

## **Alexis de Tocqueville's Take on the American People**

**Teresa Ornedo**

In the early part of the 19th century Alexis De Tocqueville, a young French man of aristocracy, gave us an incredible glimpse into the lives of the American people where many started out on an equal footing in society, but as time went on as they got richer that social divide became more apparent. Even though Tocqueville only spent less than one year on American soil, he has given us a tale of triumph and at times tragedy. From the reading "Democracy in America," Tocqueville was astounded and at times in awe of how the American people had progressed so far at a time when industrialization and commercialization had taken hold of this new nation. Before his very eyes, Tocqueville witnessed poor people becoming rich and the rich becoming incredibly wealthy. He highlights how the American people had changed over a rather brief period, especially regarding their love affair with industry and commerce. One of the first things that stood out for Tocqueville was the American people's obsession with "equality" and how Americans seemed to pride themselves on a lack of social hierarchy, real or imagined. (221).<sup>1</sup>

According to Tocqueville, the American people were obsessed with equality and embraced it like "some precious treasure which they fear to lose" (222). What struck Tocqueville the most was that there were no social barriers, people of all backgrounds, whether they were poor or rich or somewhere in the middle, everyone considered themselves and treated each other as their equals. Tocqueville was in awe of a country where "privileges of birth never existed" and men were willing to "frequent the same places" and hang out with total strangers to seek out wealth like everyone else (222/259). He was even astounded by the people that were wealthier than others, for there was no display of haughtiness towards each other. They don't care to show or hide their wealth and when they do meet, "their manner is therefore natural, frank, and open" (259). Tocqueville reminds

us that in England everyone knew their position in society, for you are either born into it or not. He also notes, in aristocratic societies, that it is rare for men of different social standing to come together and interact unless it is out of necessity, stating that "their intercourse is not upon a footing of equality..." (257). However, Tocqueville observed that the American people had become more individualistic and independent of one another.

In this new democratic nation, Tocqueville observed that the American people had grown more individualistic, and everyone was out for themselves. He cautioned that this new self-reliance of the American people will only cause them to forget about their fellow countrymen. For example, this self-reliance will only allow people to withdraw from their community to form their own "little circle" of just their closest friends and family (223). Tocqueville also noted that "new families are constantly springing up" whilst others are "falling away," and he cautioned that there is the danger that one will forget their "ancestors" and that the past would be easily "erased" for the next coming generations (224). Tocqueville reminds us that in the old world, one did not forget their ancestors and had nothing but profound respect for them. He also observed as the American population grew, the people had not acquired enough wealth to have any significant impact on their fellow countrymen, because "they owe nothing" and "expect nothing from any man" (225). However, Tocqueville cautioned that in this new democratic nation, individualism could only lead one to "prefer himself to everything in the world" and in turn lead to a very selfish society (224). Another observation of Tocqueville's was how the American people were preoccupied with becoming rich without having to work extremely hard for it.

Tocqueville observed the American people thought of how to "better [their] condition" by turning to "commercial and industrial occupations" (248). He noted that they were becoming all too aware of their fellow countrymen in the "thousands" getting richer and they wanted a piece of

it (248). For example, in rural areas individuals began to question their means of income obtained through hard work out in the fields and thought it best left "to those who have already large superfluous wealth" (249). Tocqueville noted that these rural individuals moved to the cities to join the others in "commerce and manufactures" in the hope of making it bigger in a "hazardous but lucrative" field (249). He also pointed out how even the wealthiest individuals were not always satisfied with what they had and looked for easier ways for "efficient means of success," and in turn, they looked to "trade and manufacturers" (249). Tocqueville was in awe of this young democratic nation that had progressed so fast in trading and manufacturing more so than any other country "in the world" and where everyone rich and poor were "engaged in productive industry" (251). However, Tocqueville reminds us that there are those who remain poor where "fate still obstinately withheld from him," and that glance they give to the wealthy one is "of hope and envy" (245).

Tocqueville also reminds us that many of these wealthy individuals were "once poor" and have "felt the sting on want," and now they reap the rewards after "40 years" of pursuing, becoming "intoxicated by the small enjoyments" (245). He also pointed out how the American people had an intense feeling for wealth that had become "the predominant taste of the nation," and with this newfound wealth, these individuals would display it like those of "aristocratic ages" (246/247). Tocqueville referred to the old world of aristocratic societies in which people were born into wealth and were used to the rich comfortable lifestyle that they never had to think about otherwise. On the other hand, there were those who worked hard to become successful in life but could not "live after they have lost it" (244). However, Tocqueville cautioned that in this new democratic nation, the extent of one's social position would only give rise to the general population's resentment of the wealthy classes who "reap advantage from them" and "keep them at arm's length" (228). Even

though wealthy people could "spend fortunes without warming the hearts of the population around them," Tocqueville was of the impression that these wealthy individuals felt bound by duty for the "welfare of [their] fellow-citizens," whereas the poor ask for nothing but their dignity (228/229). He also notes these wealthy individuals did not detach themselves from the "lower classes," but treated them as equals as they were all too aware that "the rich in democracies always stand in need of the poor" (228). Another observation Tocqueville made was that the American people formed their own associations.

In this new democratic nation with the explosion in industry and commerce, Tocqueville witnessed the ever-growing populations in towns and cities as people migrated there for a better life. One of the things that Tocqueville was mesmerized by was the American people coming together to form their associations. Tocqueville was in awe of how the American people of "all ages, all conditions, and all dispositions" had come together to do just that (230). He noted that many of these associations were of "religious, moral, serious, futile, general..." and they also oversaw the construction of "inns," schools, churches, and the establishment of "hospitals and prisons" giving us a sense that the American communities had grown quite a bit (230). From Tocqueville's writing, there is a sense that religion played an important role in American communities, especially with the construction of religious schools, "found seminaries" with the notion of sending out "missionaries" to spread the word of God to the Native Americans (230). Tocqueville shared how he visited several of these associations and admitted that he was amazed by the American people's art of persuasion in convincing "a great many men" to be part of their cause (230). However, he noted that such undertakings like this in France would be done by the government and in England by a man of high social standing. He also stated that an aristocratic society does not need to persuade others to come together to form associations since they have so

many people that are "dependent upon him" (231). Another observation of Tocqueville was family relationships, more specifically between a father and his children.

According to Tocqueville, in American society the relationship between a father and his sons is remarkably close. It is only in the early years of childhood that the father expresses his authoritative nature over his sons and as soon as they reach "manhood" it becomes more relaxed – "strictly speaking, no adolescence" (266). He also noted that when it came to communication with each other, the father was allowed to be addressed by his children "with perfect colloquial equality" and that as time went on their relationship became "more intimate and more affectionate" (269). Also, Tocqueville observed that the form of communication in which a son addresses his father is "mingled freedom, familiarity, and affection" (269). Tocqueville was taken aback to see that intimate relationships between father and sons in aristocratic societies were distant and that their behavior towards each other was quite formal. When father and sons communicated with each other, the sons exhibited the utmost respect for their authoritative father, and communication with each other was not one of familiarity, but one of "correct, ceremonious, stiff and so cold" (269). Also, Tocqueville pointed out that in aristocratic societies the eldest son stands in line to inherit his father's estate and becomes the head of the household, which often caused resentment from his other brothers. This left him the responsibility "to procure wealth and power for his brothers," and their relationship with each other could be cold and formal (270). Meanwhile, in democratic societies the inheritance is divided amongst the brothers and their relationship with each other is close and intimate. Tocqueville also observed that young women in this new democratic nation had more freedom in their expression.

Tocqueville observed how young American women just barely out of their childhood had a mind of their own, explaining that "she thinks for herself, speaks with freedom and acts on her

own impulse" and does not display any "childish timidity or ignorance" (272). Whereas in Europe, Tocqueville points out that young women display "childish timidity or ignorance" and "seeks to please" (273). He also notes that when it comes to education, young women of France "commonly receive a reserved, retired and almost conventional education" whereas young American women were knowledgeable "on all subjects" and are exposed to "the corruptions of the world" (274). However, Tocqueville cautioned that when a young American woman entered marriage she left behind her freedom and happiness and her "independence ... lost in the bonds of matrimony," and "she is subject to stricter obligations" (274). However, young American women would have been coached from an early age to know where one's position is in a marriage and to be an obedient wife to her husband. However, Tocqueville observed that equality in this new democratic nation had now taken on a whole new meaning, for no longer were all men equal and the social divide had become more apparent.

Tocqueville observed that men had become richer and more educated and stated that their taste "will interpose some differences between them" (288). Men no longer frequented the same places for pleasure, but they now only came together when required by the law, "united together by the similitude of conditions, habits and manners" (288). Tocqueville observed that when American people came together for political reasons, they exhibited no signs of superiority over each other for they were there for "the affairs which concern their common welfare" (288). They acknowledged each other as equals, but when it came to private discussions of their affairs, they would only allow a "very limited number" of these people into their small circles "as his friends or his guests" (288). Tocqueville even predicted that these private circles would only get smaller and more formal, especially with expensive tastes that were exclusive to others. Tocqueville reminds us that in the old world of aristocratic societies "different classes are like vast enclosures"

that were difficult to penetrate, and “they do not liaise with each other unless it is out of necessity” when they are in contact with each other daily (289). Whereas in democratic societies, “they are divided by many small and almost invisible threads” which continuously break up or “or moved from place to place” (289).

In conclusion, for the brief time Tocqueville spent in the new democratic nation of the United States, he has given us a wealth of valuable historical information about the American people, especially at a time when there were so many changes happening around them and how these changes influenced their way of thinking and behavior toward each another. It is almost like a rags-to-riches story, especially at a time when the opportunity for everyone to become wealthier was all thanks to industry and commerce in the early part of 19th century America. Yet there was tragedy for those who fell below or got stuck at the poverty level with their glance of envy and resentment towards the wealthy as the chance of wealth passed them over. From his personal experience, Tocqueville gave us a phenomenal insight into the lives of the American people, in which many started with an equal footing in society, but as time went on, they have gotten richer and better educated, and the social divide became more apparent.

---

<sup>1</sup> All page numbers from volume two of, Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (New York: Allard and Saunders, 1838).