

Liberty

For Tocqueville, the central problem of democracy lies in the natural, necessary, and inescapable tension between liberty and equality, both of which are constitutive of democracy's very essence. The gravest danger that may threaten the existence of true democracy is the possible, probable, and perhaps inevitable sacrifice of liberty in the name of equality. This is the underlying motif that runs through Tocqueville's entire work, as well as his political speeches to his fellow deputies and countrymen.

For Tocqueville, liberty is the highest of values, the one that endows human life and the individual with dignity and nobility. It is the absolute attachment to their freedom that, in his eyes, makes Native Americans the last living aristocrats, and it is this very attachment that condemns them to annihilation...

Yet the historical and democratic evolution of Western societies, particularly in those governed by the rule of law, has brought to the fore the **quest for equality**, which, for the vast majority of citizens, has become the primary value, both by its longevity and its perceived importance:

"In most modern nations, and particularly among all the peoples of continental Europe, the taste and idea of liberty only began to arise and develop when conditions started to become more equal, and as a consequence of that very equality. It was absolute monarchs who worked the hardest to level ranks among their subjects. In such nations, equality preceded liberty; thus, equality was an old fact when liberty was still a new idea. One had already given rise to opinions, customs, and laws suited to it, while the other emerged alone, and for the first time, into the public light. So liberty remained confined to ideas and desires, while equality had already shaped habits, seized the moral character, and given a particular cast to even the smallest acts of daily life. How can we be surprised, then, that people today prefer one over the other?"

While the advantages of equality are **immediate and visible**, the demands of liberty are **cumbersome**, even burdensome, to the point of being rejected as aristocratic relics of the old society. Tocqueville recalls the credo of certain revolutionaries:

"Let us try to be free by becoming equal, but better to forfeit liberty a hundred times than to remain or become unequal!"

For Tocqueville, individual liberty and political liberty are the primary values of modern society. They are not inherently in contradiction with democracy, but they are the most naturally threatened by demagoguery, the pursuit of comfort, the lure of ease, and the love of mediocrity : « *aurea mediocritas* »...

"One can, however, imagine an extreme point where liberty and equality meet and merge. Suppose that all citizens take part in government and that each has an equal right to participate. No one differing from his fellows, none would be able to exercise tyrannical power; men would be perfectly free because they would be entirely equal—and entirely equal because they would be perfectly free. This is the ideal toward which democratic peoples tend. [...] The taste men have for liberty and the one they feel for equality are, indeed, two distinct

things, and I do not hesitate to add that, among democratic peoples, they are two unequal things.”

As for economic liberty, its existence is, for Tocqueville, absolutely essential: any system that undermines it necessarily destroys, *ipso facto*, all other liberties (see the entries *Liberalism* and *Commerce*).