

A Tocquevillian Analysis of Facebook: The Good, The Bad, and The (Softly) Despotic

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In the introduction to his masterwork *Democracy in America*, Alexis de Tocqueville famously declared, “A new political science is needed for a world altogether new.”¹ Insofar as the newness Tocqueville describes consists of democratic institutions, we are clearly still living in Tocqueville’s “new” world. Since the time Tocqueville wrote in the early 19th century, many more nations have become democracies. Violent religious extremism serves as a legitimate counterpoint against the claim that modern liberal democracy has unilaterally come to dominate geopolitical affairs,² but there can be no denying that democracy -- built upon the foundation of equal conditions that Tocqueville says “struck [him] more vividly during his [time in America] than [any other novelty]”³ -- defines the current global zeitgeist.

While we can easily recognize Tocqueville’s predicted future in our own present, we must also admit that the digital age has introduced a new variety of “newness” into the world. This variety of novelty was not present in Tocqueville’s day. The internet has fundamentally changed human life in many ways. To deny the internet’s substantial impact on culture, industry, and human communication is to deny a basic fact of modern life. Roughly half of all living human beings use the internet on a regular basis.⁴ Much of this usage involves social media sites, where users can connect and interact with each other in various ways. The most popular of these

¹ *Democracy in America*. 12. All citations refer to the edition mandated by the syllabus.

² That is to say that it’s become clear that Fukuyama was premature in proclaiming the “end of history.”

³ *Id.* 9.

⁴ <http://www.internetlivestats.com/internet-users/>

social networking sites (in the United States) is Facebook. Over half of *all* Americans have a Facebook account.⁵ Combining this fact with the additional fact that Tocqueville is often considered one of the best (if not simply *the* best) commentators on the foundations of American democracy, we ask a worthwhile question when we inquire into what Tocqueville would have to say about Facebook. Such an inquiry will undoubtedly reveal both affirmations of Tocqueville's analysis as well as potential differences that may give us further insight into how the ethos of the United States has changed in the nearly two centuries since Tocqueville was writing.

In spite of potential differences between the 19th century and the contemporary era, an analysis of the social media site still touches upon many themes that were central to Tocqueville's thinking. Some of these themes include the role of associations in catalyzing democracy, the danger of "soft" despotism as a consequence of the masses' attachment to petty amusements, and Tocqueville's thought regarding individualism and egoism. This paper will explore Facebook through all of these Tocquevillian lenses, ultimately aiming to make a reasoned statement as to whether -- from Tocqueville's perspective -- Facebook is a positive or negative development for American democracy.

Association

Tocqueville viewed associations as a critical key to understanding American democracy as it stood and ensuring that democratic institutions would exist perpetually into the future. His thinking covered both legally established associations, such as townships, and civil associations,

⁵<http://www.usatoday.com/story/tech/2015/01/09/pew-survey-social-media-facebook-linkedin-twitter-instagram-pinterest/21461381/>

such as temperance organizations. This analysis will focus on the latter because Facebook is generally not organized around legally defined associations (although Facebook groups designed for people within such groups most certainly exist).⁶ In this sense, Facebook reflects Tocqueville's acknowledgement that "In the United States, political associations are only one small part of the immense number of different types of associations found there."⁷ Outside of the minority of groups that are civically defined, Tocqueville sees a plethora of topical diversity. He speaks of "a thousand different types -- religious, moral, serious, futile, very general and very limited, immensely large and very minute."⁸ Facebook's "Groups" features allows users to create digital "associations" that seem to mimic associations in "real" life. These groups run the gamut in subject matter; one can truly find a group organized around anything on Facebook. In this way, Facebook groups present precisely the kind of diversity that Tocqueville recognized in civil associations in the United States. Users can join groups involving seemingly any imaginable subject -- ranging from the deadly serious⁹ to the incredibly crude and frivolous.¹⁰ Whatever kind of group an American Facebook user is looking for, he or she is virtually sure to find it, and this serves as strong evidence that Tocqueville was right when he said, "Americans of all ages, all stations in life, and all types of dispositions are forever forming associations."¹¹ Facebook has catalyzed the formation of associations, an activity that runs deep within the American ethos.

Despite the fact that Tocqueville would probably be pleased with Facebook's ability to assist in forging associations, his thought on the topic ran deeper than merely connecting the

⁶ Prominent examples would include Facebook groups for public universities or for residents of specific towns and cities.

⁷ *Democracy in America*. 513.

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ E.g: the approximately 25,000 member 'Cancer Support Community'

¹⁰ E.g: the approximately 500,000 member "Well, That Was Awkward"

¹¹ *Democracy in America*. 513.

presence of many associations with healthy democracy. What Tocqueville admired about associations was not just their presence, but instead their capacity to train citizens for collective action. Democratic peoples must voluntarily unite around shared interests because “[t]hey can hardly do anything for themselves, and none of them is in a position to force his fellows to help him.”¹² Tocqueville sees that democracy’s very character demands that citizens be capable of uniting towards a common end. These common ends might sometimes appear laughable or frivolous,¹³ but they all ultimately assist in achieving a higher aim (i.e., the perpetuation of refined, genuine democratic institutions that work towards the common interest). Civil associations are so critical because “if they did not learn some habits of acting together in the affairs of daily life, civilization itself would be in peril.”¹⁴ Association makes up a significant portion of the bedrock of democracy for Tocqueville. Take away their prominence or multitude, and that foundation starts to show cracks that might lead to its crumbling.

Given this high aim that constantly lurks just underneath the ostensibly superficial or inconsequential character of many associations, one is left to wonder whether Facebook associations really fit into Tocqueville’s conception. Tocqueville definitely included some relatively frivolous groups within his broad definition of an “association,” but it is hard to imagine that many of the completely frivolous, often nonsensical, Facebook groups most popular today would fit within even this admittedly broad definition.¹⁵ Many Facebook groups exist purely for entertainment purposes, to serve as a place where group members can go to find

¹² *Id.* 514

¹³ E.g., Tocqueville thinking that temperance societies were a laughable joke upon first learning about them.

¹⁴ *Id.*

¹⁵ Here is a list of what I mean:

http://thestir.cafemom.com/healthy_living/104956/11_stupid_meaningless_facebook_groups

amusing pictorial “memes” or saucy humor. They seem to be more directly related to Tocqueville’s fear of soft despotism than his conception of an association that bulwarks democratic habits.

Stripped of this productive element (or at least the artifice of a productive element), these Facebook groups arguably fail in preparing democratic man to face “the time coming in which men will be less and less able to produce, by each alone, the commonest bare necessities of life.”

¹⁶ Faced with that circumstance, man must turn to either strong private associations or the government. In the absence of the former, the latter can become a serious threat to the livelihood of democratic man and democratic institutions. Tocqueville saw this scenario not as a theoretical exercise, but as a serious, potentially dire threat. This urgency becomes apparent in his saying, “Nothing, in my view, more deserves attention than the intellectual and moral associations in America.”¹⁷ Facebook catalyzes many of these associations and therefore seems to alleviate Tocqueville’s worry, but, at the same time, there are good reasons to doubt that many (if not most) of Facebook’s groups are so frivolous and without aim that they lie outside the bounds of Tocqueville’s admittedly broad definition. Tocqueville would probably say there is just as much promise in Facebook’s ability to forge associations as there is danger. He might conclude that perhaps America was perfectly capable of forging associations before the internet, and the introduction of Facebook is therefore an unnecessary risk that makes it more likely for soft despotism to take hold.

Soft Despotism

¹⁶ *Democracy in America*. 515.

¹⁷ *Id.* 517.

The final chapter of Tocqueville's epic two-volume magnum opus presents an overarching summation titled "General Survey of the Subject."¹⁸ The penultimate chapters -- which are also the last chapters on a single, specific subject -- present Tocqueville's thoughts on "soft" despotism. Tocqueville sees such oppression "of schoolmasters"¹⁹ as a greater threat to democracy than traditional despotism at the hands of a single cruel tyrant. He thinks democratic governments may experience bouts of violence, but he adds that "such crises will be rare and brief."²⁰ The truly serious threat to democracy comes as a result of a complacent populace resigned to a life of petty amusement in the spirit of Aristotle's "life of fatted cattle."²¹ This penultimate placement suggests the critical importance of the topic for Tocqueville, and it is only fitting that our analysis of Facebook's relationship to American democracy provides sufficient coverage of this important topic.

In attempting to define the "new" thing that Tocqueville identifies as soft despotism, he says that he sees "an innumerable multitude of men, alike and equal, constantly circling around in pursuit of the petty and banal pleasures with which they gut their souls."²² When one considers the kind of posts most shared on Facebook, it seems that what Tocqueville saw before him in the physical realm is playing itself even more intensely on the internet. On Facebook, everyone is equal. The richest man and the man without even the bare essentials of life have access to the exact same platform and the exact same digital tools. Tocqueville's comment about pettiness and

¹⁸ *Id.* 702

¹⁹ *Id.* 691

²⁰ *Id.*

²¹ *Nicomachean Ethics*. Book I: Chapter 5: Line 15 (1095b). Found on page six in the Bartlett and Collins translation.

²² *Id.* 692.

banality also seems to apply. The most shared content on Facebook, by far, consists of visually appealing photos, tautological and often nonsensical overly-sentimental rantings, and thoughtless, crude humour.²³ Facebook posts with images are far more likely to be shared frequently and “go viral.”²⁴ This emphasis on the imagistic at the expense of the typographic seems connected to the brand of “orderly, gentle, peaceful slavery”²⁵ that characterizes Tocqueville’s soft despotism.²⁶

This seems especially true and concerning when one takes into account Tocqueville’s thoughts on newspapers. Tocqueville gives the newspaper such praise that one might be forgiven for at first mistaking it for intentional hyperbole. He argues, “We should underrate their importance if we thought they just guaranteed liberty; they maintain civilization.”²⁷ Facebook is, of course, used quite frequently to disseminate news sources,²⁸ but we must consider how online social media may differ from the newspapers of Tocqueville’s day. On the one hand, it is no longer true that “[o]nly a newspaper can put the same thought at the same time before a thousand readers.”²⁹ Facebook does quite an excellent job at that, though we may wonder if there is a qualitative difference in Tocqueville’s mind between on thousand readers and one million or one one billion readers.

²³ <https://blog.kissmetrics.com/shared-the-most-on-facebook/>

²⁴ <http://okdork.com/2014/04/21/why-content-goes-viral-what-analyzing-100-millions-articles-taught-us/>

²⁵ *Democracy in America*

²⁶ I am indebted to Neil Postman’s *Amusing Ourselves to Death* for both the general contours of this argument and the specific language used here. I cannot remember whether or not Postman talks much about Tocqueville specifically, though.

²⁷ *Democracy in America*. 517

²⁸ <http://www.journalism.org/2015/07/14/the-evolving-role-of-news-on-twitter-and-facebook/>

²⁹ *Democracy in America*. 517.

On the negative side, Tocqueville's thought may help us recognize a danger in more and more Americans having their news curated by an unimaginably huge, centralized corporation. Tocqueville praised America's subdivision of administrative power, and he claimed that such a subdivision "has much more to do with the enormous number of American newspapers than the great political freedom of the country and the absolute independence of the press."³⁰ Even if we concede that Facebook steadfastly holds firm to the latter principles (and we have very good reason to doubt that),³¹ no one can deny that receiving news from Facebook at least in some way strips Americans away from the administrative subdivision that Tocqueville praised. Facebook can emulate some of the positive features that Tocqueville recognized in newspapers, but the platform also strips away a crucial element of that allowed newspapers to catalyze democracy: extensive subdivision and curation of local interests.

Another factor (which was briefly mentioned above) that suggests Facebook's connection with Tocqueville's soft despotism is the way that the company curates what content its users see (and do not see). Content on Facebook users' "news feeds" is prioritized and ordered by algorithms that Facebook does not fully release to the public. Facebook does make public at least some of the factors that it takes into account when ordering stories. Some of these factors include whom you interact most (and least), the popularity of a post, and the type of post (whether it is writing, photography, videos, etc.).³² Users can have some control over this curation process, but there are so many variables at play and confusing options³³ that many multitudes undoubtedly

³⁰ *Democracy in America*. 519.

³¹ <http://gizmodo.com/former-facebook-workers-we-routinely-suppressed-conser-1775461006>

³² <https://www.facebook.com/help/166738576721085>

³³ <https://www.facebook.com/help/335291769884272/>

just allow Facebook to fully dictate their experience. Beyond the potential for confusion in changing your Facebook settings, it is also relevant to point out that Facebook's settings default to their private curation process. A user must go out of his or her way to opt-out of having their news feeds arranged and censored by the corporation.

Taking into account the way that Facebook dictates its users' exposure to content, the social media site, like soft despotism, arguably "makes the exercise of free choice less useful and rarer, restricts the activity of free will within a narrower compass, and little by little robs each citizen of the proper use of his own faculties."³⁴ What may seem like an irrelevant detail about how particular social networking site curates content appears far more menacing when one considers that Americans are essentially becoming habituated to having the "importance" of their information decided for them. As more and more Americans continue to sign-up for and use Facebook and similar sites, the threat of soft despotism grows ever more urgent.

Tocqueville wrote that he finds it "difficult to imagine how people who have entirely given up managing their own affairs could make a wise choice of those who are to do that for them. One should never expect a liberal, energetic, and wise government to originate in the votes of a people of servants."³⁵ In the context which we find this specific thought, Tocqueville had in mind the relegation of choice from individuals to governmental agencies, but there is no reason that his concern would not transfer over into the private realm when a corporation on the scale of Facebook is concerned. The possibility that Facebook is both a symptom and a cause of soft despotism is rather compelling, and we are wise to think seriously about the ways that Facebook

³⁴ *Democracy in America*. 692.

³⁵ *Id.* 694.

causes us to “gradually [lose] the faculty of thinking, feeling, and acting for [ourselves]” such that we “slowly fall below the level of humanity.”³⁶ Tocqueville cautions us to remember that the political ramifications of such a state of affairs are rather bleak, ultimately causing “the people, tired of its representatives and of itself, [to] either create freer institutions or soon fall back at the feet of a single master.”³⁷

Individualism and Egoism

Tocqueville distinguishes egoism, which he defines as “a passionate and exaggerated love of self which leads a man to think of all things in terms of himself and to prefer himself to all,”³⁸ from individualism, which he understands to be “a calm and considered feeling which disposes each citizen to isolate himself from the mass of his fellows and withdraw into his circle of friends.”³⁹ These concepts are distinct, yet “in the long run ... [individualism] finally merges in egoism.”⁴⁰ This question then merits asking relative to the subject at hand: Is Facebook usage a display of egoism or individualism? Is it possible that using the social media site involves both concepts, or perhaps neither?

There is certainly a case to be made that Facebook involves an intense egoism. A typical user will post several pictures of himself in the hope that various “friends” will “like” what they see. The user will post many “status updates.” These often concern extremely mundane matters such as what the person had for lunch. Users will also craft a customized “profile” where other users can see various books, music, movies, and the like that their “friend” professes to “like”

³⁶ *Id.*

³⁷ *Id.* 695.

³⁸ *Id.* 506

³⁹ *Id.*

⁴⁰ *Id.* 507

themselves. These examples present Facebook as a direct outlet for egoistic tendencies, a place where the “vice as old as the world”⁴¹ can fully flourish.

At the same time, there are also compelling reasons to present Facebook as a place where individualism is practiced and valued. Facebook’s homepage declares in large, bold letters that Facebook helps users to “connect with friends and the world around you.”⁴² Indeed, Facebook will (for the most part) only show you content from your “friends.” The Facebook conception of friendship is generally understood to be far broader than what Tocqueville (or any person alive in the 19th century) had in mind, but Facebook does at least attempt to imitate the “circle of family and friends” mentioned above in the definition of individualism. This broadening of the conception of friendship actually meshes quite well with Tocqueville’s thinking on social equality in democratic times. In contrast to aristocracy, which “linked everybody, from peasant to king, in one long chain,” democracy “breaks the chain and frees each link.”⁴³ The fact that Facebook “friendship” often extends beyond traditional borders of race, class, profession, and geography testifies to the fact that Facebook has a foundationally democratic ethos.

It is clear that Facebook features aspects of both egoism and individualism, yet a full account of Facebook’s tendencies must also take note of its capacity to encourage the tyranny of thought held (or purported to be held) by the majority. Facebook encourages “popular” opinion with its “like” feature. Beyond merely discouraging posts that could be relatively unpopular, the “likes” feature also determines, for some users, whether some content remains on their profile at

⁴¹ *Id.*

⁴² Facebook.com

⁴³ *Democracy in America*. 508

all.⁴⁴ This practice bears an eerily close resemblance to Tocqueville's thought regarding tyranny in democratic society. Especially in the first volume of his work, Tocqueville is very concerned about the psychological tyranny of a majority implicitly suppressing thought. He states that tyrants no longer declare, "Think like me or you die."⁴⁵ Instead, they say something more subtle and ultimately nefarious. They state, "You are free not to think as I do; you can keep your life and property and all; but from this day you are a stranger among us... I have given you your life, but it is a life worse than death."⁴⁶ This phenomenon is omnipresent for many Facebook users. The potential for Facebook comments to devolve into a one-sided, mobocratic session of abusive, thoughtless language has been noted by countless users and media commentators.⁴⁷ Despite Facebook's capacity to encourage egoism and individualism, it is perhaps its tendency to stimulate the wild passions of the mob that should concern us the most.

Conclusion

On the whole, Tocqueville's thought most likely leads us to conclude that Facebook is, all things considered, a negative development for democracy and democratic institutions. Its main positive contribution, from a Tocquevillian lense, is probably its capacity to facilitate association. There are, however, good reasons to think that the quality of these associations do not necessarily meet even the admittedly low bar that Tocqueville established. A bowling league may not have the same goals or virtuous aims as a temperance society, but both have aims. It's

⁴⁴ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/simone-collins/why-do-some-of-your-friends-get-likes_b_6800102.html

⁴⁵ *Id.* 255.

⁴⁶ *Id.* 256.

⁴⁷ Here is one example: <http://thefederalist.com/2013/11/04/facebook-mobs-death-individuality/>

hard to make the same argument for people sitting in their living rooms virtually “liking” pictures of cats. This is true even when such a group has millions of members.

Beyond the limited positive aspects Facebook “associations” may contribute to democracy, the strikingly close character of Facebook usage to Tocqueville’s “soft despotism” reveals that Facebook may be not just a symptom but also a harbinger of Tocqueville’s worst fear. When the best argument we can make against this is that Facebook is a *private* despot instead of Tocqueville’s anticipated governmental one, we may find ourselves actually choosing between the bullet or the gallows.

Finally we have explored how Facebook does encourage egoism, individualism, and tyranny of the majority simultaneously. The site is an environment where one’s individual accomplishments and tastes are celebrated, as long as they conform with the opinion of a majority of your “friends.” If they do not, then users potentially subject themselves to precisely the kind of implicit censorship or open scorn (or both) that Tocqueville anticipated.

In summation, if Tocqueville’s thought is to be taken seriously, Facebook (and really all social media) is a negative development for democracy. Prudent members of democratic society are best served by avoiding the platform as best they can or using extreme caution in their usage. Living in the digital age, we cannot wholly escape social media. It is so firmly engrained in our cultural landscape that, in Tocqueville’s words, it is part of “our predestined circle around each man beyond which he cannot pass.”⁴⁸ We can, however, hold firm and act on the belief that

⁴⁸ *Democracy in America*. 705,

Tocqueville was also correct in asserting that “within those vast limits, man is strong and free.”

hopefully, that’s something we can all learn to like.