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### The Inevitability of Race Relations in a Democracy:

An analysis of Toqueville's arguments about memory in *Democracy in America*

The first half of *Democracy in America* avoids any discussion of a most crucial aspect of democracy in America: race relations. Tocqueville justifies this omission with a loaded statement that he merely glosses over, seemingly in passing. He throws out the statement that race relations “are like tangents to my subject, being American, but not democratic” (*Democracy in America* Vol. I, Part II, CH. 10, P. 316). Although Tocqueville offers convincing arguments that American ideals exacerbate racial tensions, he does not offer the same convincing arguments that these relations are unique to just America and *not* present in democracy more generally. On the contrary, his definition of democracy that revolves around the idea of *memory* seems to instead reveal the opposite. Analysing Toqueville's first argument that memory is detrimental to equality, his second argument that America relies on memory, and his final argument that democracy cannot exist without this memory, all combine to reveal the inevitability of racial tensions in a democracy that necessarily perpetuates memories that elevate the majority at the expense of the minority.

First, *memory* is detrimental to equality because it promotes rigid inequality of the present based solely upon favourable lands of the past. This concept is most clearly evident in

Tocqueville's opening criticism of attaching memories to land in the form of land inheritance and laws of primogeniture, that both instill a certain "sentiment," "pride," and "ambition" in the land, as a way to "immortalise" man "in his posterity" (56). This "immortalization" is precisely the aristocratic nature that frightens Tocqueville, leading to his ultimate conclusion that democracy must eliminate the association of memory to the lands. He necessitates that democracy eliminates this form of memory when he states, "in the constant state of flux that prevails in a democratic society, the bond that ties generation to generation is loosened or broken. People easily lose track of the ideas of their ancestors or cease to care about them" (484). Therefore, Tocqueville opens his book with the concept of memory as detrimental to a democracy of equal peoples, and something that must be avoided through constant change.

Ironically, he follows this argument with countless examples of America doing exactly the opposite, by instead relying heavily on an attachment between memories and land. The land inheritance of the South is a glaring example of this because it necessarily revolves around primogenitor habits that keep wealth within the white slave-owning families that Tocqueville describes as "an aristocracy body headed by a number of privileged individuals whose wealth was permanent and leisure hereditary" (403). Further, because the institution of slavery was based upon a 16th century form that was "careful to restrict it only to one of the races of man" (393), the memory attached to land became deeply cemented in race, in a way that made it unable to overturn, even in the case that slaves were freed. Tocqueville explains the irreversibility of the memory that this caused, when he explains "the memory of slavery dishonours the race, and the race perpetuates the memory of slavery" (394). Along with slavery in the South, primogenitor habits of the North also attached memories to land. Even though primogenitor laws were abolished through democratic legislature, the custom of providence kept the habits alive in

practice “without offending any principles of justice.” (325). Lastly, in both the North and the South, memory proved a defining feature of democratic elections, with Andrew Jackson as a primary example. Although enlightened members of the union outwardly resented Andrew Jackson, he was nevertheless elected because of “the memory of the victory he won twenty years ago outside the walls of New Orleans” (320). Therefore, Tocqueville shows countless examples of America’s *reliance* on memories being attached to land through his description of the southern institution of slavery, the northern institution of primogeniture habits, and the nationwide preoccupation with land-winnings that decided democratic elections. With these demonstrations, Toqueville effectively presents the convincing argument that American ideals exacerbate racial tensions by perpetuating memories that are directly attached to land.

Although American ideals exacerbate race relations in this way, it is still unclear how this is unique to democracy in America. Toqueville’s concern with the tyranny of the majority seems instead to reveal an inevitability of perpetuated exclusionary memories in *any* democracy, not just in America. The tyranny of the majority is a frightening phenomenon to Tocqueville because it has the ability to perpetuate a memory that can *never* be changed. He states this permanence when he explains that once the majority “has made its mind up about a question, there is nothing that can stop it or even slow it long enough to hear the cries of those whom it crushes in passing” (285). The power of this majority comes directly from the indoctrination of the people that must be coerced into a “faith in the people at large” (492). In fact, the majority must live in “self-adoration” (295), their egos must be inflated to motivate participation (279), and they must be convinced that their civil duties have impacts, even though they are for “appearances only” (317). All of this indoctrination that promotes pride, self-esteem, ego and faith in the majority, combines to create the necessary national memory directly attached to the land they *rule* over. In

a more dystopian way, Toqueville describes this national memory as “a form of religion to which people become attached through practising it” (76). Although Toqueville offers a remedy to this tyranny of the majority through a legislative counter weight (291), he firmly maintains that the legislative or political changes that this counterweight would bring would still have no effect on the permanent national memory. Specifically, he writes that even in the extreme case of a “nation subject to a king in a pure democracy... we may anticipate that faith in common opinion will be some sort of religion, with the majority as its prophet.” (492). Therefore, the indoctrination of the people who form a tyranny of the majority creates a permanent memory that advances the majority, while reducing the minority.

Not only is the tyranny of the majority a seemingly unavoidable threat to equality by perpetuating memories attached to land, even more terrifyingly, Toqueville reveals that the majority is already determined *before* the democracy is even created. He argues that whoever creates the first majority, sets the metric for equality, which naturally excludes the minorities who do not fit the metric at the time of this “point of departure.” Toqueville’s belief in this pre-determination is evident through his continual references to “destiny” in the context of the “point of departure” for Puritans as well as the cornered Native Americans and slaves. In the context of the Puritans, he directly expresses “when I reflect on what this original fact has produced, I see the entire destiny of America embodied in the first puritan to land on its shores, just as the entire human race was embodied in the first man” (322). Similarly, he comes to this same conclusion about the destiny of people in the context of the Native Americans and slaves. He states that all three “naturally distinct” (366) races shared the same land, but each sought “its destiny separately” (366). The destiny of each race does not overlap even through forced inclusionary attempts like assimilation of Native Americans or abolishing slavery. Toqueville

explains that even in the case of this *legal* equality, the Native Americans and former slaves are still “exposed to the tyranny of the laws and intolerance of mores” (405) as outsiders who enjoyed “independence among his equals,” but were forced into a “servile position” among the democratic people. (384). In this way, Toqueville reveals that the man who makes up the first majority gets to determine the destiny of the democracy by creating the standard of “equality.”

Overall, Toqueville’s statement that race relations are “American” and not “democratic,” can not be overlooked, especially given his definition of democracy in which the concept of memory is central. Although it is clear that the American institution of slavery that targeted one specific race, American primogenitor habits that were residual from Britain, and American fixation on land-winnings all exacerbated racial tensions with deep ties of memories to land, it is unclear that this is specifically unique to America and not an effect of democracy. Instead, analysing Toqueville’s early criticisms of associating memory with land, in combination with his later arguments that necessitate the majority associating memory with their land, proves that the two cannot simultaneously occur in a democracy: on the one hand, democracy must entail constant changes that eliminate permanent memories, on the other hand, democracy must encourage permanent memories to indoctrinate the masses into participating. Therefore, in order for democracy to exist and for the masses to have faith in each other, there must necessarily exist a perpetuated memory that advances the majority with pride of their lands. This comes at the inevitable cost of the minority. Lastly, the first majority determines the destiny of democracy. Thus, while there may exist equality within the democracy that includes men of equal conditions, this simultaneously creates an aristocracy with the men who are not originally included in this equality of conditions, making racial tensions inevitable in the formation of a democracy.