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Coda: Tocqueville and the Greeks

I

Alexis de Tocqueville seems at first glance to have no place in a story about Greek republicanism. His greatest work, *Democracy in America*, has been characterized routinely as the first intimation of a fundamentally new age and the unveiling of a new approach to political reasoning. As Tocqueville himself puts it, his study of American democracy exhibits "a new political science for a world completely new."¹ This is a statement worth taking seriously. Tocqueville's belief that mankind no longer faces a choice among different regimes leads him to abandon the standard search for the *optimus status reipublicae*. The rise and global victory of democracy is "fated," he tells us, and nations can only hope to control "whether equality leads them to servitude or liberty, to enlightenment or barbarism, to prosperity or misery."² In short, for Tocqueville, political science in the modern world is left with the relatively modest task of identifying the *optimus status democratiae*. But Tocqueville's critique of the republican tradition goes far deeper. Apart from insisting that men of his day have no real choice of regimes, he is clear that no form of government is "best" at all times, or always promotes human flourishing better than all the others. He argues that "the political powers which seem best established have no safeguard of their longevity aside from the opinions of one generation, the interests of one century, or often the life of one man . . . There has never been a government which is based on some invariable disposition of the

¹ All quotations from *Democracy in America* are taken from Alexis de Tocqueville, *De la démocratie en Amérique*, with a preface by André Jardin, 2 vols. (Paris: Librairie Gallimard, 1986). All translations are my own. "Il faut une science politique nouvelle à un monde tout nouveau" (vol. 1, p. 43).

² "Les nations de nos jours ne sauraient faire que dans leur sein les conditions ne soient pas égales; mais il dépend d'elles que l'égalité les conduise à la servitude ou à la liberté, aux lumières ou à la barbarie, à la prospérité ou aux misères" (ibid., vol. II, p. 455). On this, see Catherine H. Zuckert, "Political Sociology Versus Speculative Philosophy" in *Interpreting Tocqueville's Democracy in America*, ed. Ken Masugi (Savage, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1991).

human heart, nor one which could found itself on an immortal interest."³ Nature has been replaced by circumstance as the source of political principles.

This deeply historical vision of political society in turn leads Tocqueville to an unabashed appreciation of what Machiavelli called the "effectual truth" (*la verità effettuale*), the "facts on the ground."⁴ Different historical moments have different needs, and those needs determine political principles and, to some extent, the moral apparatus that underlies them. For example, Tocqueville ascribes to the Americans a moral philosophy based on "self-interest rightly understood" (*l'intérêt bien entendu*), according to which they perform virtuous actions because they believe those actions will bring them benefits – and that the resulting benefits will outweigh any costs associated with performing the actions. This theory, writes Tocqueville, is not as noble or beautiful as one which recommends virtue for its own sake, nor does "self-interest rightly understood" inspire the great acts of self-sacrifice that have animated other societies. Tocqueville explicitly contrasts this "virtue as interest" approach to a Platonist notion of virtue, in which man "sees that the purpose of God is order; he assimilates himself freely to this grand design, and, in sacrificing his particular interests to this admirable order of all things, he expects no other reward than the pleasure of contemplating it."⁵ This Platonist idea of virtue is "sublime," but nonetheless, Tocqueville concludes, "I will not hesitate to say that the doctrine of self-interest rightly understood seems to me, of all the philosophical theories, the most attuned to the needs of men in our time, and I see in it the most powerful safeguard men have left against themselves."⁶ He continues by urging contemporary moralists to embrace this theory, though imperfect, because its adoption is "necessary" if virtue is to be preserved in an age of interest. As Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. summarizes Tocqueville's thinking, "the city-state was founded on virtue, the nation-state on interest. The problem

³ "Les puissances politiques qui paraissent le mieux établies n'ont pour garantie de leur durée que les opinions d'une génération, les intérêts d'un siècle, souvent la vie d'un homme... et l'on n'a jamais vu de gouvernement qui se soit appuyé sur une disposition invariable du cœur humain, ni qui ait pu se fonder sur un intérêt immortel" (Tocqueville, *Démocratie*, vol. 1, p. 440).

⁴ See Niccolò Machiavelli, *Il principe*, in *Opere*, ed. Mario Bonfantini (Milan: Riccardo Ricciardi, 1963), p. 50 (chapter xv).

⁵ "il voit que le but de Dieu est l'ordre; il s'associe librement à ce grand dessein; et, tout en sacrifiant ses intérêts particuliers à cet ordre admirable de toutes choses, il n'attend d'autres récompenses que le plaisir de le contempler" (Tocqueville, *Démocratie*, vol. II, p. 179).

⁶ "Je ne craindrai pas dire que la doctrine de l'intérêt bien entendu me semble, de toutes les théories philosophiques, la mieux appropriée aux besoins des hommes de notre temps, et que j'y vois la plus puissante garantie qui leur reste contre eux-mêmes" (ibid., p. 176).

was to make private interest the moral equivalent of public virtue."⁷ For Tocqueville, even views of morality must bend to the demands of the age.

Thus, Tocqueville is without question a very different sort of philosopher from those I have been discussing. But, strikingly, it is not Tocqueville's repudiation of a fixed account of human nature which has seemed most novel to scholars, but rather his notion of the *état social*. Several recent students of Tocqueville have seen this aspect of his thought as an innovation which should secure his status as the founder of social science. For Harvey Mansfield, Tocqueville's "social state" was a "new feature" which, for the first time, shattered the "liberal (or Rousseauian) distinction between state and society that derives from a prepolitical, presocial situation called the state of nature."⁸ Likewise, for J. G. A. Pocock, it was through this concept of *état social* that "Tocqueville charted the transition from equality in its Machiavellian or Montesquieuan sense – *isonomia* or equality of subjection to the *res publica* – which had been part of the ideal of virtue, to that of *égalité des conditions* which he saw as marking the triumph of democracy in its modern sense, superseding the values of the classical republic."⁹ Thus, the "social state" is seen as a fundamentally new notion which allowed Tocqueville to leave behind both the classical-republican and natural-law traditions, and to embark on a new theoretical path.

To be sure, not all scholars have embraced this abstracted view of Tocqueville's *état social*. Aurelian Craiutu, for example, prefers to derive Tocqueville's "social state" from the French *doctrinaires* of the nineteenth century, such as François Guizot, Pierre Royer-Collard, and Charles de Rémusat. He then assigns to these thinkers the credit for having first identified democracy as "a new type of *society*," rather than a "form of government,"¹⁰ and for having espoused "an original *sociological* approach, which stressed the influence of the social order on the functioning of political

⁷ Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., "Individualism and Apathy in Tocqueville's *Democracy*" in *Reconsidering Tocqueville's Democracy in America*, ed. Abraham S. Eisenstadt (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1988), p. 96.

⁸ Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop, "Introduction" to Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. and trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. xlv.

⁹ J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton University Press, 1975), p. 537.

¹⁰ Aurelian Craiutu, "Tocqueville and the Political Thought of the French Doctrinaires (Guizot, Royer-Collard, Rémusat)" in *History of Political Thought* 20 (1999), 485. See also Georgios Varouxakis, "Guizot's Historical Works and J. S. Mill's Reception of Tocqueville" in *History of Political Thought* 20 (1999), 292–312.

institutions."¹¹ But in suggesting that the distribution of property shapes mores and determines the distribution and exercise of political power (and is, therefore, in a sense "prior" to political structures), Tocqueville was drawing on a much older line of thought. Indeed, his discussion of the *état social* is very much within the Greek tradition we have been following.

Tocqueville addresses the "social state" of the Americans early in the first volume of *Democracy*. He explains that "equality of conditions" constitutes a "democratic social state" which in turn supports democratic government. What is not often noticed is that this observation had long been a commonplace of early American historiography and political theory. David Ramsay, for example, wrote in his 1789 *History of the American Revolution* that in the American colonies "a sameness of circumstances and occupations created a great sense of equality, and disposed them to union in any common cause, from the success of which, they might expect to partake of equal advantages."¹² Likewise, as we have seen, Noah Webster and others routinely insisted that "a republican or free government, necessarily springs from the state of society, manners, and property in the United States."¹³ As a result of this ideological commitment, the American Founders, like Harrington and Montesquieu before them, placed enormous weight on the significance of inheritance laws in bringing about the equal agrarian.

Tocqueville replicates this analysis with remarkable exactitude, making it somewhat strange that this aspect of his thought has received so little scholarly attention:¹⁴

I am surprised that the ancient and modern writers have not attributed a larger influence in the progress of human affairs to inheritance laws. These laws, it is

¹¹ Craiutu, "Tocqueville," 487.

¹² *American Political Writing during the Founding Era: 1760-1805*, ed. Charles S. Hyneman and Donald S. Lutz, vol. II (Indianapolis: Liberty Press, 1983), p. 725.

¹³ Webster, "An Oration on the Anniversary of the Declaration of Independence" in *American Political Writing*, vol. II, p. 1236.

¹⁴ Even Jean-Claude Lamberti, who provides an excellent account of Tocqueville's *état social*, almost wholly neglects this aspect of the subject. See Lamberti, *Tocqueville and the Two Democracies*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Harvard University Press, 1989), pp. 15-17, 25-39. In a study of Jefferson's influence on Tocqueville, James Schleifer makes passing reference to the question of inheritance laws, but then adds a remarkable footnote: "Tocqueville failed to realize that Jefferson himself exaggerated the significance of the abolition in Virginia of the laws of primogeniture and entail." If by this he means that the new laws did not have a significant effect on the actual practices of testators, then it is not a point I care to argue (although, see Holly Brewer, "Entailing Aristocracy in Colonial Virginia: 'Ancient Feudal Restraints' and Revolutionary Reform" in *The William and Mary Quarterly* 54 [1997], 307-46). If, however, he means that these laws were not of staggering ideological consequence at the time, he is surely mistaken. See James T. Schleifer, "Jefferson and Tocqueville" in *Interpreting Tocqueville's Democracy in America*, ed. Ken Masugi (Savage, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1991), p. 178n.

true, pertain to the civil order, but they must be placed at the head of all political institutions, since they have an incredible influence on the social state of peoples, of which the political laws are a mere expression.¹⁵

Montesquieu, who had called inheritance laws the mainstay of republican government, could hardly have said it better.¹⁶ Tocqueville adds that "the lawgiver regulates the inheritances of citizens just once, and he can rest for centuries. His work having been put in motion, he can withdraw his hand. The mechanism works by its own forces, and directs itself as if of its own accord toward its appointed goal."¹⁷ He is even more emphatic later in the first volume, where he claims rather grandly that "no great change in human institutions takes place where one does not find inheritance laws among its causes."¹⁸ On Tocqueville's account, these inheritance laws can tend in one of two radically opposed directions. On the one hand, "constituted in a certain manner, the law reunites, concentrates, and groups property – and soon afterwards power – around a single individual. In a way, it causes an aristocracy to sprout out of the soil."¹⁹ Once again we have the standard Harringtonian view: the balance of property determines the balance of power. If property is allowed to accumulate in the hands of a few men, aristocratic government is the result. This, argues Tocqueville, was precisely what transpired in the early years of the American south. The settlers brought with them the English aristocratic inheritance law; wealth quickly began to concentrate in a very few hands, and the resulting wealthy elite gathered to itself the bulk of political power.²⁰ In a note,

¹⁵ "Je m'étonne que les publicistes anciens et modernes n'aient pas attribué aux lois sur les successions une plus grande influence dans la marche des affaires humaines. Ces lois appartiennent, il est vrai, à l'ordre civil; mais elles devraient être placées en tête de toutes les institutions politiques, car elles influent incroyablement sur l'état social des peuples, dont les lois politiques ne sont que l'expression" (Tocqueville, *Démocratie*, vol. 1, p. 96).

¹⁶ Indeed, the first sentence of the above passage is somewhat unexpected, since Tocqueville was a careful reader of both Plato and Montesquieu and was surely familiar with their intense interest in inheritance laws. Perhaps he saw his own account as building on the interventions of his predecessors, and assigning an even more prominent place to these laws.

¹⁷ "le législateur règle une fois la succession des citoyens, et il se repose pendant des siècles: le mouvement donné à son œuvre, il peut en retirer la main: la machine agit par ses propres forces, et se dirige comme d'elle-même vers un but indiqué d'avance" (Tocqueville, *Démocratie*, vol. 1, p. 96).

¹⁸ "Il ne se fait pas un grand changement dans les institutions humaines sans qu'au milieu des causes de ce changement on ne découvre la loi des successions" (ibid., p. 510). See also Tocqueville's analysis of the distribution of land in *L'Ancien Régime et la Révolution* (II.1). Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the Revolution*, ed. François Furet and Françoise Mélonio, trans. Alan S. Kahan, vol. 1 (University of Chicago Press, 1998), pp. 112–13.

¹⁹ "Constituée d'une certaine manière, elle réunit, elle concentre, elle groupe autour de quelque tête la propriété, et bientôt après le pouvoir; elle fait jailler en quelque sorte l'aristocratie du sol" (Tocqueville, *Démocratie*, vol. 1, p. 96).

²⁰ Ibid., p. 95.

Tocqueville glosses this discussion with a familiar passage from Jefferson's *Autobiography*:

In the earlier times of the colony, when lands were to be obtained for little or nothing, some provident individuals procured large grants, and desirous of founding great families for themselves, settled them or their descendants in fee tail. The transmission of this property from generation to generation, in the same name, raised up a distinct set of families, who, being privileged by law in the perpetuation of their wealth, were thus formed into a Patrician order, distinguished by the splendor and luxury of their establishments. From this order, too, the king habitually selected his councillors of state.²¹

This nascent aristocracy only failed to consolidate its position, Tocqueville argues, because it relied on slavery, rather than landed patronage (i.e. wealthy landholders had slaves, rather than dependent tenants), and lived amongst people already accustomed to the democratic social state.

There was, however, an alternative approach to inheritance laws which Tocqueville insisted was becoming irreversibly dominant:

Driven by other principles, and launched on another path, its action [i.e. the action of an inheritance law] is more rapid still. It divides, parcels out, and disseminates goods and power. It sometimes happens that one is frightened at the speed of its advance; in despair of halting its movement, one tries at least to place before it problems and obstacles. One wants to counterbalance its action by contrary efforts, but all in vain! This law crushes or dashes to pieces everything it finds in its path. It causes things to rise up and fall again onto the soil incessantly, until the point where it no longer presents to view anything other than the fleeting and impalpable dust on which democracy makes its foundation.²²

With almost no noticeable variation, we have here the Harringtonian and Montesquieuan agrarian. Inheritance laws which insist on the equal division of estates among children (i.e. which have abolished primogeniture and the entail of estates) produce a relative equality of conditions which brings with it democratic government and mores. These democratic inheritance laws, according to Tocqueville, have two immediate effects: first, and more obviously, they continually break up large estates, dividing them into smaller

²¹ Ibid., p. 615. Jefferson's English is given in Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. J. P. Mayer, trans. George Lawson (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), p. 721.

²² Conduite par d'autres principes, et lancées dans une autre voie, son action est plus rapide encore; elle divise, elle partage, elle dissémine les biens et la puissance; il arrive quelquefois alors qu'on est effrayé de la rapidité de sa marche; désespérant d'en arrêter le mouvement, on cherche du moins à créer devant elle des difficultés et des obstacles; on veut contrebalancer son action par des efforts contraires; soins inutiles! Elle broie, ou fait voler en éclats tout ce qui se rencontre sur son passage, elle s'élève et retombe incessamment sur le sol, jusqu'à ce qu'il ne présente plus à la vue qu'une poussière mouvante et impalpable, sur laquelle s'assoit la démocratie (Tocqueville, *Démocratie*, vol. 1, p. 97).

parcels and redistributing them. But equally importantly, Tocqueville believes that these laws have a particular psychological effect on wealthy landholders. Since, under such laws, landholders despair of maintaining large family estates, they lose their sentimental attachment to ancestral lands and sell them of their own free will, even before the inheritance laws have a chance to break them up.²³ The wealthy become complicit in the liquidation of their own patrimonies.

This process of agrarian levelling, argues Tocqueville, was the most significant legacy of the American Revolution:

The English legislation on the transfer of goods was abolished in almost all the states during the era of the Revolution. The law of entails was modified in such a way as to hinder the free circulation of goods only in the most innocuous manner. The first generation passed away, and the lands began to be divided. The pace became more and more rapid as time went on. Today, when scarcely sixty years have passed, the appearance of society is already unrecognizable. The families of great landowners are almost all swallowed up in the midst of the common masses . . . The sons of these opulent citizens are today merchants, lawyers, and doctors. Most have fallen into deep obscurity. The last trace of ranks and hereditary distinctions is destroyed, and the inheritance law has everywhere established its middling level.²⁴

In his note Tocqueville reproduces the basic inheritance law almost universally instituted throughout the United States after the Revolution: "When a man dies intestate, his goods pass to his heirs in direct line; if he only has one heir or one heiress, he or she alone receives the entire estate. If there happen to be several heirs of the same degree, they divide up the estate equally among themselves with no distinction of sex."²⁵ Property is thus continually divided and redistributed, ensuring what Tocqueville calls the democratic "social state."

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

²⁴ "La législation anglaise sur la transmission des biens fut abolie dans presque tout les Etats à l'époque de la révolution. La loi sur les substitutions fut modifiée de manière à ne gêner que d'une manière insensible la libre circulation des biens. La première génération passa; les terres commencèrent à se diviser. Le mouvement devint de plus en plus rapide à mesure que le temps marchait. Aujourd'hui, quand soixante ans à peine se sont écoulés, l'aspect de la société est déjà méconnaissable; les familles de grands propriétaires fonciers se sont presque toutes englouties au sein de la masse commune . . . Les fils de ces opulents citoyens sont aujourd'hui commerçants, avocats, médecins. La plupart sont tombés dans l'obscurité la plus profonde. La dernière trace des rangs et des distinctions héréditaires est détruite; la loi des successions a partout passé son niveau" (*ibid.*, p. 101).

²⁵ "Lorsqu'un homme meurt intestat, son bien passe à ses héritiers en ligne directe; s'il n'y a qu'un héritier ou une héritière, il ou elle recueille seul toute la succession. S'il existe plusieurs héritiers du même degré, ils partagent également entre eux la succession, sans distinction de sexe" (*ibid.*, p. 615).

It should be noted, however, that Tocqueville does not labor under the misapprehension that such a democratic agrarian will eliminate the classes of "rich" and "poor." On the contrary, he repeatedly insists that rich and poor will exist in any society, and that they certainly exist in America.²⁶ In America, however, wealth is kept within practicable bounds, and is promptly redistributed after the deaths of wealthy men. As a result, the son of a wealthy man is invariably poorer than his father,²⁷ and the consolidation of supereminence in particular families becomes impossible. The democratic agrarian, in short, provides that men are never so wealthy that they can "exercise a great influence over their fellow citizens."²⁸ Furthermore, the mores and intellectual habits produced by the general equality of conditions ensure that, even when average men confront men of significant wealth and (as a result) power, American public opinion "which bases itself on the usual order of things, restores them to a common level and creates between them a sort of imaginary equality, despite the actual inequality of their conditions."²⁹ Thus, the democratic social state can defend itself against mild and temporary disparities in wealth through the accumulated force of the beliefs it engenders. In Harringtonian terms, there will always be democratic and aristocratic elements in society; the agrarian and its resulting mores make sure that the rich do not "overbalance" the people.

II

Described in this way, Tocqueville seems largely similar to the major figures in the tradition we have been following. But differences abound, and the most significant among them is suggested by a quick look at one of Tocqueville's more innocuous comments. In his appendix concerning inheritance laws Tocqueville notes that the central provisions of the American agrarian (in particular its repudiation of entails) were proposed in Virginia by Jefferson in 1776. As we have seen, Jefferson embraced these democratic inheritance laws out of a conviction that, once the disproportionate wealth of the "Pseudo-aristoi" was eliminated, the natural aristocracy would shine

²⁶ Ibid., p. 101.

²⁷ Ibid., vol. II, p. 216. This entire discussion clearly recalls Montesquieu's account of how commercial republics can preserve good mores through inheritance laws (*De l'esprit des lois* v.6).

²⁸ "n'étant plus assez riches ni assez puissants pour exercer une grande influence sur le sort de leurs semblables" (Tocqueville, *Démocratie*, vol. II, p. 145).

²⁹ "l'opinion publique, qui se fonde sur l'ordre ordinaire des choses, les rapproche du commun niveau et crée entre eux une sorte d'égalité imaginaire, en dépit de l'inégalité réelle de leur conditions" (ibid., p. 253).

forth brightly and the people, forgetting the allure and glamor of riches, would always choose the "real good and wise" to rule – thus satisfying the demands of nature and justice. Tocqueville believes no such thing. He completely rejects the basic Greek notion that, if extremes of wealth and poverty were eliminated, money-loving would cease to be a dominant passion in society. Indeed, he argues the precise opposite: on his view, the equalization of holdings produces a universal tendency toward money-loving. Speaking of the United States with its democratic *état social*, he declares that "I do not know of any country where the love of money holds a larger place in the heart of man."³⁰ The reason for this perplexing state of affairs, explains Tocqueville, is that, in societies where a non-democratic social state prevails, the rich are tranquil in their wealth, knowing full well that it has always been there and will always be there. As a result, they do not worry or obsess about money, and their bent runs to luxury and sloth.³¹ The poor for their part have no hope of acquiring extensive property, so they sensibly decline to give money-making much consideration. In societies where the democratic social state holds sway, however, everyone has a reasonable expectation of being able to make a fortune, and no one is immune from financial concerns.³²

Once again, for Tocqueville, a key contrast is that between the American North and South. The Southern, patrician, slave-holding class displays no regard for money-making, and exhibits all the vices of habitual indolence.³³ In New England, however, the situation is very different:

Since the equality of fortunes reigns in the North, and slavery does not exist there, man finds himself absorbed with those same material wants which the white man disdains in the South. From childhood, he occupies himself with combating misery, and he learns to place material ease above all the joys of the mind and heart. Focused on the small details of life, his imagination stifles itself, his ideas are less numerous and less general, but they become more practical, more clear, and more precise. Since he directs all the efforts of his intellect only toward the study of well-being, he does not take long to excel at it. He knows admirably to take advantage of nature and men to produce riches.³⁴

³⁰ "Je ne connais même pas de pays où l'amour de l'argent tienne une plus large place dans le cœur de l'homme" (ibid., vol. I, p. 101).

³¹ Ibid., pp. 546–47.

³² Ibid., vol. II, p. 336. On this, see also Tocqueville's "Preface" to *L'Ancien Régime* (Tocqueville, *The Old Regime*, p. 87).

³³ This was a standard observation in American political pamphlets of the 1780s. See, for example, the third letter from "Cato" to the *New York Journal* (October 25, 1787) in *The Debate on the Constitution: Federalist and Antifederalist Speeches, Articles, and Letters During the Struggle over Ratification*, vol. I, ed. Bernard Bailyn (New York: Library of America, 1993), p. 217.

³⁴ "L'égalité des fortunes régnant au Nord, et l'esclavage n'y existant plus, l'homme s'y trouve comme absorbé par ces mêmes soins matériels que le blanc dédaigne au Sud. Depuis son enfance il s'occupe

Because fortunes are middling, all men seek great fortunes.

But Tocqueville goes even further. Not only, he suggests, does the democratic social state condition a population to seek money above all things; it also greatly enhances the prestige of money-making. In direct opposition to the Greek claim that the temperate regulation of property will diminish the status of wealth as a social good, Tocqueville argues that such arrangements have the effect of ennobling it. Indeed, on his view, once the social state has become democratic, wealth asserts itself as the only relevant social distinction:

Men who live in democratic times have many passions, but the majority of their passions either result in the love of riches, or flow from it. This does not come about because their souls are smaller, but because the importance of money in such times is truly greater. . . . Since the prestige which attached itself to things ancient has disappeared, birth, station, and profession no longer distinguish men. Nothing remains but money which creates very visible differences among them and which can place some of them above the common level. The distinction which is born from riches feeds off the disappearance and diminution of all the other distinctions.³⁵

Moreover, this unique source of social distinction receives the status of a positive virtue (a fact which greatly concerns Tocqueville) due to the overall circumstances of the American experience:

There are certain tendencies which are deplorable in the eyes of general reason and universal conscience which happen to be consonant with the particular and immediate needs of the American confederation . . . I mention particularly the love of riches and the secondary tendencies which attach themselves to it. In order to clear, cultivate, and transform this vast, uninhabited continent which is his domain, an American needs the daily support of an energetic passion. That passion cannot be anything other than the love of riches. The passion for riches is therefore not at all condemned in America, and, provided that it does not exceed the limits which

à combattre la misère, et il apprend à placer l'aisance au-dessus de toutes les jouissances de l'esprit et du cœur. Concentrée dans les petits détails de la vie, son imagination s'éteint, ses idées sont moins nombreuses et moins générales, mais elles deviennent plus pratiques, plus claires et plus précises. Comme il dirige vers l'unique étude du bien-être tous les efforts de son intelligence, il ne tarde pas à y exceller; il sait admirablement tirer parti de la nature et des hommes pour produire la richesse" (Tocqueville, *Démocratie*, vol. 1, p. 547).

³⁵ "Les hommes qui vivent dans les temps démocratiques ont beaucoup de passions; mais la plupart de leurs passions aboutissent à l'amour des richesses ou en sortent. Cela ne vient pas de ce que leurs âmes sont plus petites, mais de ce que l'importance de l'argent est alors réellement plus grande. . . . Le prestige qui s'attachait aux choses anciennes ayant disparu, la naissance, l'état, la profession ne distinguent plus les hommes, ou les distinguent à peine; il ne reste plus guère que l'argent qui crée des différences très visibles entre eux et qui puisse en mettre quelques-uns hors de pair. La distinction qui naît de la richesse s'augmente de la disparition et de la diminution de toutes les autres" (*ibid.*, vol. 11, p. 315).

public order assigns it, it is honored. The American calls noble and estimable ambition that which our fathers of the middle ages called servile cupidity.³⁶

Thus, in Tocqueville's opinion, far from banishing wealth from the pantheon of esteemed goods, the temperate distribution of property elevates money-making into a cardinal virtue.

The implication of all this is fairly clear. Tocqueville is led completely to reject the view of Plato, More, Harrington, and their progeny, that the equalization of holdings will result in a more excellent society. On the contrary, he argues that equality of conditions creates a pervasive mediocrity. Middling fortunes produce middling characters, neither disgraceful nor inspirational. Tocqueville explains that "it is not only fortunes which are equal in America: to a certain point, equality reaches intellects themselves. I do not think that there is anywhere on earth where, in proportion to the population, there are as few ignorant men and as few intellectuals as in America."³⁷ For Tocqueville, this accounts for what he calls the *niveau moyen* of American intellectual life: out of equal conditions and relatively equal education emerges a calcified consensus on major social, economic, political, and philosophical questions, along with a relative absence of dynamic thinking.³⁸ Nor does the onslaught of mediocrity end with the life of the mind. All of social life is reduced to a palatable, sometimes profitable, but always unexceptional common denominator:

Great riches disappear; the number of small fortunes increases. Desires and enjoyments multiply; there are no longer extraordinary prosperities or miseries without remedy . . . Souls are not energetic, but mores are mild and laws humane. If one finds few great acts of self-sacrifice and few virtues that are very high, very brilliant, and very pure, yet habits are well-ordered, violence is rare, and cruelty almost unknown. The existence of men becomes longer and their property safer. Life is not very ornate, but very easy and very peaceful. There are few very delicate or very

³⁶ "Il y a certains penchants condamnables aux yeux de la raison générale et de la conscience universelle du genre humain, qui se trouvent être d'accord avec les besoins particuliers et momentanés de l'association américaine . . . je citerai particulièrement l'amour des richesses et les penchants secondaires qui s'y rattachent. Pour défricher, féconder, transformer ce vaste continent inhabité qui est son domaine, il faut à l'Américain l'appui journalier d'une passion énergétique; cette passion ne saurait être que l'amour des richesses; la passion des richesses n'est donc point flétrie en Amérique, et, pourvu qu'elle ne dépasse pas les limites que l'ordre public lui assigne, on l'honore. L'Américain appelle noble et estimable ambition ce que nos pères du moyen âge nommaient cupidité servile" (ibid., p. 325).

³⁷ "Ce ne sont pas seulement les fortunes qui sont égales en Amérique; l'égalité s'étend jusqu'à un certain point sur les intelligences elles-mêmes. Je ne pense pas qu'il y ait dans le monde où, proportion gardée avec population, il se trouve aussi peu d'ignorants et moins de savants qu'en Amérique" (ibid., vol. I, p. 101).

³⁸ Ibid., p. 103.

coarse pleasures, little refinement in manners and little brutality in tastes . . . There is less perfection, but a greater proliferation of accomplishments.³⁹

Tocqueville may well have believed, as he says, that through such an arrangement "le grand lien de l'humanité se resserre," but he leaves little doubt that such a society is not the most virtuous imaginable (although it is, perhaps, the most virtuous available).

In order to see precisely how revolutionary Tocqueville's model actually is, it is worth comparing it to a theory which appears superficially similar: Aristotle's account of middle-class rule in *Politics* IV. Like Tocqueville, Aristotle argues that middling fortunes tend to produce characters which are in some important sense "middling," and he also agrees with Tocqueville in suggesting that the relative equality of conditions yields a certain kind of fellow-feeling which helps to bind political communities (*Politics* 1295a25 [IV.8]–1296a22 [IV.9]). Aristotle writes as follows:

those who have an excess of fortune's goods, strength, wealth, friends and the like, are not willing to be governed and do not know how to be (and they have acquired this quality even in their boyhood from their home-life, which was so luxurious that they have not got used to submitting to authority even in school), while those who are excessively in need of these things are too humble. Hence the latter class do not know how to govern but know how to submit to government of a servile kind, while the former class do not know how to submit to any government, and only know how to govern in the manner of a master. The result is a state consisting of slaves and masters, not free men, and of one class envious of another and contemptuous of their fellows. (*Politics* 1295b15)⁴⁰

This condition, Aristotle adds, is "very far removed from friendliness, and from political partnership," the essential element of "political" rulership. As a result, he concludes that since "the ideal of the state is to consist as much as possible of persons that are equal and alike, and this similarity is most found in the middle classes," a state dominated by the middle class will be the best readily available state.

But Aristotle insists that the "middling" quality of the middle class is *itself* virtue: moderate property is a "mean" between the extremes of wealth

³⁹ "Les grandes richesses disparaissent; le nombre des petits fortunes s'accroît; les désirs et les jouissances se multiplient; il n'y a plus de prospérités extraordinaires ni de misères irrémédiables . . . Les âmes ne sont pas énergiques; mais les mœurs sont douces et les législations humaines. S'il se rencontre peu de grands dévouements, de vertus très hautes, très brillantes et très pures, les habitudes son rangées, la violence est rare, la cruauté presque inconnue. L'existence des hommes devient plus longue et leur propriété plus sûre. La vie n'est très ornée, mais très aisée et très paisible. Il y a peu de plaisirs très délicats et très grossiers, peu de politesses dans les manières et peu de brutalité dans les goûts . . . Il y a moins de perfection, mais plus de fécondité dans les oeuvres" (*ibid.*, vol. II, p. 452).

⁴⁰ All quotations from Aristotle are taken from Aristotle, *Politics*, ed. and trans. H. Rackham, Loeb Classical Library (Harvard University Press, 1932). I have used Rackham's translations.

and poverty. Far from “dumbing down” virtue and creating a society of money-lovers, Aristotle’s temperate distribution of wealth allows for the broader exercise of virtue and tames the passions of greed and envy:

Since then it is admitted that what is moderate or in the middle is best, it is manifest that the middle amount of all of the good things of fortune is the best amount to possess. For this degree of wealth is the readiest to obey reason, whereas for a person who is exceedingly beautiful or strong or nobly born or rich, or the opposite – exceedingly poor or weak or of very mean station, it is difficult to follow the bidding of reason; for the former turn more to insolence and grand wickedness, and the latter overmuch to malice and petty wickedness, and the motive of all wrongdoing is either insolence or malice. (*Politics* 1295b4)

For Aristotle, disproportionate wealth and poverty create vice, not virtue, and the man with moderate property is the most attentive to the demands of reason. In the political sphere, the chief demand of reason is distributive justice: the distribution of political offices according to desert. Since the state aims at the good life, explains Aristotle, the most virtuous men have the most to contribute to governance, and, accordingly, should be assigned rulership positions. The man of middling property, immune from the influence of greed or envy, will obey the demands of reason in deferring to the rule of the best men.

In Tocqueville’s model nothing is further from the truth. States possessing an equal agrarian are by no means governed by the most exceptional men:

Many men in Europe believe without saying, or say without believing, that one of the great advantages of universal suffrage is to call men worthy of public confidence to the management of public affairs. The public does not know how to govern itself, they say, but it always sincerely desires the good of the State, and its instinct does not lack the ability to identify those men who are animated by the same desire and who are the most capable of holding power. For myself – I must say it – what I saw in America does not authorize me at all to think that this is the case. On my arrival in the United States, I was struck with surprise to discover the extent to which merit was common among the governed, and rare among the governors. It is a constant fact that, in our days, in the United States the most remarkable men are rarely called to public offices.⁴¹

⁴¹ “Bien des gens, en Europe, croient sans le dire, ou disent sans le croire, qu’un des grands avantages du vote universel est d’appeler à la direction des affaires des hommes dignes de la confiance publique. Le peuple ne saurait gouverner lui-même, dit-on, mais il veut toujours sincèrement le bien de l’Etat, et son instinct ne manque guère de lui désigner ceux qu’un même désir anime et qui sont les plus capables de tenir en main le pouvoir. Pour moi, je dois le dire, ce que j’ai vu en Amérique ne m’autorise point à penser qu’il en soit ainsi. A mon arrivée aux Etats-Unis, je fus frappé de surprise en découvrant à quel point le mérite était commun parmi les gouvernés, et combien il était peu chez les gouvernants. C’est un fait constant que, de nos jours, aux Etats-Unis, les hommes les plus

There are, according to Tocqueville, several reasons for this state of affairs. First, the desire for money is so pervasive – and the process of electioneering so demeaning – that capable men will seldom pass up their commercial opportunities to pursue public service (a total contradiction of Aristotle's insistence that men of moderate property will neither covet political office unduly, nor shun it for financial reasons [*Politics* 1295b12]).⁴² Second, the mediocre education of the populace leaves it susceptible to the seduction of demagogues.⁴³ But most importantly, the democratic social state makes people resentful of their intellectual superiors, and implants in them a tendency to keep the most exceptional men away from political office:

For the rest, it is not always only the ability to choose men of merit which is lacking in a democracy, but the desire and the taste. It is no use denying that democratic institutions develop the sentiment of envy in the human heart to a very high degree. This is not at all because such institutions offer to each person the means to become equal to others, but because these means constantly fail to achieve that goal for those who use them. Democratic institutions awaken and flatter the passion for equality without ever having the power to satisfy it entirely . . . In that condition [i.e. the state of continually seeking absolute equality, only to be frustrated] anything that surpasses the public seems like an obstacle to its desires, and there is no superiority so legitimate that the sight of it does not tire the public's eyes.⁴⁴

Accordingly, Americans "do not fear great talents, but they have no taste for them. In general, one notices that those who rise on their own without popular support obtain the public's favor later only with great difficulty."⁴⁵ This democratic envy which keeps the best men out of power can be tamed somewhat by good mores and education. In New England, for example, the general orientation of society is so deeply meritocratic that "the people, while it has banished all the superiorities which wealth and birth ever created among men, is nonetheless accustomed to respect intellectual and

remarquables sont rarement appelés aux fonctions publiques . . ." (Tocqueville, *Démocratie*, vol. 1, p. 299).

⁴² See *ibid.*, and pp. 309–10.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 299.

⁴⁴ "Du reste, ce n'est pas toujours la capacité qui manque à la démocratie pour choisir les hommes de mérite, mais le désir et le goût. Il ne faut pas se dissimuler que les institutions démocratiques développent à un très haut degré le sentiment de l'envie dans le cœur humain. Ce n'est point tant parce qu'elles offrent à chacun des moyens d'égaliser aux autres, mais parce que ces moyens défont sans cesse à ceux qui les emploient. Les institutions démocratiques réveillent et flattent la passion de l'égalité sans pouvoir jamais la satisfaire entièrement . . . Tout ce qui le dépasse par quelque endroit lui paraît alors un obstacle à ses désirs, et il n'y a pas de supériorité si légitime dont la vue ne fatigue ses yeux" (*ibid.*, p. 300).

⁴⁵ "[le peuple] ne craint pas les grands talents, mais il les goûte peu. En général, on remarque que tout ce qui s'élève sans appui obtient difficilement sa faveur" (*ibid.*, p. 301).

moral superiorities and to submit to them without displeasure."⁴⁶ But the particular circumstances of Puritan New England's founding make it an exceptional case. In general, as far as Tocqueville is concerned, a disinclination to promote excellent men to political office is a very real byproduct of the equality of conditions.

III

We have seen that, while Tocqueville's concept of the *état social* follows closely in the Greek tradition, his account of the social and intellectual consequences of the democratic social state distance him significantly from Plato, Aristotle, Montesquieu, and other authors examined above. Should we then say that Tocqueville's debt to the Greek tradition consists solely in the Harringtonian dictum that "the balance of property produces the balance of power"? Has this descriptive claim simply been abstracted from its traditional normative context? What is perhaps most fascinating about Tocqueville is that this is not the case. While Tocqueville denies that the equality of conditions will clear a path through the wilderness for the natural aristocracy or scuttle the social prestige of wealth, he continues to insist that the temperate distribution of wealth will have ameliorative effects on mores. Although he argues that aristocratic societies will produce a kind of virtue not to be found in democratic societies, he maintains the conviction of the ancients that disproportionate wealth and poverty corrupt. In the case of the poor, he states flatly that "in those places where we find men who are extremely strong and rich, the weak and poor men feel overwhelmed by their baseness. Not discovering any means by which they can regain equality, they despair of themselves completely and let themselves fall beneath the level of human dignity."⁴⁷ Likewise, Tocqueville insists that the guarantee of permanent wealth (in particular the sort which lives off slavery) breeds indolence, luxury, and laxity in mores.⁴⁸ Equality of conditions, on the other hand, carries with it a robust work ethic, one that survives even the amassing of great fortunes. For if a man develops a large amount of wealth in a democracy, he retains the instincts of temperance and thrift that allowed

⁴⁶ "Le peuple, en même temps qu'il échappe à toutes les supériorités que la richesse et la naissance ont jamais créées parmi les hommes, s'est habitué à respecter les supériorités intellectuelles et morales, et à s'y soumettre sans déplaisir" (ibid., p. 303).

⁴⁷ "Dans ces lieux, où se rencontrent des hommes si forts et si riches, les faibles et les pauvres se sentent comme accablés de leur bassesse; ne découvrant aucun point par lequel ils puissent regagner l'égalité; ils désespèrent entièrement d'eux-mêmes et se laissent tomber au-dessous de la dignité humaine" (ibid., p. 65).

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 74.

him to amass it in the first place, and his son, though born wealthy, will have less wealth than his father and will take as an example his father's workmanlike manner.⁴⁹

Moreover, Tocqueville is adamant that sexual mores improve under a democratic social state. In an aristocratic society, matches between members of different classes are strictly forbidden, leading star-crossed lovers to seek relief in extra-marital dalliances.⁵⁰ The fact of forced marriages, or forcibly prevented marriages, in turn, captures public sympathy and leads to a tolerant, "look the other way" sort of attitude toward infidelity. In a democratic social state, however, anyone may marry anyone else, eliminating the need for clandestine liaisons, and choking public sympathy toward those who engage in them. Furthermore, the active, engaged life of middle-class people simply leaves them less time to make mischief; the idleness that invites vice has no place in democratic society. Man's energy is either taken up by industry, or diverted at an unprecedented level to civic engagement. Indeed, as Roger Boesche and others have observed, Tocqueville is perhaps the last great theorist of the *vita activa*.⁵¹

In the United States, the fatherland makes itself felt throughout. It is an object of care all the way from the village to the entire Union. The inhabitant attaches himself to each of the interests of his country as if they were his own interests. He feels glorified himself by the glory of the nation; in the success the fatherland obtains, he believes he can recognize his own effort, and it elevates him. He rejoices in the general prosperity through which he himself profits. He has for his country a feeling analogous to that which one feels for one's family . . .⁵²

Of course, in Tocqueville's case, the democratic civic renaissance does not take place because temperate wealth inclines its possessors to public virtue, but rather because individual interest gives each person a stake in the success of the whole.⁵³ Nonetheless, equality of conditions encourages political liberty and participation, which, in Tocqueville's estimation, produce good mores – albeit in a somewhat circuitous manner.

⁴⁹ Ibid., vol. II, p. 337. ⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 283.

⁵¹ See, for example, Roger Boesche, *The Strange Liberalism of Alexis de Tocqueville* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), pp. 121–22.

⁵² "Aux Etats-Unis, la patrie se fait sentir partout. Elle est un objet de sollicitude depuis le village jusqu'à l'Union entière. L'habitant s'attache à chacun des intérêts de son pays comme aux siens mêmes. Il se glorifie de la gloire de la nation; dans les succès qu'elle obtient, il croit reconnaître son propre ouvrage, et il s'en élève; il se rejouit de la prospérité générale dont il profite. Il a pour sa patrie un sentiment analogue à celui qu'on éprouve pour sa famille . . ." (Tocqueville, *Démocratie*, vol. I, p. 159).

⁵³ See *ibid.*, pp. 118, 160.

But, for present purposes, Tocqueville explains the most significant moral effect of the democratic social state early in volume two, in the chapter entitled "Why the example of the Americans does not prove at all that a democratic people could not have an aptitude or taste for the sciences, literature, and the arts."⁵⁴ In the first volume, as we have seen, Tocqueville had tried to explain what he perceived as a dearth of artistic and literary achievement in the United States by highlighting the "middling" character of American life. Equal social conditions ensured that citizens received an always tolerable, but never exceptional education, which, in turn, created a breed of thoroughly competent but uncreative people. In this chapter of the second volume, however, Tocqueville qualifies his earlier pronouncement by insisting that democracies can and should produce great scientific and artistic achievements (America simply had not, due to a series of particular circumstances). His reason is extremely significant:

When there is no longer any hereditary wealth, class privilege, or prerogative of birth, and each man no longer acquires his force from any source outside himself, it becomes apparent that the thing which creates the principal difference between the fortunes of men is intelligence. Everything which serves to strengthen, extend, and adorn intelligence quickly acquires a great value.⁵⁵

Once all distinctions of class and condition have been leveled, the only means of advancement will be intellectual achievement. When the public becomes aware of this fact, it will seek knowledge and improvement above all things in order to advance, and society will have been rendered creative. Thus, while the desire for wealth remains a constant, Tocqueville maintains that when coupled with equality of conditions it becomes an engine for intellectual progress – and ends up assigning to the gifts of the mind pride of place among social goods.

Tocqueville compares this societal condition to a proposal offered by "une secte célèbre" (by which he means Saint-Simon and his colleagues) to concentrate "all goods in the hands of a central power and to charge those who manage it to distribute the goods to individuals according to their merit."⁵⁶ Such a mechanism would combat the tendency of democracies

⁵⁴ "Comment l'exemple des Américains ne prouve point qu'un peuple démocratique ne saurait avoir de l'aptitude et du goût pour les sciences, la littérature et les arts" (ibid., vol. II, p. 55).

⁵⁵ "Quand il n'y a plus de richesse héréditaire, de privilèges de classes et de prérogatives de naissance, et que chacun ne tire plus sa force que de lui-même, il devient visible que ce qui fait la principale différence entre la fortune des hommes, c'est l'intelligence. Tout ce qui sert à fortifier, à étendre, à orner l'intelligence, acquiert aussitôt un grand prix" (ibid., p. 60).

⁵⁶ "tous les biens dans les mains d'un pouvoir central et charger ceux-là de les distribuer ensuite, suivant le mérite, à tous les particuliers" (ibid., p. 59).

to give equal benefits to unequal people. But Tocqueville comments that there is a less drastic way of accomplishing the same end, a way which is intrinsically built into the structure of democracy itself: simply "to give to everyone equal enlightenment and an equal independence, and to leave each individual to make a place for himself."⁵⁷ If this approach is taken, "natural inequality will very soon make itself felt, and wealth will pass of its own accord to the most able men."⁵⁸

The outlines of a new theory – an adaptation of the basic Greek view outlined above – are apparent here. The question is no longer one of rulership, or even of virtue *per se*, but instead concerns the distribution of goods according to merit and desert. In a non-democratic social state where conditions are unequal, hereditary wealth and generational poverty prevent the allocation of a fair share of social goods to the most talented citizens; wealth stays where it is, regardless of how meritorious its proprietors happen to be. In a democratic social state, however, where estates are continually broken into pieces and disproportionate wealth and poverty have been eliminated, the organization of society at last allows merit to have its day. The argument is no longer that property levels must be equalized in order to secure the rule of the best men, and, in so doing, to align society with nature and justice. It has become an argument to maintain a temperate distribution of property in order to protect the "level playing field," a position which remains alive and well in our own time. Tocqueville ends *Democracy in America* by reflecting that "equality is perhaps less elevated, but it is more just – and its justice constitutes its grandeur and beauty."⁵⁹ Perhaps that is the signature statement of a thinker who transformed the Greek tradition and prepared it for life in the modern world.

⁵⁷ "de donner à tous d'égaux lumières et une égal indépendance, et de laisser à chacun le soin de marquer lui-même sa place" (ibid.). I have based my translation here on Lawson's (*Democracy in America*, ed. Mayer, p. 457).

⁵⁸ "L'inégalité naturelle se fera bientôt jour, et la richesse passera d'elle-même du côté des plus habiles" (Tocqueville, *Démocratie*, vol. II, p. 59). I have based my translation here on Lawson's (*Democracy in America*, ed. Mayer, p. 457).

⁵⁹ "L'égalité est moins élevée peut-être; mais elle est plus juste, et sa justice fait sa grandeur et sa beauté" (Tocqueville, *Démocratie*, vol. II, p. 453).