Notes for a Seminar-Style Discussion of Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*

Session I

General Topic of Discussion: Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, through p. 201

Outline of Discussion

1. Tocqueville's Historical Context
2. Communal Freedom in the Townships (p. 62)
3. Equality of Conditions
4. Communal Freedom in America v Europe (bottom-up v. top-down; room to develop)
5. Why the Puritans? (religious mission; covenant-model)
6. Tocqueville's Liberty (not license)
7. Communal Freedom as the People's Authority over Itself (autonomy)
8. Personal Liberty v. Communal Liberty
9. Mores as Decisive for Political Development (and our understanding thereof)

Flow of Discussion

- We began by supplying the class with some of the historical context surrounding the composition of Tocqueville's work. In addition to the specific details, we emphasized how Tocqueville was captivated by the intensity of the 'sovereignty of the people' as recognized and enacted in American society.
- The class then transitioned to the discussion of key passages in the text, as selected by certain students. We began with L., who pointed us to the bottom of p. 62. Discussion of these lines would end up motivating almost our entire conversation: "So communal freedom is not, one may almost say, the fruit of human effort. It is seldom created, but rather springs up of its own accord. It grows, almost in secret, amid a semibarbarous society. The continual action of laws, mores, circumstances, and above all time may succeed in consolidating it. Among all the nations of continental Europe, one may say that there is not one that understands communal liberty."
- We began our interpretation of this passage by referring back to Toqueville's emphasis on the "equality of conditions" in America. This refers to a kind of leveling-out, if not of capacities than at least of resources. We all ought to begin with about the same amount of 'stuff,' so that we can freely pursue our projects on that common basis.
- It was then pointed out that the "communal freedom" of this passage cannot easily develop if larger governing bodies loom over townships and influence their development. The lack of such interference is one reason that American townships were more able to develop towards communal freedom than were their European counterparts.
- But the conditions for these American—or at least New England—townships were not limited to their organic and local nature. There were more specific, historical conditions. Tocqueville points to the English Puritan mores of the early settlers as playing a large role in the formation of these townships.

- Why, then, were the Puritans so good at forming political organizations? Well, they took their founding of new communities as part of God's divine work. Through them, God was bringing a "vine into the wilderness." (Ps. 80) Their political work was a manifestation of their covenant with God: a sacred, inviolable contract that provided the pattern for the social contract or constitution that should lie at the heart of political communities. Through the Puritan pilgrims, according to Tocqueville, we find the most successful cooperation of the Spirit of Religion with the Spirit of Freedom.
- But what kind of freedom or liberty is Tocqueville talking about here? He is careful to distinguish between mere wanton liberty and civil liberty. This latter liberty goes hand-in-hand with authority. It is the goal of authority.
- Within the democratic structures of the Puritan townships, such civil liberty took the form of the people's subjection to itself. This was communal autonomy. Genuine liberty is when one has authority over oneself, and, in these communities, the goal was to have the people hold authority over itself.
- We then critically discussed Tocqueville's claim that there are certain matters which affect only individuals. And, since each individual is the best judge of her own interests, individuals should retain their personal liberty with regard to those matters. The general point of debate here was whether or not there are such matters that pertain only to an individual and not to her community. (This tension between kinds of liberty was related back to Benjamin Constant's distinction between ancient and modern liberty. We also left room open for future tensions here between individual and communal autonomy.)
- Getting back to the Puritans, we realized that an understanding of a group's mores is necessary if we are to grasp the core of that group's social contract. In the case of America, the desire for an equality of conditions would count as part of the mores motivating the development of American political life.
- After all this, we circled back to "communal freedom" as it was framed in the original passage. There, Tocqueville writes that such freedom develops via laws, mores, circumstance, and, "above all, time." That is to say: it must be cultivated or built up. Progress needs time so that its tendencies can play out. More specifically: the idea of local rule or communal sovereignty needs time to become part of a people's mores.
- Mores turn out to be decisive for Tocqueville's understanding of politics. If people have mores contrary to certain forms of political organization, for example, they will be less likely to adopt those forms of organization. Mores are also easier to spread and preserve on the local level, and so this could explain Tocqueville's emphasis on the 'bottom-up' approach of American settlement. In general, Tocqueville's point is that these mores are historically, culturally, and even geographically specific. And if they are so crucial for political development, then that development should itself be studied with some degree of specificity and contextualization.

Session II

General Topic of Discussion: Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, through p. 309

Outline of Discussion

10. Ranking Influences on Democratic Development (geography, laws, mores)
11. What Are Mores? (various definitions)
12. Mores and Majority Rule
13. Changeability of Mores
14. Tyranny of Thought
15. Humanity's Religious Nature

Flow of Discussion

- We began our discussion with a passage from p. 308, which gives us Tocqueville's ranking of three potential influences on the development of democratic institutions: "Europeans exaggerate the influence of geography on the lasting powers of democratic institutions. Too much importance is attached to laws and too little to mores. Unquestionably those are the three great influences which regulate and direct American democracy, but if they are to be classed in order, I should say that *the contribution of physical causes is less than that of the laws, and that of laws less than mores*."
- So the ranking that Tocqueville gives us is:
    - (1) mores
    - (2) laws
    - (3) geographical factors
- It's clear, from this, that mores are the number one influence on the development of social and political institutions. But what are mores? To tackle that question, we looked at a number of other passages that tell us more about mores.
- On p. 308, Tocqueville relates them to habits, opinions, beliefs, dispositions, practical experience, mindset, or mentality. Mores also seem to be more lasting or durable than laws. They also need not correspond directly with the laws. We can, for example, have mores that lead us to obey laws that we feel violate those very mores.
- On p. 249, Tocqueville emphasizes the changeability of democracy; but, we then asked, does this changeability affect mores as well? Or do mores persist on some level, while the surface of democracy fluctuates?
- On p. 305, mores appear to be defined in a footnote as "the sum of the moral and intellectual dispositions of men in society."
- On p. 287, mores seem to be not just the habits of the heart, but also habits of the mind: that is, various kinds of notions, opinions, and ideas.
- Searching for more particular expressions of mores, we then discussed a number of features in the American political landscape. The first of these was majority rule. A respect for majority rule might be seen as part of the mores conditioning American politics. Tocqueville himself has concerns about this, since majority rule can become tyranny if it's not morally bounded by what he terms "justice." Such justice would have to obtain between the majority and the minority, conceived as two potentially competing

"individuals." (pp. 250-251; 222) We then asked whether there might be a similar competition between 'majority mores' and 'minority mores.'

- Going back to the question of changeability, we asked whether or not mores 'erode' over time. Some thought yes, others though it better to say that mores merely changed or evolved. Tocqueville, for his part, seems to suggest that democracy, unlike aristocracy, is just not very effective at elevating mores. Instead of pursuing the heights of human excellence, democracy tends to level things out.
- Returning to the majoritarian question, it was pointed out that Tocqueville oddly passes over the issue of woman's involvement (or lack thereof) in American politics. This would have seemed like an obvious place for him to explore the possibility of minority oppression in America.
- The greatest risk of majority rule, though, appears to be the tyranny of thought. This is the effect the majority can have even upon mores, dispositions, and ideas. There can be a kind of soft power or implicit policing of beliefs and public opinion. Such policing can also instill prejudices of various kinds, including those having to do with race and gender. Those prejudices can even be internalized by those whom they pre-judge, so that people begin to see themselves in light of majority opinion. Tocqueville sees this taking shape already in America, and he marks it out as a danger.
- Finally, we turned our attention to p. 296, where Tocqueville argues that humanity is faithful or religious by nature. He calls religion a kind of hope, which is particularly suited to humanity's love-hate relationship with existence.

Session III

General Topic of Discussion: Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, through p. 418

Outline of Discussion

16. Slavery and the Difference between North & South (interests v character)
17. Society Founded on Shared Opinions
18. Slavery Ancient and Modern
19. Attitudes About Labor
20. Mores vs Opinions
21. Two Kinds of Instability
22. Slavery and Religion

Flow of Discussion

- We began with a passage on p. 376, which dealt with the interests and character of Northern and Southern inhabitants of the United States: "If two men belonging to the same society have the same interests and, to some extent, the same opinions, but their characters, education, and style of civilization are different, it is highly probable that the two will not be harmonious. The same observation applies to a society of nations. Slavery therefore does not attack the American confederation directly, through interests, but indirectly, through mores."
- Slavery, in other words, benefits both North and South, though it leads to different kinds of mores in each.
- From this, we jumped back to pp. 373-374, where Tocqueville discusses the dangers deriving from America's internally conflicting characteristics and passions. A true society, he argues, requires shared opinions. This raised a number of questions for us, such as: is Tocqueville saying that the North and South make up two different societies? Does the unity of a society depend on shared opinions, shared mores, or both? What, after all, is the difference between opinions and mores? (This is a question that would stay with us throughout class.)
- On p. 343, Tocqueville notes that racial hatred is in fact just as strong, if not stronger, in the North than it is in the South. In the North, the white worker has trouble seeing the different between himself and a freedman, and so he has to work to make that difference apparent.
- In describing slavery for us, Tocqueville also draws a distinction between the ancient and American brands. Ancient slavery, such as that in the Roman Empire, seems to have been less obviously racialized. Slaves could be educated. They shared in the same culture as their masters. It wasn't too hard to free a slave, if a master wanted to. In America, meanwhile, slavery is entirely racialized. The white slave-owner now tries to prevent the slave not just from being free, but even from wanting to be free.

- Leaping back to p. 375, we then returned to Tocqueville's distinction between North and South. The character of each region appears to be shaped in large part by prevalent attitudes towards labor. This could derive both from differences in the original settlers of each region, but Tocqueville tends to emphasize the role of slavery here instead. Slavery, insofar as it dishonors labor, leads to a lower estimation of the value of work in the South. In other words, there is a shift in their mores concerning labor.
- On pp. 346-347, Tocqueville visualizes this distinction between North and South with his boat-ride down the Ohio River. On both sides of the river, people share many similarities, even of mores. Yet there are second-level opinions that diverge based on economic practices and emerging ways of life. Generally speaking, all share in 'American mores,' but North and South express these mores in increasingly distinct ways.
- We learn from this that there is some wiggle room between mores and opinions for Tocqueville, so that it's also possible for people to share some particular opinions while letting their underlying mores develop in different directions. Northerners and Southerners share, for example, negative racial stereotypes about people of African descent, but they don't express this in the same way.
- So, given all this, why would the North and South ever stay together? Tocqueville first points to geographical reasons why the states have a vested interest in maintaining peace and cohesion on their continent. He then draws a distinction between the Union—a temporary political agreement—and the Republic—which is the moral basis of American society, rooted firmly in respect for the sovereignty of the People. The Republic, he contends, could outlive the Union.
- Next, on p. 398, Tocqueville points out two kinds of instability. There is the instability of foundational principles ('bad instability') and the instability of secondary laws ('good instability'). America tends to allow variation in its particular laws, while still maintaining consistency in its constitutional foundations. Slavery, though, poses a threat to Americans' shared understanding of equality and freedom, and so it may lead to the bad kind of instability that can tear a nation apart.
- Finally, we ended by touching on how slavery touches upon the connection between mores and religion. In both the North and the South, the debate about the moral and political status of slavery has developed and will continue to develop in conversation with certain Christian understandings of human equality.

Session IV

General Topic of Discussion: Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, through p. 705

Outline of Discussion

23. Society founded on Shared Ideas
24. General Ideas and Overgeneralizations
25. Religious Dogmas as Shared Ideas
26. Individualism vs Egoism
27. Liberty Combats Equality
28. Associations against Isolation (as consequence of equality)
29. Theory vs Practice

Flow of Discussion

- Q. started us off with a passage from pp. 433-434: "… it is easy to see that no society could prosper without such beliefs, or rather that there are no societies which manage in that way. For without ideas in common, no common action would be possible, and without common action, men might exist, but there could be no body social. So for society to exist and, even more, for society to prosper, it is essential that all the minds of the citizens should always be rallied and held together by some leading ideas; and that could never happen unless each of them sometimes came to draw his opinions from the same source and was ready to accept some beliefs ready-made."
- Tocqueville seems to be saying that shared ideas are needed as a basis for society. Without them, there can be a group of human beings, but there can't really be a society in the proper sense. As a class, we then tried to figure out where such shared ideas could most effectively be derived from. Religion was suggested as a possible source, as was public opinion. Both of these seem to carry risks. One such risk is that some kind of tyranny of ideas would overwhelm the civil sphere, much as Tocqueville fears that a tyranny of the majority might overwhelm the political sphere.
- In America, according to Tocqueville, these kinds of leading ideas usually take the form of overgeneralizations. Given how busy the average American is, what with their political involvements and business interests, they have little time to think through every aspect of their world. Instead, they rely on general ideas, which help us break down the world into manageable chunks, even if these chunks are not 'real' in themselves. This too carries risks, as we can see in the case of racial stereotyping, for example.
- As he likes to do, Tocqueville then makes a distinction between two kinds of generalization. One kind is hard-won and earned through the labors of thought. The other is lazy and superficial. Democratic peoples like the latter kind, since they have a taste for easy success and immediate pleasures. They also like to immediately apply their ideas to practical use, rather than staying too long in the realm of theory.

- At this point, we came back around the role of religion in all this. How is religion able to make use of our democratic instincts, rather than merely compensate for them? American Christianity, for its part, seems able to accommodate itself to certain democratic functions, so as to use them and preserve its own dogmas by means of them. Those dogmas themselves can then, in turn, contribute to the 'leading ideas' that ground society.
- Americans also show a taste for independent individualism, however, and this can run into trouble with certain religious dogmas. Overall, there is a strange tension between Americans' desire for increasing individualism and their reliance on generalizations.
- To clarify his point about individualism, Tocqueville casts it in opposition to egoism. Egoism is exaggerated self-love, a traditional vice that has seemingly also plagued humanity. Individualism, meanwhile, is a consequence of democratic equality. It consists in the considered withdrawal of a citizen's concern from the people at large, in order to focus in on his or her friends and family. Ideally, this localized self-interest would help strengthen society overall. But there is always the risk that it could devolve into base egoism.
- In order to keep individualism from collapsing into egoism, Tocqueville says that the Americans use Liberty to combat Equality. Equality comes with great risks, not the least of which is that we can all be equal under a tyrant, just as well as we are equal in a supposedly free society. The threat of despotism increases with the isolation from one another we experience under democracy's egalitarian individualism. Only good use of our political liberty would seem able to save us from our own equality.
- Tocqueville is most impressed by Americans' use of their liberty to form private associations that fight against isolation and despotism. Broad political engagement does not just arise naturally; it has to be cultivated through our political institutions. Associations can even function as a new aristocracy, giving guidance to society as a whole. But, like the old aristocrats, they too can be corrupted by their power, and so must be used with caution.
- Finally, we returned to Tocqueville's dichotomy between theory and practice in America. One of the great risks, he thinks, is that Americans will become too absorbed in practical applications, failing to preserve the theoretical underpinnings of their own society and its technology. Certain associations and institutions will be needed, if America is going to keep from forgetting its own foundations.

Session V

General Topic of Discussion: Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, through to the end

Outline of Discussion

30. Americans Simultaneously Absorbed in Private & Public Interests
31. Self-Interest as Encompassing Both?
32. Self-Interest as a Motive for Utilitarian Virtue
33. Tocqueville's Discussion of Women

Flow of Discussion

- P. started us off with a selection of quotes from p. 541: "There is perhaps no country in the world with fewer men of leisure than America, nor one in which all those who work as so keen on making themselves prosperous. … An American will attend to his private interests as if he were alone in the world; the moment afterward, he will be deep in public business as if he had forgotten his own. Sometimes he seems to be animated by the most selfish greed and sometimes by the most lively patriotism. But a human heart cannot really be divided in this way. Americans alternately display passions so strong and so similar first for their own welfare and then for liberty that one must suppose these urges to be united and mingled in some part of their being."
- So there seems to be a tension in the American spirit, simultaneously embedded in public discourse and absorbed by private interests. Tocqueville observes both tendencies, but, as a class, we're wondering whether he has a way of conceptually rectifying them.
- Perhaps, it was suggested, private and public interests can both serve "self-interest" in a more general sense. On p. 526, Tocqueville argues that the American's motive for working for the interests of others 'just is' his or her own self-interest. Self-interest, properly understood, produces the utility of civic virtue. This general concept of self-interest might, then, be the key to mediating the American's twin pursuits of private and public interests.
- But in man, Tocqueville tells us, an angel instructs a brute. Humanity is capable of acting purely on ideals. But this may not always or even usually be the case, especially for a democratic populace. Democratic moralists are less given then their aristocratic counterparts to lofty flights of speculation. In a democracy, utility must be appreciated as a motive for virtue.
- Still, even in America, an overemphasis on private interests can be a degradation of self-interest. This is perhaps akin to egoism as a degradation of individualism. Proper self-interest should make room also for public interests—that is, for a kind of self-interest that's good for both you and others.
- Tocqueville's discussion of private and public interests leaves us with some questions. Does he really bemoan the loss of aristocratic virtue theory? Is he willing to accept

democracy's reduction of virtue to utility? And does he give us the tools to decide whether the public interests is merely the adding-up of private interests or, instead, some kind of independent general will?

- Leaving these questions open, for the most part, we concluded class with a discussion of Tocqueville's sections having to do with women. On the one hand, Tocqueville praises American women for their freedom, intelligence, and willfulness. But on the other, he makes their free use of reason culminate in subjugation to the conjugal yoke. Why, we asked, does he fail to apply notions of democratic liberty more broadly to the female population? Is this a contradiction in his work? Or have we merely reached the limits of his own moral imagination?
- By asking these kinds of questions, we realized that our analysis of Tocqueville on women can reflect back on our understanding of his work as a whole. His inability or unwillingness to conceive of total gender equality may be linked to his general suspicions about unrestrained equality. Perhaps his sense that moral formation must precede equality has the consequence—distasteful for many of us—of delaying the granting of equality to subjugated portions of the population, as in the case of both slaves and women.