**Democracy in America: For Some, and Definitely Not Others**

I would like to prelude my essay by stating that by using terms like “American” to define citizens of the United States and “he, him/self, his” to define the generic person, I am using the same language that Tocqueville uses in his book (which was the most socially accurate language for Tocqueville to use at the time) and in no way do I intend to support these ideals. However, it must be noted that when “he, him/self, his” is used, it is in fact referencing only (white) men since they were the only group of people who were considered true citizens of American democracy at the time, so it does seem to be the most precise language to use anyways.

This essay will comment on the past standard of “equality” in the United States and how Tocqueville’s conclusions on the effectiveness and virtues and pitfalls of democracy in the United States are still notable in present-day society, but have gained complexity and lost meaning in many senses because of the altered definition of citizenry in this country. Now that the United States has become a “melting pot” of ethnicities and classes and the status of citizenship has extended beyond that of the white man, many of the polices that upheld True American Ideals of the past cannot be enacted today. I argue though that in spite of the changing demographics of this country there are still many who hold onto these original ideals that keep the power in the hands of the privileged, those who were and always have been considered fully human under the eyes of the U.S. government. In some instances, I will insert my own commentary directly into Tocqueville’s quotations from *Democracy in America* to emphasize what I believe to be the hidden indications of his statements.

In the sweet, sunny days of America’s youth Tocqueville visited the United States to bear witness to democracy in action. His observations are interesting to say the least, particularly since the ideals of the nation applied so wholeheartedly in Tocqueville’s eyes to the original notion of an American public. Tocqueville himself explains that “[i]n the United States, apart from slaves, servants, and paupers whose upkeep is paid for by the towns, there is no one who is excluded from voting who does not as a voter, contribute indirectly to the law” (267). With this clarification, the first red flag in the democratic United States’ understanding of equality is waved. Slaves (who were not even granted the respect to be seen as human) and paupers (those of very low socioeconomic status) were not included in the lawmaking process in the United States at this time, therefore their concerns could not be considered in the policies of the United States. Women are not even alluded to in this statement and thus Tocqueville does not call their absence into question in the slightest. Already, we have more than half of the population unrepresented in the laws of this “democracy” that preaches liberty and justice for all.

Tocqueville also notes that “[the] moral ascendency of the majority rests in part on the idea that there is more enlightenment and wisdom in an assembly of many than in the mind of one” (284), which speaks to the notion that in the United States, the white point of view is seen as objective and as more enlightened than any other perspective because it is the majority opinion, the mainstream line of thought. However, this thinking is flawed since there is no such thing as an unbiased opinion. In fact, I argue that the white (particularly white man’s) perspective is the *least* objective, since it cannot bear witness to the complexities of oppression it has established through the creation of this country. One man’s utopia is another man’s dystopia; in the creation of a state by white men to be that which is most ideal for him, it is not possible to consider the consequences of these laws on those who were not included in these processes. Expanding on this point and alluding to future tension, Tocqueville mentions that “because the United States was settled by [the only people who were able to be considered as] equals, no natural and permanent conflict among their interest yet exists” (285). So, now that we consider people of all races and genders as “equals” and not just white men, conflict has indeed arisen. The laws written to support the then-equal citizenry cannot apply to the present day, since they were never written to include individuals who do not hold both identities of white and male.

The continued maintenance of this country’s problematic democracy is partly due to the fact that “[i]n the United States, the common man has understood how the general prosperity [of the public] affects his own happiness … What is more, he has become accustomed to looking upon that prosperity as his own handiwork. He therefore identifies the public fortune as his own, and he works for the good of the state not only out of greed or pride but, I would almost venture to say, out of greed” (271). This entitlement rings true to this day, as the individuals who benefit from the laws in place (those who founded the country, white men, and presently wealthy white men and sometimes women) are the ones who fight so diligently to keep them in place. Those who advocate for maintaining the traditions of the United States are those who are supported by it; they do so out of greed and entitlement as stated by Tocqueville. People whose status and wealth are sustained by the laws and practices in place by the government often see their success as entirely due to their own personal efforts, and the collective prosperity of this group as a result of their good will. Tocqueville elucidates—with additions of my own perception of this commentary—that

“[b]ecause the [wealthy, societally and legally supported] American [theoretically] takes part in everything that is done in his country [that benefits himself], he believes that he has an interest in defending everything about it that is criticized [by those who wish to lift up disenfranchised and unsupported members of U.S. society], for it is not only his country that is attacked but himself [and his status that he has supposedly earned entirely by his own will]” (271).

Any resistance to this may be seen a personal affront, almost as if those who do not benefit from systems in place are attempting to delegitimize the gains of the wealthy white men. This is truly an irrational fear since a) these privileged individuals currently have not earned their positions entirely due to their own accomplishments, but rather because of their accumulated social capital; and b) criticism of these biased policies is definitely not intended to be perceived as personal attacks on these individuals, but rather ventures to deconstruct unjust social and legal policies and promote equality amongst a diverse American public.

Occasionally, Tocqueville acutely observes the flaws I have previously mentioned in the United States’ democracy. I find his report on the tyranny of the majority to be precisely why the foundations of democracy in the United States are problematic, since the power of the majority cannot account for the opinions of minorities:

“When a man or party suffers from an injustice to the United States, to whom can he turn? To public opinion? It constitutes the majority. To the legislature? It represents the majority and obeys it blindly. To the executive? It is elected by the majority and serves as its passive instrument. To public force? Public force is nothing but the majority in arms. To the jury? The jury is the majority invested with the right to pronounce judgment. In some states, judges themselves are elected by the majority. However iniquitous[[1]](#footnote-1) or unreasonable the measure that strikes you may be, there must therefore submit to it” (290).

It is clear from these criticisms that equality is difficult to achieve through a democracy since the opinion of the majority will always win out and the needs of the minority cannot be fairly addressed. This contradiction in ethics is further emphasized by Tocqueville in a footnote written in response to this critical monologue. He brings attention to the fact that although freed slaves legally had the right to vote in Pennsylvania, they voluntarily abstained from doing so. Why deny themselves of this, you may wonder? An exchange between Tocqueville and a civilian explains:

“‘It isn’t that they refuse to vote, but they are afraid of being mistreated if they do. The law here has no teeth if the majority refuses to support it. But the majority harbors strong prejudices against the Negroes, and our officials do not feel strong enough to guarantee the rights that the legislature has bestowed on them’” (291).

So, the issue of the majority disenfranchising the minority is even clear to a verified citizen of the United States. And this concern is still very present in the U.S. in the 21st century. I suppose then that the intentions of our original democracy are still alive and well and working just as it was intended to: to ensure the rights and safety of those fortunate enough to be considered as citizens of the United States since this nation’s birth.

1. grossly unfair and morally wrong [↑](#footnote-ref-1)