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Another Tocqueville

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Don Herzog

Another Tocqueville

Time for a true confession: I'm skeptical of predictions in social and political life. Talk of causal generalizations and Hempel's covering laws strikes me as science fiction and fantasy in drag; talk of the unfolding of the immanent logic of modernity makes me dyspeptic. I usually think that structural considerations are context, not cause, and that weird combinations of stray contingencies explain what happens. Worse, now I'm called on to predict how political theorists will be discussing democracy ten years hence. Images of herding cats and Brownian motion come to mind. Nonetheless, duty calls. I dust off my crystal ball and discover it has three channels.

We tune in first to BLEAK REALISM. As the fog clears, we glimpse a gathering of extremely cool people dressed in all black. They are discussing equality, hegemony, discourse, alterity, domination, preliminary steps toward the possibility of articulating the possibility of an emancipatory politics, and more laborious bits of jargon I can't quite make out. The conversation is liberally peppered with new forms of exotic leftism, preferably with Continental conceptual lineages and surnames, though oldies and goodies (Lukacs, Habermas, Foucault, Zizek, Agamben) still get their share of fond and uncertainly ironic airtime. (Come on, I can't be called on to predict the names of yet-unheard-of theorists.) Peering over my shoulder, you're baffled by what seems like a conceptual shell game, with too many abstractions chasing too few particulars. Still, many of the participants really are exceedingly intelligent, and if you could burst in to complain that you can't make out quite what it is they want to say, they would remind you that it's not as though the rest of political science does without repellent jargon. They invite you to join their merry band: with some years of sustained reading and study, you too could talk this way. But I predict you'll politely decline—and then my crystal ball goes blank.

Not to worry: a new channel bursts into focus. At BRAVE NEW WORLD, bespectacled young men with facial hair—somehow women seem in very short supply here—are huddled over computers. Dust-covered busts of Kenneth Arrow and William Riker are leaning over, atop an old file cabinet strewn with economics journals. This time the transmission is good enough that I can make contact with the ghostly denizens of the future. "Modeling?" I ask. I get a snippy yes; then one of the younger and brighter whippersnappers asks facetiously, "What else?" "N-dimensional issue spaces? Cycling? Structure-induced equilibria?" I persist. One looks confusedly at another. "Is this guy a historian of political theory?" he asks. The other shrugs. The

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first gazes at me with solicitous, no, clinical concern. “I think I might still have some stuff on that in my old textbooks,” he says. “No, don’t bother,” I go on, suddenly excited by the thought of grabbing their spiffy new models and bringing them back to the present. Think of the lustrous new line of prestigious publications on my c.v.! But the gruesome shade of Karl Popper intercedes. “You cannot predict scientific innovation,” he cautions me. “If you could predict it, it would happen now, not later.” Oh well. I have one last question. “What happened to political theory?” I ask plaintively. “Don’t be silly!” one shoots back. “We *are* political theory.”

The picture is still vibrantly clear, but I’m suddenly finding the lebensraum-style audio signal repulsive, so I throw a black cloth over the crystal ball. A few minutes later I’ve tuned into CAUTIOUS OPTIMISM. These are my kind of people: they’re immersed in Tocqueville. Better yet, they’ve learned to shrug off the uneasy sense that political theorists are always poised precariously between necrophilia and metaphysics. They don’t have any ghettoization fantasies about their role in political science: they’ve figured out that the behaviorists’ battle for an amusingly—or embarrassingly—crude conception of Science is well and truly dead, and that it’s fun and interesting to talk to their colleagues (yes, the modelers too). Some of their colleagues even reciprocate.

They’ve also figured out that Tocqueville is not interesting for his own predictions. Yes, he got some right, perhaps most spectacularly that America and Russia would emerge as the two great powers (*Democracy in America*, I, conclusion). But he produced some unfortunate howlers too. Islam has not in fact faded from the scene (II.i.5) and Protestantism seems to be holding its own quite nicely between Catholicism and atheism (II.i.6). Next decade’s theorists have noticed that Tocqueville capitalizes on the Jeane Dixon effect: make enough predictions and some of them will come true. (Yes, I’m capitalizing on it, too. Or trying to.) Tocqueville insists that Americans will never rely on a military draft (I.ii.5) and that democratic societies will inevitably rely on a military draft (II.iii.23). Whoops. Tomorrow’s theorists gently laugh off prediction as a fool’s errand. Nor are they captivated by Tocqueville’s grandiose historical claims, such as the one about the relentless providential march of equality over seven centuries (I, introduction). They explain that he wanted to jolt the Catholic ultras out of their maudlin obsession with doom and gloom by exhibiting the French Revolution as God’s irreversible will, that’s all.

But they are much pleased by two other facets of Tocqueville’s work. One is his sustained ambivalence about equality. God may count the rise of equality as progress, Tocqueville reports, but he sees it as decay (II.iv.8). This jittery stance strikes them as far more promising for understanding the problems and possibilities of democracy than any value-neutral stance. And even if they are (little-d)

democrats, as they mostly are, they think it better in social inquiry to be acerbic than starry-eyed. The other is Tocqueville’s fascination with finding aristocratic substance under Jacobin forms, or, as he puts it, the aristocratic colors under the democratic paint (I.i.2). Secondary associations as estates (II.iv.7), industrial capitalists as aristocrats (II.ii.20), whites as aristocrats (I.ii.10), lawyers as Egyptian priests, and omnipotent judges chastening the jury’s belief in democratic competence (I.ii.8): such curious social formations don’t merely allow Tocqueville to console the ultras, to assure them that all is not lost; they also open up a lovely research agenda, exploring the weird, intricate links between egalitarian and inegalitarian social dynamics in democratic societies.

So too Tocqueville worries about dangerous transitions. He explains, for instance, that domestic service works fine when everyone is reciting from a fully aristocratic script or a fully democratic one, but that in the move from one to another, everything is alarming, even dangerous (II.iii.5). Scrap the inexorable providential march, take seriously the thought that equality and hierarchy exist side by side—Tocqueville was wrong about Protestantism, but it’s not as though the Catholic Church is going away, either; nor have democratic societies vanquished the social inferiority of women he congratulates them on maintaining (II.iii.12)—and you realize that we’re always up against dangerous dissonances, if not dangerous transitions.

I note that these theorists have rejected a priority thesis Tocqueville regularly flirts with. I mean his thought that political society will inevitably reflect civil society (II.iii.8.n1; so too I.i.5, I.i.8, I.ii.5). They notice that at the very least Tocqueville understands reciprocal causation, or scratch/itch cycles: if the public turns passively individualist; if their social horizons shrink; if they succumb in turn to a debased taste for leveling equality; then they will assign more and more power to the state, and the benevolently paternalistic state in turn will control more and more of social life, furthering the people’s mindless absorption in their daily lives. And since these future theorists are not the least bit pious or deferential about the canon, they don’t mind adding a thought, whether or not it’s Tocqueville’s: they’re interested in how politics and policy shape society. Like Tocqueville, they move readily back and forth between constitutional structure and apparently trivial episodes in everyday life, between law and religion, between the weight of tradition and how history gets written.

In short, these theorists turn to Tocqueville not for melodramatic theses about the shape of modernity, not for conservative cautions that we must save liberty from the ubiquitous threat of equality, but for an approach to doing political theory. To call it a method would be too much: enough, even better, that it’s a grab-bag of tricks and insights. Now you may suspect that my crystal ball has mislabeled the channel, and I’ve really tuned into UTOPIAN OPTIMISM. Or, then again, NAIVE SELLOUT. Maybe. Time will tell.