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Tocqueville's Critique of Individualism: Relevant Today?

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TOCQUEVILLE'S CRITIQUE OF INDIVIDUALISM: RELEVANT TODAY?

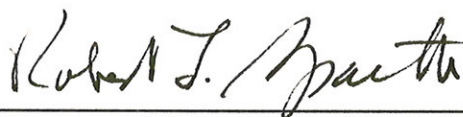
A THESIS
The Honors Program
St. John's University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Distinction "All College Honors"
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In the Department of Government

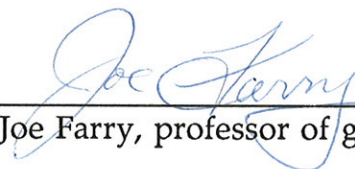
by
Michael G. Atkins
April, 1991

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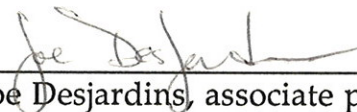
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Introduction

One hundred and fifty-one years ago, Alexis de Tocqueville published the second volume of his celebrated Democracy in America. In it, he analyzed many aspects of American democracy, from women to slavery to tyranny of the majority. Tocqueville also paid close attention to what he termed the phenomenon of individualism. Individualism, he defined, was the individual's withdrawal from society into a microcosm of family and friends. Tocqueville concluded that while always dangerous, the American inclination toward individualism was sufficiently combatted by various community-based institutions inherent to American society.

One hundred-and-fifty years later, social scientists are still evaluating the phenomenon of individualism. Now grown into dominant proportions, individualism today threatens the very future of American democracy. This paper argues that by embracing the same institutions that combatted individualism in Tocqueville's time--the family, community, religion, respect for the past and love of the future, and community mores--Americans can eventually and successfully combat the effects of individualism.

What follows is a modern description of Tocqueville's critique of individualism. This paper is intended for readers who may question the destructiveness of American individualism. To this end, it is more illustrative and less analytical, for example, than Robert Bellah's 1985 book, Habits of the Heart. Instead, its chief aim is to demonstrate by example the overwhelming dominance of individualism in modern American society and to suggest ways for Americans to understand and make use of their intrinsic interconnectedness.

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OSB, who helped fund my summer research, and my advisor, Mr. Robert L. Spaeth, whose time and devotion made this project worthwhile.

Chapter One: Tocqueville's Critique of Individualism

Writing about the influence of democracy on the sentiments of the Americans, Alexis de Tocqueville devoted serious attention to the concept of individualism in American society. "Individualism," he defined, "is a calm and considered feeling which disposes each citizen to isolate himself from the mass of his fellows and withdraw into the circle of family and friends; with this little society formed to his taste, he gladly leaves the greater society to look after itself" (Tocqueville 506).[†]

Given the transitory economic conditions inherent to a democratic, capitalist society, Tocqueville believed that Americans rejected involvement in community life in favor of pursuing individual identity and well-being. What resulted, he feared, was a fragmenting of American society: "Democracy not only makes men forget their ancestors, but also clouds their view of their descendants and isolates them from their contemporaries. Each man is forever thrown back on himself alone, and there is danger that he may be shut up in the solitude of his own heart" (Tocqueville 508). Observing the isolating character of individualism, Tocqueville concluded that it was not only a part of American life, but a serious danger as well.

Tocqueville especially worried about the excessive self-reliance that characterized individualism. He warned his readers that "individualism at first only dams the spring of public virtue, but in the long run it attacks and destroys all others too..." (Tocqueville 507). More specifically, he believed that the deeper individuals withdrew into their circle of family and friends, the more difficult they would later find it to return to the larger society of politics, religion, and education. Tocqueville feared that if individualism became the

[†]All Tocqueville quotations are taken from Democracy in America.

only common element between neighbors, individuals would choose their custom-tailored society over the fundamental principles of democracy.

Fortunately, Tocqueville saw a way for society to combat these dangers. By drawing the individual back into the larger community through the natural workings of the family, community, religion, respect for the past and love of the future, and community mores, Tocqueville believed that citizens would learn to work with one another for mutual benefit and would prevent individualism from ever becoming a distinctively great problem in America. These institutions, he wrote, taught the doctrine he termed "self-interest properly understood" (Tocqueville 525). Self interest properly understood, or "enlightened self interest," as Tocqueville termed it, served to direct the self-reliance of individualism to the higher plane of the common good. As Tocqueville explained it, "...in the end one comes to believe that by serving his fellows man serves himself and that doing good is to his private advantage" (Tocqueville 525). At the time of his writing, Tocqueville was pleased to observe that this doctrine for the most part "has come to be universally accepted" in America. "It has become popular," he said (Tocqueville 526).

Following is an analysis of Tocqueville's assessment of individualism in America, along with a discussion of self-interest and community participation, broken down into five categories based on those identified by Tocqueville scholar Roger Boesche (1988):

The Family

Tocqueville saw the American family as an institution which regularly involved individuals in matters other than their own. For this reason, he saw the family as a first and limited defense against the ills of individualism.

He wrote that self-interest was usually left out of family relationships, for "not interest...but common memories and the unhampered sympathy of thoughts and tastes draw brothers...to one another. Their inheritance is divided, but their hearts are free to unite" (Tocqueville 589). For this reason, Tocqueville believed that families served to combat feelings of individualism, and especially egoism. Families, however, did little to teach proper self-interest and sometimes even served as the hub of an individualistic society. As Tocqueville wrote, "Democracy loosens social ties, but it tightens natural ones. At the same time as it separates citizens, it brings kindred closer together" (Tocqueville 589). To this extent, the family even fostered individualism; it became the very enclave individualists sought when retreating from the outer community. Yet, Tocqueville believed that the family was intrinsically an unselfish institution and helped direct individual interest from the self to the benefit of the larger community.

Community

Contrasted with the family, Tocqueville saw one's community as more important to combatting individualism and teaching the doctrine of self-interest properly understood. The individual's participation in community life is complex and multi-dimensional, but like the more limited role of the family, the community's chief purpose was to encourage individuals to consider interests other than their own. According to Tocqueville, significant involvement in community life was important on both the neighborhood level, as well as on the city, state and national level. On both scales, Tocqueville believed politics to be the central activity in community life and thought it did much to teach individuals to see beyond their own selfish interests.

On the neighborhood level, free institutions like the school board and the city council served to bring individuals together in the political arena. Tocqueville used the example of a man who wanted his town to build a road adjacent to his property. After petitioning the city council as a taxpayer, he is ignored. But once he rallies the support of his neighbors, the man approaches the council again, who this time agrees to build the road for the neighbors' benefit. United together, the man and his neighbors are rewarded twofold: first with the benefit of accessibility to the highway, and second with the understanding that cooperation and community action are more effective than individuals acting alone. The man also learns the connection between his self-interest and the common good, seeing "at once that this small public matter has a bearing on his greatest private interests, and there is no need to point out to him the close connection between his private profit and the general interest" (Tocqueville 511).

Tocqueville suggested that free institutions combatted the ill effects of individualism because of their bonding effect on ordinary citizens. When the people who make up a neighborhood have to look after its well-being, he wrote, "the same people are always meeting, and they are forced, in a manner, to know and adapt themselves to one another" (Tocqueville 511). Bonding between neighbors naturally follows, since democratic people are hesitant to give trust freely, and are therefore willing to perform what Tocqueville described as "a long succession of little services rendered and of obscure good deeds" (Tocqueville 511). This process, he believed, enlightened one's individual pursuit of self-interest.

Free associations were another vehicle for individuals to participate in the local community. Borrowing the same idea that proved effective while lobbying for the road, Tocqueville saw that Americans "...can hardly do

anything for themselves, and none of them is in a position to force his fellows to help him. They would all therefore find themselves helpless if they did not learn to help each other voluntarily" (Tocqueville 514). For this reason, Tocqueville believed that citizens habitually began to come together when they wanted to get something accomplished.

The nature of voluntary associations also lent itself to increasing participation on the state and national level. Since "In a democracy an association cannot be powerful unless it is numerous," it naturally sought to enlist others who would also work for their cause" (Tocqueville 518). Newspapers promoted this widening of community participation by disseminating timely information and commentary to thousands of readers at once. Tocqueville applauded newspapers for fulfilling the citizens' need for "...talking every day without seeing one another and of acting together without meeting" (Tocqueville 518). The newspapers' editorial pages motivated individuals--oftentimes across state borders--to join associations and help widen their base of support. He saw the increased participation newspapers brought to associations as a practical way to teach enlightened self-interest to citizens on a large scale.

Tocqueville believed that political associations on the national level were especially effective at teaching individuals to combine their self-interest with the common good. Small-scale associations, spurred on by the press, merged with one another to increase their political power. These state and national organizations were important, Tocqueville wrote, because only they were able to properly relate political issues to the individual. "In politics men combine for great ends, and the advantages gained in important matters give them a practical lesson in the value of helping one another even in lesser affairs," he said (Tocqueville 521). Though working on a much grander scale,

citizens in large political associations learned roughly the same lesson as the citizens who worked together to get the road built: that there were more important pursuits than merely furthering one's own interest. In sum, Tocqueville praised the political association because it "...draws a lot of people at the same time out of their own circle; however much differences in age, intelligence, or wealth may naturally keep them apart, it brings them together and puts them in contact. Once they have met," he said, "they always know how to meet again" (Tocqueville 521). They continue to meet because it is in their interest.

Religion

Tocqueville also believed that religion played a role in dampening individual self-interest. Though Americans were first drawn to religion out of their singleminded desire to get to heaven, priests, Tocqueville said, were "continually coming down to earth," to teach individuals that there was more to life than simply following one's own personal interests (Tocqueville 530). Every Sunday Tocqueville saw ministers call on their congregations for richer community life and more cooperation between individuals. Since he believed (like Tocqueville) that economic forces conflicted with religious forces, they did their best to squelch the individualistic desire for material goods and isolation from others. In Tocqueville's estimation, they were successful. In the rugged west, for example, he was pleased to see "Whole families, old men, women, and children, cross difficult country and make their way through untamed forests to come great distances" to worship (Tocqueville 534). In sum, Tocqueville believed that religion succeeded "in struggling successfully with that spirit of individual independence which is its most dangerous enemy" (Tocqueville 449).

Respect for the Past, Love of the Future

With the constant drive to satisfy immediate desires, Tocqueville believed, individualism inevitably locked one into the present. Any force that diverted attention from what was presently at hand, therefore, served to restrain individualism. Remembering one's ancestors and following social tradition, for example, restrained self-interest by illustrating the interdependence inherent to community life. It also greatly increased the number of opportunities for individuals to leave their personal enclaves and through a shared memory, connect with someone in the outside community. That first connection, Tocqueville wrote, is an important step to understanding one's self-interest and involving oneself more fully in community life. Love of the future likewise drew individuals out of isolation by emphasizing its long-term logical conclusion: solitude. When individuals looked to the future, they saw themselves living and interacting with others, rather than being separate and alone. Tocqueville argued that although this vision may at first include only the individualistic microcosm of family and friends, he believed that over time it would mature into a more natural desire for community life. Together, Tocqueville thought that proper respect for the past and love of the future directed democratic citizens to follow their aristocratic counterparts who "...frequently sacrifice...personal gratifications to those who went before and to those who come after" (Boesche 1989, 37).

Mores

Tocqueville was less confident that laws themselves would be able to teach proper self-interest. Though an effective weapon against the encroachment on personal rights, the written law by itself was harmless

against the legal pursuit of self-interest and individual isolation. Tocqueville instead counted more heavily on the mores of society to combat the drift toward individualism. Mores, he explained, covered "the whole moral and intellectual state of a people" (Tocqueville 287). These community-wide "habits of the heart" kept individuals from pursuing self-interests contrary to the common good with the unspoken threat of ostracism. Tocqueville believed that if society's consensus opinion frowned on the pursuit of self-interest, individuals, desiring community acceptance, would eventually reform their ways to the tastes of their neighbors. In America, Tocqueville wrote, "The master no longer says: 'Think like me or you die.' He does say: 'You are free not to think as I do...but from this day you are a stranger among us. You can keep your privileges in the township, but they will be useless to you...'" (Tocqueville 255). Applying these thoughts on tyranny of the majority to the role of society's mores, it is clear that if individualism became socially unacceptable, individual self-interest would broaden to include the common good. Though Tocqueville was ambiguous as to what extent mores effectively checked individualism, he did state that they were "the only tough and durable power on a people" and hinted that they played one of the key roles in teaching proper self-interest (Boesche 1988, 38).

Conclusion: Tocqueville's Critique of Individualism

Tocqueville believed that the individual pursuit of self-interest and the systematic withdrawal from the larger society were permanent fixtures in American life. If not checked, however, individualism could stunt community participation, weaken the American social fabric, and even extinguish the same democratic forces that made individualism possible. Yet, through the family, community, religion, respect for the past, love of the

future, and community mores, Tocqueville argued that citizens could learn to combat individualism by adopting the doctrine of self-interest properly understood: working together for mutual interest and the common good. Families supported this aim by teaching selflessness. Associations and religion taught individuals to respect the interests of others and showed them the benefit of mutual cooperation. Respect for the past and love of the future placed the individual in a context broader than the largely self-focused present. Mores acted to temper radical tendencies toward individualism and strengthen participation in community life. Together, these factors persuaded Tocqueville that individualism, though always powerful, did not pose an overwhelming threat to American society.

Chapter Two: The Modern Critique of Individualism

Introduction: Individualism in Modern Times

It has been a century-and-a-half since Tocqueville published Democracy in America. Since then, we have seen industrialization, urbanization, immigration, a population explosion, the end of slavery, a civil war, and two World Wars. Given the evolution of social conditions, we need to ask, what influence does individualism have today? In contrast to Tocqueville's optimism, scholars agree that individualism in the twentieth century has grown to become a significant threat. Popularly dubbed the "me" generation, some highly visible circles of today's young adults have so stressed the pursuit of self-interest that their personal identity has become associated solely with the type of car they drive, the sushi bar they lunch at, and the acronym that best fits their lifestyle: Yuppie (young urban professional), NYPNS (neat young person in neat situation), or DINK (double-income, no kids). More common, however, has been the individual's drive for increased freedom and security through financial independence and social standing. Many of these Americans also spend a significant amount of time bettering society through various volunteer organizations. But, in general, the alluring lifestyle of the upwardly mobile and the increased leisure of the financially independent have motivated Americans today in greater numbers than ever before to choose the success of the individual over the common good of the community.

The Current Dominance of Individualism

Many contemporary psychologists, political scientists, sociologists, and laymen agree that individualism is dominant in modern American society. Social psychologist Alan Waterman, for instance, suggests that in the 1970s,

"we saw a psychological turning inward toward private concerns and personal gratifications" (Waterman 3). For the first time, he writes, the popular press began to address the issues of individualism, calling the 1970s the "me decade" and the decade of the "new narcissism." Another social psychologist, Alex Inkeles, cites similar results from studies conducted in the 1960s and 1970s: "Instead of God or luck, the great majority of Americans still believe that it is only a person's own efforts that account for success or failure in life" (Inkeles 30). In one 1964 study he cites, only one percent of Americans polled attributed their success to luck or fate, compared to an average of 30 percent in six developing countries, and a high of 53 percent in Bangladesh (Inkeles 30). In a 1971-1972 survey of blue-collar workers, more than 80 percent denied that "bad luck, growing up poor, or...being discriminated against" was responsible for their present economic condition (Inkeles 31). According to Inkeles, "What is notable in these spontaneously offered explanations for personal success and failure is that they do not put blame outside, on the society or on social conditions, but rather place the blame inside the person...," as if to say "What happens to me is my own doing" (Inkeles 31). Focusing on these individualistic tendencies, psychologist E. E. Sampson concludes that "Our culture emphasizes individuality, in particular a kind of individual self-sufficiency that describes an extreme of the individualistic dimension" (Waterman 71).

Many political scientists also concur that individualism in America has grown into a dominant force. In his 1988 book, Middle American Individualism, political thinker Herbert Gans describes the tendencies of what he terms middle Americans: everyday blue- and white-collar workers with average schooling and moderate incomes. According to his study, individualism is "...probably the most widely shared ideology in the U.S."

(Gans 1). He argues that middle Americans pursue individualism primarily as a means of attaining freedom. Individuals commonly isolate themselves from society, therefore, because separation makes it easier for them to avoid "involuntary conformity, whether it is required by the family, neighbors, or the government" (Gans 2). Whenever possible, he notes, middle Americans "hope to be free to choose goods, services, and ideas...so they can learn their own needs and begin to be able to achieve as many as reasonably possible" (Gans 2). Theologian and political scientist Douglas Sturm, however, writes that this flight from community involvement instead has ironically diminished individual freedom. "Given the full iconoclastic force of modernity," he states, "each individual remains in isolation, vulnerable to the sufferings of meaninglessness. Save for rare moments...the public realm, the realm of practical freedom, is a mirage" (Sturm 14).

Individualism in American society has never been more closely monitored than in the field of sociology. According to sociologist Robert Bellah, co-author of the influential 1985 book, Habits of the Heart, "Individualism lies at the very core of American culture" (Bellah 1985, 142). He states that individualism today springs from the drive for increased freedom and security. Convinced that they can buy their way out of ordinary social commitments, middle Americans seek lucrative jobs and financial independence. Once they attain financial security, Bellah believes, they ironically either acquire lifestyles beyond their means necessitating even more lucrative jobs, or they distance themselves from society by spending their newfound leisure time in isolation. "Most people have been sold a bill of goods by our system," says Marra James, one of Bellah's interviewees. "I call it the Three C's: cash, convenience, consumerism. It's getting worse. The reason you don't feel a part of it is that nobody is a part of it. Loneliness is a

national feeling" (Bellah 1985, 158). Theologian Thomas Schindler adds that "The ideal now is not success in one's career or financial standing but a life rich in experience, open to all kinds of people, luxuriating in the sensual as well as the intellectual, above all a life of strong feeling" (Schindler 43-44). Although it is evident that some Americans prefer to transfer their financial independence into time working with volunteer groups in their community, in general sociologists agree that individuals in modern society have changed their emphasis "from concerned citizen to individual seeking career success or fulfilling personal experience," which inevitably "loosens the individual's connection with society" (Schindler 44).

Studs Terkel's interviews with ordinary citizens provide yet another case that individualism today is on the rise. In Terkel's 1988 book, The Great Divide, master's degree candidate John Duffy, for example, observes that many of his friends from the South Bronx are too busy with work and home life to be very active in their neighborhood community. Instead of succumbing to the materialistic life of the upwardly mobile, Duffy's friends simply "...have family concerns, the kids, bills, all that stuff. They just aren't active as they once were" (Terkel 301).^{*} Ed Novak, a Ku Klux Klan recruiter, targets the many Americans who demonstrate similar tendencies: "Joe Six-Pack" sits at home and watches television,

drinks his beer and he pays his bills. He's concerned about his mortgage, his car payment, what time he'll get to work, and that's it. He's not concerned about what really goes on around him, as long as it doesn't affect Joe Six-Pack. We wanna reach his kids" (Terkel 293).

Former civil rights activist Timuel Black also notes the wide scale pursuit of self-interest: "I'm talking of college kids," he says. "There is ambivalence and

^{*}All Terkel quotations are taken from The Great Divide.

confusion. A self-centeredness that is frightening... A lack of trust [also] has come into being, not just at older people but among themselves" (Terkel 278).

The many interviews in Terkel's book illustrate two interconnected themes of modern individualism studied by today's social scientists: the need for self-reliance and responsibility, and the drive for comfort and independence. According to Mary Gonzales, associate director of a local community organization, individualism has edged out neighborly trust as the prevalent force in modern society. "[Trust] is what's missing in our society today," she states. "This whole drive to individualism. People don't know one another on the street. Afraid to get to know" (Terkel 77). A young commodities broker echoes her observation:

You can't trust a lotta people. It upsets me. I don't care how well you know somebody, you can't trust them. I know, I've found that out anybody else (Terkel 131-2).

This rejection of trust is indicative of the individual's rejection of outside assistance.

Individuals in modern times generally view themselves as independent, removed from society and solely responsible for their individual condition. "Self-centeredness and selfishness has become the farmer's way of life out here, instead of neighborliness, conservation, and families," comments Lou Anne King, a Minnesota farm advocate (Terkel 85). "I don't hear a solitary farmer say, if we had organized and fought those responsible, we wouldn't be in trouble today. They say, If I would have farmed a little bit better..." (Terkel 86). Mary Gonzales also speaks in Inkeles' language: "There's another isolation: within ourselves. We feel incompetent. I lost my job at Wisconsin because I'm worthless. If I had more

skills... Instead of saying, It's Chase Manhattan that created Wisconsin Steel's closure, it's not you" (Terkel 77).

Individuals in America today seek comfort as well as independence from the outside community. The first value, comfort, is a constituent of the American dream. Individuals who function in capitalist societies expect a reward for their efforts. For some, the reward is the prestige of good social standing. For others, it is time spent vacationing with family and friends. Underlying the benefits of these rewards is a pronounced desire for comfort. According to Ray Scholl, an independent insurance broker, "When I was ten years old, I had a paper route. My dream was to reach the comfort zone" (Terkel 70). Today, "All I wanna do is be comfortable." (Terkel 71). Scholl's feeling is not unique. Individuals throughout The Great Divide rank comfort at the top of their priorities. Laborer Brian Devlin's goal, for example, is to "Have my family, take it light, and maybe have the enjoyment of a little cottage in Wisconsin" (Terkel 197). Karen Ballard, fund raiser for a nationwide charitable organization, in retrospect even admits choosing comfort over the prospect of improving society: "When I got this job twelve years ago, I thought I could change things within the system. What happened is that I became part of the system. I found it very comfortable. I viewed myself as a career woman. I had my little briefcase. I had a nice apartment. I liked it" (Terkel 215).

Like their drive for comfort, individuals in modern times also pursue freedom and independence. They believe that although American citizens are guaranteed freedom under the Bill of Rights, the reality of capitalist economics dictates that individuals hold steady jobs, keep fixed residences, and save their earnings for future security. Many Americans, for this reason, believe that their unstable financial condition actually precludes true

freedom. Eighteen-year-old Mike Royce, for instance, believes that "...once I get money, I don't need anything else. I don't think money's too important, it's just you gotta have it in order to live" (Terkel 61). Larry Moran, agricultural assistant at the Chicago Board of Trade, echoes, "I do want to make money. Most people do... 'Cause money in our society is power, freedom" (Terkel 142).

Probably today's most visible champion of this type of economic freedom is the economist Milton Friedman. Friedman believes that government in today's society impinges on one's personal freedom by dictating that individuals pay taxes. Americans argue that economic constraints likewise impinge on the freedom of the sixty-year-old man who can't afford to retire. Or the factory worker who can't take a week's vacation. As an economic philosopher, Friedman's solution to the problem is to create a laissez-faire society. Middle America's solution to the problem, however, is much more practical and immediate. Rather than objecting to society's principles of economic distribution, individuals choose to embrace them in an attempt to become independent and free.

The Dangers of Individualism

Unrestrained, the current dominance of individualism threatens to erode the quality of life in our society. Today the threat seems much more powerful than it did to Tocqueville in the 1830s. Social psychologists offer many vivid scenarios for the effect of individualism on modern society, ranging from diminished confidence in our civilization to cultural narcissism. As one psychologist suggests, individualism at its most extreme would eventually require citizens to reject democracy in favor of a "strong, autocratic governance to control their [individualistic] appetites" (Sampson

quoted in Waterman, 779). A more likely and equally serious effect of individualism, however, is the increased failure of government social policy.

"In the long run," Sampson asks,

how can a society manage its complex problems of energy and population policy and its welfare programs, for example, while supporting so individualistic an outlook? How can a democratic system of governance survive when collective interests and recognition of vital interdependencies are felt to be too constraining?" (Sampson quoted in Waterman, 780).

Summarizing the modern critics of individualism, Waterman states that the consensus among social psychologists is that singleminded pursuit of self-interest is destructive to American society. "Not only is it claimed that individualist values do not promote the general good," he says,

it is also held that they do not provide personal benefits. The paradoxical result of the pursuit of self-realization and self-interest is that, at the end, the individual stands alone, isolated and alienated, both victimizer and victim (Waterman 9).

This is pure Tocqueville, 150 years later.

Combatting Individualism

Institutions that combat individualism do exist in modern times. In general, the structure of these bodies is sufficiently strong to teach enlightened self-interest, but free institutions today lack the broad appeal necessary to keep individualism in check. The mores of society, furthermore, not only approve of individualism, but in many cases encourage it. At the same time, however, there is reason for hope that individualism may in the future come under control: thousands of people currently volunteer their services to help fight disease, shelter the homeless, and feed the hungry. There are also thousands of burgeoning volunteer organizations in every part of the country. And with the advance of scientific technology, many

Americans continue to learn the necessity of interdependence, even on an international scale. Modern society, therefore, is at a something of a crossroads. As Terkel puts it in the introduction to his book,

Things can go either way. There may be a shaft of awareness sifting through. There are such signs. There may be a sharpening of elbows. There are such signs. There was a phrase in vogue during World War Two, shortly before the Normandy invasion: Situation Fluid. It is so now as it was then" (Terkel 16).

Following is an assessment of individualism in modern times. Since the analysis is well suited to the structure of the preceding chapter, it is similarly broken down into sections on the family, community, religion, love of the future and respect for the past, and society's mores.

Family

Though sometimes a powerful social force, the family in modern times enjoys only moderate success in its struggle against individualism. Today, the family affects individuals in a positive manner by instilling in its members unselfish values and a sense of interdependence. Individualistic forces in recent years, however, have diminished familial success by eroding its geographic stability. Individuals, as Terkel states, are putting "distance between themselves and their parents in part because the jobs have...been moving out," but also because they wish to sever unwanted family ties (Terkel 15). The families that remain, furthermore, are being strained by current economic conditions. The family farm, for example, once an important social structure, is now being forced out of business by the corporate farm. Farm lawyer Lynn Hayes is characteristically angry at the current trend: "We have Reagan telling us how important the American family is and yet his administration is destroying the most stable family there

is: the farm family, working the land, staying together," she says. "There never have been so many rural divorces... They're having what they never had before: violence in schools, child abuse, drugs and alcohol. We're talking about the heart of America" (Terkel 96). Even in the face of such hardship, however, many families in modern times still struggle to stay together and teach enlightened self-interest. But since "Many values of popular individualism are familistic, with control, security, comfort, and convenience being sought for the family," the family's positive influence has lost much of its power (Gans 3).

Community

The strongest potential check on individualism in twentieth century America is an active participation in community life. Though currently not broadly effective enough to oppose individualism as the dominant social force, free associations do much to bolster community participation and teach individuals the practical relevance of the common good. Judging by the number of Americans active in various associations, however, participation is only moderate. A 1986 Gallup poll, for instance, reveals that 39 percent of those surveyed were involved in "charitable or social service activities, such as helping the poor, the sick or the elderly" (Terkel 37). Though their participation bases are limited, these activities are diverse, widespread, and often yield immediate results. Frank Lumpkin, a displaced steel worker, for example, formed the "Save Our Jobs Committee" and now feeds and counsels families who were financially dependent on Wisconsin Steel. Mary Gonzales' mother founded a school for retarded children, and within fifteen years the \$10,000 facility exploded into a first-rate school now worth over \$1.7 million. Maria Elena Rodriguez-Montes took a stand against the

multinational Waste Management Company. Thanks to her efforts, her Southeast Side of Chicago neighborhood is today free from a 289 acre toxic waste dump. These examples of participation in the community are representative because free associations typically spring out of one's self-interest. And because they divert attention from the self to the success of the project, volunteer associations today are also effective at combatting individualism.

At the same time, the dominance of individualism in modern America draws many away from community participation. The popularity of the personal stereo, the video cassette recorder, and the home gymnasium, for example, demonstrates the potential for individualism to undermine community involvement. According to Herbert Gans, "...goods can be taken home and used privately, freeing people from undesired contact with others. The VCR is a perfect illustration; people can now obtain movies they can watch in the privacy of their own home rather than in a public theater, by themselves or with friends" (Gans 32). Retired steel worker Cliff Mazo agrees. Instead of participating in community-centered activities, "...you got your head stuck in that TV. You put a little plastic swimming pool out in the back yard, so your kids don't associate with the neighborhood kids... I can take care of myself, my family" (Terkel 171). In this sense, the current drive toward individualism keeps community activity down to a modest number of participants.

Consistent with the lack of interest in community activity is a strikingly low level of political participation in modern American society. According to a June 1990 report released by the Times Mirror Center for the People and the Press, a public-opinion research group, contemporary citizens are "indifferent toward public affairs--to politics, to government..." (The

Atlanta Journal and Constitution 1990). This assessment holds true for many of Terkel's interviewees. According to high school student Charlie Waters, for example, "the majority of people at school are just kinda apathetic about all the political stuff..." (Terkel 402). Isabelle Kuprin, copy editor for an advertising agency, agrees. "It's hard to get the energy to care," she says.

It's too hard to live your life, get to the bank, and talk to the dry cleaners and then sit down and learn what a nuclear plant is all about and how you can help. Even though it's to your benefit, it's easy to go-- Well, someone else will take care of it (Terkel 139).

The notable exception to this attitude is the significant level of participation in volunteer organizations. But over all, the dominance of individualism today drives citizens into isolation and political unconcern.

Political indifference is apparent in America's decreasing participation in the democratic process. Only fifty percent of those between 18 and 24 voted in the 1972 national election, the first time much of the age group was eligible (The Atlanta Journal and Constitution 1990). By 1988, that figure had dropped to 36 percent. Overall, voting statistics in 1988 dropped to a 64-year low of 50.2 percent, and two years earlier, to an off-year low of 37.6 percent. This trend promises to continue: "This fall [1990] an estimated 110 million to 120 million Americans, nearly two-thirds of the electorate, will not vote--the largest group of nonvoters in U.S. history" (Taylor 6). The decline of voters undoubtedly in part led another research group, People for the American Way, to conclude that there is "a citizenship crisis" in which "America's youth are alarmingly ill-prepared to keep democracy alive in the 1990s and beyond" (The Atlanta Journal and Constitution 1990). They are ill-prepared because they are individualistic.

Political indifference is also connected to the negative perception of politics. Though not many today would claim that the number of political

candidates is in decline, many still view politics as a corrupt and unsafe profession. "I don't have any super expectations for anything anyone is doing politically at this point," Patt Shaw says. "Maybe that's why I'm removed from it. If you don't get involved, you don't get hurt" (Terkel 261). Engineer Nancy Miles is equally wary. Her father "Lost his job, lost all their money, lost everything..." because of his political activity during the McCarthy era (Terkel 326). When she herself became involved in politics, Miles' father warned her: "...you're on somebody's list. You're gonna find out later in life that you've been on somebody's list and you're gonna lose your job or something's gonna happen to you" (Terkel 326). This belief is not pervasive in mainstream politics, but many individuals do feel the possibility that political activity could blacklist them among their friends, family, or employer on one pole, or organized crime or the Federal Bureau of Investigation on the other. In either case, the easy association of political activity with physical or social harm undoubtedly turns some highly qualified candidates away from careers in politics and scores of voters from the polls.

More pervasive is the feeling that politics in modern America is corrupt. Ranging from the recently publicized and widely-condemned lawbreaking and ethics bending of Oliver North, James Wright, and David Durenberger to the scandals involving Presidents Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan, many perceive politics as being an unclean activity. Headlines in newspapers and lead stories on television newscasts also lead individuals to believe that scandals such as Abscam, Wedtech, Watergate, Iran-Contra, and now HUD and Savings and Loan taint in some way virtually every politician and every political office. Bob Eckhardt, once a congressman himself, admits that "The scandals, open or secret, are happening so regularly, it's as if one is constantly irritated by a blow on the shins to a point where he's no longer

sensitive... The violations have been unprecedented in their repetitiousness. People have lost their sense of outrage" (Terkel 367). The Atlanta Journal and Constitution, furthermore, confirms that this belief is widespread: "Not one of the young people interviewed...had a good word to say about politics or politicians," it writes.

But unlike older people, who often express anger about news about sloth or corruption in government, these young people seem simply to be reporting it as a well-known fact (The Atlanta Journal and Constitution 1990).

Given these conditions, it is not surprising that participation in the American democratic process is presently unpopular.

The new special-interest orientation of today's political scene further defeats political participation as a means of opposing individualism. Instead of learning interdependence and enlightened self-interest through political parties, individuals in modern times often join parties or interest groups solely to advance their personal agenda. The issues of abortion, gun control, and tax policy are presently creating rifts in America's two political parties. In the Democratic Party, for example, pro-choice advocates across the country have rejected otherwise promising candidates because of their stand on the issue of abortion. Ignored are their promises for environmental protection, consumer advocacy, or welfare reform. "When I was first elected," Republican Congressman Bill Frenzel confirms,

the most powerful political forces in my state were the Democrats and the Republicans. Now, they are the Minnesotans for Life, the AFL-CIO and the National Education Association. They have legitimate claims on the process, but all of them operate under a much smaller umbrella than the parties (Taylor 6).

Special-interest politics of this kind also troubles Bob Eckhardt, for he believes it lacks the broad vision necessary to address the full scope of social policy:

"It's a very narrow special concern," he says. "The new wave of congressmen is much more cautious. There is no broad concern" (Terkel 365). The cause is the dominance of individualism. According to Herbert Gans, special issue politics began partly as a "result of the availability of computerized mailing lists, but, except among religious fundamentalists, it also reflects the shift from supporting party issues to supporting individually chosen ones" (Gans 18). Special-issue politics, therefore, undermines the forces in politics today which previously served to oppose individualism. Even strengthened by the moderate (albeit dedicated) participation in voluntary associations, it is clear that community participation is not yet an effective opposition to the dominance of individualism in modern society.

Religion

Religion in contemporary America, is once again becoming increasingly influential and dynamic. Against the forces of individualism, however, religion today falls short, as churches across the country reject community values in favor of increased membership. Membership, indeed, is high, with 66 percent of Americans professing allegiance to a church or synagogue and 40 percent attending a weekly service. Ninety-five percent of Americans, furthermore, acknowledge a belief in God, and 90 percent express a religious preference. According to these figures, "...the United States is the most religious society in the modern industrial world" (Bellah 1987, 322). Fundamentalist preacher Jerry Falwell even goes so far to say that "...America has more God-fearing citizens per capita than any other nation on earth" (Falwell quoted in Bellah 1987, 361). The manner in which Americans express their belief, however, is increasingly individual-based. Though participation in traditional forms of Christianity still outnumber other forms

of religion in America, new fundamentalism in modern times is quickly on the rise. Televangelists each week preach the fundamentalist message to millions of viewers who receive their religious direction without even leaving the home. This message, by many accounts, is wholesome and comforting, and focuses on individual fulfillment. "You don't have to learn anything before you listen to these television programs," comments Methodist minister Roy Larson. "You do not have to have mastered the liturgy. It's fast food. It's just there, it's bland, it's inoffensive, it fills you up for a while. And it helps. Sadly" (Terkel 210-11). These new religions, almost by definition, are individualistic. They center around the individual's personal relationship with God, and accordingly treat their members as a collection of individual worshipers instead of a worshiping community. According to Herbert Gans, "Religious faith has become privatized, individualized, in effect, 'invisible.' That is the new form of religion in modern times" (Gans 15). A good though extreme example of this new form of religion, with variations estimated at over 220 million in America, is "Sheilaism," the religion of Sheila Larson, a young nurse. "I can't remember the last time I went to church," she states. "My faith has carried me a long way. It's Sheilaism. Just my own little voice" (Bellah 1985, 221). Religions of this kind--extreme, but not uncommon--demonstrate the dominance of the individual over the community in American religion.

The influential teaching of the Catholic monk Virgil Michel, OSB, warns Americans about individualistic religion like Sheilaism. He argues in a 1935 essay that the liturgy--the community participation in holy communion--is the most important function of religion. By participating in the liturgy, he says, Roman Catholics can together learn enlightened self-interest: "The early Christians understood this very well. And therefore they

had no difficulty in transferring this intimate fellowship of love that was wrought among them in holy Communion into every action of their daily lives" (Michel 6). Michel's words, though first spoken to Roman Catholics, underscore in a broad, modern context the tangible importance of community in religion. Still influential today, Michel provides hope that religion can again combat the dangers of individualism. Given religion's present cooption of individualism, however, there is little hope that religion today can effectively teach the doctrine of self-interest properly understood.

Respect for the Past, Love of the Future

Americans have a similarly individualistic approach to time. Rather than learning to broaden their outlook by respecting the past and loving the future, the majority of individuals today concentrate only on what is immediately at hand. Like Congressman Philip Crane's father, who stressed the importance of the present when teaching psychology to salesmen, "People [today] are saying: ME, HERE, NOW" (Terkel 371). This self-oriented attitude locks one into the present and makes secondary the values of history, tradition, and memory. Reflecting on this trend, Terkel notes that "With exceptions..., there emerges, to an alarming degree, a collective Alzheimer's disease. Yesterday's headline is forgotten as a new one is emblazoned today" (Terkel 4). Other interviews in his book make Terkel's point even more clear: "What shocked me was my students knew nothing about the sixties...", says cartoonist and art teacher Art Spiegelman. "I had to go back and explain how people were protesting against the Vietnam War, and that there was a drug culture, that there was a movement toward sexual liberation. I was talking as if I were from another planet" (Terkel 35). The Methodist minister Roy Larson agrees that young adults today lack the tools necessary to the past:

Our schools are turning out technicians who have no sense of history. You can get a master's in journalism without knowing anything of cultural and social history...You've bought the trappings. It's like buying a Brooks Brothers suit and thinking you're a traditionalist. You can't purchase tradition. You have to earn it and acquire it slowly (Terkel 212).

By these accounts, history for many people in contemporary America consists of fuzzy remembrances of events gone by. And there seems to be little indication that individuals are willing to let history expand their vision and combat individualism.

America's expectations of the future is roughly divided into two camps: those who believe it is primarily nuclear weapons and foreign policy that affect their future, and those who believe that economic conditions and domestic policy are most important. Among those in the former group, hope is rising. Only two years after 1988 statements like "...this earth is not gonna last much longer" (Terkel 62), and "Ernie assumes there will be a nuclear war..." (Terkel 59), America has celebrated the fall of communism in eastern Europe and the end of the cold war. Americans in this group love the future, and the interdependence and cooperation they recently witnessed in eastern Europe has given them direction and motivation to combat individualism in this country. The latter group, however, is less optimistic. Individualists themselves, these middle Americans for the most part look negatively on the future because they predict tougher economic times. Sandy Scholl, owner of a commercial cleaning service, states the typical view that "No matter how well you do, you're never quite able to stay ahead. It's harder and harder for the average person to attain the average American dream" (Terkel 69).

Washington Post staff writer Paul Taylor even attributes low voter turnout to "Americans' loss of faith in the future... Our economic position, relative to

the rest of the world's has been declining for a generation," he writes (Taylor 6). Throughout every economic class, Americans savor the present over the possibilities of the future: The rich worry about losing their fortunes. Middle Americans strive for financial independence, and the poor, called by advertising executive Bruce Bendinger, "the knee-driven underclass," are "concerned with short-term gratification, for reasons that are sad but obvious" (Terkel 133). In light of these economic conditions, few predict a promising future. Considered together, therefore, respect for the past and love of the future present at best a modest opposition to individualism in modern times.

Mores

The mores of contemporary America, once an effective opposition to individualism, now encourage it. Instead of glorifying volunteerism or public service, community mores now turn individualists into heroes: the cowboy, the trucker, the detective, Rambo. In order to reach cultural heroism, these ordinary citizens willingly isolate themselves from society and against all odds succeed in the face of great danger. Bellah explains mythic individualism in the mores of American society in terms of the "hard-boiled" detective: By society's standards, the hard-boiled detective is a failure; he smokes, he drinks, he gambles. Once he lands a case, however, he is tenacious. With no wife or kids to hold him back, the hard-boiled detective tracks his quarry through the night. He holds a tight rein on the law and resists corruption until his case is solved, until justice prevails. "The hard-boiled detective," Bellah writes, "who may long for love and success, for a place in society, is finally driven to stand alone, resisting the blandishments of society, to pursue a lonely crusade for justice" (Bellah 1985, 146).

Community mores have produced many individualists like the detective, and encourage modern citizens to do the same.

Conclusion: The Modern Critique of Individualism

Individualism is dominant in modern American society. While threatening cultural narcissism, public policy failure, and autocracy, the contemporary mores of American culture still embrace individualism. Since the family's influence is diminishing, religion is fragmented, history is often forgotten, and fewer than ever participate in the democratic process, the dominance of individualism is likely to continue and grow. With the notable exceptions of the moderately-sized but dedicated corps of volunteers, and those toasting a promising future with the end of the cold war, individualism has become the staple of American culture. Tocqueville predicted that individualism's influence would continue in America, but he never predicted it would have such widespread dominance and support.

Chapter Three: Tocqueville's Critique of Individualism: Relevant Tomorrow?

Introduction: Tocqueville and Modern Times

Chapter One of this paper recalled Alexis de Tocqueville's identification of the nature of individualism in America. Tocqueville concluded that sufficient forces to combat the ill effects of individualism existed in American society. Chapter Two outlined the state of American society 150 years later. It confirmed that forces which combat individualism in modern times still exist but have weakened to the point where individualism has become the dominant social force. Chapter Two showed the serious relevance of Tocqueville's critique to today's America. Given the progression of these conditions, Chapter Three serves as a discussion of the future of individualism in America. By comparing Tocqueville's thoughts on individualism with the condition of individualism in modern times, this section will serve to go beyond the main question of this paper to answer: Is Tocqueville's critique of individualism relevant tomorrow?

The Future State of Individualism

A discussion of the future state of individualism is warranted. A century-and-a-half ago, Tocqueville warned that individualism could dam the spring of public virtue, leading not only to the exaggerated love of self, but also to the overturning of democracy. Today, many of the most important checks on individualism have either weakened to the point of ineffectiveness or have outright bowed to individualistic forces. Politics, for example, once a primary force opposed to individualism, has today lost widespread participation and now centers on individualistic single-issue coalitions. Religion, too, now often focuses on the individual rather than on the

community. There is some hope that volunteer organizations can teach enlightened self-interest, but in general, individualism has become the dominant force in contemporary American life.

By all accounts, individualism is a permanent fixture in American society. Tocqueville wrote that individualism was intrinsic to democracy, and predicted that it would grow in direct proportion to the level of equality in America. Trends in politics, religious participation, and in the marketplace confirm its present growth. Modern writers Robert Bellah, Alex Inkeles, and Studs Terkel, furthermore, agree that individualism will continue well into the future. Considering this evidence, one should ask, Will individualism continue its growth? What can be done in the future to combat individualism's the ill effects?

Though increasingly ineffective today, American society provides several viable institutions to combat individualism. Separate unto themselves, these institutions, ranging from family and community to religion and society's mores, combat individualism by teaching interdependence and enlightened self-interest. Intrinsic to their effectiveness, Tocqueville wrote, is one common element which contemporary scholars believe society is now lacking: education. "I do not think that the doctrine of self-interest as preached in America is in all respects self-evident," Tocqueville observed. "Hence it is all-important for them [Americans] to be educated, for the age of blind sacrifice and instinctive virtues is already long past, and I see a time approaching in which freedom, public peace, and social stability will not be able to last without education" (Tocqueville 528).

Tocqueville was correct that Americans need to be educated to achieve enlightened self-interest. He was, however, mistaken that without education, the doctrine of self-interest would be evident at all. America's leaders today

appear oblivious to the dangers of individualism. Rather than stressing the need to combat self-interest, they create education policy that teaches students how to become better individualists. Educators in less formal systems have also given individualism priority over interdependence and proper self-interest. Religion today stresses self-fulfillment, rather than creating community through the liturgy. Political parties, likewise, focus on the practicality of special-interest politics rather than on the common good. In almost all systems of education, today's leaders promote the more evident self-interest over the more subtle but more pressing need to teach the doctrine of self-interest properly understood. Without a deliberate change in society's institutions, individualism will continue to grow in both size and danger.

Future Hope

It is not too late, however, for today's leaders to alter society's mores. Making evident the doctrine of enlightened self-interest in contemporary times is not only possible, but over the long run of cultural narcissism and policy failure, it is mandatory. Beginning with the schools, the best way for today's leaders to teach enlightened self-interest would be to embrace Bellah's concept of communities of memory. Community, Bellah defines, is a group of individuals who share a common interdependence, and through discussion and participation in like rituals, possess a common history. A community of memory, therefore, is the retelling of a group's past, carrying out its traditions, and living its history. The act of teaching individuals to recognize communities of memory in their race, family, church, school, association, and nation fosters interdependence and builds community. If students would learn to realize that instead of being isolated in their circle of

family and friends they are an important link in the chains of hundreds of different communities, they would grow to respect their interdependence and curb their self-interest accordingly. Once schools introduce communities of memory to its students, less-formal institutions of learning such as the family, church, and political party would likely follow suit.

Recognizing communities of memory on a large scale would revitalize the effectiveness of institutions that have historically combatted individualism. Taking enough pride in one's family to learn about one's name, to engage one's parents and grandparents in conversation, and to carry on family tradition, for example, would strengthen the family as an institution. The interdependence and understanding that would result from such activity, furthermore, would lessen the individualistic desire to leave the family for more freedom or better employment. Though not a panacea, embracing the family as a community of memory would do much to combat the ill effects of individualism and teach enlightened self-interest. Learning about the history of one's community, the uniqueness of one's profession, and the tradition of one's church would similarly teach enlightened self-interest on a broad scale by creating culture-wide webs of interdependence through the same institutions that combatted individualism in Tocqueville's time.

Bellah adds that the teaching of "second languages," the languages of "tradition and commitment," is also important to recognizing one's communities of memory (Bellah 1985, 154). Second languages shift one's usage of the individualistic pronouns "I" and "my" to the community-based "we" and "our" to make one's communities of memory and interdependence with society more apparent. Carroll Nearmyer, for example, a farmer on the

brink of bankruptcy, is so limited by the first language of "I" that he fails to recognize the communities of memory he desperately needs to survive:

There was times that I got suicidal. I would be driving and didn't know how I got there. There was several times that I had the gun to my head and she didn't know that. And then I got damn mad. I got to thinkin' about it and I got madder. These people don't have the right to do this to me! I have worked, I have sweated, and I have bled. I have tried out there to keep this place goin'. And then they tried to take it away from me! I worked out there to keep food on the table for the people over this whole nation. Nobody has the right to keep me from doin' that! I got so damn mad that I would have picked up arms to protect myself and the family. I would have shot somebody (Terkel 101).

Instead of using the second language to communicate his feelings ("*We have worked, we have sweated, and we have bled.*"), Nearmyer unconsciously isolates himself from the otherwise obvious support of his communities of memory. Other than the community of his family, which he alone tries so hard to protect, Nearmyer's use of the second language would have enlightened himself to a plethora of support: his neighbors, his church, his political party, the mores of the farm community, and the tradition of Iowa farming. Simple knowledge of the 1930s radical farmers' group, The Farm Holiday Association, for instance, or the hard times his father may have experienced during the Great Depression, would have linked him with similar people in similar situations, giving him hope that he, too, could survive. In this way, the language of communities of memory helps combat individualism by highlighting one's communities of memory and the individual's need to work for the common good. Only through education can one learn this enlightened self-interest.

Conclusion: The Relevance of Tocqueville Tomorrow

The concept of communities of memory and the language of tradition and commitment both advance the 150-year-old thought of Alexis de Tocqueville. Though modern in language, these devices were created to teach Tocqueville's doctrine of self-interest properly understood by enlightening individuals to their interdependence and their need to help each other achieve a common good. Working with the same institutions that Tocqueville identified as naturally opposed to individualism, today's leaders can teach individuals to recognize communities of memory and use the language of tradition and commitment to keep individualism in check. As more individuals begin to acknowledge their interdependence with others in society, there is definite hope that individualism, though the dominant force in society today, can be effectively checked in the future. Though written over a century-and-a-half ago, it is evident that Tocqueville's critique of individualism is still relevant today and tomorrow.

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