**Race as Political Metaphor in Tocqueville’s Democracy in America**

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**Abstract:**

In the last chapter of *Democracy in America*’s first volume, Tocqueville provides a fascinating account of two oppressed ethnic groups in America: the Negroes and the Indians. While examining the races’ differing responses to oppression, Tocqueville allegorizes the American Negro and the American Indian to the central properties of democracy and aristocracy. Though this provocative comparison may initially appear imprecise, my analysis proves that the allegory is remarkably well constructed. Moreover, the comparison informs a new mode of understanding for both the allegorized races and the form of government that each represents. To bring these implications into focus, I expand Tocqueville’s metaphor to its fullest extent. I note a number of shared structural and cultural characteristics between each system of government and its representative race, and then reveal the more intricate similitude between each race’s psychology and the mental effect each political system has on their citizenry. These two levels of allegory, the physical and the psychological, combine to align the Negro with democracy and the Indian with aristocracy. Lastly, I explain that by adopting this allegorical method, Tocqueville is able to efficaciously speak to the permanence of the three races in the new world.

In the last chapter of *Democracy in America*’s first volume, Alexis de Tocqueville (1835) writes, “There is more than one way to look at the peoples that inhabit the New World” (365).[[1]](#footnote-1) He goes on to provide a fascinating account of the “naturally distinct, and I might almost say hostile, races” in the United States, the Indians and the Negroes[[2]](#footnote-2) (366). Though “these two unlucky races have in common neither birth, appearances, language, nor mores,” Tocqueville explains that they “both suffer the effects of tyranny… [though] their miseries are different” (366). In examining this divergent response to oppression, Tocqueville moves beyond report and allegorizes the American Negro and the American Indian to the central properties of democracy and aristocracy. According to Tocqueville, the nature of the Negro exhibits the democratic passion for equality *in extremis* while the nature of the Indian represents aristocratic passion for liberty *in extremis*. Though this provocative comparison may initially appear imprecise, a thorough analysis proves that the allegory is remarkably well constructed. Moreover, the comparison creates a new dimension of understanding for both the allegorized races and the system of government each represents. To bring these implications into focus, I will expand Tocqueville’s metaphor to its fullest. First, a number of shared structural and cultural characteristics between each regime and its representative race will be identified and contrasted. Then, the more intricate similitude between each race’s psychology and the mental effects that each political system impresses on their citizenry will be explored. These two levels of allegory, the physical and the psychological, combine to align the Negro with democracy and the Indian with aristocracy. Lastly, I will suggest why Tocqueville chose to represent these two regimes analogically rather than through direct analysis.[[3]](#footnote-3)

**Democracy and the Negro**

The first point of cultural similarity between the American Negro and American democracy is the lack of influence from a prior regime. Tocqueville explains that he studies democracy specifically in America because “America is the only country in which it has been possible to witness the natural and tranquil course of a society’s development” from the moment of it’s origin (32). Thus, American society does not possess ancient “customs,” “laws,” and “inconsistent opinions” that appear to oppose prevailing mores in contemporary societies of older nations. Tocqueville likens these antiquated features to “those fragments of broken chain that one sometimes finds dangling from the vaults of an old building, no longer supporting anything,” and argues that they obfuscate any attempt to gain an understanding of a nation in modernity (32). These archaisms, he writes, further resist identification because “time had already shrouded the moment of their inception in fog, and ignorance and pride had surrounded it with fables behind which the truth lay hidden” (32). Since Tocqueville considers America unique among democracies—indeed, among all nations—for its lack of these qualities, his opening statement, “Among the new things that attracted my attention during my stay in the United States, none struck me more forcefully than the equality of conditions,” suggests that American society’s extreme equality results directly from the absence of any polluting sense of inequality remaining from past regimes of government (1). In short, America offers a clean slate, culturally, for the principle of equality to prosper.

During his analysis of the Negro, Tocqueville makes a similar point. He writes that the Negro, too, exists free from the political and cultural regimes of his past: “The Negro in the United States has lost even the memory of his homeland. He no longer understands the languages spoken by his ancestors. He has forsworn their religion and forgotten their mores” (366). Extirpated from the social and political habits of his ancestors, the American Negro, like America herself, offers an unpolluted plot for equality to take root and flourish, a plot free from the weeds of political antiquity.[[4]](#footnote-4)

The interrelation between the increased focus on individual economic output and the downplayed role of the family provides another parallel between the Negro and democracy. In American democracy, economic output is man’s prevailing interest. Society arranges itself around this locus. Tocqueville writes, “Among democratic peoples… everyone works in order to live, or has worked, or was born to people who worked.” Thus, “the idea of work” becomes the “necessary, natural, and respectable condition of humanity” (642). As a result, “the huge gap that formerly separated the various occupations in aristocratic societies disappears” (643). This progression is more pronounced in Negro enslavement. As the American citizen is honored in accordance with his economic productivity, under the system of slavery, the Negro’s value directly relates to his labor capabilities. As in democracy, where “everyone works in order to live” (642), “the Negro enters servitude when he enters life” (367). Thus, the Negro typifies an extreme example of American industry; one equalized by a uniform system of work for no pay (i.e. slavery) rather than a uniform exchange of work for pay.

As in democratic society, the role of the family diminishes in the life of the Negro. Tocqueville argues, “In democratic nations, new families are constantly springing from nothing, while others fall, and all those that remain change their appearance. The fabric of time is forever being ripped, and vestiges of the generations disappear” (586). American social and geographic mobility destroys what used to be understood as the family, simply—which we now call the “extended” family. In short, “In America, the family… does not exist” (685). This conclusion might be camouflaged by the continued existence of the “nuclear” family, but the logic of equality renders even that notion weak. Tocqueville shows this through the example of the American slave, writing, “the Negro has no family” in reference to the splitting of slave families as the individual Negro is bought and sold among slave owners, “often… while still in his mother’s womb” (366-367). In addition, the Negro father holds woman as merely “the fleeting partner of his pleasures” (366). Without the bond of marriage, the Negro family has no foundation on which to stand. The similarity between the family in democracy and the Negro family can be seen further in the structure of the domestic unit. In democracy, “the distance that once separated a father from his sons has decreased and that paternal authority has been if not destroyed then at least impaired” (685). He continues by explaining that this results, in part, from the focus on work in democratic society: “When a father has little in the way of property, he and his sons live in the same place constantly and work side by side” (688). By participating equally in work, the father and the son in democracy have equal honor and become as equals. The slave experience also exhibits this progression. Tocqueville describes how the Negro’s “sons are his equals from birth” (366). In servitude, both father and son toil equally and share equally in a slave’s honor. [[5]](#footnote-5) Thus, as in democracy, slavery results in a complete erasure of both familial distance and parental authority for the Negro.

These related democratic characteristics of the Negro result from an important progression in democracy: equality gives rise to individualism. Tocqueville contends that “individualism is democratic in origin, and it threatens to develop as conditions equalize” (585). Democracy has an intrinsic tendency to promote individual interest. This tendency results in the features of democracy that—I have argued—the Negro also exhibits, such as the universality of work, the dissolution of the family, and equality between family members. While the Negro also exhibits a strong sense of individualism, Tocqueville’s emphasis in the chapter is not on Negro individualism but on his desire for equality and submission to his masters—qualities that Tocqueville describes as slavish. Here, the purpose of Tocqueville’s analogy begins to emerge. Though democracy extols individualism, Tocqueville suggests that the individual in democracy becomes a slave to the mores of the system. Through the Negro, Tocqueville highlights the worst features of democracy, subtly indicating that individuals in democracy and the Negroes share equally in a slavish mentality. In the above analysis, I explored Tocqueville’s comparison between the Negro and democracy’s cultural similarities. In the next section, I will outline this relation’s intellectual counterpart.

The principle psychological characteristic of democracy and the Negro is the notion of equality. Through his enslavement, the Negro exhibits the total state of equality that Tocqueville considers a foundational source of democracy. Equality has been the uniform feature underneath all the previously identified cultural traits shared between the Negro and democracy: the absence of prior political habits and mores allows equality alone to thrive; the universal value of labor equalizes man in the eyes of his peers; and familiar bonds weaken as everyone equally strives for their own personal interests. Equality’s centrality in these aspects should come as no surprise, as Tocqueville argues that equality is the principal virtue of democratic society. He writes that democratic people “have an ardent, insatiable, eternal, invincible passion” for equality; “they want equality in liberty, and if they cannot have it, they want it still in slavery” (584). Through his servitude, the Negro manifests the logical consequences of this democratic fervor for equality—if equality is undisciplined by a countervailing commitment to freedom. Because the “Negro enters servitude when he enters life,” the Negro represents the notion of absolute equality demanded by the democratic mind (367). Because all enslaved Negroes in America were considered property, they all equally possessed the social status of having no status. Intentionally stripped from the larger social and political order in which slavery is embedded, the adamant form of equality seen in the phenomenon of slavery vividly represents the Negro as democracy *in extremis*. Tocqueville further strengthens the analogy by suggesting that, due to the extremity of equality’s manifestation in the Negro, he’s also affected by some of democracy’s more pervasive, intangible effects. Thus, though an American should (and today usually would) find the comparison reprehensible, Tocqueville suggests the psyche of the enslaved Negro *is* the psyche of the democratic individual in a dark mirror. Precisely because this is such a hard truth to absorb, Tocqueville requires an extended metaphor to capture and express it.

The Negro stands completely at the mercy of the tyranny and the omnipotence of the majority in democratic society. Existing within the system he allegorizes, the Negro not only serves as symbol for democracy but also serves to reveal certain commanding features of that system. The figure of the slave illustrates both democracy’s physical power and even more importantly, the way democracy configures the minds or psyches of the individuals that compose it. Tocqueville writes that in the democratic majority, “is vested a force that is moral as well as material, which shapes wills as much as actions and inhibits not only deeds but also the desire to do them” (293). Tocqueville describes the majority’s effectual arm—which is capable of physically restraining minority freedom in the polity—as the tyranny of the majority. He writes: “the majority of a people has the right to do absolutely anything” (288). He characterizes this majority as “an individual with opinions and, more often than not, interests contrary to those of another individual known as the minority,” and poses the following question: “if you are willing to concede that a man to whom omnipotence has been granted can abuse it to the detriment of his adversaries, why will you not concede that the same may be true of a majority?” (288-289). Through the enslavement of the Negro, we see Tocqueville’s characterization of the majority as a single man actualized in the slaveholder, who, when forcing the Negro to submit to his every whim, physically imposes his tyrannical power over him. As in the democratic majority, this occurs within the confines of the law. However, what makes the Negro an exact portrait of democracy is the extent to which violence is done to his soul.

Tocqueville’s psychological profile of the Negro reveals the omnipotence of the majority’s utter control over him. Tocqueville argues that democracy spiritualizes despotism. He writes, “Princes made violence a physical thing, but today’s democratic republics have made it as intellectual as the human will it seeks to coerce” (294). The “moral” force of the majority represents this spiritualization because it “shapes wills as much as actions and inhibits not only deeds but also the desire to do them” (293). Tocqueville refers to this power as the omnipotence of the majority. This omnipotent majority acts as an absolute ruler—and rules in an even more “absolute” sense—because, while the tyrant can only control the body, the tyrannical majority “erects a formidable barrier around thought” (292). In this way, it extends its tyrannical power to the subconscious.

The Negro falls victim to this pervasive force. Tocqueville writes that the Negro, “bows to the tastes of his oppressors, adopts their opinions, and aspires, by imitating them, to become indistinguishable from them” (368). Thus, the Negro unwittingly embraces the attitudes that confine him to servitude, further enslaving him to the omnipotent majority’s spiritual tyranny. Tocqueville reveals the extent to which the majority maintains a mental hold over the Negro when he writes, “Violence made him a slave, but habituation to servitude has given him the thoughts and ambitions of one. He admires his tyrants even more than he hates them and finds his joy and his pride in servile imitation of his oppressors” (367). This perversion of the Negro’s mind is further evident during Tocqueville’s parable at the end of his discussion of races. He describes how when a Negro and Indian woman appear with a young white girl, “the Negress tried to attract the little Creole’s attention with a variety of innocent tricks” (370). The image becomes a symbol for the Negro’s submission. Like the democratic individual who willingly submits to a system delineated and controlled by an omnipotent majority, the Negro submits to the servitude that binds him. In the preceding analysis, we see the utter triumph of the majority over the body and mind of the Negro. However, if the Negro symbolizes democracy in its entirety, as well as exhibiting its effects, what qualities of the Negro’s condition elucidate the state of our own democratic condition?

Revisiting the democratic side of the slave-democracy analogy reveals democracy to be a subtle but profound form of slavery. Tocqueville writes, “The Negro exists at the ultimate extreme of servitude” (149). If the Negro represents democracy, then democratic society too must be a form of servitude. Prima facie, this may appear incorrect—isn’t democracy the system espousing freedom, equality, and liberty? The answer is complex but, rightly understood, gives relief to one of Tocqueville’s most poignant observations. He writes that since “Liberty has manifested itself to men in various time and forms. It is not associated exclusively with any social state, and one does not find it only in democracies. Hence it cannot constitute the distinctive characteristic of democratic centuries.” Instead, “The particular and dominant fact that makes such centuries unique is the equality of conditions; the principle passion that stirs men in such times is love of that equality” (582). Certainly, democratic society is more equal than that of other regimes and democratic citizens do love that equality; however, Tocqueville suggests that this love results from the spiritual tyranny of the omnipotent majority and not the volition of the democratic citizenry. In democracy, majority opinion acts as the master and the individual citizen as the slave. Like the Negro whose “habituation to servitude has given him the thoughts and ambitions of one. He admires his tyrants even more than he hates them and finds his joy and his pride in servile imitation of his oppressors,” the individual in democratic society blithely submits to the proposition that “the interests of the many ought to be preferred to those of the few” (367, 285). The Negro allegorizes the minority in democracy. A minority can become so absorbed by the mores of the omnipotent majority that it sometimes doesn’t even realize it is a slave to the master majority—or perhaps even recognize that it is a minority. Tocqueville calls this principle “the moral ascendancy of the majority,” as it is the foundational precept that clandestinely exercises despotic control over all other morals of democratic people (285).

This moral ascendancy also exemplifies the spiritual despotism of the omnipotent majority. Thus, like the Negro who, due to a “disposition of [his] soul,” remains “insensible to extreme misery and, indeed, often inspires in him a sort of depraved taste for the cause of his misfortunes,” the democratic citizen unwittingly loves the equality that, rather than protecting his freedom and liberty, imprisons his mind (367). In cognizance of this moral ascendency, Tocqueville’s word choice in describing the tyrannical majority now looks grimly appropriate: “There are those who have made so bold as to insist that a people… cannot overstep the bounds of justice and reason entirely, hence that there is no reason to be afraid of bestowing all power on the majority that represents that people. But to speak thus is to speak the language of a slave” (288). Through the symbol of the Negro, we see how equality forces man into a kind of slavery that denies him of the true form of liberty he believes he possesses, replacing it instead with the democratic facsimile that sets boundaries on his freedom. Slavery in America reveals the theoretical and practical limits of democracy, *per se*.

**The Indian and Aristocracy**

If the Negro symbolizes democracy, the Indian in America allegorizes aristocracy. The parallels between the Indian and aristocracy provide a contrast to many of the cultural and intellectual features shared by the Negro and democracy. Let’s first consider the cultural aspects. Foremost is the place of origins and history in the political identity of both the race and the political regime. As previously discussed, the influence of equality over American democracy and the Negro is strengthened by their novel beginnings free from the “broken chains” of an “old building.” In contrast, aristocracy and the Indian both value and rely on antiquity, celebrating the “chains” of past regimes (16). This arises because of the significant role inheritance plays in aristocratic and Indian cultures. Tocqueville writes:

Laws of inheritance… should be placed first among political institutions because of their incredible influence on a people’s social state… inheritance laws act on society in a sure and uniform way; in a sense, they lay hold of each generation before it is born. Through them, man is armed with an almost divine power over the future of his fellow men… It causes aristocracy to spring, as it were, from the soil. (54)

Because the aristocracy inherits its livelihood from its progenitors—and codifies this feature in law through primogeniture—aristocracy both relies on its history and cherishes its historical character. Additionally, the mores and opinions of aristocratic forefathers pass down to the new generation along with their wealth.

In America, the Indian’s history operates much the same way. The Indian people arise from and rely on “the chain of memory” (368). The Indian develops his identity and transfers that identity down to his progeny through tradition. In this way, Indian culture subsists over time. Tocqueville expresses the degree to which Indian culture relies on tradition when he writes that by “sever[ing] the chain of memory,” the European reduced the Indian to obscurity. Without the support of the past, the Indian cannot progress to the future. Because both the aristocracy and the Indians confer mores, laws, and political habits from generation to generation, this practice is also closely tied to the family in both cultures.

The importance of family provides another point of similarity between the aristocrat and the Indian. Contrary to democracy and the Negro’s disregard for the family, aristocracy and the Indian place a premium on the family; their cultures rely on it. Tocqueville writes, “Among aristocratic peoples, families remain in the same station for centuries, and often in the same place... A man almost always knows and respects his forebears… and will frequently sacrifice his personal pleasure for others who no longer exist or have yet to be born” (585). In much the same way, the Indian expresses aristocratic honor for his family through veneration for his ancestors. He fills his “imagination… with the supposed nobility of his origins” much like the aristocrat, who—going a step farther—affirms his own nobility by codifying it in law (368). Thus, by treating his predecessors with the honor he believes they deserve, both the aristocrat and the Indian secure his own nobility. [[6]](#footnote-6) Consequently, the Indian and the aristocrat depend on their families for their own social well-being. This dependence on family and traditions also reduces the focus on the individual in aristocratic and Indian society. Tocqueville writes, “Yet another effect of aristocratic institutions is to create close bonds between each man and a number of his fellow citizens” (586). Thus, unlike democracy, which fractures the citizenry into individuals, aristocracy groups people in landed families or social classes in the same manner that the Indian nations are grouped into various tribes.

The importance of land further binds the aristocrat and the Indian. In both the aristocracy and Indian nations, the values of family and tradition coalesce into a reliance on, and worship of, land. Tocqueville writes:

Among the [aristocracy,]… landed estates ordinarily pass undivided from generation to generation. As a result, the family spirit in a sense becomes materialized in the earth. The family represents the land; the land represents the family. The land perpetuates the family’s name, its origins, its glory, its power, and its virtues. (55)

This account evokes earthly spiritualism and the worship of the natural world characteristic of Indian peoples. While the honor of the aristocratic family is a function of their landed holdings, the honor of the Indian tribe increases with the extent of their controlled territory. On this point, we transition from the cultural similarities shared by the Indian people and aristocracy to the psychological similarities between aristocratic and Indian.

Just as the Negro exhibits psychological traits of the democratic citizen, the Indian exhibits those of the aristocrat. As a constituent of this psychology, the Indian possesses the defining mores of aristocratic society. The first of these is importance of honor in society. I previously demonstrated that the Indian and the aristocrat both honor the family, tradition, and land. I also noted that by honoring these values, the individual in aristocratic and Indian society assures his own honor, which contributes to his nobility. Now, I will investigate the character of this honor and reveal its relationship with nobility. Honor is the underlying cause for many of the salient features shared by Indian and aristocratic society. This becomes apparent during Tocqueville’s discussion of feudal honor. He writes:

In some cases feudal honor prescribed vengeance and stigmatized pardon for insults. In others it imperiously commanded men to conquer their passions and neglect their own interests. It made no law of either humanity or gentleness. Yet it praised generosity; it prized liberality more than benevolence, and it allowed a man to enrich himself through gambling or war but not through work… and violence often met with its approval. (727)

If we consider Tocqueville’s depiction of feudal honor, we see the Indian exhibits many of these characteristics. Like aristocratic nobility, Indians live in an honor-based society that dictates many of their values. They are a noble class existing geographically within America but apart from democratic society and culture—and Tocqueville suggests that honor impels this firm separation. Tocqueville writes that the Indian, “clings to barbarity as a distinctive sign of his race, and he rejects civilization not so much because he hates it, perhaps, as because he is afraid of resembling the Europeans” (369). Here, Tocqueville also suggests that barbarism naturally arises from aristocratic social conventions unchecked by universal norms (as exist in democratic society). As the noble in aristocracy will “deliberately place certain bold and brilliant vices above peaceable and modest virtues,” to “maintain itself in… [its] supreme rank,” the Indian adopts barbaric habits to separate him from the democratic peoples of America (727). The Indian’s degree of barbarism represents this aristocratic more *in extremis*. Here, Tocqueville also suggests that honor, a foundational precept of aristocracy, epitomizes a sort of social barbarism. Honor’s barbarism stems from its exclusivity. As in “the feudal world,” the Indians’ “actions were not always praised or blamed in accordance with their intrinsic value but judged in certain cases solely in relation to the person who was their author or object—a procedure repugnant to the general conscience of the human race” (726). Levying punishments or rewards onto an individual based upon their class or station in society is diametrically opposed to democratic mores of equality, for it rests upon the notion that certain individuals or groups are inherently different from others. According to Tocqueville, systematizing these notions in honor offends man’s “depraved taste” for equality (60). It’s the height of incivility—a barbaric precept. Thus, Tocqueville’s description of the Indian casts principles of aristocracy into sharp relief, revealing the barbarism underlying gentility. Tocqueville supports this reading later in the chapter, writing, “In what we call Germanic institutions… I am tempted to see nothing other than barbarian habits, just as I am tempted to see the opinions of savages in what we call feudal ideas” (379). Therefore, in the sections that follow, we can use the Indian’s status in the face of equalizing American society as a barometer for aristocracy in a democratizing world.

Barbarism’s centrality to aristocratic society is solidified by Tocqueville’s account of an Indian commander in the American military. While the violent effects of honor can be observed in the dueling and caprice of the European aristocrat, honor also explains the “barbarity” that accompanies “the usual vicissitudes of the savage life” led by the Indian (369, 367). Tocqueville makes this point especially clear in a footnote to his chapter on race. He writes that he knew an American officer, a Major, who told him a story about an Indian commander in the American army. The man reports that the Indian “had been educated at a school in England… [and] did very well there.” When war broke out between America and England, the Indian served as “the commander of a group of warriors from his tribe.” This unit was allowed by the American forces under one condition: they would not scalp their victims. One night, the Major ran into the Indian commander. They began telling exploits of the war until the Indian unbuttoned his shirt to reveal, “the hair of an Englishman still dripping with blood,” telling the Major, “‘Don’t give me away!’” (369). The barbarism of the Indian exhibits the aristocratic taste for violence and depravity *in extremis*. Through the Indian’s refusal to abandon his savage practice, Tocqueville suggests that honor indelibly marks a character constituted by that kind of regime. Despite even his English education and military post, the Indian commander could not doff his native, though socially constructed, regard for honor in the traditions of his people.

In both aristocratic and Indian societies, honor ultimately becomes a means to support one’s nobility.[[7]](#footnote-7) In aristocracy, the ruling nobility is supported through the laws of feudal society. As a social construct applicable to only the elite, honor becomes a social means “to maintain this particular position which constituted its power” (271). The same is true for the Indian. His barbarism, along with other constituents of his honor, becomes a means of constructing an identity separate from democratic people. Earlier in this investigation, I explained the correlation between democracy, independence, and work. These qualities, shared by everyone in society, threaten the honor-based Indian culture that reserves special privileges to a select group. In order to maintain his separation from other peoples of the new world, the Indian “rejects civilization not so much because he hates it, perhaps, as because he is afraid of resembling the Europeans” (369). It is for this reason that “the Indian’s imagination is filled with the supposed nobility of his origins” (368). His belief in his nobility gives him reason to maintain distance from American society, which appears to him as a lowly peasant caste. The Indians’ “pride combats civilization almost as obstinately as their indolence” (378). In this way, the Indian retains his honor and protects his noble status. To relent and join European culture, sacrificing barbarism, bravery, and courage for quotidian toil, is to renounce honor in favor of a “degraded existence” (383). As such, the Indian abhors the thought. Tocqueville connects the Indian’s prideful disdain for democracy to aristocracy: “The Indian…thus nurses the same ideas and the same opinions as the medieval nobleman… Indeed it is remarkable that the old prejudices of Europe are found today in the forests of the New World” (379). Thus, the Indian’s unwillingness to sacrifice his honor and assimilate foreshadows the same unwillingness in the aristocrat. At the end of my investigation, this unwillingness will be shown to precipitate the downfall of both societies.

The Indian’s sense of nobility nourishes a characteristic temperament also present in the aristocrat. At first glance, some mores of the Indian may appear in conflict with those of the aristocrat; however, this alleged shortfall actually strengthens the comparison. The barbaric Indian, experiencing “the ordinary vicissitudes of savage life… [and] exhibit[ing] the vices and virtues of all uncivilized peoples,” doesn’t seem to possess the “the indulgence of luxury, the refinement of taste, the pleasures of the mind, and the cultivation of the arts” distinctive in aristocratic nobility (367, 9). At the same time, however, Tocqueville describes the “Barbarous luxury” of the Indian girl that he witnesses and argues that at the heart of these pursuits, the aristocratic nobility maintains, “energetic passions, generous sentiments, deep beliefs, and uncultivated virtues”— characteristics also ascribed to the Indian (9). The spirit and even the form of luxury marks the practices of the Indian in the untamed wild. A social or political essence of what we call civility is revealed in a world without material or technological advancement. The striking similarity between the aristocrat and the Indian’s mores despite the immense difference in their material accoutrements shows aristocracy to be at bottom a political rather than economic or material phenomenon—a matter of the constitution of the soul rather than the enhancement of the body.

Moreover, one could argue that Tocqueville’s Indian analogue to aristocracy synthesizes qualities of the peerage and the peasantry. He exhibits the mores of the former and the material possessions of the latter. Thus, his symbolization of aristocracy is two-fold. While this is an interesting note, I don’t believe it was Tocqueville’s intention—particularly because unlike in an aristocratic state, the two classes exist in such harmony in the Indian. His passions do not compel him to purchase fancy clothes and his desire for leisure does not turn him to idleness. He maintains his savage passions, fierce regard for honor, and his contentment with rustic life despite European influence. However, the Indian does not remain completely unaltered.

The Indian exhibits aristocracy’s peaks of passion and, resultantly, also suffers from its troughs of depravity. Tocqueville writes that there are “certain vices and certain virtues… attached to the constitution of aristocratic nations” (833). Similarly, he contends that the Indian exhibits “the vices and the virtues of uncivilized peoples” (367). The correspondence between the vices and virtues of aristocratic nations and those of uncivilized peoples provides another point of comparison between the Indian and aristocracy. Tocqueville writes that aristocratic society is brilliant, glorious, powerful, passionate, feeling, enthusiastic, in possession of an “ardor of belief,” and “inspired by ambition or pure virtue” (10, 642). Similarly, Tocqueville describes the Indian as “rich in feeling and grandeur,” while his description of Tanner’s memoirs—and Tanner himself, who he met—reveals a sense of awe at their savage virtues (382-383). In this way, aristocracy and the Indian appear similar. Of Indian virtues, Tocqueville writes, “Savage nations are governed by opinions and mores alone” and, through “undisciplined courage” and “spontaneous instincts,” they remain “free” and “proud” like the noble aristocracy (367, 369-370). Thus, the Indian and the aristocrat share the passionate peaks of a proud, honor-based class. However, in companion with the parallels in virtuous spirit, the Indian and the aristocrat also share a propensity for vice.

As a result of their spiritual heights of passion, both the aristocrat and the Indian are susceptible to increased depravity and corruption. Due to the “restlessness of their desires,” the aristocracy is vulnerable to a perverse redirection of his energy following a “collapse of faith” (620). When this occurs, they turn “exclusively toward love of material gratifications;” however, “the search for well-being is not enough. They need sumptuous depravity and splendid corruption. They erect a magnificent shrine to matter and seem to view with one another to excel in the art of turning themselves into brutes” (620). Tocqueville identifies the same progression during a reflection on the Indian. After declaring that “Savage nations are governed by opinions and mores alone” (367), Tocqueville describes how European invasion occasioned a collapse of faith powerful enough to put the Indian into a degenerative state:

European tyranny attenuated the North American Indian’s feeling for their native land…obscured their traditions…changed their habits, and increased their needs immeasurably, making them less disciplined and civilized than they were before. Meanwhile, the tribes’ moral and physical condition grew steadily worse, and their barbarity kept pace with their wretchedness. (368)

Through this uniform susceptibility to vice, the Indian provides a strong allegory to aristocracy. It’s additionally interesting that Tocqueville identifies the Europeans as occasioning the downfalls of the native peoples of America, as if through bad influence. It’s difficult to make sense of this point when one considers that aristocratic society—in all its depravity—survived for hundreds of years. I believe Tocqueville would respond by noting that Native American society also survived for hundreds of years. Their doom began, however, the moment they encountered a society advanced far beyond their own. Introduced suddenly to “firearms, iron, and whiskey” the Indian “acquired new tastes but not the means of satisfying them” (371). Unable to control themselves and without sufficient time to adjust, the Indian succumbed to the depravities of an age far beyond his own.

Underneath all the preceding similarities identified between the Indian and aristocrat lies one central feature of aristocracy: liberty. Liberty is the principal virtue of aristocracy and the root of the Indian’s savage virtue. It allows for nobility to exist, which instantiates an honor-based social system. Though its effects on both parties are identical, it arose differently among the Indians than in European aristocracies. Tocqueville argues that the Indians value liberty above all else: “For him, to be free is to escape from nearly every social bond. He revels in this barbarous independence and would rather perish than sacrifice any part of it” (368). Maintaining Tocqueville’s allegory, liberty must then be a fundamental principle of aristocracy, yet this does not seem to be true *prima facie*. While the aristocratic nobility is at liberty to do as they please, the majority of people in aristocratic society are forced to work long and hard for meager wages. Moreover, they are immured within a rigid class system and are—in some cases—property of their lord. These features suggest that the citizens of aristocracy have less liberty than citizens of democracy. Tocqueville, however, argues otherwise.

During his consideration of the evolution of liberty and its relationship to equality, Tocqueville reveals that a love for liberty is the fundamental characteristic of the Indian and aristocracy. Tocqueville writes that in “the European continent, the taste for and the idea of liberty began to take shape and develop only when conditions began to equalize and as a consequence of that very equality” (583). Tocqueville suggests that aristocracy embraces liberty, not because it is inherently good, but because it’s a welcome limitation to the equalization of conditions antithetical to unequal aristocratic society. He explains how this equalization occurs, writing that man has “a depraved taste” for equality which “impels the weak to want to bring the strong down to their level, and which reduces men to preferring equality in servitude to inequality in freedom” (60). Liberty opposes equality because, as has been shown in the Negro, equality subjugates man in body and mind. Liberty, on the other hand, allows one to believe he is innately superior to others, and the truly liberal society respects and supports this sentiment. As such, the desire for liberty is essentially aristocratic and Indian.

Using the fate of the Indian to predict the fate of aristocracy foretells the death of the aristocratic system at the hands of democratic thought. Though the aristocratic nobility that liberty instills in the Indian saves him from the slavery of the Negro, it also affects his doom. Tocqueville writes that “The Negro tries repeatedly to enter a society that does not want him… if he could repudiate himself altogether, he would gladly consent to do so” (368). The Negro desires equality to such a degree that he is willing to disown himself to have it. In contrast, “the Indian’s imagination is filled with the supposed nobility of his origin,” preventing him “from wishing to bend his mores to ours” (368-369). Girded with his sense of superiority, the Indian rebukes assimilation into democratic society. We learn that Tocqueville experienced this aspect of the Indian firsthand: “My curiosity no doubt displeased the Indian, for she abruptly stood, rather roughly pushed the child away, and with an irritated glance in my direction set off into the forest” (370). However, this same sense of superiority affects the Indian’s downfall. Tocqueville writes that equality has “destroyed those individuals who once had the wherewithal to battle tyranny on their own” (11). While this is true within society, the Indian, subsisting apart from the rest of America, retains his fighting spirit. However, the Indian nations are not strong enough to surmount American forces; there are fewer of them, and they are weaker. His only alternative is to submit and assimilate, but Tocqueville explains that this is also not a possibility. Though the Indian’s sense of superiority allows him to resist the spiritual despotism of the omnipotent majority, it also causes him to “[disdain] to attempt” to join American society (369). Too proud to let equality detract from his liberty and unable to overcome a more powerful culture, “In this unequal contest, he succumbs” (369). In this way, the Indian foretells the fall of aristocracy at the hands of democratic thought.

Through the chapter on the Negro and the Indian, Tocqueville reveals the dangers of American democracy. In the opening of the chapter, Tocqueville clearly states his purpose in writing the chapter:

Only in passing was I able to touch on the dangers that threaten the confederation, and then only in the most incomplete way… I ventured no guess as to the permanence of republican forms in the New World, and… I was not able to treat the future of the Americans as a commercial people… I… avoided them initially, but now, by way of conclusion, I must come back to them” (365).

Though the analysis of the Negro and the Indian that follows these words initially appears unrelated, I’ve labored to show that it’s actually on point. Using the Negro and the Indian as symbols, Tocqueville offers a complete vision of the dangers facing American democracy. Democracy appears much like Tocqueville’s description of the European in relation to other races. He holds that, “the European… makes [other races] serve his needs, and when he cannot bend them to his will, he destroys them” (366). Democracy, and the alluring equality it advertizes, similarly subsumes or destroys other regimes. With this in mind, Tocqueville’s reflection on the state of the Negro and the Indian offers a vision of the future for their corresponding regimes. Making good on Tocqueville’s claim to return to issues of “permanence of republican forms in the New World,” my investigation now allows me to recast his reflection on the state of the Negro and the Indian to offer a vision of the future: “the effects of slavery on [democracy] are scarcely more disastrous than those of independence on [aristocracy]… the servility of the [former] dooms [it] to slavery, and the pride of the [latter] condemns [it] to death” (365, 368-369). What’s more, by analogizing the two contrasting regimes, Tocqueville is able to offer a vision of the future that could not be explained as clearly or convincingly through non-analogical reasoning. The allegory allows Tocqueville to speculate with regard to the future of the three races in America in a particularly persuasive and vivid fashion. His allegory is ostensive, offering more complete accounts of democracy and aristocracy through detailed description—further colored by Tocqueville’s real world experiences and anecdotes—than could be given through mere definition or analytic description. Moreover, while modern audiences can read Tocqueville and retrospectively recognize the insight of his study, his contemporaries would have had more difficulty gaining a macro perspective on the, then, unfolding regimes, democracy and aristocracy. Accordingly, providing allegories for the two regimes in the Negro and the Indian, as they then existed, served to overcome this difficulty for the reader by providing visceral examples within society. [[8]](#footnote-8) Thus, *Democracy in America* moves beyond a normative account of the merits and limits of democracy or an empirical assessment of its future—and the dangers that threaten it. While Tocqueville treats democracy as a dynamic new order that continues to unfold and move toward an unknown end, he regards the Indian and the Negro as static figures. They have already had their bout with the European and now “Both suffer the effects of tyranny, and while their miseries are different, both can blame those miseries on the same tyrant” (366). But, Tocqueville realizes, the Indian and the Negro offer instruction through their suffering. They don’t just typify two regimes; they exhibit these forms at their terminal ends. My investigation now enables me to make good on Tocqueville’s claim to return to issues of “permanence of republican forms in the New World,” and use the Negro and the Indian to offer a vision of the future for these forms of governance: “the effects of slavery on [democracy] are scarcely more disastrous than those of independence on [aristocracy]… the servility of the [former] dooms [it] to slavery, and the pride of the [latter] condemns [it] to death” (365, 368-369).

**Works Cited**

Tocqueville, Alexis de. 2004. *Democracy in America*; translated by Arthur Goldhammer. New

York: Literary Classic of the United States, Inc.

1. All quotations appearing in this investigation are taken from Tocqueville, Alexis de. 2004. *Democracy in America*; translated by Arthur Goldhammer. New York: Literary Classic of the United States, Inc. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Although it may be somewhat jarring to our contemporary linguistic conventions and political sensibilities, to recover Tocqueville’s understanding I will follow his text closely. For example, I use his terms Negro and Indian, rather than African-American and Native American. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Prior attempts to interpret the introduction to chapter ten as more than a factual account occur in Wolin’s *Tocqueville Between Two Worlds: The Making of a Political and Theoretical Life* and Lerner’s *The Thinking Revolutionary*. However, these treatments do not consider the implications of Tocqueville’s allegory at length and largely limit focus to the Negro as a corollary to the spiritual despotism of democracy. My investigation is the most comprehensive interpretation of this crucial chapter to date and thus attempts to fill a large and important gap in the critical literature on *Democracy in America*. Accordingly, I believe Tocqueville’s introduction to the chapter is not a dismissible opening but a veiled section of analysis crucial to understanding the theoretical thrust of the remainder of the chapter. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. It’s additionally interesting that the Negro’s enslavement induces his receptivity to equality considering that slavery itself exemplifies a type of equality. This complex interchange, however, strays too far afield of the current line of inquiry. I will return to it at the end of this section. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Though this honor is—perhaps—no honor, the greater point is that they are totally equal in this regard. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. This subtle relation between honor and nobility will be discussed further in the section on Indian mores below. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Attributing nobility to honor and honor to nobility only seems to defer the defining principle of Indian and aristocratic society. The honor and nobility relation seems to create a “chicken or egg” paradox: if honor is used to maintain nobility but nobility awards one honor, which quality is more central to the aristocratic and Indian character? Are not both of these qualities merely the “broken chains” hanging from an old building, obscuring the essential feature of their characters? Addressing this concern, Tocqueville writes that, “There is no need here to inquire when and how the aristocracy of the Middle Ages come into being, why it was so profoundly separate from the rest of the nation, or what undergirded and buttressed its power” (726). Similarly, the origin of the Indian’s nobility need not be identified. Certainly there is an origin, but it has been lost to history. At the very least, however, the arrival of Europeans to America provides a definite moment when the Indian’s nobility came under siege and he felt it necessary to separate himself from other Americans. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The allegory also lends his account a poignant air. By picking the Negro and the Indian as symbols, Tocqueville humanizes abstract regimes, which makes them more accessible to readers, and compels readers to care more about the resolution of the struggle between these antithetical regimes currently playing out on the world stage. His closing remarks in the chapter sum this up nicely: “But there was something particularly touching in the scene just described: here a bond of affection united the oppressed to the oppressors, and nature, in striving to bring them together, made the vast distance that prejudices and laws had placed between them even more striking” (370). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)