

Response to alexis de tocqueville's democracy in america



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Growing up under Napoleon, Alexis de Tocqueville was very passionate about change in government specifically in the ideas of democracy. He went on a nine month voyage around the newly founded America with his friend Gustave de Beaumont to see what he thought would be the future of government across the world. He had high expectations and was somewhat pleased with what he saw but he also noticed countless problems with their so called democracy, he put his thoughts into his work, Alexis de Tocqueville's Democracy in America. In Democracy in America, Tocqueville thoroughly analyzes what he believes to be an ideal democracy. He does this by praising and critiquing the type of government that 1800's America had, while comparing and contrasting it to what he thinks a true democracy is. Throughout his book he talks of the accomplishments that the American settlers should be proud of while also bringing up where they contradict the Constitution, their own written word. Tocqueville brings up five of the most important issues facing 1800's America, materialism, shame, majority rule, authority, and freedom.

First, Tocqueville believed there to be an unhealthy look by the Americans on materialism, specifically in how they look at something's value. It is an understatement to say that wealth was important to the Americans, it was what they strived for. It is noticeable in specifically how hard the Americans worked to make money no matter how poor or down on their luck they happened to be. This was very different than how Tocqueville knew it as in France, where he grew up, the rich stay rich and the poor stay poor.

Naturally wealth was not often on people's minds and it was not the way

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they judged a life. In America he saw that this sentiment was not shared as value was very intertwined with money, specifically in materialism where something was judged by how much money it could make. For example how they valued books, they believed that if a book didn't sell many copies it meant that it wasn't any good. It didn't matter what was in the pages if it didn't make a lot of money it was worth very little. Tocqueville disagreed with this notion as he thought it to be an oppressive way to look at equality where you are not judging someone or something on their good qualities but rather their valuable or money filled ones.

Second, Tocqueville has a problem with how the Americans looked at other accomplishing people around them, specifically how they use their peers' achievements as 'reference points'. He believed that this created a false reality for their people as they believed they could emulate the lives of the people they looked up to but it was often untrue and misleading. He stated, "When all the prerogatives of birth and fortune have been abolished, ... when every profession is open to everyone, an ambitious man may think it is easy to launch himself on a great career and feel that he has been called to no common destiny. But this is a delusion which experience quickly corrects." (Tocqueville) He believed this to be a very telling problem as it created very feelings that were very common within the Americans which were envy and shame. They were saddened that they weren't able to do the same as the ones they looked up to and were envious of their accomplishments. This behavior was very different from that in France as under the rule of Napoleon there was a very clear line in the heiroritical system between the rich and the poor. Tocqueville was obviously not happy with this system

either but he believed it to at least have more credibility in that it was known what the poor could achieve and there was not false hope.

Third, Tocqueville noted that while democracy was advertised as the direct opposite of tyranny they shared many troubling qualities. While democracy is expressed as valuing everyone's opinion this sentiment was often contradicted as majority ruled. For example a new bill comes out and everyone loves the idea of it because it cuts taxes on the people in half. There is one problem with the bill though as it also allows a company to dispense their wastes in our local rivers. So say majority ignores the bad part of the bill because of all the money they will save and rules in favor of the new bill. One local man goes against the bill saying it will ruin our water, for going against the majority he will be demonized as it is a differing opinion. This is not only backward but it is the opposite of the ideals of democracy. Tocqueville also noticed that when one would differentiate themselves from the crowd, trying to spread their ideas or opinion they would be seen as going above themselves and would be cut down by the majority.

The fourth issue Tocqueville found is the conflict that democracy in America brought against authority. Meaning that they didn't respect their fellow peers and often thought of themselves to be just as good as everyone else, even ignoring a doctor's degree. This prevented them from any kind of submission, it can also explain why majority rule was such a problem as even if someone with established credibility on the given topic/issue came out with a differing opinion it was demonized just the same. Alexis believed this to be an idiotic way to look at things as there must be some people of greater intelligence or maturity that could do better at making these

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important decisions and should be listened to with as he called it ' special attention'. He sums up his thoughts with what is considered today as one of his most famous quotes, " Democracy was fatally biased towards mediocrity" (Tocqueville)

Finally, the fifth and maybe most important issue Tocqueville stated was with America's idea of freedom. The reason why democracy was so important and progressive in the first place was with the ideas of the Enlightenment, where individuality was very important and you were allowed to have a free mind. The same was said in America it was advertised like everyone thought for themselves and went against the majority. Tocqueville the opposite to be true as not only were there not many free thinkers left they also often judged you for thinking differently. He said instead of doing their own critical thinking they followed the words being written in the newspapers and the behavior of their fellow peers. He even went on to say that one can find few places with less independence of mind and true freedom of discussion than in America.

Alexis de Tocqueville wasn't completely against the ideas and actions of the democracy in America though, he just believed it wasn't as good as everyone was saying. He still thought it was a step in the right direction, " he thought that the United States offered the most advanced example of equality in action." (" Alexis De Tocqueville" para. 6) He also admired the success of the country, " Tocqueville was impressed by much of what he saw in American life, admiring the stability of its economy and wondering at the popularity of its churches." (" Alexis De Tocqueville" para. 7)

In conclusion, I believe that Alexis de Tocqueville was very ahead of his time and provided us with a mirror of what we as a nation were doing. I think he was right in his beliefs and criticisms as today we have almost completely followed them to a T. While it isn't perfect, we have made steps in the right direction for everyone of our people to their own voice heard. It is important for people like him to point out the irony or contradictions made against written word.

Works Cited

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