Tocqueville on Economic Inequality and the "Absenteeism of the Heart"

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There are perhaps no opening passages among the "Great Books" more resonant and familiar than the first sentence of Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*: "Among the new things that attracted my attention during my stay in the United States, none struck me more forcefully than the equality of conditions" ([1835/40] 2004, 3). It is no mystery that equality is one of *Democracy's* Leitmotifs and organizing ideas. This much has been well-established in the extensive Tocqueville literature, which has addressed his attention to equality and community (Putnam 2000), race (Stokes 1990, Tillery 2009), religion (Rahe, 2012), politics (Dahl 2006, Breiner 2019), and gender (Vetter 2009), among other dimensions. While all of these are more than justified by Tocqueville's sprawling observations, it is surprising how rarely scholars focus on the very idea of equality he raises himself in his opening sentence, namely the "equality of conditions," or as it might be called economic equality.

While Tocqueville's interest in the "equality of conditions" is universally recognized in the literature, however, where scholars address it, they tend to stress the damaging effects of *equality*. Aurelian Craiutu and Jeremy Jennings, for example, have argued that one of Tocqueville's main concerns in *Democracy* was the "inevitable companion of centralization and the outcome of the multiplication of functions and agencies of government demanded by the growing equality of conditions" (2009, 35). This familiar line of argument suggests that the degree to which Tocqueville addresses economic equality, it is primarily to associate *equality* with the yearning for large governments and ultimately despotism. Such readings are buttressed by Tocqueville's own remarks, for example, that full equality would be "unfortunate" where any state achieved "such a state of absolute and complete leveling" (Tocqueville [1835-1840] 2004, 627). While this is, doubtless, an element of Tocqueville's work, I argue that an overemphasis on such passages oversimplifies a very complex thinker when it comes to economic equality. Not far removed from the passage just cited, the French social observer commented that "today's manufacturing aristocracy, having impoverished and brutalized the men it uses, abandons them in times of crisis and turns them over to public assistance to be fed" (Tocqueville [1835-1840] 2004, 652). There are other extended passages in *Democracy* and elsewhere describing the very real dangers of excessive *inequality* – passages that have tended to be overlooked and ignored by many of Tocqueville's readers.

At the same time, there is a literature on the left that identifies Tocqueville as a potential source of inspiration. I have already cited Putnam's emphasis on Tocqueville's civic associations. Robert Gannett (2022) similarly finds Tocqueville an inspiration for liberal ideas, institutions, and reforms. Yet he does not address economic issues of inequality that have traditionally been of great concern to thinkers on the left.

This essay seeks to address these oversights by focusing specifically on his thoughts about economic inequality. Depicting a more comprehensive understanding of Tocqueville on these matters will

require going beyond *Democracy in America* to his essays on poverty and France, which among other things indicate just how pervasive thoughts about material inequality were in his writings and why we would do well to take them seriously. This essay precedes by: 1) understanding how modern inequality emerges, 2) exploring how inequality complicates life both for individuals, societies, and democracies, and 3) sketching the solutions Tocqueville entertained for grappling with inequality.

Tocqueville on the Origins of Inequality

The most striking feature of America for Tocqueville, as mentioned already, was its "equality of conditions." This equality was not merely a figment of his imagination. As a Frenchman, he was accustomed to the strict demarcations of classes that had persisted for centuries in a feudal system. And although that system was clearly disintegrating in Europe, it possessed significant vestiges in France and elsewhere throughout the Continent throughout Tocqueville's life. By contrast, America was born free from that history, abolished formal classes and titles of nobility in its Constitution, and disregarded European norms of inheritance that concentrated wealth in the hands of the oldest son. All of this meant that America was not only largely equal in a legal and social sense, but it was also significantly more equal than most European countries in economic terms. As Williamson and Lindert have calculated, "Colonial America was the most income-egalitarian rich place on the planet. Among all Americans – slaves included – the richest 1% got only 8.5% of total income in 1774. Among free Americans, the top 1% got only 7.6%" (Williamson and Lindert 2016). By contrast, inequality in France at roughly the same time was significantly steeper (find citation).

Given that America was "born equal" and remained relatively so through Tocqueville's visit, one must appeal to texts outside *Democracy* to determine his thoughts about the origins of inequality. The most useful texts in this regard are his two *Memoirs on Pauperism*.

Tocqueville drafted the two *Memoirs* in 1835 and 1837 largely in response to ambitious reforms to England's Poor Laws. The first draws heavily from Rousseau's account in the *Second Discourse*, beginning with his account of the state of nature. Tocqueville depicts early human beings as focused entirely on their own survival, where food and shelter were the primary needs. He specifically likens early humanity in this regard to the "barbarous tribes in North America" ([1835] 2021, 3). He describes them both in *Memoir* but especially in *Democracy* as surviving as hunter/gatherers, enjoying extensive freedom and equality. As he observes in the latter, "When the first Europeans arrived, the natives of North America still had no notion of the value of wealth and seemed indifferent to the well-being that civilized men could acquire with their riches" ([1835/40] 2004, 27). The largely nomadic hunter/gathering lifestyle does not lend itself to property, much less in accumulation, so everyone is economically equal. No one feels the worse for it, according to Tocqueville, since their needs are so few.

Yet just as Rousseau attributes the growth of inequality to the transition to an agricultural society ([1754] 2018, 141-144), Tocqueville also links inequality's origins in the turn to farming ([1835] 2021, 3-4). For both, the transition is crucially accompanied by a growing list of "needs." Whereas the hunter/gatherers were content with basic physiologic needs, agricultural people become increasingly interested in possessing things extending beyond what it took to merely survive. "Assured of survival, they begin to glimpse that human existence offers other sources of pleasures beyond the satisfaction of life's first and most urgent needs" ([1835] 2021, 3). The possibility of satisfying these further needs, accompanied by land ownership, stimulated emerging inequality. Those

understanding early the possibilities and advantages of property acquisition soon exploited the new economy to seize all the land as quickly as possible. Then to cement this inequality for generations, they thereafter introduced laws of inheritance that would sustain this inequality in perpetuity. As Tocqueville summarizes, "Inequality passed into laws, and from having been a fact, it became a right." Such were the origins of the feudal system for Tocqueville ([1835] 2021, 3-4); see also Rousseau [1754] 2018, 145).

Tocqueville does not mince words in depicting the feudal system as effectively a "tyranny," in which "landed property is accumulated immoderately" and where all political authority "becomes concentrated in a few hands" ([1735] 2021, 4).

Throughout this feudal period, needs continue to multiply – at first for the nobles, who eagerly "expand the sphere" of their pleasures ([1735] 2021, 5). But at the sight of the rich enjoying these pleasures, peasants soon came to covet the same. And with this, many of those peasants abandon the fields and head to the cities where they seek their fortunes. This is the beginning of the commercial economy. "Men left the plow for the shuttle and the hammer; from the cottage, they went to the factory" ([1735] 2021, 4-5).

One factor contributing to and exacerbating the growth of inequality in Britain in this period, Tocqueville notes, was the enclosure laws that redistributed common lands used by independent peasant farmers to large landowners for private use. Those who were "violently ripped from the cultivation of the earth" had little alternative but to "seek refuge in workshops and factories."

This is no triumphalist story for Tocqueville, however. As the peasants leave the farm, they also leave behind their security. Whereas in a feudal system, the farmer could always be assured that the lords would tend to their most basic needs, a commercial economy made no such assurances. What was worse, for Tocqueville, commercial economies inevitably drove a significant portion of the laboring class into unemployment and desperate poverty, since consumer needs are always evolving from one "need" to the next ([1735] 2021, 8-9). In this way, the inequality found in commercial societies is worse than feudal inequality. Whereas the poor in feudal economy still have the security of food and shelter even in difficult times, the industrial poor have no such assurances.

The Effects of Inequality

Because Tocqueville's most celebrated work, *Democracy in America*, focuses on a nation characterized by extensive economic *equality*, it is easy to lose sight of what made that equality so appealing to Tocqueville. Or rather, it is easy for Tocqueville's readers to overlook his serious criticisms of economic *inequality*. To appreciate this element of his work, it is helpful again to appeal beyond *Democracy* to his *Memoirs* and especially the *Ancien Régime*, where he sketches the conditions that facilitated the Revolution.

Post-Feudal Rural Inequality

The *Second Memoir on Pauperism* distinguishes two categories of the poor as he found them in 1837: the agricultural poor and the industrial poor. Regarding the former, Tocqueville is unambiguous:

> The concentration of landed property into a small number of hands has not only accidentally resulted in bringing misery to a portion of the agricultural class but also has given a large number of farmers ideas and habits that will necessarily make them miserable in the long run ([1837] 2021, 31).

The agricultural inequality of which he speaks here manifests in two specific pathologies. The first of these are the "miseries" associated with the peasants' loss of independence. When they lost access to their land through the enclosure laws, they became subjected to the "caprices" and "greed" of their wealthy neighbors ([1837] 2021, 30). Tocqueville elaborates that under this system, "no portion of the land ever falls into the possession of the poor person. Neither his well-being nor even his existence ever depends on himself, but instead on the will of the wealthy people against whom he can do nothing and who can give or refuse him work as they please" ([1837] 2021, 32).

Here again, Tocqueville echoes Rousseau, who in his *Second Discourse* warned that the worst thing that could happen in relationships between citizens is for one to be subjected "to the mercy [*discretion*] of the other." He continues, "It is indisputable, and the fundamental maxim of all political right, that people gave themselves leader to defend their liberty, and not to enslave them" ([1754] 2018, 150, 151). This is why, for the Genevan, that the *Second Discourse's* faux contract is illegitimate – because the poor surrender their freedom to the rich in perpetuity, a right that cannot in principle be abandoned.

Tocqueville likewise prizes the independence of citizens, even when they are not always able to see it for themselves. Although he attributes to democratic peoples "a natural taste for liberty," he acknowledges that it is often sacrificed to other values, particularly the passion for equality, such that while "[t]hey want equality in liberty," if they cannot have it, "they will want it still in slavery" ([1835/40] 2004, 584; see also [1856] 2011, 144).

But what is the kind of "liberty" that Tocqueville prizes? Once we know this, we can begin to understand how material inequality obstructs it. It is perhaps easiest to begin by clarifying what it is *not*. As he explains in the *Ancien Régime*, it is *not* free trade. This was the freedom prized by the Physiocrats, such as Quesnay, who were "very much in favor of free trade in commodities, or *laisser faire*" ([1856] 2011, 144). Nor was it simply the kind of "literary freedom" prized by Voltaire – a freedom to speak one's mind in essays and novels ([1856] 2011, 143). Nor was it the kind of freedom accompanying the accumulation of large private fortunes ([1856] 2011, 151). What Voltaire and the Physiocrats overlooked, and the essence of liberty for Tocqueville, is *political* liberty. By this he means the people govern themselves, without being subject to others' whims. As he clarifies, "What a people who are made to be free hate is the evil of dependence itself." This liberty or independence, for him, has an "intrinsic attractiveness," and "inherent charm, independence." To be free is "a good so precious and so necessary that nothing else can console" for its loss ([1856] 2011, 151).

Returning to the *Second Memoir*, one can now appreciate how yawning inequality threatens peasants' liberty, particularly the propertyless. As their property was transferred to their wealthier neighbors, they could no longer farm sustainably, having to "seek refuge in workshops and factories," where they would be subjected to their employers' whims. In this condition, he observes, "Neither his well being nor even his existence ever depends on himself, but instead on the will of the wealthy people against whom he can do nothing but give or refuse him work as they please" ([1837] 2021, 30, 32). That is, so long as economic conditions conspire to keep the peasants poor, they have no choice but

to surrender their independence and subject themselves to the caprices of wealthy industrialists in the cities.

Tocqueville elaborates at length on the indignities suffered by French peasants before the Revolution in the *Ancien Régime*. These peasants enjoyed something denied to the English poor – they sometimes "owned a portion of land" ([1856] 2011, 112). But this alone did not alleviate their sufferings. As the old feudal farms disbanded, and peasant farmers were tending to their own fields, the regional wealthy aristocrats (once "nobles" or "lords") no longer had any particular interest in the fate of the poor. That is, whereas under feudalism, the lords had a vested interest in the serfs' welfare, as they were farming *their* fields, in the new economy, the aristocrats were now indifferent to the peasants' fate: "he could not feel the same warm sympathy for their plight, which he did not share, nor could he join in their grievances, which were alien to him." In a phrase that echoes his "habits of the heart," he calls this an "absenteeism of the heart [absentéisme de cœur]" ([1856] 2011, 113; see also [1835/40] 2004, 331).

This was, for him, symptomatic of a greater selfishness that emerged in the transition from the feudal to a commercial economy.

> Because men are no longer tied to one another by bonds of caste, class, guild, or family, they are only too apt to attend solely to their private interests, only too inclined to think exclusively of themselves and withdraw into a narrow individualism that stifles all public virtue. Despotism, far from combatting this tendency, makes it irresistible, for it deprives citizens of all common passions, all mutual needs, all necessity to reach a common understanding, and all opportunity to act in concert.

As the market economy evolved, and as people were increasingly atomized, there was a growing appeal in money – which became the "principle mark of class and distinction" ([1856] 2011, 5). So rather than finding solace, comfort, and meaning in civics bonds, individuals increasingly pursued private wealth in order to distinguish themselves above their neighbors. This meant that the rich would grow increasingly wealthy.

Tocqueville's French peasants, if they meant anything to regional aristocrats, were tenants and debtors – namely, revenue sources. They were decidedly *not* neighbors whose plights or sufferings registered meaningfully. One finds a powerful example of this "absenteeism of the heart" in *Democracy in America*, where Tocqueville quotes a letter from an aristocratic French woman, Mme de Sévigné, in which she casually reports on "all those wretched people . . . milling about in tears outside the city gates with no idea of where to go and nothing to eat and nowhere to sleep," before moving on to report on "yesterday's magnificent weather." The French social observer cannot resist commenting on the fact that while she was doubtless "quite sensitive to the sufferings of her friends," she was "selfish" and "barbarous" toward those below her social class. He is explicit on the role of economic inequality in this kind of insensitivity to the suffering of others: "When ranks in a nation are roughly equal . . . each person can judge everyone else's sensations in an instant: all he has to do is cast a quick glance at himself" [1835/40] 2004, 657-658). Implicitly, one can deduce, where conditions and fates are so radically separated, such fellow feeling vanishes.

In response to aristocrats' indifference, Tocqueville reports the "former vassals" feel more "hatred" toward them than anything else ([1856] 2011, 113). He does not judge them for arriving at this disposition.

Tocqueville acknowledges that some fragment of those formal vassals somehow beat the odds and become rich themselves. That is, they become members of the bourgeoisie. But this does not mean that they retained their fond feelings for their poorer neighbors who were once their peers. These success stories removed themselves both physically and otherwise. Most of them, upon earning any significant wealth soon abandoned the countryside, such that one never found "more than one generation of rich peasants." And even where they might have remained geographically, as the nouveau riche "acquired education or wealth, they shunned him [the poor peasant]. He was winnowed from the nation and set apart" ([1856] 2011, 115).

More than this, however, the peasant farmers were increasingly carrying France's tax burden, as evidenced in "the tenfold increase in the *taille* [tax]" in the two centuries preceding the Revolution that "was born almost entirely by the peasant" ([1856] 2011, 115). Having very little political authority to do anything about it, Tocqueville condemns such tax laws as "barbarous," "violent," and "arbitrary" ([1856] 2011, 115, 117). And what was worse, it was enforced in a way that incentivized peasants spying and reporting on their neighbors, such that they were "trained to outdo one another in slander and hatred" ([1856] 2011, 117).

Adding to the burdens placed on the rural poor, they were subjected to "forced labor" to build roads and other infrastructure projects that primarily benefitted their wealthy neighbors. Tocqueville describes this practice as "oppressive," where "social progress made all the other classes of society rich by left country people desperate. Civilization turned against them alone" ([1856] 2011, 119). Tocqueville acknowledges that the peasants were paid for this work, but then immediately adds that their wages were "arbitrarily set and low" ([1856] 2011, 120).

The winter months sometimes hit the peasants particularly hard such that "begging was a matter of absolute necessity" on their part as a matter of survival. Yet because of the aforementioned "absenteeism of the heart" their desperate appeals for the scraps of the rich were met with "violent treatment." For example, in 1767, the duc de Choiseul ordered the police to arrest all beggars – more than 50,000 of them, Tocqueville speculates, who were sent either workhouses or the galleys. Arresting the poor was common practice, he observes, "in connection with compulsory labor, military service, begging, disorderly conduct, and a thousand other things" ([1752] 2011, 121).

All of these "new forms of oppression" suffered by the typical 18th century peasant, Tocqueville speculates, were almost certainly facilitated by the absence of "wealthy and enlightened men" with the interest and power "to intercede on his behalf" ([1752] 2011, 120). This is what happens as the classes drift apart in commercial societies, feudal ties are cut, as the wealthy pursue still greater fortunes, and the bonds between classes are frayed. Rural inequality in the commercial age makes it difficult to impossible for the "upper classes" to "ever perceive clearly what is going on in the soul of the people, and in particular in the soul of the peasants. . . . [And] when the poor man and the rich man share virtually nothing in common nor common affairs, the darkness that hides the mind of one from the mind of the other becomes unfathomable" ([1752] 2011, 123). This will have profound social effects that Tocqueville explores in his conclusion to the *Ancien Régime*.

Industrial Inequality

Returning to his *Second Memoir*, Tocqueville identifies a second category of the poor – the industrial poor, a growing population in the 19th century as peasants fled poverty in the countryside and as commerce continued growing. He begins by noting that industry seems to require inequality in a way not required of agriculture – "we have still not discovered a way of dividing industrial property so that it is not made unproductive." As such, he regrets, "large capital concentrated in a small number of hands is necessary," where "we find a few individuals who possess great wealth and who put to work on their behalf a multitude of works who possess nothing themselves" ([1837] 2021, 33). In this particular respect, the industrial economy resembles the Medieval one, that is, in the radical concentration of wealth in the hands of the rich and the complete absence of property amongst the poor. This differs from the rural poor of the 19th century insofar as the rural poor have at least some property. But it also differs from the Medieval economy insofar as the factory owners feel no particular affection or obligations to their employees outside of signing their paychecks.

Perhaps the greatest problem of industrial poverty for Tocqueville, however, is how radically it subjects workers to forces well beyond their control. Whereas peasant farmers are always working hard on producing the food that they themselves will eat, the industrial worker is "incessantly exposed to accidental evils that he cannot foresee" ([1837] 2021, 33). "Commercial crises" are an inevitable feature of commercial economies that will negatively affect workers' wages and employment status. Although he does not expressly state it in the *Second Memoir*, this radical contingency of workers' livelihoods effectively undermines any thought of independence. He is explicit, however, in *Democracy*, where he specifies that industrial workers suffer "necessary dependence" ([1835/40] 2004, 650). They are completely dependent on their employers – and on the mysterious forces of the larger economy itself. That is to say, lacking property and being subject to the whims of the rich and market forces, they lack liberty.

Drawing from *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville also observes how punishing this work is for the laborers. Echoing Adam Smith, he compares factory workers to artisans. Whereas the individual artisans who make their wares from start to finish enjoy "remarkable dexterity in doing that job," those whose labor has been divided into many small and discrete tasks find every day that they become more "degraded as the workman [artisan] is perfected" ([1835/40] 2004, 649). Over time, he observes,

> As the principle of division of labor is more thoroughly applied, the worker becomes weaker, more limited, and more dependent. The art progresses, the artisan regresses. Furthermore, as the scale of manufacturing and capital investment increases, products improve and become cheaper, and as more people begin to realize this, very wealthy and enlightened men move in to exploit industries that previously been left to ignorant or hard-pressed artisans. These men are attracted by the magnitude of the effort required and the immensity of the results to be obtained ([1835/40] 2004, 650).

This results in the development of an increasingly separated class system where "One comes more and more to resemble the administrator of a vast empire, and the other to resemble a brute." Emerging from this, he speculates, will be a new sort of feudal class system, only without any of the affections that bound lord and serf in the Middle Ages.

> In this respect, therefore, master and worker are not alike at all, and with each passing day they become increasingly different. They are joined only in the sense of being the two extreme links of a long chain. Each one occupies a place that is made for him, which he

> does not leave. One is in a state of constant, strict, and necessary dependence on the other and seems born to obey, as the other seems born to command. What is this, if not aristocracy? ([1835/40] 2004, 650).

And like the inequality found in the French provinces, this new aristocracy is characterized by a real dissolution of social bonds between rich and poor: "there is no genuine bond between the poor man and the rich man. . . . The two see each other at the factory but they have nothing to do with each other anywhere else, and while they come into contact at one point, in all other respects they remain distant." Whereas sentiments under feudal inequality were able, in some respects, to transcend class boundaries, industrial inequality severs them. "The manufacturer asks nothing of the worker but his labor, and the worker expects nothing from the manufacturer but his wages. The former makes no promise to protect, the latter no promise to defend, and neither habit nor duty creates a permanent bond between them" ([1835/40] 2004, 651).

Thus industrial inequality delivers many of the same effects as rural inequality insofar as it undermines liberty/independence, subjects the poor to brutalization and oppression, and destroys all affective bonds between citizens.

The Social & Political Effects of Inequality

Beyond the damaging effects of inequality on the rural and urban poor, the *Ancien Regime* suggests still greater social and political effects. In this respect, Tocqueville is a keen moral psychologist. It was not mere inequality that ultimately drove the Third Estate in France to its Revolution and its associated violence. Serfs had endured inequality under feudalism for centuries without a comparable revolt. Two factors, accompanying the baseline inequality discussed above, changed this. The first was that in the new economy, poverty was no longer perceived as ascribed and inevitable. There were examples of peasants who had "made it" in the new economy despite their initial humble origins. The people will tolerate the "evils" of inequality "patiently because it seems inevitable" in the feudal system. But that same inequality becomes "unbearable the moment its elimination becomes conceivable." As he continues, "Feudalism in the fulness of its power did not inspire much hatred in the French as did feudalism on the verge of disappearing" ([1856] 2011, 157).

The second development that stimulated the poor to action in France took place largely in the 10-15 years immediately preceding the Revolution. This was nothing more than simply drawing attention to the inequality itself and its causes. As the French poor were suffering in a famine, various government officials pursued relief policies. But each of these policies were typically accompanied by clarification of just how the poor came to be so vulnerable. He notes, for example, that on one occasion, in a call the king made to the rich to step up their charitable efforts, "The king will not tolerate a state of affairs in which some men are sacrificed to the greed of others." On another occasion, the king affirmed that "the avarice of the rich [is] responsible for the public's distress" ([1856] 2011, 161, 162). Tocqueville ties together the effects of such pronouncements:

> This was to inflame each and every individual by enumerating his woes and point a finger of blame and those responsible, thereby emboldening the victims by revealing the small number of authors of their woes, piercing their hearts to the quick, and setting them ablaze with greed, envy, and hatred ([1856] 2011, 164).

As the poor became increasing aware of their poverty and oppression relative to their wealthier neighbors, and as they learned that this suffering resulted from those neighbors' hands, they became increasingly volatile.

These resentments continued to fester in the years leading up to the Revolution. As inequality persisted, their suffering grew in the context of famine, and as they came increasingly to perceive the aristocrats as responsible for their unpleasant condition. To be sure, Tocqueville does not suggest that their suffering or oppression was imagined. It was very real. "For centuries they had borne the whole burden of abuses almost alone." But what made the "burdens" of inequality particularly unbearable was the sense that it was no longer inevitable and very much a policy choice on the part of its beneficiaries. This is what transformed relatively docile peasants into enraged victims. It was in this context that they adopted a . . .

> violent, inextinguishable hatred of inequality. This was ignited and fueled by the sight of inequality itself, and with constant and irresistible force it had long driven the French to seek to destroy, down to the very foundations, whatever remained of the Middle Ages, and once the ground was clear, to build upon it a society in which men would be as similar and conditions as equal as humanity would allow ([1856] 2011, 182).

But this passage only captures the perspective and moral psychology of the poor. Tocqueville offers a two-sided, albeit highly succinct, account in *Democracy*: "When, in the wake of a prolonged struggle between the various classes of which the old society was composed, conditions become equal, envy, hatred, and scorn of one's neighbor, together with pride and exaggerated confidence in oneself, invade the human heart" ([1835/40] 2004, 487). Here "equality" refers not so much to *economic* equality as *social* equality. There are no legal barriers in America (excepting obviously Native Americans and slaves) to anyone becoming rich – which Tocqueville repeatedly emphasizes is the universal American ambition. In this sense, they are equal. But because "[n]atural inequality being very great, unequal fortunes will result as soon as each individual turns all his faculties to the task of making himself rich" ([1835/40] 2004, 519). This means, for him, that rich Americans will assume "pride and exaggerated confidence," while the poor suffer from "envy" and "hatred" to the rich. The outcome of all this is to "divide men and make them misjudge one another's judgment" ([1835/40] 2004, 487). While Americans were a long way from coming to blows over this in the 1830s, and hence not on the verge of the kind of collapse suffered by the French in 1789, the seeds were planted perhaps for a long simmering of issues that would eventually manifest in countless ways as inequality would hit its various peaks.

The experience of economic inequality under conditions of supposedly social equality can perhaps be understood here by drawing on Aristotle. In his *Politics,* the Ancient Macedonian philosopher observes two kinds of equality: numerical and "equality according to merit." Numerical equality is simply that everyone will get the same, regardless of their merit or desert. Equality according to merit suggests distributing resources in proportion to individual merit. Where people are understood to deserve different allotments, and distribution matches their relative desert, this can be considered both "equal" in the relevant sense and "just." But it so often happens, according to Plato's pupil, that merit and distribution are ill-matched. "For those who desire equality start faction when they believe they are getting less, even though they are the equals of those who are getting more" (*Politics*, 5.3, 1302a). That is to say, when people think resources are not distributed according to their desert, that is to say they do not reflect equality according to merit, they become agitated and prone to forming politically destabilizing factions.

Importing this to Tocqueville's analysis, so long as France assumed social inequality under feudalism (that some people *deserve* more based on their ancestry), it could sustain greater economic inequality. But once it began dismantling its social inequality, the poor began to assume – based perhaps on their hard work and native intelligence – that they would become more economically equal. But no such thing happened. Rather, as the poor were constantly reminded by their own bitter experiences, they continued to experience significant economic inequality. The transition from a feudal economy to a commercial one had the effect of attributing the unequal distribution of resources to individual merit in a world where it was less than clear that that distribution reflected actual merit. Or to put it in simple Aristotelian terms, it was *perceived* as manifestly unjust in a way that simply didn't apply under feudalism. And insofar as that injustice continued to be noted and emphasized, the effect was to anger the poor to the point of revolution.

Much of this is intimated in a key early paragraph from *Democracy in America*, in which Tocqueville contrasts the poverty of the natives and that experienced by those in "civilized countries." Whereas the natives enjoyed almost a perfect equality and independence, the civilized have private property, classes, inequality, and dependence. This forces upon them the regular contemplation of their unhappy economic and psychic circumstances.

> The daily contrast between their own misfortune and weakness and the prosperity and power of a few of their fellow human beings stirs anger in their hearts at the same time as fear. Their sense of inferiority and dependence vexes and humiliates them ([1835-1840] 2004, 27).

Inequality is, for the relatively poor, a daily reminder of several unpleasant thoughts. This includes, first, the possibility that in a meritocratic society they are in fact the lazy or talentless "losers" of society who richly merit their meager circumstances. Or, second, that despite their efforts and talents that they have been systematically deprived of their just rewards by a small cabal of wealthy elites. And, third, that regardless of the reasons for their poverty, they find themselves very much at the mercy of their wealthy neighbors.

Finally, and beyond questions of moral psychology, Tocqueville in his 1836 essay, "France before the Revolution," raises the very simple – but important! – matter of whether democracy is consistent with significant economic inequality. Here, as in the *Ancien Régime*, he worries that inequality creates an élite far more interested in the welfare of other élites than with their poorer neighbors. And in so doing, they become "a little community apart from the nation, which invariably comes to obtain a certain degree of power over the larger community in the midst of which it is placed." They become, that is, an oligarchy, "which is most hurtful to a democratic government" (FBR, 44). Insofar as great economic inequality might emerge in democratic societies, it is fleeting, since the rich are at "risk of losing their property by violence," while the poor are in danger of "losing their independence. It is, therefore, strongly the interest of those nations who desire to arrive at a democratic government, that great inequality should not exist among them" (FBR, 45). So inequality renders societies vulnerable to oligarchy and revolution.

Tocquevillian Solutions to Inequality?

Not Public Assistance

To this point, I have portrayed Tocqueville as a serious critic of economic inequality. This much seems unambiguous. Given his critique, one would assume similarly impassioned appeals for programs of redistribution. Such a pattern of reforms can be found in any number of major thinkers who highlighted such extensive concerns about inequality, such as Plato, Jesus, Hobbes, Rousseau, Mill, and Marx. But Tocqueville defies this expectation in some of the most obvious ways. Unlike Plato, he does not call for restricting personal fortunes to a 4:1 ratio. Unlike Jesus, he does not call for the forgiveness of debt and the equitable redistribution of land. Unlike Hobbes, he does not authorize the sovereign to redistribute fortunes. Unlike Marx, he does not call for revolution and the banishment of private property.[1]

In fact, much in Tocqueville seems to push against the kind of ambitious programs of inequality amelioration found among the other notable critics of inequality. Perhaps best known among his readers along these lines is his stark cautions against government programs aimed fundamentally against alleviating poverty.

In *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville acknowledges that democracies naturally tend to demand more of their governments in bringing about greater equality. This tendency originates in equality itself. The more equal citizens are, the less they tolerate inequality. "When all conditions are unequal," he observes, "no inequality is great enough to be offensive." This is why, he reasons, that feudalism – despite its inequality – was more stable. But the "more complete the uniformity, the more unbearable the sight of inequality." To alleviate the "unbearable sight," democratic citizens appeal to the one authority that incontestably stands above both rich and poor – the state. "The sovereign, being of necessity and incontestably above all citizens, arouses no envy in any of them" ([1835/1840] 2004, 795). Hence, for Tocqueville, democracy's strong tendency to concentrate state powers.

Once in possession of this power, the sovereign will incline to an "immense tutelary power" that "seeks to keep them in childhood irrevocably." This authority . . .

> provides for their security, foresees and takes care of their needs, facilitates their pleasures, manages their most important affairs, directs their industry, regulates the successions, and divides their inheritances.

"Why not," Tocqueville asks, "relieve them entirely of the trouble of thinking and the difficulty of living? ([1835/1840] 2004, 818).

His concern derives from the problem of dependence discussed above. Just as poor citizens can become excessively dependent upon their wealthy neighbors and employers, they can also become excessively dependent upon their governments. This can extend even to the point of the government taking "care of their needs."

Tocqueville's concern about dependency here also informs his rejection of large public assistance programs to aid the poor as discussed in his first *Memoir on Pauperism*. Public assistance here is a

[1] See Williams 2024.

problem, among other reasons, because of its "effects on the poor man's liberty" ([1835] 2021, 21). Those dependent upon public aid to meet their most basic needs become anchored in place and unreceptive to professional opportunities. Assuming with Mandeville that most have "a natural passion for idleness," they are generally content to deposit government checks and continue to live as such indefinitely.[2]

All of this being noted, Tocqueville carefully sets aside certain classes of citizens who are absolutely entitled to government assistance – largely those who are unable for various reasons to provide for their own needs. This includes various categories of "inevitable evils such as infant frailty, the failings of old age, illness, [and] insanity." Beyond this, he adds, victims of natural disasters are entitled to government relief until such time they can provide for their own needs ([1835] 2021, 26).

Private Charity

Beyond the categories of citizens eligible for public assistance, however, Tocqueville in his first *Memoir* appeals to private charity to address poverty. In his France, this would largely mean institutions like the Church. The crucial relevant difference between public and private charity is its *contingency*. Whereas public assistance becomes a legal "right," no one has a legal right to private charity – it is bestowed according to the means and benevolence of individual benefactors and institutions. It can, thus, be revoked. This is important for Tocqueville insofar as contingency discourages dependence. No one can *depend* on what is contingent. So private charity has a built-in mechanism to encourage recipients to seek out establish their own independence.

Tocqueville also promotes private charity insofar as it exchanges the *impersonal* nature of public charity for something more *personal*. That is, for him, a government check does nothing to promote civic bonds beyond supporting the poor in their most elemental needs. What private charity does, on his account, is to "establish precious ties between the rich man and the poor one" or what he also calls a "moral link" across the classes ([1835] 2021, 19). Although he does not expressly say so, private charity appears in his eyes to reestablish some of the civic bonds that once existed under feudalism – where the lords looked upon the serfs with a sense of responsibility and affection, while the serfs viewed the lords as gracious benefactors. While this does not radically change the *degree* of inequality in societies, it promises on his account to reduce its divisive effects. Without these more personal relations, rich people look at the poor man "only as a greedy stranger" and the poor man feels no gratitude to the taxpayers for putting food on his plate. A system of public charity, still profoundly unequal, results in a wealthy class full of "fear and hatred" of the poor – and a poor class suffering "despair" and "envy" of the rich ([1835] 2021, 19). Shifting charity from the public sphere to the private one, he hopes, will moderate some of these psychological effects of inequality.

The transfer of private funds from the wealthy to the poor has perhaps some modest effect upon economic inequality, but Tocqueville's loose program of private alms does not likely represent much more than tinkering on the margins of that systematic inequality that troubles him throughout his major writings. The rich remain very rich; the poor largely remain poor. So questions persist about whether he entertains additional programs that might help moderate the inequality that upset France and loomed as a future danger in America.

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[2] See Englert 2017 (esp. 659-669) for a detailed and sympathetic account of Tocqueville's rejection of redistributive programs along these lines.

Property Division: Or, against Primogeniture

Returning to *Democracy in America* once again, it is useful to explore the simple question of *why* Americans enjoyed greater "equality of conditions" than their European counterparts, beyond the obvious Constitutional prohibition against aristocracy. There was a simple reason, which he repeatedly emphasizes: the distinctively anti-feudal practice of splitting inheritances equally among children. Whereas European aristocrats had long ago adopted the practice of bestowing their land and fortunes on the eldest male child, American parents preferred to divide their estates equally among their children.

There was a distinctively American reason for adopting this anti-European egalitarian ethos. They had a vast frontier to their west. Children inheriting less than their European counterparts simply had to move west to seek their own estates and fortunes. They remained equally capable of achieving all their parents had with sufficient effort.

Primogeniture had, for Tocqueville, the effect of arming the aristocrat "with an almost divine power over the future of his fellow men." By contrast, he observes, the elimination of the practice "divides, partitions, and disseminates wealth and power," as it "rapidly destroy[s] great fortunes and especially great estates" ([1835-1840] 2004, 54, 55).

This division of the land quickly eliminated the "divine powers" of aristocrats, humbled citizens and changed their souls. The cultural rejection of primogeniture produced the broad economic equality and the associated benefits Tocqueville encountered in the United States. Not only did it limit the kinds of usurpations and exploitations that burdened aristocratic France, but it also engendered the "restlessness" of the American spirit that spurred industriousness, exploration, and self-sufficiency.

The fact that Americans could *all* acquire their own property also produced, for Tocqueville, a cultural respect for property rights. As he surely knew from reading Rousseau's *Discourse on Inequality*, one reason that the poor in early societies took up arms against the rich was because they literally had nothing to lose. It was the rich who had everything to lose – and it was only through deception that they were able to maintain it. But widespread property ownership, for Tocqueville, meant "there are no proletarians in America. Since everyone has property of his own to defend, everyone recognizes property rights as a matter of principle" ([1835-1840] 2004, 273).

Programs from the Second Memoir

The benefits of broadly dispersed wealth and property ownership were clearly on Tocqueville's mind in considering remedies to poverty and inequality in an industrial context in his *Second Memoir*, although before pursuing this any further, it is important to acknowledge that the manuscript was clearly unfinished and his thoughts underdeveloped. This being said, he explores two possible avenues for alleviating poverty and inequality in the essay: 1) worker co-ops, and 2) a savings program for industrial workers. His express goal in each of these is to achieve for European laborers "the small farmer's spirit and habits of property ownership" ([1837] 2021, 35).

Tocqueville's consideration of worker co-operatives resembles John Stuart Mill's plan repeatedly advocated in his economic writings.[3] He describes this as "giving the worker an interest in the factory" ([1837] 2021, 35). He spends little time reviewing the mechanisms and benefits of this proposal and advances almost immediately to exploring its challenges. The first of these is the fact that present factory and business owners show no particular interest in sharing their businesses with workers in this fashion. Although Tocqueville thinks industrialists "have made a grave mistake in not doing this," he resists imposing it on them ([1837] 2021, 36). He does not consider a further option, consistent with his principles and parallel to Mill's reformed enclosure act where shares of their businesses could be purchased at market value and then given to the workers.[4] In this way, he respects existing property rights while giving workers a meaningful role and stake in the businesses where they work.

Tocqueville is generally attracted to the idea of worker co-ops, although he does not think they yet have the business skills to run them just yet. This being said, he appears optimistic that "as our workers gain broader knowledge" the government should provide financial support to provide them such stakes when they might "multiply and prosper" ([1837] 2021, 36).

After considering and then rejecting a plan for savings accounts, Tocqueville pursues a plan to unite pawn shops with savings accounts – "to make these two things one and the same enterprise" ([1837] 2021, 44). Generally skeptical of state authority, he envisions these as private businesses that would "receive people's savings with one hand and return those savings to them with the other." It would make sense from a business perspective, he argues, because the pawn shop would hold collateral. But the interest it pays to customers also encourages saving, while its loans could conceivably stimulate reasonable economic risks and associated lifestyle improvements. But this whole discussion takes only a few paragraphs and does not flesh out its full mechanisms or shortcomings for that matter.

Conclusion: Assessing Tocqueville on Inequality

This analysis is not to suggest that Tocqueville is as fierce a critic of economic inequality as figures like Rousseau or Marx. Nor is he the kind of maximal interventionist on this matter like others in the tradition. Tocqueville's clear preference is for societies to work out the problems associated with poverty and inequality without the intervention of large government agencies or programs. Whether or not private solutions are equal to the task is another question. The most obvious limitation of Tocqueville's solutions is getting the wealthiest members of democratic society to agree in any substantial degree to plans that would likely result in some redistribution of their wealth to their poorer neighbors. It was this kind of resistance to such measures that lead Marx to argue that revolution was the most efficacious mode of equalizing societies. But even short of Marx's radical solutions, democratic socialism appears more realistic insofar as it relies on democratic majorities to choose government policies and programs that would redistribute wealth more equitably. That is, the poor theoretically have the democratic power to change policies on their own. Tocqueville's obvious resistance to such routes raises real questions about whether or not he has anything like a workable plan to address the problems that clearly concern him.

[3] See Williams 2024, 244-248.
[4] Williams 2024, 248-249.

But at the same time, it cannot be denied that poverty and inequality are the problems of such a scale, to his mind, that they cannot be ignored or avoided. Any society failing to acknowledge their disruptive capacities flirt with their own demise and destruction.

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