

Associations

In *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville devotes, in both the 1835 and 1840 volumes, extensive analysis to the nature and significance of associations in the United States. He was initially struck by the sheer number and variety of associations, both in purpose and size:

“Americans of all ages, all conditions, and all dispositions constantly unite. Not only do they have commercial and industrial associations in which all take part, but they also have a thousand other kinds, religious, moral, serious, futile, general and particular, immense and very small. Americans form associations to give fêtes, found seminaries, build inns, raise churches, distribute books, and send missionaries to the antipodes. In this way, they establish hospitals, prisons, and schools. If a truth is to be made known or a sentiment to be developed with the help of an example, they form an association. Wherever, in France, you would see the government at the head of a new initiative, or, in England, a great nobleman, rest assured that in the United States you will find an association.”

Associations in the United States span all domains; in his reflections on them, Tocqueville conceives of association as a global modality of social life, a societal unit that transcends its internal diversity: civic and political, economic and industrial associations alike. Americans create associations for every purpose, to address immediate needs or pursue lasting objectives, dissolving once those ends are achieved or persisting over time.

Thus, the association becomes a specific model through which democratic societies engage with reality. When a societal issue arises, Americans form associations; in contrast, in France, people instinctively appeal to the State for everything, at all times:

“The first time I heard in the United States that a hundred thousand men had pledged publicly to abstain from strong liquor, I found the notion more amusing than serious, and I did not understand why these temperate citizens could not simply drink water in the privacy of their own homes. I came to understand that these Americans, alarmed by the spread of drunkenness around them, wanted to publicly lend their moral authority to sobriety. They acted precisely as a great nobleman might dress simply to inspire in others disdain for ostentation. One may presume that, had those hundred thousand men lived in France, each of them would have petitioned the government individually to supervise all the taverns of the kingdom.”

For Tocqueville, the existence of associations is essential in democratic regimes, as they safeguard individual freedoms and rights against the potential or actual despotism of the all-powerful State. Associations also serve as antidotes to the withdrawal into oneself that is the natural counterpart of democratic individualism.

In aristocratic regimes, the great possess sufficient individual power to shield themselves from oppression:

“Aristocratic societies always contain, within a multitude of powerless individuals, a small number of citizens who are very powerful and very wealthy; each of these may, by his own means alone, undertake great endeavors. Each forms, as it were, the head of a permanent and forced association composed of all those whom he holds in his dependence, and whom he makes contribute to the execution of his plans.”

By contrast, in democratic societies, associations are both the best remedy against the isolating tendency of democratic individualism, which is the surest accomplice of the State's natural despotism, and the most viable expression of the active citizen, who remains the true guarantor of individual liberty. Moreover, the proliferation of associations creates a network of decentralized entities that counteracts the centralizing tendency of democratic power. Associations are therefore a key component in the balance of powers, providing a counterforce to the State. They constitute one of the first and most vital guarantees of democratic liberty. By uniting divergent energies around a common goal, associations generate a powerful synergy. They prevent citizens from falling prey to factional domination or despotism.

To function, however, associations must make themselves known, must clarify their objectives before public opinion. In this, their purpose partially overlaps with that of the press. Thus, freedom of the press and freedom of association are complementary. Yet unlimited freedom of association, especially in political matters, is not to be conflated with freedom of the press. While the press indeed expresses public opinion, it enters into a dialectical relationship with it and becomes, in this sense, a power. Associations, on the other hand, rely only on themselves.

In a democracy, power must neither fear nor limit the scope and role of associations, for they are the very guarantee of democratic life. Though their presence may seem uncomfortable to rulers in the short term, Tocqueville notes:

“In countries where associations are free, secret societies are unknown. In America, there are factions, but no conspirators.”

Associations, along with the press, are among the only bulwarks against democracy's internal excesses; they are one of the necessary, but not sufficient, conditions of its proper functioning and of the liberties they embody.

Nevertheless, for historical and cultural reasons, Tocqueville knows that in France, the State will always regard unfettered associational freedom with suspicion. That is why he formulates this imperative, which reads like a categorical injunction:

“In democratic countries, the science of association is the mother science; the progress of all the others depends upon the progress of that one.”

And he adds:

“Among the laws that govern human societies, one seems clearer and more precise than all the rest. In order for men to remain civilized, or to become so, the art of association must develop and perfect itself in direct proportion to the growth of equality of conditions.”