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“Plus ça change...”: Innovation and the Spirit of Enterprise in America

Christine Dunn Henderson

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> “To be free one must have the capacity to plan and persevere in a difficult undertaking, and be accustomed to act on one’s own; to live in freedom one must grow used to a life full of agitation, change, and danger; to keep alert the whole time with a restless eye on everything around: that is the price of freedom. All those qualities are equally needed for success in commerce... “
>
> -Alexis de Tocqueville, 1835[1]

At the end of the first volume of Democracy in America, Alexis de Tocqueville turns his attention to the situation of the “three races” in the United States.[2] The chapter devoted to this theme is the longest in Democracy in America; this is not surprising, given its relevance to Tocqueville’s themes of equality and liberty. Nor is it entirely surprising that Tocqueville moves from race to two discussions of the Union’s chances for survival, for although this movement does not exist in Tocqueville’s manuscript notes for the chapter’s organization,[3] the connection between the American Union’s racial situation and its chances for survival are fairly direct. What is unusual, however, is that these extended considerations of race and the Union’s likely survival are followed by an investigation into the causes of the commercial greatness of the United States.[4] This portion of Democracy in America is particularly memorable for its depiction of the risk-taking sea merchant, but the section’s placement on the heels of Tocqueville’s discussions of race and of the Union’s prospects for survival is puzzling. In one sense, the shift to commercial greatness appears an abrupt change in topics, yet upon reflection, it is possible to discover some connections by which Tocqueville’s thought might naturally turn from the Union’s preservation to the country’s commercial prowess. Indeed, the chapter’s discussions of the American character point to attributes necessary for mercantile success as well as for the defense of freedom, and its analysis of commercial greatness emphasizes the American merchant’s moral qualities, thus bridging smoothly-although in all likelihood unintentionally-into the second volume’s explorations of American national character under the guise of moeurs.

Tocqueville’s admiration for the commercial-and especially the maritime-prowess of the Americans is immediately evident, beginning with the section’s title “... the Commercial Greatness of the United States.” The section’s first revelation comes in its précis, which asserts that nature “calls” the Americans to be a great maritime people. Here, Tocqueville is able to play upon two senses of “nature”: the physical conditions of the United States, but also the constitution or genius of its people. In the former category, Tocqueville observes that the extended coastline and plentiful ports favor the development of a maritime commerce in the United States. Added to this geographic good fortune is the territory’s natural fecundity and America’s own relatively undeveloped manufacturing economy, resulting in a situation in which American goods are exported as the raw materials for European manufactures, while European products constitute the bulk of American purchases. Tocqueville observes, “Europe, therefore, is the market of America, as America is the market of Europe” (DA 385). In a note found at this passage of the manuscript, he adds that “Europe has no less need of the United States than the latter of Europe.”[5] This system of mutual-and mutually beneficial-dependence would alone insure heavy commercial traffic across the Atlantic, but it would not guarantee that the United States would take the lead in that activity. American dominance in transatlantic commerce[6] can be partly attributed to their heritage, and Tocqueville notes that “At

all times the Anglo-Americans have shown a decided taste for the sea" (DA 385). Yet American shipping is a more expensive endeavor, for both the wages paid to sailors and the costs of ship building are greater. The success of American shipping cannot be located in its comparative cost advantage vis-à-vis its European competition, and the non-material factors must account for American maritime dominance. Indeed, in Tocqueville's analysis, these non-material factors are not merely the decisive ones, they are the fundamental reasons that American maritime commerce surpasses its European competitors. Tocqueville makes this clear by asserting that "this superiority. ... is due to purely intellectual and moral qualities" (DA 386, with emphasis added). Not surprisingly, moeurs are the dominant factor in Tocqueville's explanation of the American situation.

Tocqueville's exploration of the moral and intellectual characteristics which contribute to America's commercial spirit is perhaps best remembered for its vivid portrait of the American navigator risking shipwreck in order to arrive first in port[7] and for its ascription of heroism to this activity: "the Americans put a sort of heroism in their manner of doing commerce" (DA 387). But what is this new type of commercial heroism? Chief among its constituent parts are the American merchant's recognition of the value of time, his willingness to take risks, and-most significantly-his proclivity for and receptivity to innovation. Seemingly separable, Tocqueville's discussions of these qualities reveals their interconnectedness, as well as the manner in which the drive to innovate lies at the heart of the American character. It is this drive which elevates the willingness to take chances and to experiment with the untried from mere calculation to the realm of the heroic.

Time, Risk and Reward

The "secret" of the American merchant's success, notes Tocqueville in the manuscript copy for Democracy in America, lies in his awareness of time. "The American seems to me to be the one who has conceived the greatest and most accurate idea of the value of time," observes Tocqueville. "There is no portion so small of day or night that does not have a value ... in his eyes"[8] This recognition of time's value and its passage spurs the American merchant to press his vessel and himself to their physical limits. He applies round-the-clock production schedules to the art of sailing, continuing through the night and avoiding all unnecessary stops. Sailing through storms or other inclement conditions, the American presses toward his goal, repairing storm-damaged ships without deviating from his course. "He saves hours like the Dutch merchant saved capital,"[9] comments Tocqueville, and these small savings accumulate, eventually enabling the American agent to make his crossings with less expense and greater speed than his competitors. The American is the first merchant to recognize and to capitalize upon the value of each second in the voyage. Tocqueville's depiction of the personal costs to the merchant in his indefatigable pursuit of victory is dramatic: "During a crossing of eight to ten months, he has drunk brackish water and lived on salted meat; he has struggled constantly against the sea, against illness, against boredom" (DA 387). Yet, the merchant's reward for his single-mindedness and daring is the ability to vastly undercut his competitors and to maximize his own profit.[10]

Tocqueville likens the merchant's discovery of time's value to the introduction of new military tactics by the French. The French, says Tocqueville, "undertook for the first time to do without a host of things that until then had been judged indispensable to war; they required new efforts of their soldiers that well-ordered nations had never demanded of theirs; one saw them do everything on the run and without hesitation risk the lives of men with a view to the result to be obtained." Although these tactical innovations "troubled" older leaders, they were devastatingly effective (DA 386). Just as the French innovation consistently brought them victory over their more conservative enemies, the American's new understanding about commerce brings him victory in the marketplace.

But what "kind of heroism" is found in American commercial democracy, and how is it distinguishable from its aristocratic and military counterparts? Certainly, the scope of commercial victory is less lofty than the military battlefield. In this sense, the development of commerce as the setting in which democratic individuals test themselves and manifest their superiority is consistent with other effects of equality's spread observed by Tocqueville: the field may be less elevated, but it is fundamentally democratic in its openness to a greater number of participants. This characterization of commerce recalls the great equality of fortunes-and brains-which so stuck Tocqueville in observing the Americans,[11] yet despite the fact that commerce appears a less noble (and less ennobling) arena than traditional fields of military combat, Tocqueville does insist upon its heroism.[12] Commercial battles also differ from their military equivalents in their body count, which is considerably lower. American democracy's substitution of commercial heroism for military heroism not only yields a wealthier economy, but it peacefully channels the same passions which lead to war in other settings.[13]

Most importantly, perhaps, commercial heroism is not an artificial channel for passions and personalities who might otherwise disrupt American society. In Tocqueville's presentation, American maritime commerce-and the spirit of enterprise of which it is a manifestation-is impelled as much by interest as by nature. At the end of his sketch of risks undertaken by the American navigator, Tocqueville notes, "The American, in acting in the way I have described above, not only follows a calculation; he obeys, above all, his nature" (DA 387). Tocqueville's working manuscript notes also suggest a direct connection to the merchant's natural heroism: "Heroism that is not only calculation, but also suggested by nature."[14] The heroic nature under investigation is both American and democratic. In one sense, it is particularly American, or at least particular to the collection of individuals who gambled on their chances of creating better lives in the North American colonies. With a nod to the self-selection factor in the American sample, Manent observes, "What is thus under investigation by Tocqueville is a political experiment conducted by individuals who where particularly enterprising, competent, and talented, who acted in full consciousness of what they were doing."[15] Yet the near universal availability of commercial heroism also suggests its democratic aspects-because neither birth nor class limits the individual's possibilities, all who dare to risk are equally possible winners. In this sense, it can said that Tocqueville's presentation of commercial heroism is one example in which "inquiry into the nature of democratic man is inquiry into the nature of man per se."[16]

Having given some consideration to the self-selection factors which might make the American colonists naturally risk-friendly, it remains to investigate the additional sources of the American commercial heroism, both those particular to America and those general to democracies. What is it, we might ask directly, that gives rise to the innovative spirit upon which commercial success depends? Is it a spirit of optimism fostered by the natural richness of the vast American territory? Is it the equality of conditions, a term Tocqueville uses to encompass the political, social, and economic equalities he found in America, as well as their effects-such as motion, mobility, progress, and restlessness-in the broadly social context? The answer is "yes," to both questions. The spirit of innovation is partly inspired by the possibilities of the American territory, but it is because these territorial possibilities are experienced within the context of a democratic social state that they inspire innovators and risktakers.[17] As we will see, not only does democracy eliminate many of the traditional barriers to innovation and entrepreneurial activity, but it also appears to encourage certain character traits and behaviors-such as an inclination for the new, a belief in progress, a habit of self-reliance and a taste for one's own judgment-which foster the innovative spirit upon which commercial success depends. Paradoxically, however, although equality of conditions encourages the spirit of innovation, it also gives rise to certain characteristics and tendencies which threaten that very spirit.

Nature, Environment, Choice, and Change

Returning to Tocqueville's portrait of the American sea merchant helps transition from American particularities to more general considerations about the relationship between democracy and the spirit of innovation. As we have already noted, Tocqueville's depiction of the American sea merchant is contrasted to his less daring (and less competitive) European counterpart, both in terms of tactics and personality. The American's willingness to take risks is implicitly compared to the European navigator, who "ventures only with prudence onto the sea." A certain imprudence, then, is part of the American's formula for success; while this quality is also associated with new ways of thinking, Tocqueville suggests that this imprudence is a type of instinct, or that it is an impulse- rather than a reason-driven attribute. Whether reflection would counsel caution or recklessness, the American seems to follow the impulses of his nature rather than the dictates of his reason. Impulse and the American character (so often described as calculating) first appear an odd combination, though not a combination which is inconsistent with an understanding of moral behavior that emphasizes the role of habituation. The jury system functions in a similar manner, for it "serves to give to the minds of all citizens a part of the habits of mind of the judge; and these habits are precisely those that best prepare the people to be free" (DA 262).[18] Conversely, Tocqueville's discussion of the manner in which free institutions counter the atomizing effects of democratic individualism (DA II.II.4) emphasizes the opposite effect; there, self-interest initially leads individuals to attend to the public interest, but that practice develops what Tocqueville variously describes as "an instinct," "a habit," and "a taste" for public service.

Whether the American's risk-taking is rooted in nature, in impulse, or in calculation may make little difference, for Tocqueville connects the willingness to take risks with an inclination for the new, or for change more generally. Indeed, key to the American navigator's success is his ability to think outside of accepted modes, to break with tradition, to devise new methods or to improve upon older ones-in short, to innovate. "It is this same spirit [of innovation], applied to maritime commerce, that makes the American navigate more quickly and more cheaply than all the traders of the world" (DA 388) Not only is this propensity for innovation essential to the individual merchant's success, but Tocqueville also describes it as the fundamental attribute of American national character. Tocqueville notes, "The American taken randomly will therefore be a man ardent in his desires, enterprising, adventurous-above all, an innovator" (DA 388). The spirits of innovation and enterprise are linked in the American soul as well as in Tocqueville's thought, and he also describes the spirit of enterprise-together with the taste for material well-being-as the heart of American character. The spirit of enterprise is intimately connected with America's pervasive equality of conditions, and it "is in fact found in all his [the American's] works," including politics, religion, social economy, and private industry (DA 388). Indeed, Tocqueville's portrait of the Americans stresses this pervasive innovativeness, or the American "genius for creating new forms of communities, including intentional communities (associations), communities of information, and communities of belief."[19]

Equality of conditions is the basic fact of democratic life, and it is also the primary cause of the Americans' characteristic innovativeness.[20] Enterprise and innovation flourish throughout America because neither nature nor custom imposes barriers to change. Physical nature plays its role, for the land of the United States, while not rich enough to sustain a territorial aristocracy, is sufficiently fertile to sustain whoever chooses to apply his labor to it (DA I.I.2). Tocqueville nods to the material pre-requisites for an innovative society when he describes America as "a new and immense country in which they can spread out at will and which they make fertile without trouble" (DA 429).[21] Even more importantly, though, the land's abundance serves as a type of blank slate, offering unprecedented opportunities for individuals to make (or remake) themselves and their fortunes. Nineteenth-century America is a land in constant motion, in figurative senses as well as in the literal sense of waves of immigrants arriving on her shores while other waves of settlers move

West. What Tocqueville describes as a "double movement of emigration" (DA 268)-from Europe to the Eastern seaboard, and from the East to the West-produces economic prosperity for both the Eastern factory worker and the Western pioneers. This migration also causes the ideas of change and prosperity to become implicitly associated in the American mind, and the expansive Western territories further encourage individuals to try new modes of life and to take risks in pursuit of material improvement.

Although Tocqueville repeatedly asserts the primacy of mores,[22] the seemingly endless possibilities opened up by America's physical territory do exert considerable influence over the development of American character. In speculating about "Some Sources of Poetic Inspiration," Tocqueville describes the manner in which the land captures the American imagination: "The marvels of inanimate nature find them insensible...Their eyes are filled with another spectacle. The American people sees itself advance across this wilderness, draining swamps, straightening rivers, populating empty areas, and subduing nature" (DA 461). Such a spectacle engages the mind and spirit, empowering the individual by encouraging him to apply his intellect, imagination, and labor to whatever challenges confront him.[23] The experience of taming the frontier wilderness-of changing nature by the application of human will and man-made technology-and the experience of ameliorating one's personal situation through the same exertions have taught Americans to have virtually boundless confidence in their own powers and in the possibilities for innovation and change. The constant movement of the West, described as "democracy carried to its furthest limit,"[24] further contributes to the American's sense that nothing is permanently fixed and that everything is therefore possible. What is true of the transformative possibilities inherent in the Western wilderness might also be said of the individual living within a democracy, and the possibilities for innovation in the form of radical self-making can expand in apparently limitless ways in the democratic context.

The effects of the country's physical characteristics upon its citizens are heightened by the democratic social condition, for equality of conditions undermines the rigid class structures and the habitual deference to the past which characterize aristocracies. Tocqueville's discussion of the "Philosophic Approach of the Americans" at the beginning of Democracy in America's second volume investigates the effects of this erosion of tradition on the American spirit. Calling Americans natural Cartesians, Tocqueville describes the chief aspects of their philosophic approach in the following manner:

To escape from the spirit of system, from the yoke of habit, from family maxims, from class opinions, and, up to a certain point, from national prejudices; to take tradition only as information and current facts only as a useful study for doing otherwise and better; to seek the reason for things by themselves and in themselves alone, to strive for a result without letting themselves be chained to the means, and to see through the form to the foundation (DA 403).

Although democratic equality does not erase the past completely, it does destroy much of its authority as a guide to current and future action. Tradition exerts some force on the American, but in a manner fundamentally different than way in which tradition is experienced by individuals within aristocratic societies. Tocqueville notes that "Equality develops the desire in each man to judge everything by himself; it gives him in all things a taste for the tangible and real and a contempt for traditions and forms" (DA 433). Rather than preserving tradition to the greatest extent possible, Americans consult tradition for factual information, almost as a negative blueprint or as a model of what not to do as they devise improved and new modes of thinking and acting. Democracy's emphasis on change, re-making, and dynamism encourages individuals to disregard the past, and it empowers them to engage in an almost unimaginable variety of transformative endeavors.

Equality of conditions also destroys the class distinctions and other social boundaries which gave aristocracies their characteristic forms. The giving way of those rigid structures, when combined with democracy's incessant activity, leads to the relaxation or the breaking of the links between generations and also between classes (DA 403). With these ties of obligation and deference obliterated, democratic individuals have no one other than themselves upon which to rely, and so they must learn to depend upon themselves. Moreover, equality's leveling effect places individuals side by side, thus encouraging each to rely upon and value his own judgment; the result is that democratic citizens are "constantly led back toward their own reason as the most visible and closest source of truth" (DA 404).[25] This habit of self-reliance is especially favorable to innovation, both because it disposes Americans to focus on practical matters and also because they feel a general distaste "for believing any man whomsoever on his word" (DA 404). The democratic individual's distaste for taking another's word may be but another manner of indicating his preference for his own opinion. He also prefers his own ways of doing things; this inclination for his ways and for doing things for himself encourages innovation, for the thought of simply following the paths blazed by others is less appealing to democratic peoples than to those living in non-democratic ages.[26]

Change is a constant in all democratic ages, and in the American context, change becomes especially associated with amelioration. According to Tocqueville, "The idea of the new is therefore intimately bound in his mind to the idea of the better" (DA 387-8). Just as the scope of change seems boundless and determined only by the effort applied, the possibilities for improvement appear to be similarly without inherent limits. Americans develop a belief in infinite perfectibility; this optimism spurs individuals to endeavor constantly to improve their selves and their situations. Tocqueville writes,

Continual changes then pass at each instant before the eyes of each man.... and he concludes from this that man in general is endowed with the indefinite faculty of perfecting himself. His reverses make him see that no one can flatter himself with having discovered the absolute good; his successes inflame him to pursue it without respite. Thus, always seeking, falling, righting himself, often disappointed, never discouraged, he tends ceaselessly toward the immense greatness that he glimpses confusedly (DA 427; see also DA, 431).

Not only are Americans natural innovators, then, but they are also natural progressives, confident that improvement can be continuous and that their seeking will yield new and better ways. Tocqueville's conversation with an American sailor illustrates one application of this attitude, which permeates American society. When asked why American ships are not built to last very long, the sailor replied that because of rapid progress in navigational arts, any ship built now would soon be obsolete. Tocqueville comments, "In these words pronounced at random by a coarse man concerning a particular fact I perceive the general and systematic idea according to which a great people conducts all things" (DA 428).

The same belief in never-ending progress which spurs technological experimentation and innovation produces a similar effect on both the political and the individual levels. "Betterment and progress" are said to be a free democracy's primary political questions (DA 232), and these concerns also are reflected in private life, with Americans striving constantly to improve their situations. Depicting the never-ending change and restlessness characterizing Americans, Tocqueville describes the following sight:

In the United States, a man carefully builds a dwelling in which to pass his declining years, and he sells it while the roof is being laid;... he clears a field and he leaves to others the care of harvesting

its crops. He embraces a profession and quits it. He settles in a place from which he departs soon after so as to take his changing desires elsewhere (DA 512).[27]

Always seeking to better his condition, the American changes place and profession often. One year a farmer, the next a sailor, the next a small businessman, he thus avoids the intellectual narrowing which Tocqueville-along with Adam Smith, Jean-Baptiste Say, and others[28]-believed to be a product of an advanced division of labor and a barrier to innovation and progress. In his discussion of American commercial superiority, Tocqueville contrasts the American "jack of all trades, master of none" with the division of labor found in Europe. Conceding that the American worker is less skilled at any particular task than his European counterpart, Tocqueville also notes that that the American is more broadly capable and ultimately more creative or innovative. Because of the American's lack of specialization, "the sphere of his intellect is more extensive," with the further result that "he is no more attached to one system of operation than to another; he feels no more bound to an old method than to a new one; he has not created any habit, and he readily escapes from the empire that foreign habits would exercise over his mind" (DA 387). The working manuscript also contains an additional comment here, directly linking the absence of the division of labor with American innovativeness. In a note, Tocqueville observed that "With the division of labor, you do better and more economically, but you do not innovate. The division of labor is an element of wealth more than of progress."[29]

An advanced manufacturing economy's division of labor, Tocqueville believed, conditions the worker to performing a single task and weakens his abilities to think more generally. "The art makes progress," says Tocqueville, but "the artisan retrogresses" (DA 531). Eventually, the worker loses the capacity to think beyond the task for which he earns wages, and finding no outlet, the "powerful human intelligence which has so often moved the world" (DA 530) atrophies. Production becomes more efficient, but creativity and innovation decline, with disastrous long-term results for the worker and for society in general. Although this general decline might be a specter on the horizon of America's future, Tocqueville thought that mid-nineteenth-century American production was less highly developed than what he witnessed in Europe and that the American soul had largely escaped the narrowing effects of the division of labor. These facts, especially when combined with the American's belief that he is free to change profession at will, promote the senses of freedom and possibilities which are the keys to an innovative and dynamic society.

Innovation and Individual (Dis)Empowerment

Americans are successful commercial agents because of their propensity for innovation, a tendency born of the equality and freedom at the heart of American society. The relationship between liberty and innovation works both ways, though, for the self-reliance and independence which lead to innovation are also developed through innovation; these qualities characterize the types of individuals who are capable of self-rule and of maintaining freedom in a democratic society.[30] To the extent that the spirit of innovation develops these qualities, it is able to empower individuals, and thus to offer some corrective both to democratic society's tendency to overwhelm actors and also to the majority's almost irresistible authority.

Democratic equality is paradoxical, and it affects individuals in two ways which are apparently contradictory but which are not mutually exclusive. On one hand, we have seen the manner in which equality can imbue individuals with a strong sense of their own abilities, encouraging them to think and act independently, to push limits, to test themselves and their abilities. This is equality's liberating aspect, and it fuels creativity, innovation, and progress in a variety of arenas. On the other hand, though, the very lack of fixity which makes democratic societies amenable to innovation and

which encourages individual independence can also erode those same qualities of independence and creativity, leading individuals to doubt their own abilities and to rely more heavily upon others' judgment. Tocqueville captures this dual effect of equality in the following passage, first describing the more empowering face of equality, then moving on to its overwhelming and paralyzing effects. He writes:

> When the man who lives in democratic countries compares himself individually to all those who surround him, he feels with pride that he is equal to each of them; but, when he comes to view the sum of those like him and places himself at the side of this great body, he is immediately overwhelmed by his own insignificance and his weakness (DA 409).

Comparing himself to the mass of his fellow citizens, the individual loses confidence in his own ability and judgment. Applying the principle of equality as he compares himself to the majority, he easily succumbs to the majority's tastes and will. The principle of equality lends a particular force to public opinion in such democratic eras; just as "likeness" leads citizens to value their own opinions, they also accord equal value to each other citizen's opinions, with the result that public opinion-understood as the sum of others' opinions-acquires added power. Tocqueville explains that "this same similarity gives them an almost unlimited trust in the judgment of the public; for it does not seem plausible to them that when all have the same enlightenment, truth is not found on the side of the greatest number" (DA 409). The lack of genuine intellectual independence which Tocqueville noted in the United States is attributable to the erosion of the individual's confidence in his own judgment as well as to the force with which majority opinions bear down upon individuals.[31] seen from this perspective, the principle of equality which had helped fuel creative innovation stifles it by creating a majority whose moral and political authority is virtually unstoppable. Tocqueville discerned these opposing effects of equality, characterizing them as one which "brings the mind of each man toward new thoughts," while "the other would willingly induce it to give up thinking" (DA 410).[32] The consequences of the majority's omnipotence, he warned, are "dire and dangerous for the future" (DA 237).

Tocqueville believed that any government (whatever the form) which lacked limits to its authority was a potential tyranny.[33] His concerns about omnipotence extend equally to the majority's nonpolitical powers, and Tocqueville's notes stress the dangers of unlimited authority for the individual. As he observes, the "absence of these intermediate authorities between his own reason and the collective reason of his fellows leaves nothing else as guide except the mass."[34] This dimension of majority omnipotence most clearly endangers American innovative individualism, for just as the majority's tyranny accounts for the relative paucity of outstanding men in American politics, it also discourages the lack of reverence for (the majority's) prevailing opinions and ways which is the spring of innovation and success.[35]

Tocqueville does not cite the innovative character of Americans as a remedy to the majority's omnipotence; instead, his discussions emphasize systemic or structural elements and certain citizen traits. In particular, he cites the lack of administrative centralization created by federalism, the jury as a political institution, and the legal profession as protections against the tyranny of the majority,[36] and a rapid summary of the features which make them effective counters to majority despotism also highlights similarities to the spirit of innovation.

Federalism does little to change the majority's desire to impose its will, but it helps to guarantee that the majority lacks effective means to compel obedience to its will everywhere. The decentralized institutions of the federal system seek to thwart the majority's attempts to enforce uniformity, for they create "many hidden shoals that delay or divide the flood of popular will" (DA 250). Tocqueville's treatment of the legal profession, the second major protection against the omnipotence of the majority, describes lawyers as a quasi-aristocratic body, with its own tastes and

habits. Lawyers are thus another decentralization within American political life. In this sense, they are like innovators, whose creative energies are centrifugal forces, preventing the concentration of power. Yet Tocqueville's account of the lawyer also stresses certain character traits which highlight the contrast between the lawyer and the innovator. Described as sharing some of the "habits and tastes of aristocracy," the lawyer is a natural conservative, favoring order and evincing "a certain taste for forms, [and] a sort of instinctive love for the regular sequence of ideas." These traits "naturally" oppose the lawyer to the not only to the "unreflective passions" of the majority but also to "the revolutionary spirit" (DA 252) of which the spirit of innovation is one manifestation.

The final counterweight to the tyranny of the majority is the jury, and Tocqueville's analysis of the jury "as a political institution" focuses on its educative function. In particular, the jury teaches citizens about the laws and their rights, and it teaches them the principle equity. Most significantly, however, the jury develops the "habits of mind of the judge" among the people; and it is these habits which best prepare a people to be free (DA 262). The jury system broadens individuals' horizons, pulling them from their own petty concerns, and developing in them a sense of responsibility and independence of judgment. The American spirit of innovation works along some of these same lines, for to the extent that it develops individuals' capacities to rely upon themselves, to trust their own judgments, and to go against prevailing trends, it develops qualities necessary to resist the force of the majority.

Whether the innovative spirit offers any corrective to the so-called "mild despotism," or other type of despotism to which democracies are particularly prone, is a different matter. This more subtle despotism, described by Tocqueville at the end of the second volume of Democracy in America, appears as something new and unique to democratic ages, arising from the individualism and the taste for "small and vulgar pleasures" which induce citizens to withdraw from public concerns. The vacuum in public life is filled by a protective, expansive governmental power which seeks to relieve citizens of the burdens self-government. A less obvious form of tyranny, it leaves men's bodies free, instead shackling their minds and spirits. Under the guise of providing for man's happiness, it daily "renders the employment of free will less useful and more rare; it confines the action of the will in a smaller space and little by little steals the very use of it from each citizen." This enfeeblement of the will is accompanied by a mental atrophy, as the tutelary state strives to relieve individuals of even "the trouble of thinking" (DA 663). This form of tyranny is much more dangerous to the innovative spirit and to the freedom which that spirit preserves. As Tocqueville notes, democracy's mild despotism "does not destroy, it prevents things from being born; it does not tyrannize, it hinders, compromises, enervates, extinguishes, dazes" (DA 663). Not only does the American innovative character offer no remedy against this form of oppression, but to the extent that innovation encourages individuals to focus on their own interests rather than on public concerns, it also fosters the conditions favorable to that despotism's development, for soft despotism redirects the potentially unsettling aspects of the spirit of innovation into a passive acceptance and reinforcement of itself.

Change Begets Change: Innovation's More Ambiguous Face

In an 1840 letter to Henry Reeve, Tocqueville writes, "Everything today that lifts up the idea of the individual is healthy."37 Innovation, however, turns out to be a quality which can either lift or lower the idea of the individual, depending on the context. The same traits which incline Americans to innovate the practices and mechanics of their commercial enterprises manifest themselves in many other areas of American life, but Tocqueville's assessment of the effects of the innovative spirit outside of the commercial realm is more mixed. Inquiring into the manner in which this spirit manifests itself in the general agitation of democratic society, in religion and philosophy, and in

scientific inquiry reveals some of Tocqueville's reservations about this distinctively American characteristic.

Fundamentally, innovation is about change and therefore about motion. Although Tocqueville generally praises the innovating elements of American character and considers the constant motion of U.S. politics as one of the advantages of democratic government,[38] volume two's discussion of "Why Americans are so Restless in the Midst of their Prosperity" highlights some of Tocqueville's misgivings about the non-political repercussions of a society in which change and motion dominate. That chapter, with its image of the man who plants his garden and rents it before the trees come in,[39] offers a less optimistic interpretation of the innovating tendencies which Tocqueville had lauded in the first volume. Endless possibilities for change and improvement still spur individuals, but Tocqueville draws attention to the darker side of limitless possibilities by emphasizing the worries and anxieties which can result. From Tocqueville's description of Americans as constantly tormented by the "fear of missing the shortest road that would lead them to happiness" (DA 512), it is easy to see how democratic innovation passes from a healthy drive to an unhealthy compulsion. In the end, the man who builds his house and sells it before the roof is complete passes his life in insecurity and fear; he might improve his condition, but he can never stop to acknowledge-much less enjoy-that improvement during his life, for he is haunted by the possibility that he has missed or will miss something better. The same innovative tendencies which yield commercial pre-eminence become the sources of constant anxiety and unhappiness for the individual.[40] This agitation yields insanity rather than greatness, and only death offers democratic man a respite from "this useless pursuit of a complete felicity that always flees from him" (DA 512).

When carried into the religious and philosophic realms, the qualities which fuel the innovative spirit pose different problems. Just as the individual's confidence in his own judgment and abilities leads him to try new ways of doing things, it also encourages him to look for new explanations for the world around him. Tocqueville notes that this spirit produced the revolutions in science, theology, and philosophy associated with Bacon, Luther, Descartes, and Voltaire. Each thinker innovated in his own way, but all shared methodology which "undertook to submit the object of all beliefs to the individual examination of each man" (DA 405). Brought to its natural conclusions, this type of confidence can extend to overconfidence, leading individuals to believe that "everything" can be explained and that "nothing exceeds the bounds of intelligence" (DA 404). This belief in man's power to explain and to change the world also fuels Tocqueville's worry that democratic nations are prone to overestimate the possibilities for progress and the limits of human perfectibility. Their (over)confidence in the powers of human reason also causes them to place little faith in things supernatural or extraordinary, and this could easily contribute to a decline in religious belief in democratic centuries. Tocqueville did not believe the erosion of religious beliefs was a real problem in the United States, but religion's strength and the inviolability of its moral teachings are attributable to specifically American factors rather than to democratic ones. In other democratic societies, by contrast, religious beliefs are subjected to the same Cartesian methods; the resulting skepticism (or atheism) obviously also erodes religion's capacity to correct democratic tendencies such as materialism and individualism.[41]

Science would seem to be the area in which innovation is an unambiguously good quality, for scientific progress depends on precisely this spirit. Indeed, Tocqueville's account of the sciences in America emphasizes the manner in which the taste for intellectual pursuits will become more broadly diffused.[42] In principle, the lack of barriers to innovation should invigorate all aspects of scientific life, yet Tocqueville draws attention to the manner in which the same features of American democratic life which foster innovators can also determine the direction in which such individuals focus their creative efforts. He particularly notes the manner in which society's incessant motion encourages a pragmatic bent of mind rather than a theoretical one. Tocqueville does not claim that the practical, complicated, agitated, and active spirit of democratic life will

completely destroy intellectual curiosity, but he does believe that society's general characteristics pull men away from the "slow, detailed, conscientious work of intelligence" through which the "sphere of human knowledge" is expanded (DA 414).[43] Democratic scientists, then, will tend toward technological improvements and other applications which will be commercially successful and financially rewarding.

Their pursuit of these types of improvements comes at a price, and Tocqueville worries that theoretical inquiries will be neglected. Americans "have introduced a new machine into navigation that is changing the face of the world," but they have not discovered a general law of mechanics or physics (DA 437). Tocqueville's assessment of this condition is mixed, for despite this concern, he does hold out hope that there is a type of enlightened scientific self-interest which will prevent democratic scientists from neglecting theory. Without this hope, the future is a bleak one, for the same innovative and entrepreneurial instincts which allowed the American merchant to dominate will also eventually fall victim to some of that spirit's excesses. Admittedly, the process would be a gradual one, but the neglect of theoretical inquiry in favor of more practical innovations could eventually extinguish all innovative capacities. Tocqueville writes, "By dint of being confined to application, one would lose sight of the principles... one would no longer be able to invent new ones, and one would employ without intelligence and without art the erudite principles that one would no longer understand" (DA 438). To illustrate this phenomenon, Tocqueville turns to China, a once-dynamic society, in which "the nation was industrial ... but science itself no longer existed" (DA 438). Eventually, this neglect of theoretical innovation manifested itself throughout society, forcing them to "renounce the idea of improvement" entirely (DA 438).

Over 150 years after Tocqueville penned Democracy in America, his worry that American innovation would eventually burn itself out seems misguided, as does his belief that Americans would focus on the practical to the exclusion of the theoretical. Despite these prognosticative errors, Tocqueville's observations about the connection between the innovative spirit and a free society remain true, and his investigations into the manner in which democracy can both reinforce and stifle innovation are revealing. The greatest dangers to the American innovative spirit lie within, from the very social characteristics which also foster innovation and enterprise. Democracy in America continues to remind us of those dangers and of how the American spirit can prevent its own self-destruction. In his discussion of the extinction of the spirit of innovation in China, Tocqueville issues a clear warning to democracies endeavoring to preserve that same spirit, alerting them to the dangers from within. He writes, "Hence we must not reassure ourselves with the thought that the barbarians are still far from our gates, for if there are peoples who allow the torch of enlightenment to be snatched from their grasp, there are others who use their own feet to stamp out its flames."[44]

Sidebar

I am indebted to Eugene Miller and Dwight Lee for encouraging me to think about this aspect of Tocqueville's thought, and also to Mark E. Yellin for reading a draft and for trying to keep me from error. This essay is dedicated to the memory of my father.

Footnotes

1. Alexis de Tocqueville, Journey to England and Ireland, edited by J.P. Mayer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1958), 116. The ellipses are Tocqueville's.

2. Alexis de Tocqueville, Democracy in America. Translated by Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 394. Subsequent references to Democracy in America will be within the text, as DA, followed by the page number referring to this edition.

3. See Eduardo Nolla's De la Démocratie en Amérique, tome I (Paris: J. VRIN, 1990), 249 (note h). Unless otherwise noted, translations from French are my own.

4. There is a lively debate on the general themes considered in this chapter, primarily centering on whether the topics investigated are generally democratic or specifically American. see, for example, Jean-Claude Lamberti's Tocqueville and the Two Democracies (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), pp. 13,21. As part of his "two democracies" argument, Drescher follows Tocqueville's own characterization of the topics as particularly American (see Seymour Drescher's "Comparison and Synthesis in Democracy in America," in Reconsidering Tocqueville's Democracy in America, ed. Abraham S. Eisenstadt [New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press, 1988], p. 79). By contrast, Manent observes that although the chapter purports to describe specifically American things, the depiction of Americans in the discussion of commercial heroism corresponds to the general portrait of the democratic individual (Pierre Manent, Tocqueville and the Nature of Democracy [Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1996], p. 58). Tocqueville does indeed characterize the topics discussed in 1.2.10 as "American without being democratic" (DA 303), yet he also notes how difficult it is "to separate out what is in untangling what is democratic, commercial, English, and Puritan" (Tocqueville quoted in Lamberti, p. 13.) Sean Wilentz quotes this same passage, concluding that Tocqueville "never really did untangle it all" (Sean Wilentz, "On Tocqueville and Jacksonian America," Reconsidering Tocqueville's Democracy in America, ed. Abraham S. Eisenstadt [New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press, 1988], p. 224).

5. See Nolla, tome 1, 305.

6. Tocqueville daims that American vessels transport 90% of European goods coming to the U.S., as well as 75% of American goods being shipped to Europe. See DA 385.

7. This image-along with the sad pioneer woman of II.III.100 -is one of the most memorable and powerful in Democracy in America

8. Nolla, tome I, 307.

9. Ibid.

10. Manent's reading of this passage emphasizes anxiety as the cause of the merchant's single-minded pursuit of a speedier crossing. He sees this anxiety [inquiétude], which is produced by the universal passion for well-being and by the burden placed on individuals to choose the best means for achieving material prosperity, as characteristic of democratic ages. (Manent, Tocqueville and the Nature of Democracy, p. 56). Manent reads the house building example in the same vein.

11. See DA, I.I.3.

12. Kahan's assertion that "in the aristocratic liberals' presentation of the commercial spirit mediocrity was often as prominent as money-making" neglects this aspect of Tocqueville's presentation (see Alan S. Kahan, Aristocratic Liberalism: The Social and Political Thought of Jacob Burckhardt, John Stuart Mill, and Alexis de Tocqueville [New York: Oxford University Press, 1992], p. 41). By contrast, Manent emphasizes intentionality in Tocqueville's use of "heroism" to describe commercial activity (Manent, Tocqueville and the Nature of Democracy, p. 57).

13. See Montesquieu, Spirit of the Laws, XX.1.2.7-8. Tocqueville's debt to Montesquieu is widely acknowledged. On this point, see Jean-Claude Lamberti, Tocqueville and the Two Democracies, p. 180; also, George Armstrong Kelly, The Humane Comedy: Constant, Tocqueville, and French Liberalism (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 68; and Marvin Zetterbaum, Tocqueville and the Problem of

Democracy (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1967), p. 57. Lamberti points out, however, that Tocqueville believed democracy rather than commerce tempers moeurs. While also noting the Montesquieuian point of departure to Tocqueville's argument, Kelly emphasizes the connections between war and commerce, observing that Tocqueville "has no confidence that supplementing the one with the other is a critical step toward freedom" (Kelly, The Humane Comedy, p. 69).

14. See Nolla, tome I, 306, where this comment was crossed out of Tocqueville's text.

15. Marient, Tocqueville and the Nature of Democracy, p. xvii. On this point, I am also indebted to the students who pressed me on this question during a discussion at the Summer University in Aix-en-Provence.

16. Zetterbaum, Tocqueville and the Problem of Democracy, p. 35.

17. Michael Zuckert observes the same relationship between territory and outlook. Contrasting Tocqueville with Montesquieu's environmental determinism, Zuckert notes, "Tocqueville's point is not that physical nature is irrelevant, but that it exerts its influence via the intermediary variable of social state" (Michael Zuckert, "On Social State," in Tocqueville's Defense of Human Liberty, ed. Peter Augustine Lawler and Joseph Alulis [New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1993], p. 6).

18. See also Tocqueville's treatment of local institutions as the schools of liberty (DA 1.1.5).

19. Arthur Kaledin, "Tocqueville's apocalypse: culture, politics and freedom in Democracy in America," The Tocqueville Review/La Revue Tocqueville, 26, no. 1 (2005): 63.

20. Manent describes equality of conditions as the defining characteristic of democratic society (Manent, Tocqueville and the Nature of Democracy, 10). Welch observes that Tocqueville often employs equality of conditions as a "virtual synonym" for democracy and that his typical usage of democracy includes "equality of conditions (the absence of ascriptive classes, with rights, occupations, and social functions open to every citizen) and the psychological tendencies that such equality naturally encourages. The most important of these tendencies," she continues, "are a deep passion for equality and a penchant for independent action" (Cheryl B. Welch, De Tocqueville [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001], 66.) see also Kaledin's characterization of the lack of obstacles to change as democracy's most salient feature (Arthur Kaledin, "Tocqueville's apocalypse: culture, politics and freedom in Democracy in America," 86).

21. Tocqueville believed this was "without example in the world" (DA 429).

22. See, for example, DA I.II.10 on the importance of moral qualities for commercial success, and also DA 1.11.9 on the primacy of moeurs over laws.

23. After the lines just quoted, the working manuscript contains an additional passage, emphasizing the effects of the western expansion on the individual: "Every day they notice their size growing and their strength increasing, and they already perceive themselves in the future leading as absolute masters of the vast continent that they have made fruitful and cleared" (Nolla, tome 2, 75).

24. DA 1.1.3. The translation is mine.

25. An almost identical statement is found at DA 424: "Equality disposes men to want to judge for themselves." Made in the context of Tocqueville's discussion of Roman Catholicism in the United States, this statement concludes: "but it also gives them a taste for and idea of a single social power that is simple and the same for all."

26. Manent argues that the democratic man's preference for his own judgment produces vanity rather than the type of genuine independence upon which innovation depends. See Manent, Tocqueville and the Nature of Democracy, p. 40.

27. In reading this passage, commentators often emphasize the competition for material success and democratic man's resulting anxiety and unhappiness. See, for example, Zetterbaum, Tocqueville and the Problem of Democracy, pp. 65 and 69; see also Seidentop, Tocqueville, p. 75. Manent, who describes anxiety as "the key word which explains the enigmas of democratic man," also stresses that the anxiety of competition is felt more strongly than the material pleasures which might be attained (Manent, Tocqueville and the Nature of Democracy, pp. 59-60). While not denying the anxiety inherent in democratic inquiétude, I would suggest that a more optimistic reading is also possible.

28. See, for example, Adam Smith's Wealth of Nations, Book V, chapter 1 and Jean-Baptiste Say's Treatise on Political Economy, vol. I, chapter 8.

29. This comment is found in a circled passage at this point of Tocqueville's working manuscript. See Nolla, tome I, 307.

30. Although he places less emphasis on innovation as a component of American commercial greatness, John Adams Wettergreen also associates the spirit of independence, commercial greatness, and the mores which preserve American freedom. His argument also makes the important distinction between individual independence, which preserves freedom, and individualism, an "anti-social and antipolitical moral attitude" which can endanger freedom. See John Adam Wettergreen, "Modern Commerce" in Interpreting Tocqueville's 'Democracy in America,' ed. Ken Masugi (Savage, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1991), p. 220. See also DA I.II.9 and II.II.2.

31. Calling freedom of thought the "most indispensable" of the "extrainstitutional factors affecting liberty," Lamberti views this as the most original part of Tocqueville's analysis of majority (Lamberti, Tocqueville and the Two Democracies, p. 119). See also Manent's extended discussion of the manner in which majority opinion acquires strength as the individual's confidence in his own opinion erodes (Manent, Tocqueville and the Nature of Democracy, pp. 40-41), and Siedentop on this same process, which he calls "a moral aberration" (Larry Siedentop, Tocqueville, [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994], pp. 81-2).

32. Welch sees this tension one of Tocqueville's central themes. "Throughout Democracy in America, he explores the paradox that the democratic patterns of living and thinking that have come to structure American and French societies represent at once a complex process of collective human innovation and a constraint on the capacity to innovate in the future" (Welch, De Tocqueville, 104).

33. According to Tocqueville, "Omnipotence seems to me to be an evil and dangerous thing in itself. Its exercise appears to me above the strength of man, whoever he may be, and I see only God who can be omnipotent without danger, because his wisdom and justice are always equal to his power. There is therefore no authority on earth so respectable in itself or vested with a right so sacred that I should wish to allow to act without control and to dominate without obstacles. Therefore, when I see the right and the ability to do everything granted to any power whatsoever, whether it is called people or king, democracy or aristocracy, whether it is exercised in a monarchy or in a republic, I say: there is the seed of tyranny, and I seek to go live under other laws" (DA 241).

34. See Nolla, tome 2,22 (note o).

35. Manent describes the fact that equality can both encourage and quell the independent qualities which are keys to preventing this type of majority tyranny as the "paradox of democratic liberty" (Manent, Tocqueville and the Nature of Democracy, p. 22).

36. See I.II.8. Although not treated in this chapter, associations offer still another remedy to the omnipotence of the majority. See Welch, De Tocqueville, pp. 89, 92-3.

37. He writes, "Le grand péril des âges démocratiques, soyez-en sûr, c'est la destruction ou l'affaiblissement excessif des parties du corps social en présence du tout. Tout ce qui relève de nos jours l'idée de l'individu est sain" (italics original). Letter of 3 February 1840, to Henry Reeve, in Tocqueville, Lettres Choisies: Souvenirs, 1814-1859. ed. Françoise Mélonio and Laurence Guellec (Paris: Quarto Gallimard, 2003), p. 457.

38. See Democracy in America, II.II.6. There, Tocqueville asserts that the "constantly renewed agitation" which spills from political to civil life is both the "true" and "the greatest advantage of democratic government." The ensuing discussion highlights the connection between the public and private spheres, noting that democratic political life "spreads throughout the body social a restless activity, superabundant force, and energy never found elsewhere, which, however little favored by circumstance, can do wonders" (DA 244).

39. See II.II.13.

40. Tocqueville also emphasizes this point in a passage contrasting the gravity of Americans in a tavern with the joyousness of the more carefree Indians gathered outside. See Nolla, tome 2,124 (note b).

41. "Religious peoples," says Tocqueville, "are therefore naturally strong in precisely the spot where democratic peoples are weak" (DA 419). See also DA 422 on religion's check on excessive materialism and Tocqueville's earlier discussion of the manner in which religion "restricts the action of individual analysis within narrow limits and spares from it several of the most important human opinions" (DA 406). On the relationship between the innovative spirit and religion, one of Tocqueville's most telling statements describes religion battling "the spirit of individual independence that is the most dangerous of all to it" (DA 424).

42. Tocqueville includes sciences, literature, and the arts under the general category of things of the mind which will attract more people in democratic societies than in aristocratic ones (DA II.I.9).

43. See also II.I.1, in which Tocqueville observes that the naturally Cartesian Americans have never read that philosopher's works "because their social state turns them away from speculative studies" (DA 403).

44. Alexis de Tocqueville, Democracy in America, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (New York: The Library of America, 2004), p. 529.

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