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Restoring the Republic: A Conservative Manifesto for America's Future

Cameron Khansarinia
Harvard University

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Title: Restoring the Republic: A Conservative Manifesto for America's Future

Author: Cameron Khansarinia

University: Harvard College

Biography: Cameron Khansarinia is a graduate of Harvard College. He studied political theory in the Department of Government and wrote his honors thesis on Alexis de Tocqueville's contemporary relevance under the advisement of Professor Harvey C. Mansfield.

Abstract: In response to liberal attempts to diverge from many American values and ways, some contemporary conservatives have responded by looking backward to what we used to be. Instead, the conservative project should be to transform us into the nation that we were always supposed to be, a project for which Tocqueville can provide guidance.

The American founding advanced the idea of equality before the law predicated on the belief in the inherent similarity of the American people and their equal status as children of God. It is with this ultimate aspiration that America announced its debut to the world, that in this new land all would be “created equal” and endowed with the same rights to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” The Founders knew that there would always be natural differences among people, leading to inevitable inequalities, but that as a matter of justice all should be treated equally before the law. Yet the country (both its institutions and its citizens) has consistently fallen short of this ultimate aspiration.

It is ironic that a nation founded on such lofty goals as the equality of all before the law would establish a system of racialized enslavement of human beings. It is troubling that a country supposedly guided by such principles would spend more than half of its history subjecting women to second-class citizenship. It is confounding that a people, purportedly similar to one another, would treat their fellow citizens with contempt because of race, class, or religion. Today much progress has been made on all of those fronts, but we are far from done. The shortcomings insufficiently listed above have led many to, quite reasonably, argue that a radical change in American institutions is needed. Yet such a radical change would ultimately fail as a far better solution exists much closer to home. Herein lies the opportunity for the conservative movement. We must revitalize America and restore the republic, not by going back to what we were, but by going forward to what we were always supposed to be. This can be realized by achieving a truly united country, free of the divisions we find so commonly today.

Our great early admirer, Alexis de Tocqueville, offers a guide to restoring the social solidarity that he witnessed in Jacksonian America, particularly if one reimagines his idea in a truly inclusive manner. Tocqueville marveled at the lack of class distinctions in early America. He wrote that “there is still a class of valets and a class of masters; but it is not always the same individuals, and above all not the same families” (Tocqueville 2007, 549). Without the strict class structures that kept those of lower classes in “subordinate position[s] that [they] cannot leave,” in America, “the servant can become a master” and therefore “one is not naturally inferior to the other” (Tocqueville 2007, 548, 549). Tocqueville described this relationship as *semblables* or “those like oneself” and he viewed it as an inherently American phenomenon (Tocqueville 2007, xciii).

Tocqueville was quite surprised to find this sense of solidarity and similarity in the Americans because he posited that democratic peoples tended to be pulled apart. Americans, however, “almost always kn[e]w how to combine their own well-being with that of their fellow citizens” (Tocqueville 2007, 501). Through that, he notes that they “combated the individualism to which equality gives birth with freedom, and they have defeated it” (Tocqueville 2007, 489). This similarity between the Americans of Tocqueville’s time came about because of religion, civil associations, and work ethic. These values and practices seem to provide a true path to making a unified country, yet in Tocqueville’s time they were extremely exclusionary. Writing in the middle of the nineteenth century, Tocqueville’s observations did not at all apply to non-whites. Tocqueville’s rose-colored vision of America may seem antiquated and diluted, but it actually provides the roadmap to establishing the America that he thought existed.

One of Tocqueville's most critical observations was that "the Christian religion has... genuine power over souls" in America (Tocqueville 2007, 278). He contrasted the American church with others he saw across Europe. The European churches, often affiliated with the state, had lost the aforementioned "genuine" faith of many of their congregants. They had become filled with pomp and ceremonial circumstance. The American church, however, dominated by low-church, mainline Protestantism, was thriving.

Although he viewed the vigor with which Americans believed in the Christian dogmas to be quite genuine, he set aside the question of personal salvation. Tocqueville instead viewed the domination of Christianity in America as a social tool that Americans wielded with immense precision and efficiency. The first and most obvious utilitarian benefit he saw stemming from religion came from the belief that "Jesus Christ [came] to earth to make it understood that all members of the human species are naturally alike and equal" (Tocqueville 2007, 413). With this view reinforced to them constantly at church, Americans looked upon their neighbors as quite similar to themselves. If God viewed His children as equal, who were mere humans to diverge from His example? It forced Americans to consider their "duties toward the human species" and to treat their fellow humans with dignity and respect (Tocqueville 2007, 419). These people divided by geography, wealth, upbringing, and in other ways suddenly considered themselves much more similar because "the unity of the human race constantly leads them back to the idea of the unity of the Creator" (Tocqueville 2007, 426). Yet the glaring exception was the inclusion of different races in this worldview. Unfortunately, for many in the United States, their faith has become of decreasing importance. Church attendance rates have dwindled for many denominations, and the genuine power over souls which Tocqueville observed seems less powerful.

A revitalized church today must take the step that the Christians of Tocqueville's time rarely did: integrate. A church in which all, guided by Christ's teaching, view their fellow congregants as equals is not valuable in a diverse nation if the congregation is entirely of one race. The values of the Christian religion are truly color blind and can have powerful effects on people, but to overcome America's racially-troubled past, America's revitalized churches must be color-conscious. By developing houses of worship which collect congregants from diverse economic, social, and racial backgrounds they can finally achieve Tocqueville's aspirations of Christianity serving to develop a sense of *semblables* among the American people.

In addition to the matter of similarity, a revitalized Christianity can and has served another critical purpose. It can serve as an effective advocate for social justice. Christians have been a powerful voice for equality, dignity, and justice in the United States since her founding. Many Abolitionists were devout Christians who, inspired by Scripture, were disgusted by the brutal practice of slavery. Further, the Civil Rights movement was powerfully supported by many Christians and had the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, a Baptist Minister, as its leader. Many protest songs from both movements were Biblically-inspired. A revitalized church, which once prioritizes the equality of *all* of God's children, can follow in and advance these noble ends.

Tocqueville's next great observation of the American people was of their extremely advanced civil society. This critical space that forms between individuals and the state was nearly nonexistent in Tocqueville's Europe. Old-style societies in which the government is heavily

involved tend to limit the civil society through government overaction. Democracies, on the other hand, have the potential to run the opposite risk and have individuals overpower the civil society through their selfish, individualistic actions. Americans, once again, confounded the expectations of a democratic people by having an incredibly vibrant civil society that drew them closer to one another.

Tocqueville wrote that “Americans of all ages, all conditions, all minds constantly unite[d]” into a variety of different organizations. Some united around common interests like reading, history, or culture and others around sports, hunting, or occupation (Tocqueville 2007, 489). Members of these groups came together not only to unite around issues about which they cared, but they took actions to address common causes in which they believed. Many groups built schools, raised funds for hospitals, took in the poor, and helped ailing veterans. Whereas Europeans may have relied on the government for such actions and purely democratic peoples may not have addressed the problems, or look to fix them on an individual basis, Americans came together in civil associations to fix their collective problems.

Once again, there was also a secondary benefit of this uniquely American characteristic. In addition to increasing social welfare in the form of a new school, hospital, or other tangible benefit, there was the intangible benefit of social connection and unification. The individuals who entered civil associations left them as members of a collective and felt “no longer isolated” as they once had without such a community (Tocqueville 2007, 492). Often these groups pulled from across the society and thus served to put “citizens of all classes in contact” (Tocqueville 2007, 501). Not only did Americans get to know one another more intimately through these groups, but they got to know citizens from decidedly different backgrounds than their own.

This connection, which further contributed to the sense of similarity among the American people, made it easy for Americans to “combine their own well-being with that of their fellow citizens” (ibid.). Unlike their European counterparts who may have only identified with their fellow countrymen if they were of the same neighborhood, family status, or income level, Americans worked together and found similarity in one another in spite of such differences. So well able to unite for small local projects, the American people were uniquely prepared to “pursue great undertakings in common” (Tocqueville 2007, 542). Today, this propensity to undertake projects in common has dwindled significantly. We have fallen prey to the peril of democracy that Tocqueville warned about: selfish individualism. We are so keen to advance in our work and excel in our private lives that we disavow connections with others. In addition to the rise of individualism, the country has seen an obvious rise in disunity. The country is increasingly divided along political, social, racial, and religious lines. The primary means of self-identification has become who people voted for in the last election and not the more innocuous distinction between Elks and Lions.

A resurgence of civil associations, of various aims and focuses, would go a long way to tackling both the problem of individualism and division. These groups, reconstituted to serve contemporary purposes, would be able to once again bring people of various backgrounds together. This would allow the uniquely American method of voluntary, collective action to reemerge as supreme. Americans, equipped with membership in these groups, would once again be able to not only contribute to the good work they do, but also develop lasting connections and

bonds to their fellow citizens. One of the most critical ways through which these groups can be reconstituted in their resurgence is through racial integration. Again, Tocqueville's rosy analysis of American civil associations in the 1840s ignored the fact that they were racially segregated. By creating groups that can connect people across class, education, neighborhood, *and* race, we can produce a society and a people even more properly connected, united, and similar than Tocqueville himself could have imagined.

The final of the three defining characteristics of Americans that Tocqueville observed was their unsurpassed work ethic and the honor they placed on work. Unlike the wealthy families in Europe who had enough old wealth to sustain themselves for generations, even wealthy Americans found themselves working. This is so not only out of need, but also because of the value they placed on work. Tocqueville described how a rich man in America "would deem himself disreputable if he used his life only for living" (Tocqueville 2007, 525).

Americans, regardless of their class, believed work to be "held in honor" (ibid.). Not only did it allow them to collect a wage to support their families, but it was another common value that all held. Men honored one another not because of the particular trade they practiced but simply because they practiced a trade. That is to say that at the time of his writing, Americans believed "every honest profession [was] honorable." A banker did not look down on a shoe shiner and the shoe shiner did not feel himself below the banker. Even "American servants [did] not believe themselves degraded because they work... for the President of the United States works for a wage as well" (Tocqueville 2007, 526). The common belief in the honor of work was undeniably strong in the United States.

This belief in hard work led to the creation of innumerable small business and individually-owned enterprises which astonished Tocqueville. He viewed Americans as an inherently entrepreneurial and innovative people who, due to their hard work, were always coming up with new ideas and means of showing off their ingenuity. Of course, once again, at this time African Americans were still kept as slaves throughout the southern part of the United States and were elsewhere discriminated against such that they could not work alongside white Americans.

Since the author's writing, this work ethic and honor placed on works seems to have diminished in the United States. Sociologist Charles Murray writes that there has been an "increase in Americans for whom the founding virtue of industriousness is not a big deal anymore" (Murray 2013, 175). The data backs up Murray's claims, and the numbers are startling. One hundred years after Tocqueville's writings, the labor market in the United States may have looked much as it did in the author's time. Some 98% of men in their prime-working years were gainfully employed (Murray 2013, 5). Yet by 2011 the labor force participation for all males had dropped to some 73% (Eberstadt 2012, 43). Some one in four American men of working age are no longer working or even seeking to gain work!

It seems that despite American respect for and appreciation of work lasting more than a century after Tocqueville's writing, it suddenly dropped off in the last 50 years. Yet perhaps it was not a diminution of the appreciation of work, but a fundamental transformation of the economy. As the world economy has rapidly globalized, American workers are increasingly faced with competition from those in other countries who can perform their jobs for far lower wages.

American companies, as a result, have taken to sending those jobs overseas, looking to increase profits. In a market economy, that is an understandable reaction to an increasingly global market. Many have looked to counter this trend by bringing old-school jobs back to America's shores. Unfortunately, that effort will likely end up being insufficient. America is far better off adapting our historic work ethic and honoring work to new careers and trades that will, once again, be available and open to all Americans.

To do so, America must prioritize a transition to the knowledge economy. The knowledge economy prioritizes understanding, critical thinking, and creativity above rote, repetitive action. It allows the practitioner to engage thoughtfully with his or her task. Since Tocqueville believed Americans were so naturally innovative, this should work well. Currently Silicon Valley, Wall Street, and other elite business circles are emblematic of this new economy. Yet the wealth of skills and the wealth of economic resources they produce are far too tightly concentrated in a few parts of the country and to a few types of people (Guynn 2017). The United States must first begin to prioritize this kind of skills in its citizens through education (Unger 2017). The American education system must be modernized to teach students the skills they will need in this new economy which may range from simple logic, problem-solving, and oratory to the more technically challenging computer science, statistics, and mathematics.

Many conservatives tend to hearken back to a time when things were "great." Unfortunately, for so many such a time never existed. Times of greatness for some were times of terror, slavery, discrimination, and hate for others. Therefore, the conservative project must not be to return America to what it once was, but rather to bring it forward to what it was always supposed to be. This new conservative movement, in advocating for political change to bring about justice before the law and social change to bring about a revitalized religion, resurgent civil associations, and recaptured sense of honor in work, must work to at long last achieve the high aspirations of our Founders. In doing so it will also have the chance to finally meet the expectations of our greatest national admirer, Alexis de Tocqueville, who in his writings also provided the above framework for how we might get there.

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