



The short-form journal of the Association for Sociopolitical Heterodoxy

[the iconoclast]

www.iconoclast.jp



The Tragedy of American Liberalism: Tocqueville on the Limits of Individualism

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Alexis de Tocqueville once argued that much of the impetus for liberalism, its American version in particular, could be traced back to René Descartes. In what remains one of the most penetrating studies of American liberalism, *Democracy in America*, he writes:

America is...one of the countries where the precepts of Descartes are the least studied and most practiced. That should come as no surprise.¹

Tocqueville was not referring to the ethical and political precepts of Descartes, but rather to his epistemological ones, which aimed to transform man into a rational individual, an independent thinker who would overturn the prejudices of the academies and lay a new foundation for the sciences. Although Descartes reflected on the social consequences of his epistemology, albeit in an unsystematic way, Tocqueville believed that he had seriously underestimated them. For they had ushered in the age of individualism, whose spirit was nowhere more apparent and fruitful than in the American liberal project.

At the same time, Tocqueville recognized the limits of individualism. If the individualist is uniquely suited to public life and governance, eschewing factions and bureaucracies alike, then it is only because he remains rooted in God and Nature in his private life. For although religious institutions like the monogamous family are hierarchal, they also provide the individual with the necessary moral principles for upholding his civic duties. However, should the individual's quest to liberate himself from authority extend to these institutions, Tocqueville forewarns us, then American liberalism shall not only fail, but bring about its contrary: despotism. The post-Second

World War interpretation of liberalism no doubt calls for such liberation, the paradoxical effects of which are manifest. For state and bureaucratic authority augment today in direct proportion to attempts to exsect the vestiges of these institutions—heteronormativity, the patriarchy, and so forth. So it happens that the individual is increasingly sacrificed, not in the name of Marxism, post-modernism or any of the usual suspects, but that of individualism itself.

Owing perhaps to his hubris or defiance to the gods, the tragic hero refuses to accept his natural limits, for which he is made to suffer some fateful catastrophe. If American liberalism is a tragedy, then it is because Tocqueville predicts that it will only prosper during a brief window of time, when the individualist spirit has yet to dismantle the religious and cultural authorities that reflect our natural limits, e.g. the difference between the sexes, and permit us to navigate life. Once, however, the individual attempts to abstract himself from these institutions, he shall find himself both deprived of the strengths of family and community life, and ever more reliant upon state authority. Broken, and under despotic rule, his philosophy of liberation will have sown the seeds of his own demise.

My interest here is American-style liberalism, which is not exclusive to the United States. For Americans have been exporting this ideology across the world for more than a century now, and its influence in the anglophone world is particularly apparent. To call American liberalism a tragedy is not merely to make a literary point either. For a deeper understanding of the limits of individualism will permit us to explain many of the irreconcilable differences between progressive and conservative

liberals today.

Cartesian Individualism

Proving that such irreconcilable differences can be traced back to Cartesian epistemology might seem like a hopelessly academic point, but we must descend deep into the history of ideas if we wish to uncover the limits and prejudices of a philosophy that purports itself to be waging a war against prejudice itself.

Adopting a method of radical doubt, Descartes clears the ground to uncover the truth anew in his *Discourse on Method*. In the words of Alexander Koyré, this method demands that we:

...get rid of all our previous wisdom, renounce all our opinions, and make ourselves free of all blindly accepted certainties, to reject all existing authorities.²

Ancient philosophers like Plato conceived of man within a natural order, wherein he occupied a place in a hierarchy of beings, and might unlock the highest forms, such as eternal beauty, with the proper use of his reason. And indeed, the institutions of the ancient and medieval worlds were founded on such orders. These are the 'authorities' that Descartes' method of radical doubt obliges him to bracket. When he does so however, he uncovers that one thing alone is "clear and certain" to him: *ego cogito sum*, or "I think, therefore I am."³ In this way, the abstract or thinking 'I' becomes the foundation of its own existence, and in the hands of subsequent philosophers, ultimately evolves into the individual. Inspired by Descartes' epistemology for instance, David Hume conceives of his famous argument in the *Treatise*, which holds that no moral ought" can be derived from what naturally "is."⁴ For Hume, this means that nature or some external order can no longer serve as an authority for our moral and social practices, and that we must instead explain these in terms of psychology, or man's internal order.

The word 'individual' is so commonplace today that it is almost impossible to imagine a world without it. But before Descartes, it might be argued, the concept of an 'individual' would have nearly been impossible to explain. In the ancient and medieval worlds, there were Greeks and Barbarians, nobles and peasants, Good and Evil, but an abstract "I" floating across the ether, unbound to any role or duty, was simply nothing.

After Descartes, the classical dichotomy between reason and appearance, notably found in Plato's analogy of the cave, is supplanted by the modern one between reason and authority, thus creating the paradigm of the Enlightenment. As Hans Georg Gadamer writes:

Based on the Enlightenment conception of reason and freedom, the concept of authority could be viewed as diametrically opposed to reason and freedom: to be, in fact, blind obedience.⁵

Every conclusion to which "I" personally have not come appears suspect, and every authority, whether the metaphysical authority of God or the institutional authority of the Church, seems prejudicial to reason. Descartes of course neither rejected God nor the Church. For as Gadamer also points out, he hesitated to apply his epistemological precepts to moral and political topics. The success of this method in the sciences will prove irresistible to future Enlightenment philosophers however, and in time individualism will reign in these spheres.

This process is not only apparent in Hume but also John Locke who, more than any other philosopher, inspired the Founding Fathers of America. Locke argued in his *Second Treatise* that God had endowed all individuals with natural rights, including the right to establish governments without recourse to Biblical authority. Significantly, he interpreted individualism not only as freedom from Biblical authority, but also as freedom from governmental authority, which translated into basic rights like freedom of speech and association.

The Limits of Individualism

One remarks an interesting development in the post-World War II era however. For the doctrine of individualism now demands liberation from cultural and religious authorities such as "the patriarchy," "heteronormativity" and "ethnocentrism" that once served as the foundation of family and community life. And paradoxically, it wields the authority of the state to obtain it. The Civil Rights Acts of 1964 and 1968, which established racial quotas and effectively ended freedom of association, are two notable examples of this development in the United States. For this reason, Christopher Caldwell considers them "a rival constitution" in *The Age of Entitlement*.⁶ One also finds examples outside of the United States. In Canada, for instance, a judge recently ruled that

attempting to dissuade one's child from seeking out "medical treatment" for gender dysphoria, or refusing to use the child's preferred pronouns, constitutes "family violence".⁷ The post-WWII interpretation of liberalism as the individual's freedom from cultural authority thus contradicts the classical one as freedom from state authority, for the latter authority is required to achieve the former freedom.

I believe that this contradiction is not theoretical, but rather practical in nature. That is, the progressive interpretation of liberalism as freedom from cultural authority is theoretically consistent with the Cartesian idea that we are, in essence, abstract individuals unbound to any authority whatsoever. However, it is impossible to practice without contradiction—as we note above—and therefore reveals the limits of liberal individualism as such. On the other hand, the classical and typically conservative view that liberalism must be limited to freedom from state authority seems theoretically untenable from the perspective of Cartesian individualism, even if such a limit makes liberalism practically workable. The progressive interpretation is therefore theoretically consistent but impractical, while the classical one is theoretically inconsistent but practical. This dilemma, I argue, represents the limits of the individualist doctrine.

Tocqueville predicted this of course. American liberals were unique in their success, he argued, because their desire for freedom from state authority could be realized by virtue of the Christian authority that reigned in their private lives. For, setting natural limits, it constrained the individual but also gave concrete form to the citizen. In other words, Christianity's willingness to draw natural distinctions, say between man and woman, prevented the abstract individual from floating off like a balloon into the sky. In Tocqueville's words:

If I now consider man separately, I find that dogmatic beliefs are no less indispensable for living alone than for acting in common with his fellows. If man were forced to prove to himself all the truths that he makes use of each day, he would never come to an end; he would exhaust himself with preliminary demonstrations without advancing; as he neither has the time, given the shortness of life, nor the ability, given the limits of his mind, to act in such a way, he is reduced to taking as certain a host of facts and opinions that he has neither had the time nor power to examine and verify himself....⁸

Stated otherwise, the Cartesian abstract individualism at the heart of liberalism simply places too great a burden on man, whose natural limits and finite time on earth—hence his mortality—will always prevent him from shedding the yoke of authority. Indeed one might say of liberalism, as Rousseau said of democracy, that only the gods can truly practice it.

Tocqueville therefore seems to present American liberalism as a tragedy, for it might only flourish in this brief window of time when the desire to liberate man from state authority and give him equal footing in the government is balanced against the hierarchical structures of the past that provide him with the necessary form and strength to uphold his new duties. As he states in *Democracy in America*:

If I inquire what state of society is most favorable to the great revolutions of the mind, I find it that occurs somewhere between the total equality of all citizens and the absolute separation of classes.... But between these two extremes of the history of peoples comes an intermediate age, a period both glorious and troubled.... It is at such times that powerful reformers arise and new ideas suddenly change the face of the world.⁹

Once the individual's desire to be liberated from authority consumes those classical structures, the window shall have closed and all hope of glory lost. We are close to that point, I believe.

Conservative, or Qualified Liberalism

To restate the matter, the progressive liberals who seek freedom from cultural authority are practicing pure liberalism insofar as it is Cartesian, while the conservative liberals who strive to maintain cultural and religious structures in order to realize freedom from state authority are dedicated to a qualified version. I say "qualified" since they routinely fail to provide theoretical justification for such hierarchal structures that seem to contradict this Cartesian ideal. Indeed, this is somewhat of an intuition. Though I believe that it explains why, as the late Roger Scruton pointed out, conservatives tend to content themselves with inheriting these structures, rather than defending them. What Scruton says of the Tory Party in the United Kingdom, I might add, equally applies to the

Republican one in the United States:

...the Tory Party behaves as though Marx were its principal mentor: it treats philosophy as 'ideology', and economics as the motor of social life. This means that there is no such career in England as that of an intellectual Conservative. The Conservative Party takes exactly the same attitude to conservative beliefs as Lady Antonia Pinter (as she now is): they should be inherited and ignored, not acquired and defended. And never should they take the form of convictions.¹⁰

There are of course exceptions to this attitude. Consider for instance the Prussian philosopher G.W.F. Hegel, upon whom Scruton relied when, in his words, he "came out" as a conservative and published *The Meaning of Conservatism*. Hegel's dialectic reveals that the individual is inconceivable without the psychological fruits that family and community life provide, therefore offering more than a qualified justification for conserving traditions like marriage. However, it's not conservatives but progressives who have extracted the most value from Hegel's dialectic, and Left Hegelians like Axel Honneth have made certain to reassign the task of (re)distributing these fruits to the state. Nevertheless, my goal here is to understand why conservative liberals, adopting this practical approach, have lost almost every battle to their progressive counterparts since the Enlightenment. Positive discrimination, quotas, abortion, the welfare state, gay marriage, mass immigration, etc., so-called conservatives really haven't conserved anything of the family and community life that once reigned supreme in America and elsewhere in the West.

I suspect that Tory and Republican conservatives have generally adopted the attitude of Lady Pinter because they are, in truth, tacit followers of Edmund Burke's philosophy. To be sure, Burke does set out to defend cultural institutions and aristocratic values, but merely contents himself with saying that they have stood the test of time, and should thus be maintained. In other words, it suffices to inherit and practice a tradition to preserve it; no theoretical justification is required. This is the reasoning behind Burke's famous argument in his *Reflections on the French Revolution* that some prejudices must be cherished:

...in this enlightened age I am bold enough to confess that we are generally men of untaught feelings, that, instead of casting away all our old prejudices, we cherish them to a very considerable degree, and, to take more shame to ourselves, we

cherish them because they are prejudices; and the longer they have lasted and the more generally they have prevailed, the more we cherish them.¹¹

To be sure, certain prejudices are neither good nor bad, but simply necessary for navigating life, for prejudices are essentially the pre-judgements that we form when we reason inductively. For instance, if a study determines that Car A's brakes fail 5% more often than Car B's, then I will be prejudiced against Car A. I cannot be sure that Car A's brakes will fail should I purchase it, but I prefer to acquire Car B, not only owing to my pre-judgement, but also to the trust that I place in the authorities who conducted the study. Everyone reasons in this way, and if they did not, they would likely have very short lives. The same logic applies to cultural institutions. I do not need to personally experiment with every manner of organizing my family—polygamy, polyandry and so forth—to content myself with the monogamic one that has stood the test of time. This is what Burke means when he says that some prejudices should be cherished. And as Tocqueville rightly points out above, it would no doubt be impossible for one man to *individually* arrive at his own conclusion about everything. Hence why the doctrine of individualism, taken to its conclusion, is quite impractical. One would need to be a purely abstract, immortal brain to achieve it.

Let us return to the question at hand: why has Burke's practical approach failed to stand the test of time, and more generally, why are conservative liberals constantly losing ground? By admitting that our cultural institutions reflect our prejudices, albeit good ones, Burke engages in a type of reasoning so commonplace among conservative liberals that history might remember them for nothing else. He embraces the vocabulary of his foes, and therewith their world-view, ceding the war so that he might win a battle. Pursuant to the ideal of Cartesian individualism and the dichotomy between reason and authority, Enlightenment philosophers like Voltaire and the French Encyclopedists spoke endlessly of the evils of national and religious "prejudices." There are no good prejudices after 1789, no matter how necessary they are for life itself. If you wish to preserve cultural institutions like the family, then you must justify them theoretically. Let us not forget that for Aristotle, the monogamous family was not a time-tested prejudice, but instead reflective of the natural order. God and Nature—one must invoke transcendental truths, not "it has worked for a long

time," lest civilization turn into one endless and vain experiment.

Progressive, or Pure Liberalism

Pure or unqualified liberalism, which raises the authority of the abstract individual above all institutions, is clearly incongruent with human nature and our need to make use of external, or supra-individual authority. This is not only borne out by the fact that freedom from cultural authority requires state authority, as already mentioned, but also by the fact that progressive liberals routinely censor scientific research that potentially undermines the abstract individual's supreme authority. An interesting development no doubt, since Descartes originally conceived of his epistemology with the intention of constructing a new foundation for scientific inquiry:

As for the other sciences, to the extent that they borrow their principles from philosophy, I determined that one could not have built anything solid on such shaky foundations...¹²

When scientific investigation reveals that the individualist pursuit of the truth might in some way be preconditioned by supra-individual factors, and its conclusions acquire the weight of scientific authority, then the same dilemma discussed above manifests itself, as we are obliged to accept the prejudices of an authority. Here again, one individual freedom—the freedom to pursue the truth—is suppressed, not in some attack against individualism, but in the name of the ideology itself. Like a bonsai tree, the individual's naughty limbs require frequent pruning.

One paradigmatic example of an institution supposedly dedicated to the liberal values of freedom of thought and expression censoring such research is the case of Noah Carl. In 2019, Carl was stripped of his fellowship at St. Edmund's College of the University of Cambridge when 586 professors from around the world—including universities like Yale, Princeton and Cornell—signed an open letter demanding that Carl's appointment be reconsidered on the grounds that he was engaged in "racist pseudoscience."¹³ In addition, the letter demanded that all universities "[dissociate] themselves from research that seeks to establish correlations between race, genes, intelligence and criminality in order to explain one by the other." The university administration capitulated, despite the fact that no

empirical data was provided to substantiate the claim that Carl's peer-reviewed research constituted "pseudoscience." Carl had even written an article on the ethics of the hereditarian view of human nature, where he affirms his liberal sensibilities by stating that his goal is to avoid ideologies that cause "*material* harm to both individuals and social institutions."¹⁴ None of this mattered of course, for *individualism* does not suffer itself to be preconditioned by any conclusion, even if an *individual* arrived at it through the rigorous and scientific application of its method. Views such as the hereditarian one are now *mala in se* to progressive liberals, who routinely prove their willingness to sacrifice the *individual* in the name of *individualism*.

The Tragedy of American Liberalism

Many conservatives are content to blame the "bloody Marxists and post-modernists," as it were, for empowering the state to intervene in family and community life, and for proscribing independent research in the university. While I do not doubt that certain such individuals have contributed to these practices, it nonetheless remains true that they have been adopted by self-professed liberal nations and universities. Marxists did not pass the Civil Rights Acts, and I would wager that most of those 568 academics consider themselves liberal. Even though such practices harm the individual, they are in theory designed to liberate him from authority. The problem is that more and more authority is paradoxically required to attain this ideal, which always seems to bring us one step forward and two steps back. And just as conservative or classical liberals are wont to blame the Marxists and post-modernists, progressive liberals will attribute the need for such authority to "Whiteness," which, possessing the mystical qualities of original sin, promises to erode liberty unless absolved by acts of penance. My point is that Liberalism is menaced less from without than from within, owing to the limits of its individualist ideal, which Tocqueville identified nearly two centuries ago, but subsequent generations have largely ignored.

Rousseau once compared the march of civilization to the story of Glaucus who, desiring to become a god, instead became a monster.

Conceiving of himself as a purely abstract individual, man seeks to overcome the limits of his mortal condition, accepting no authority other than his reason. When he still remained tethered to God and Nature, liberalism flourished in America, the United Kingdom and Canada. Believing however that it sufficed to inherit such traditions without defending them, the tether snapped. So man surveyed the world from the upper atmosphere, and concluded that it was but one social construct that his infinite reason might reconstruct a thousand times over. Hence, the tragedy began to unfold. But before the gods destroyed Oedipus for his hubris, they humiliated him. Such will be our fate if we do not correct our course. For liberalism shall prescribe ever more authoritarian and censorious practices until, in its final days, individualism becomes the most wretched cage, and every individual is sacrificed upon its altar. Having ruined the very thing it once set out to protect, liberalism seals its tragic fate.

"Gray, my dear friend, is all theory, and green is the golden tree of life," Mephistopheles reminds us in the tragedy of *Faust*.¹⁵ For when ideas are young, they bring forth burgeoning and green life. But once grey wisdom can understand their true nature, then at best they produce no effect, and at worst the opposite of their intention. Such was Hegel's interpretation of the passage, which might equally be applied to the case of liberalism. The question then is whether, under the heaps of grey ash piled high upon our civilization, there still burns an ember heart from which the phoenix might again take flight, or if the sun has finally set in the West.

And I will show you something different from either
Your shadow at morning striding behind you
Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you;
I will show you fear in a handful of dust.¹⁶

¹ Tocqueville, *De la démocratie en Amérique* (Paris: Institut Coppet, 2002), p. 392; my translation.

² Koyré, *Descartes, Philosophical Writings*, trans. E. Anscombe and P.T. Geach (London: Nelson's University Paperbacks, 1979), p. xx.

³ Descartes, *Discours de la méthode* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1923), p. 7

⁴ Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1869), p. 469.

⁵ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 1975), pp. 280 – 281

⁶ Christopher Caldwell, *The Age of Entitlement: America since the Sixties* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020), p. 9.

⁷ Wesley J. Smith, "Canadian Judge Strips Transgender Child's Parents of Rights", in *National Review*, March 6, 2019. <https://www.nationalreview.com/corner/canadian-judge-strips-transgender-childs-parents-of-rights/>

⁸ Tocqueville, *De la démocratie en Amérique*, p. 396; my translation.

⁹ *Ibid.*, footnote #8, p. 567; my translation.

¹⁰ Scruton, *Gentle Regrets: Thoughts from a Life* (London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2005), p. 100.

¹¹ Burke, *Reflections on the French Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 90

¹² Descartes, *Discours de la méthode*, p. 7; my translation.

¹³ "Open Letter: No to Racist Pseudoscience at Cambridge", *Medium*, December 18, 2018. <https://medium.com/@racescienceopenletter/open-letter-no-to-racist-pseudoscience-at-cambridge-472e1a7c6dca>

¹⁴ Noah Carl, "How Stifling Debate Around Race, Genes and IQ Can Do Harm," in *Evolutionary Psychology*, vol. 4, no. 399 – 407 (2018): 399 - 407, p. 403. <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s40806-018-0152-x>

¹⁵ Goethe, *Faust: A Tragedy*, trans. Miss Swanwick (New York: John D. Williams, 1882), p. 498.

¹⁶ T.S. Eliot, *The Wasteland*, ed. Michael North (New York: North & Company, 2001), pp. 5 – 6.