

Equality and Liberty

For **Tocqueville**, within the framework of democracy, **equality and liberty form an inseparable pair**, two principles in constant interaction—even though, in earlier periods or different contexts, they may be considered separately, particularly in **non-democratic societies**, where they belong to different and heterogeneous “orders” (in the Pascalian sense).

Tocqueville approaches the question of equality and liberty through a **dialectical and comparative lens**, opposing the aristocratic and democratic societies.

The **liberty/equality dialectic** arises with the democratic social condition, which leads to democratic regimes. It has become the **central issue of democratic societies**, where the two principles form a kind of **twin force**:

“(It is even possible) to imagine an extreme point where liberty and equality meet and merge... When no one differs from his fellow men, no one will be able to exercise tyrannical power; men will be perfectly free because they are entirely equal; and they will be entirely equal because they are perfectly free. This is the ideal toward which democratic peoples tend.”

However, the union of liberty and equality is **not the general rule in democratic societies: equality may not exist in a free society**, just as people **may be equal without being free**. For Tocqueville, in this context, **liberty refers specifically to political liberty**. He continues his analysis:

“This is the most complete form that equality can take on earth; but there are a thousand others that, while less perfect, are scarcely less dear to these peoples.

Equality may be established in civil society without prevailing in the political realm. One may have the right to enjoy the same pleasures, enter the same professions, frequent the same places—in short, to live in the same way and pursue wealth through the same means—without sharing equally in government.

A certain kind of equality may even exist in politics without political liberty. One is the equal of all others, except for one, who is, without distinction, the master of all, and who equally selects his agents from among them all...

Although men cannot become entirely equal without being completely free—and although, therefore, equality in its most extreme form merges with liberty—one is nonetheless justified in distinguishing one from the other.

Liberty has appeared to mankind at different times and in different forms; it has not been tied exclusively to any one social condition, and can be found elsewhere than in democracies. It cannot, therefore, be considered the distinctive feature of democratic ages.”

Liberty and equality are **historically situated** in society, and in the *First Memoir on Pauperism*, Tocqueville offers a near-Rousseauian vision of **equality and the origins of inequality**:

“Equality exists only at the two ends of civilization. Savages are equal because they are all equally weak and ignorant. Highly civilized men can all become equal because they all have at their disposal similar means to achieve comfort and happiness.

Between these two extremes lie inequality of conditions, wealth, knowledge, power for some; poverty, ignorance, and weakness for all the rest.”

Liberty and equality thus **do not have the same weight or influence in the lived experience of democratic societies**. Tocqueville implicitly considers that, in the constitutional monarchies of Europe—especially France—**liberty is primarily a natural value**, one even **inherent to aristocratic society**, whereas it is also, from the outset, **an essential element of democratic society in the United States**:

“Among Americans, it is liberty that is old; equality is comparatively new.

The opposite is true in Europe, where equality, introduced by absolute power and under the watchful eye of kings, had already entered into the habits of the people long before liberty had entered their minds.”

In Europe—and particularly in France—**equality is an ancient value**, developed progressively and continuously since the 12th century, as Tocqueville explains in the introduction to *Democracy in*

America. This evolution was made possible through the alliance between the sovereign and the Third Estate. Since then, kings have acted as **“the most consistent levelers”**:

“Among most modern nations, and particularly among all the peoples of continental Europe, the desire and idea of liberty only began to emerge and develop as conditions started to equalize, and as a consequence of that equality.

It was absolute monarchs who most effectively worked to level the ranks among their subjects.

In these societies, equality preceded liberty; equality was already an established fact when liberty was still new.

One had already created opinions, customs, and laws of its own, while the other was just appearing, for the first time, in broad daylight.

Thus, liberty was still only in people’s minds and tastes, while equality had already penetrated habits, shaped morals, and influenced the smallest actions of daily life.

How, then, can we be surprised if modern people prefer one over the other?”

Tocqueville concludes:

“I believe democratic peoples have a natural taste for liberty. Left to themselves, they seek it, they love it, and they suffer when it is taken from them.

But they have for equality a **fierce, insatiable, eternal, and invincible passion**.

They want equality in liberty; and if they cannot obtain it, they want it still—in slavery.

They will endure poverty, oppression, barbarism—but they will not tolerate aristocracy.”

This is the **natural drift of French society**, embedded in its historical DNA since the Revolution. In his notes for the second volume of *The Old Regime and the Revolution*, Tocqueville points out that as early as 1788, what he calls **“the final word of the Revolution”** had already become a common sentiment:

“Let us strive to be free by becoming equal—but rather a hundred times lose liberty than remain or become unequal.”

Indeed, in modern democracies, there is a **pernicious tendency to sacrifice liberty—first that of others, then one’s own—in favor of equality or security**. The reason is simple: **liberty is demanding**, its inconveniences are immediate, and its benefits long-term. Equality, by contrast, is **more convenient**, and its benefits are **immediately perceptible**.

The *homo democraticus* says:

“Give us equality, and we will release you from liberty,” just as Nietzsche’s *Last Man* says to Zarathustra: “Give us comfort, and we’ll release you from greatness.”

Tocqueville again:

“When no one differs from his fellow men, no one will be able to exercise tyrannical power.

Men will be perfectly free, because they are entirely equal; and they will be entirely equal, because they are perfectly free.

That is the ideal toward which democratic peoples tend...

The defining feature of these centuries is the **equality of conditions**; the dominant passion animating men in these times is **the love of that equality**...

But aside from this, there are many other reasons, in every era, that lead people to prefer equality over liberty.

If a people were ever to attempt to diminish or destroy the equality that exists within them, they would succeed only through long and painful effort.

They would need to alter their social condition, abolish laws, renew ideas, change habits, and transform morals.

But to lose political liberty?

One need only fail to hold onto it—and it disappears.”