Tocqueville Analysis

If Tocqueville is right in thinking that people in a democratic society have a love and passion for equality much more than for freedom, then we Americans are wrong about our association that equality and freedom are interconnected. What does it mean to be completely free or to have complete equality? Is complete equality what most Americans really desire the most? Although to have complete equality, there must be freedom, I agree with Tocqueville when he describes that one can exist without the other. You can be free and not be equal and you can be equal and not be completely free.

I argue that in America or any democratic society, there will never truly be complete freedom, but that is not entirely a bad thing. Although freedom of speech, freedom of religion, etc. are the given aspects of complete freedom, there must be laws in a society. If there are no laws, which to some capacity do take freedom away, then there will be chaos and a lack of equality because people will not be under the same structure of rules within their common society. In a democratic society where there is more freedom than equality, it is this idea of laws and regulations that makes the people equal to a certain level.

In a society, people will also not always have the same opportunity and can have the freedom to do what they want, but not get the same result as another member of that society. For example, Tocqueville states that “One can have the right to indulge in the same pleasures, to enter the same professions, to meet in the same places; in a word, to live in the same manner and pursue wealth by the same means, without having all take the same part in government” (Tocqueville 479). This is a reflection of Americas democracy because people have the same rights, but are not all equal as a result because people in society have different professions, economic levels, etc. There needs to be some kind of structure that governs and maintains stability within society.

Tocqueville explains that the positive aspects of freedom take time, whereas the benefits of equality result quick and he states that “…equality forms the distinctive characteristic of the period they live in; that alone is enough to explain why they prefer it to all rest” (480). Although I do agree with Tocqueville when he explains that the benefits of freedom are more delayed and “…manifest itself to men in different times and in different forms…” (480), I disagree with him when he describes that all men in a democratic state would prefer equality so much that they would sacrifice their freedom for it. For example, during the civil rights movement, African Americans were “given equality” in the “separate but equal” Plessy v. Ferguson case, but they did not actually have freedom nor equality and were not free until many years later. Although under law blacks were considered equal to whites, this was only true under specific segregation laws of that time.

This meant they could not sit in certain areas of the bus, they could not attend certain restaurants, or even have access to education. For this reason, I argue the idea that equality would be desired so much that people are willing to risk their liberty. At the time, African Americans had limited liberty. Although African Americans were allowed to “enjoy” the same kind of transportation and same diners, one wrong word or miscommunication could have had them killed or put in jail. There is no freedom in that and a fake perception of equality is portrayed which tends to occur in many societies who preach it. In this case equality was given not only in a different form, but was also easily taken away from a large population of citizens.

To add on to this idea, I have to disagree with Tocqueville’s view when he states that “If a people could ever succeed by itself in destroying or even diminishing the equality that reigned within it, it would arrive at that only by long and painful efforts” (480), but freedom can escape much easier. Freedom may take more time to come, but I do not believe that it is not specific to democracy or that it disappears easily. If anything, I argue that freedom goes hand in hand with a democratic society in contrary to equality. Equality does exist within a democratic government, but it also exists in other forms of government and it does not have the same benefits that freedom gives. Equality can go hand in hand with a democratic society, a socialist society, and also a communist society. To answer my question, is equality really desired so much more over freedom? It can associate itself with societies that give no freedom to their people and push for equality so much that eventually people will begin to cry for freedom, as we see in cases such as Venezuela.

Tocqueville explains that freedom and equality are very distinct from each other and he states “… I do not fear to add that among democratic peoples they are two unequal things” (480). Examples of this are less free societies, such as socialist and communist based countries. People within these societies are relatively equal on an economic level and stand under basically one class of economics. Besides the elites and the corrupt government, the people of the society are equal among one another, but they do not have much freedom. They do not have enough freedom to choose or practice their religion of choice, to watch the media outlets they desire, or to share their personal opinion about the government. It is the complete opposite of a democratic society and there are no class differences in this kind of society.

This kind of equality may sound like a just and fair society and may be desired so much when first implemented because competition and rivalry will temporarily be eliminated. As time goes on, that desire for freedom begins to develop and is nowhere to be found. Tocqueville states that “In most modern nations and in particular in all the peoples of the continent of Europe, the taste for and idea of freedom began to arise and to develop only at the moment when conditions began to be equalized and as a consequence of that very equality” (481). I believe that Tocqueville was trying to argue the consequence of what happens when a society favors equality so much and does not wait for liberty which takes longer to develop.

When it comes to free societies or democratic societies, there is freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of religion, etc., but everyone is divided by the lower class, middle class, and higher class. This division or inequality is based on the socio-economic levels that each individual is under. In an article by “A Medium Corporation”, it states that “In the United States, the hot issue now is income inequality. Similarly, there are inequalities in terms of social influence and political power. These inequalities exist in free societies because they allow the natural inequalities of humans to compound” (Stark). Some people have more power than others, make more money depending on their career choice and life circumstance, and follow a different path of life. This is the result of capitalism which ultimately benefits society as a whole. This gives them the freedom to choose, but put them on an unequal base with others within that same society; This inequality within a society does not always have negative results as it is natural. Aspects of equality among the bases of gender, race, and sexual orientation are the positive parts of complete equality that benefits society and maintain a fair one.

It sounds like Tocqueville does not necessarily agree with the idea that people should have this “lasting love” for extreme equality over freedom because he criticizes the fact that even if these people do find equality within a free society, they will “still want it in slavery” (482). True equality will come after freedom is given to all people, not just the elites, as we have seen in countries like Venezuela, Albania, etc. In a socialist society equality means that if one works harder than their neighbor he will still be economically equal to the individual who did not work as hard. This kind of equality will come as a disadvantage to the working class of society and will ultimately not last forever or result in negative consequences, such as poverty and tyranny.

Equality is not putting all people in one box, but rather giving all people the equal right to have the freedom to place themselves where they want.

In a society both equality and freedom must exist in a balanced way, but one will always have to be sacrificed, to some capacity, in order to enjoy the benefit of the other. For example, we all must give money to the government in order for it to provide funding for basic needs used in daily life and we all must follow certain laws or the consequences are fines and jail time. This limits freedom to a certain extent, as I mention earlier, but increases the aspects of a democratic society that is under equal law and regulation. With that being said, in a democratic society, one also will have a higher income than their neighbor as it occurs naturally depending on the individuals circumstance or benefits. This way of balancing equality in freedom is, in my opinion, the perfect relationship between equality and freedom and being able to enjoy both in a fair and beneficial way.

As Tocqueville describes, people have this passion for equality and blindness to freedom because freedom is delayed and takes more time to arrive, but when it does its pleasures are felt, but no enjoyed as much as equality. Society rather chose equality because of its daily benefits, whereas with freedom he states that “Men cannot enjoy political freedom unless they purchase it with some sacrifices…” (481). I disagree with this idea because this extreme passion for equality has sacrifices and threats that society will not understand as they have eventually become brainwashed by the promises and ideas that the corrupt government has fed to them. Freedom has its negatives, for example, in today’s society freedom of speech can also result as hate speech which can cause chaos among society. The negatives of equality are hidden and Tocqueville states that “The evils that extreme equality can produce become manifest only little by little; they insinuate themselves gradually into the social body…” (480-1). This is a perfect explanation of what occurs in most socialist countries.

It is ironic that Tocqueville later explains that people will “…tolerate poverty, enslavement, barbarism, but they will not tolerate aristocracy” (482), even though this idea of total equality is produced by aristocratic societies. “…Habit has made them no longer felt” (481) which is why society will tolerate equality under any circumstance if it is not under a democratic society or freedom. I theorize that society expresses that they will not endure an aristocratic government, although the results of extreme equality are similar to those under an aristocratic government, because they have been blinded by this passion for equality and no longer feel the consequences. This obsession for equality will ultimately cause hatred among different classes and the people will “carefully keep them out of power…” (189), which Tocqueville mentions earlier in his writing.

In conclusion, equality and freedom are separate from one another. There may not be complete equality without complete freedom, but in a democratic society there is never complete freedom and one has existed without the other. There are many societies where equality exists among its citizens, but as that equality raises, their freedom is diminished. I argue that having both freedom and equality is the perfect balance, instead of having a society that obsesses with one over the other. Having a completely free society where people are free to do what they want with no law or restriction maintaining them can be dangerous and cause violence and hate. An equal society with no freedom of expression or political freedom, as we have seen in history and today, can ultimately cause riots, violence, and extreme poverty for the citizens residing within that society. An equilibrium among the two ideas is the ideal goal for a flourishing society.

Works Cited

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