitive fierceness of their enemies,” Roman farmers became tenants of the new, rough aristocrats; “feudal society was organized and the Middle Ages were born.” “Inequality passed into laws, and from having been a fact, it became a right” (*MP*, 5).

Tocqueville “generalizes” from these facts. “If we pay attention to what has happened since the birth of societies, we will easily discover that equality is only found at the two ends of society. Savages are equal because they are all equally weak and ignorant. Very civilized men are able to all become equal because they all have similar means of attaining comfort and happiness at their disposal. Between these two extremes, the inequality of conditions is found: the wealth, enlightenment, and power of some and the poverty, ignorance, and weakness of all the others” (*MP*, 5). Under feudal social conditions, no “Third Estate” or middle class existed, only “those who cultivated the soil without possessing it” and “those who possessed the soil without cultivating it” (*MP*, 6).

Feudal peasants were ruled by the aristocrats but not usually killed by them, as “the master’s interest coincided with theirs” when it came to their survival. Peasants “enjoyed that type of vegetative happiness whose charm is as difficult for the highly civilized man to understand as its existence is difficult for him to deny.” For their part, aristocrats lived in luxury but not in comfort. “Comfort presupposes a large class whose members are simultaneously employed in trying to make life sweeter and more comfortable”—a middle class which neither provides necessities nor keens itself for military and political glory. Aristocratic life “was brilliant and lavish, but not com-modious”; “they ate with their fingers from plates of silver or engraved steel.” Residents of provincial towns in the 1830s, he observes, enjoy more comfort “than did the proudest baron of the Middle Ages” (*MP*, 6). On one hand, “comfort was found nowhere,” not in the peasant’s hovel or the lord’s castle; on the other hand, there was “survival everywhere,” as peasants provided food and shelter for themselves and their rulers, while rulers cared for and protected peasants (*MP*, 7).

This means that the Enlightenment philosophes and their revolutionary admirers took a phenomenon for a cause. True, the feudal aristocrats endowed their lands to their firstborn sons and found positions in the Catholic Church for their second-born sons, and Christianity became associated with the ruling class. But they did so only as a politic appropriation, not as a logical consequence of the religion itself, which stipulated not an aristocratic right to rule but the equality of all men under God.

Gradually, as feudalism established itself, both peasant cultivators and warrior aristocrats developed “new tastes,” tastes satisfied only by the establishment of a new class, a class of workers who left the land to “devote themselves to industry,” to the production of the goods that satisfied the new tastes. In a word, both classes became more civilized. “A vast displacement of

population” occurred, as young peasants moved into the cities, seeking jobs that catered to the newfound taste for commodious living that both they and the aristocrats had discovered in themselves (*MP*, 7). In this, “they obeyed the immutable laws governing the growth of organized societies” (*MP*, 8). Tocqueville here does not pronounce on whether these laws are natural or “historical,” although they do seem grounded in human nature; the growth of organized societies evidently instantiates the human equality that Christianity later revealed to all men, a natural fact that the few had previously kept assiduously to themselves. Be this as it may, he diverges from Hegel and Marx by positing no known limit to the movement of this growth. The laws of social growth may have a *telos*, but Tocqueville does not claim to know what it is. This absence of finality leaves room for human liberty, which he famously opposes to the dangers that egalitarianism brings in its wake.

The more the new class produces, the more commodities there are to ease the lives of “the many” and not only the few. But “these happy outcomes have not been achieved without a necessary cost.” I once talked with one of my fellow college freshmen about his parents, who had lived in Georgia in the 1930s. He surprised me by saying he anticipated another Great Depression and indeed looked forward to it. “The Morgans did rather well in the last Depression,” he claimed, contentedly. “We stayed on our farm, raised enough crops to feed ourselves, and, after the Depression was over, we were the only ones in the county who had any money. We cleaned up!” That is indeed the advantage of subsistence agriculture. As Tocqueville puts it, “The farmer produces basic foodstuffs,” but even if market prices bring him no profit for a year or two, “these products at least furnish the means of life to those who have harvested them and allow them to wait for better times” (*MP*, 8).

The industrial worker is not so lucky. He “speculates on artificial and secondary needs that can be limited by a thousand causes and can be completely eliminated by great events” (*MP*, 8). Having “received from God the special and dangerous mission of providing, by [their] own risks and dangers, the material happiness of all” the other classes, he serves them only at their convenience. “This is a major subject of reflection for today’s statesmen!” (*MP*, 9).

Nor is this pauperism’s only cause. While men and women may cut back on their expenses during a time of widespread economic hardship, in ordinary times, as wealth and prosperity grow, their desires “become, through habit and example, real needs.” The more needs one has, “the more greatly [one] exposes himself to the blows of Fortune” (*MP*, 10). If “modernity” consists not only in the advance of social equality but in the mastery of fortune—the

conquest of nature for the relief of man's estate by the means of experimental science applied in manufacturing industries—that mastery itself finds at least temporary limits in disruption of supply and even of demand. Not only may an infestation of insects ruin the cotton crop, sending the textile industry into crisis, but the tastes of “the many” or “the few” may shift, making last year's fashions this year's embarrassments. Popular opinion under conditions of social democracy matters more than it has since the Athenians' political democracy, and it is no less fickle. These exigencies, too, throw workers out of work.

Here is where a Christian (and also a Rousseauian) sentiment comes in. When people are thrown out of work owing to no fault of their own, their fellow citizens feel compassion for them. Civil society wants to help them, attempting to “cure evils that it did not previously ever perceive.” “The more nations are wealthy, the more the number of those who appeal to public charity must multiply, because two very powerful causes tend toward this result: among these nations, the class most naturally exposed to need is increasing incessantly, and on the other side, needs themselves infinitely multiply and diversify; the opportunity of finding oneself exposed to some of them becomes more frequent every day” (*MP*, 11).

As always, Tocqueville urges moderation, deliberation, and calm. As we consider “the future of modern societies,” “let us not become drunk by the spectacle of [their] greatness”—as Hegel tended to do; “let us not become discouraged by the sight of its miseries”—as Marx tended to do, before veering toward immoderate optimism on the wings of “dialectic.” True, for most modern men “existence will be more comfortable, sweeter, more embellished, longer,” while others of us “will need to turn to the support of their fellow men in order to receive a tiny part of those goods.” “This double movement can be slowed...but no one can stop it” (*MP*, 11). It can, however, be ameliorated *if* statesmen are smart and tough as well as compassionate.

In addition to social democratization and the conquest of nature, modernity also features a particular kind of Christianity which generates a particular kind of beneficence. Tocqueville distinguishes two kinds of beneficence. “One leads each individual to relieve, according to his means, all the ills that are found within his reach,” an impulse “as old as the world”; “Christianity made it a divine virtue and called it charity.” “The other, less instinctive, more rational, less enthusiastic, and often more powerful, leads society itself to concern itself with the misfortunes of its members and to attend systematically to the relief of their distress”; this kind of beneficence

“was born out of Protestantism and is developed only in modern societies” (*MP*, 12). In England, this second kind of beneficence combined with a fourth feature of modernity: the modern state.

Tocqueville recalls how Protestant monarchs Henry VIII and Elizabeth I took over not only the institutions of Christian worship, against Roman Catholicism, but also one of the traditional functions of the church they replaced—charity—in the form of state-sponsored care for the poor. Although the “poor laws” preceded industrialization and urbanization, they were made even more necessary by them and were elaborated because of them. “England’s industrial class provides for the needs and the pleasures of not only the English people but also of a large part of humanity”; if America is “the country of the future” respecting democracy, England is that with respect to political economy. England is “the country in the world in which the farmer is most strongly attracted to industrial work—but also finds himself the most exposed to the vicissitudes of fortune” (*MP*, 13). Having already “accepted the principle of legal charity, England was not able to depart from it,” given its subsequent socioeconomic modernization (*MP*, 14).

This has led to a challenge to English Protestantism, social equality, and the modern state. The nexus of industrialism and public charity has caused “the rebirth and spread across a Protestant country of those abuses for which the Reformation had rightly reproached some of the Catholic countries,” abuses connected to that “natural passion for idleness” seen in primitive man and civilized southern European monasteries alike. A person will work for two reasons: survival and “the desire to improve his living conditions.” Of these, the first is common, the second more rare. Most of us are not what were once called go-getters. Give me a steady diet, decent clothes, and a roof over my head and I probably will not dream of starting a business. That being so, “a charitable organization, open indiscriminately to all of those who are in need, or a law that gives to all poor—whatever the origin of their poverty—a right to public assistance, weakens or destroys the first stimulant and leaves only the second intact”—that is, the rarer one. Hence “the most generous, active and industrious part of the nation...devotes its assistance to furnishing the means of life to those who do nothing or who make bad use of their work” (*MP*, 15). “Every measure that establishes legal charity on a permanent basis and that gives it an administrative form thus creates an idle and lazy class, living at the expense of the industrial and working class...It reproduces all of the vices of the monastic system, but without the lofty ideas of morality and of religion that often went with it. Such a law is a poisoned

seed, planted in the bosom of legislation. As in America, circumstances can prevent the seed from developing rapidly, but they cannot destroy it, and if the present generation escapes its influence, it will devour the well-being of the generations to come” (*MP*, 17–18).

Generally speaking, “the idea of rights” “elevates and sustains the human spirit”; Tocqueville “find[s] something grand and virile” in a principle that brings the ruled up to the level of the ruler, entitling the ruled to make honorable demands upon the ruler. “But the right that the poor person has to obtain society’s assistance is unique, in that rather than elevating the heart of the man who exercises it, it debases him.” In making my claim to public charity I formalize my “poverty, weakness, and misconduct,” admit my “inferiority” to my neighbors (*MP*, 18). To exercise most rights, I vindicate my honor as man and citizen; to exercise *this* right, however, I must sacrifice my honor, perhaps even my self-respect.

More, the original and perennial kind of beneficence “establish[es] precious ties between the rich man and the poor one,” as “the act of generosity itself makes the giver interested in the one whose poverty he has undertaken to relieve” and inspires gratitude in the one helped. This was the beneficence displayed by feudal aristocrats and indeed by the aristocrats of antiquity. But under modern conditions of social equality, beneficence becomes impersonal. The “legal charity” seen in the modern state “is not like” the natural charity or beneficence of previous times. “Alms remain, but their morality is removed,” as the rich man “sees in the poor man only a greedy stranger, summoned by the legislator to share his goods,” and the poor man “feels no gratitude for a benefit that could not be denied him.” Modern states develop civil societies divided into “two rival nations”; rich and poor “have existed since the beginning of the world,” but “public charity breaks the only line that could have been established between them” (*MP*, 19).

Even worse, “if idleness in the midst of wealth, the hereditary idleness earned by works of service, the idleness surrounded with public regard, accompanied by inner contentment, interested by the pleasures of the mind, moralized by the exercise of thought—if this idleness,” that is, this aristocratic idleness, “has been the mother of so many vices, what will come from a degraded idleness acquired from cowardice, earned by misconduct, that is enjoyed amid ignominy and that can only be endured to the extent that the soul of the one who suffers it becomes completely corrupted and degraded?” (*MP*, 19–20). Such a soul “knows the future, as an animal does, because he ignores destiny’s circumstances, and who is thus focused like the animal in the present

and in the ignoble and fleeting pleasures that the present offers to a brutalized nature.” Thus “the number of illegitimate children has risen continuously; that of criminals has grown incessantly” (*MP*, 20)—in both instances because public support obviates the need for husbands, as an unmarried mother “finds a kind of dowry in her infamy” (*MP*, 25). While enlightenment expands throughout the rest of the nation, mores become gentler, taste becomes more delicate, habits more polite,” the poor “fall back toward barbarism while in the midst of civilization’s wonders, their ideas and inclinations bring them closer to savages” (*MP*, 20). The equality of conditions prevailing in modern societies finds a countervailing pressure in this new source of social hierarchy.

Not only does this new social hierarchy lack the old aristocratic generosity, it also retains no vestige of aristocratic liberty—the spirit which, as readers of *Democracy* and of *The Old Regime* will recall, serves as an indispensable barrier against despotisms “hard” and “soft” in modern states. Unlike America, where the slogan “Go West, young man, go West” would make good sense as both an aspiration and as a safety valve to relieve the miseries of city dwellers, England “has immobilized one-sixth of their population”; not only do the poor find themselves unwelcome in a new town, but unlike feudal villeinage, which “forced the individual, *against his will*, to remain where he was born,” legal charity “stops him from wanting to move away” (*MP*, 21).

What to do? Distinguishing the deserving from the undeserving poor is difficult. The English state can send overseers of the poor to every village; they can identify poor persons easily enough. But how can it prove its causes, case by case? “The laws will have declared that blameless poverty alone will be given assistance, but in practice, assistance will be given to all poverty” (*MP*, 16). Yet the sheer number of paupers makes this impossible to support. The English have then attempted the poorhouse system, whereby those identifiably impoverished must work. But this leads to an oversupply of workers and the consequent establishment of “make-work” projects that empty public coffers as much as direct “relief,” albeit in a novel way. All of this only contributes to the tendency of modern democratic societies to generate a “regularized, permanent, administrative system” whose intended benefits will ruin the civic spirit of liberty and thereby denature the human beings who live under it. These societies may end, Tocqueville warns, in “a violent revolution in the state when the number of those who receive alms becomes as large as the number of those giving them and when the indigent, not able to draw from the impoverished rich what is necessary for their needs, find it

easier to strip them suddenly of their goods than to demand assistance from them” (*MP*, 27).

“I believe that beneficence must be a manly and reasoned virtue, not a feeble and thoughtless inclination”; otherwise, beneficence “is still a sublime instinct, but in my view, it does not deserve the name of virtue” (*MP*, 26). In this, American practices will not help, as the Americans “have borrowed most of their institutions related to the poor from the English,” making charity “a political institution” through a system of poorhouses (*Pauperism in America*, 51). The result is the same: “Almost all of the genuine poor have contracted habits of laziness that are difficult to change,” as they associate work with the punishment of confinement (*PA*, 52). The (mostly Irish) poor “spend the summer in abundance and the winter in poor houses”; as a result, “public charity has lost its character of shame for them, because thousands of men turn to it daily” (*PA*, 54).

This notwithstanding, the American model of civil association may offer some hope, if applied to the practice of charity. Civic associations are the institutions that reprise the personal and civic character of aristocratic society under conditions of democracy, of equality. “By regulating aid, associations of charitable people could give greater activity and power to individual beneficence” (*MP*, 26). It is to this possible remedy to the problem of modern poverty that Tocqueville turns in his *Second Memoir on Pauperism*, published four years after the first.

Tocqueville recalls Benjamin Franklin, “who was in the habit of saying that with order, activity, and economy, the road to fortune was as easy as the road to the market. He was right.” Even the poorest farmer exhibits these virtues because, unlike the industrial worker, he owns land. “With landed property comes thought of the future” (*Second Memoir on Pauperism*, 31). Since “among the means of giving men the feeling of order, activity, and economy, I have never known a more powerful one than facilitating their access to landed property”; and since “unlike landed property, we have still not discovered a way of dividing industrial property so that it is not made unproductive”; since, undivided, such property “has preserved the aristocratic form in modern nations” despite the overall trend toward civil-social democracy; and finally, since “we are still far” from the day when a balanced international market in industrial products will make “commercial crises” “rarer and less severe,” contemporary statesmen need “to find a means of giving the worker the small farmer’s spirit and habits of property ownership” (*SMP*, 33, 34).

Tocqueville knows two ways of doing this. What “initially seems the most efficacious” is to give the worker “an interest in the factory,” whether through profit sharing, pensions, stock options, or some other device (*SMP*, 35). Such proposals, however, “have always encountered two obstacles to their success”: capitalist entrepreneurs have proved reluctant to institute them (“a grave mistake,” but there it is); and up to this point, worker-owned businesses have usually failed. This notwithstanding, Tocqueville maintains some hope for the latter enterprises. “As our workers gain broader knowledge and as the art of associating together for honest and peaceful goals makes progress among us, when politics does not meddle in industrial associations and when government, reassured about their goals, does not refuse them its benevolence and its support, we will see them multiply and prosper.” Yet although “the idea of workers’ industrial associations is bound to be a fertile one...I do not think it is ripe” (*SMP*, 36).

Other reformers urge that the best thing to do is to provide the incentives and means for proletarians to build their savings. In their view, “the only means to give the industrial class the spirit and habit of property that a large portion of the agricultural class possesses” is the state-owned savings bank (*SMP*, 37). Tocqueville doubts it. Even if state owned, such banks would still be subject to mass withdrawals in the event of financial panic; they would accelerate excessive state centralization, already the bane of democratic societies; they would also lead to increased financial centralization, further enriching the cities and starving the provinces for investment capital. “I cannot believe that it would be wise to place the entire fortune of a large kingdom’s poor classes in the same hands, and so to speak, in a single place,” where a major crisis would ruin the depositors (*SMP*, 40). This poses an especially noticeable threat in France, where both the “old” and “new” regimes declared bankruptcy and where there have been numerous changes of regime, military invasions, and other serious disruptions of civil life. Savings banks, yes: but only as one measure, not to be misconceived as “a universal panacea” for the problem of poverty (*SMP*, 43).

Tocqueville prefers banks that would combine savings with loans. At the “savings-and-loan” bank, “poor people who have money to lend would deposit it in the hands of the administrators, and they, in return for collateral, would return that money to those poor who might need to borrow it”; that is, “the thrifty poor or those momentarily favored by fortune would lend their savings at interest to the wasteful or unfortunate poor.” That does not sound like an especially promising financial model, except that “there is nothing

more certain in the world than a collateralized loan,” as any pawnshop owner will tell you (*SMP*, 44). And, of course, the loan with collateral as its insurance will make at least some of the wasteful or unfortunate poor begin to think in terms of the future—in Franklinian terms, as it were.

Very well, but what about the provinces? What can be done for the rural poor, to dissuade them from seeking their fortunes in the city factories? Tocqueville suggests a certain kind of township association. These associations “would have no political character” and would be separate from government without being hostile to it (*Letter on Pauperism in Normandy*, 47). They would embrace no more than three townships—preferably only one. Members would pool their available monies; a board of directors would distribute those monies but the members themselves would be first in line to receive assistance. Because “no one would be able to count on the members’ aid in advance” and the members themselves would determine who got the loans, the associations would not draw additional poor people into its territory. Members could quit at any time, so there would be no “risk making poverty an insupportable burden,” as it is with state-sponsored charity (*LPN*, 48). “Once the association was well established, even the poor themselves would be able to place summer savings into the association’s hands in order to be entitled to its benefits in winter.” The available revenues would exceed those available to any local aristocrat, however generous and well-heeled. And “because the collective funds would be used systematically and in accordance with a fixed plan, a very small contribution would be enough to relieve a great deal of poverty” (*LPN*, 49). And the money would “stay local.” The association would assist members “only under the condition that the recipient would not beg,” thereby causing “the disappearance of those demeaning habits that take away poverty’s respectable face, that deprave childhood and most often follow a generation of indigents with a generation of thieves.” Finally, the existence of such an association would give each township the moral authority “to expel nonresident indigents from its midst” on the grounds that all townships should care for their own paupers (*LPN*, 50). The proposal comports with Tocqueville’s theme of defending liberty in democratizing modern societies by encouraging habits of heart and mind, along with strong local institutions, intended to strengthen local resistance to administrative centralization and to vindicate and defend intellectual, moral, economic, and political liberty.

In bringing these fascinating pieces into the English language and writing a fine introduction that gets her readers right down to business, editor and translator Christine Dunn Henderson has contributed not only to our

understanding of Tocqueville but to clear thinking about poverty and the attempts we make to ameliorate it. Much of what Tocqueville told his contemporaries speaks to us, suggesting that we could still use a dose of his vigorous and astringent common sense.