

DRST 006 Historical & Political Thought
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Tradition: Another Casualty of Modernity?
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“Amidst the continual movement that reigns in the heart of... society, the bond that unites generations is relaxed or broken; each man easily loses track of the ideas of his ancestors or scarcely worries about them.” This cutting observation could easily have come from Burke, Tocqueville, or even Marx: the three thinkers, despite their great ideological and methodological differences, align in their identification of the ills of modernity. Tocqueville made this statement about a democratic society (T 403), but his notion of the “bond that unites generations” resonates with Burke’s broken “chain and continuity of the commonwealth” (B 193) and Marx’s comments on the way “all family ties among the proletarians are torn asunder” (M 173) and all other “fixed, fast-frozen relations... are swept away” (M 161). They agree on this one point: modernity, at its frenetic pace, has lodged an attack on tradition; creeping individualism wrests ideas and practices out of the clutches of the accumulated wisdom or folly of past generations.

Tradition generally refers to the customs or ideas from a society’s predecessors. Burke, Tocqueville, and Marx each recognize the unprecedented changes of their respective times and grapple with the value and implications of such deviations with the past—with tradition. As the sanctity of tradition slips from society’s grasp, the views these three thinkers have about the role tradition should play in modern societies diverge, primarily as a result of their assumptions about

historical conditions and history's subsequent telos. But rather than simply view their thought as a progression of historical thought, as merely reacting to their historical conditions, it is more productive to engage with their core assumptions. The attitudes of Burke, Tocqueville, and Marx towards the importance and tenability of tradition in the radically shifting conditions of modernity are clarified through their views on a dimension of traditional ideas: jurisprudence.

Jurisprudence, for Burke, is the ultimate manifestation of tradition; it is "the pride of the human intellect... the collected reason of ages" (B 193). With its attention to precedent, jurisprudence exhibits what Burke considers the most important aspect of tradition: its specificity. The overall role of government is "so practical in itself, and intended for such practical purposes" that it "requires experience, and even more experience than any person can gain in his whole life, however sagacious and observing he may be" (B 152). Burke maintains a skeptical stance towards the validity of individual reason, noting its dangerous capriciousness and general fallibility; to effectively guide the state, individual reason must be tempered by time and experience in the form of tradition. Jurisprudence is tradition codified, "a heap of old exploded errors" that have been tailored to fit the particular needs of its society (B 193). Burke's approbation of jurisprudence is but an expression of the high valuation he places on tradition, as the "*entailed inheritance* derived to us from our forefathers... an estate specially belonging to the people of this kingdom without any reference whatever to any other more general and prior right" (B 119). His reverent language towards property and the dignity of age belies his pious reliance on tradition as the guiding principle of politics, one whose domain extends into all aspects of life and consciously defines a nation's character.

Tocqueville, in his description of the Americans, first notes their "philosophic method," diametrically opposed to Burke in many ways, with an overemphasis on individual reason and

judgment. Their propensity to “seek the reason for things by themselves and in themselves alone” leads them to “take tradition only as information” or even something to “escape” (T 403). Although they share Burke’s disdain for abstraction, Americans are so enamoured with the profit of the practical that they radically lean into the specificities of personal experience. Rather than revere it as a testament to accumulated human wisdom, the American penchant for individual reason renders tradition simply another source of information, even subordinate to personal experience: “the taste for believing any man whomsoever on his word” is destroyed, much less the constrictive, entrenched systems of belief that tradition represents (T 404).

Concerned with the extreme disposition of American democracy, Tocqueville turns to lawyers and jurisprudence as a countervailing force to democratic impulses. Lawyers, particularly English and American lawyers (Tocqueville himself was a lawyer, albeit a French one), are trained in a sort of “abnegation,” one that leads them to “draw from the opinions and legal decisions of their fathers the opinions that they will hold in matters of law and the decisions that they will take” (T 254-255). When forced to change the laws, the lawyer “resorts to the most incredible subtleties in order to persuade himself that in adding something to the work of his fathers, he is only developing their thought and completing their work” (T 256). Consider Burke’s recommendation that mirrors this resistance to revision: “no man should approach to look into [the state’s] defects or corruptions but with due caution... he should approach to the faults of the state as to the wounds of a father, with pious awe and trembling solicitude” (B 194). Tocqueville’s American lawyers embody the attitude to tradition that Burke promotes, with their similar language of filial piety. Their habits, in addition to the authority they are afforded by society, put lawyers in the position of being “the most powerful and so to speak the lone counterweight to democracy,” the mediating influence between aristocratic conservatism and

democratic interests (T 256). American democracy may be devoid of a respect for tradition, but lawyers reintroduce the spirit of tradition that, crucially, preserves the very existence of a republic (T 254) by “act[ing] constantly on [society] without its knowing, and in the end models it to its desires” (T 258).

While Burke and Tocqueville share similar views about jurisprudence, indicating the importance of tradition to society, Marx’s evaluation of jurisprudence reveals a fundamentally different understanding of the nature of, and degradation of, ideals relating to tradition. He employs jurisprudence as a specific example of the attributes of ideals generally, deeming it “but the will of your class made into a law for all, a will, whose essential character and direction are determined by the economical conditions of existence of your class” (M 172). Marx’s focus on the path of history—and subsequently, of the development of tradition—as one of class struggle and economic conditions (M 158) shapes his understanding of “bourgeois notions of freedom, culture, law” as “but the outgrowth of the conditions of your bourgeois production and bourgeois property” (M 172).

If tradition is meant to be the cumulative and enduring qualities of human societies, as perhaps Burke or Tocqueville would say, Marx reduces “tradition” to nothing more than the thread that ties all the historical epochs together: the common fact of “the exploitation of one part of society by the other” (M 175). Jurisprudence, then, is the perfection and codification of this exploitation. Marx scoffs at “bourgeois clap-trap” about traditional elements of culture such as “the family and education,” when the actualization of these ideals, for “nine-tenths of the population,” (M 171) is but commodification and instrumentalization (M 173). Given that “the dissolution of the old ideas keeps even pace with the dissolution of the old conditions of existence” (M 174), the aristocratic ethos of greatness and nobility that leads Burke and

Tocqueville to value tradition has all but disappeared in the harsh new age where “all that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned” (M 161-162). The ruling ideas of the old, aristocratic age have been replaced by the new ruling ideas of the bourgeois, more defined by their changeable character than by content.

To Marx, the abolition of classes is imminent; thus, the abolition of tradition, exploitative ideas grounded in class domination, is too imminent. Marx and Tocqueville both claim a sort of teleological vision of history: Marx, towards the ultimate abolition of class, Tocqueville, towards the ultimate equality of conditions. These two visions may seem compatible, but Tocqueville resists the idea of equality without distinction, one that flattens and unmoors, without countervailing forces that can restore the greatness of aristocracy. Marx, speaking for the proletariat, may revile “law, morality, religion”—constituent elements of tradition—as “so many bourgeois prejudices, behind which lurk in ambush just as many bourgeois interests” (M 168), for which they must be discarded, but perhaps we have no choice but to restore some form of these ideals, to rescue them from their corruption by class influences. Tocqueville sees “some principal ideas” as necessary to the very existence of society, for without grounding principles there will only be chaos and anarchy (T 407). Marx’s proposition is therefore simply untenable: his most “radical rupture with traditional ideas” (M 175) will destroy society, if no alternative source of ideas is offered.

The precise danger of the American “philosophic method” is its foundational deficiency: the shortcomings of individual reason requires an external, stabilizing source of ideas. For Tocqueville, this is best exemplified in the case “when religion is destroyed in a people”: if denied a stable source of beliefs, people are paralyzed, “frightened at the aspect of this limitless independence... they give themselves a master” (T 418). What is this new master, if not

tradition? Tocqueville's response is the tyranny of the majority, but that is just one alternative; unless clearly directed, this vacuum will seek out any possible replacement, no matter how sinister. Tradition offers a stable source of beliefs, one that offsets individual reason with its spirit of cautiousness and deference, as Burke and Tocqueville note in the spirit of lawyers. Indeed, Tocqueville deems lawyers necessary to an enduring democratic republic for how they restore the spirit of tradition to society without compromising gains in equality or the focus on a democratic common good. The importance of lawyers, of any good counterweight to the ills of modern society, lies in the stabilizing effect they provide to the turbulent progress of equality.

One question remains, the challenge to tradition issued by Marx: is tradition even possible in the new conditions of society? The enlightenment ideal of cosmopolitanism has only accelerated the process of globalization and universalism that Marx believes has "stripped [the proletariat] of every trace of national character," precipitating some form of unified, global action (M 168). When nationality is erased in this way, will there be any significant groups or grounds left to maintain tradition? Erasing distinction simultaneously erases attachment to tradition, in particular its specific character, as Tocqueville notes in the case of disappearing honor: equality erodes the motivating need for differentiation to preserve superiority, replacing it with "simple and general notions of good and evil" (T 599). Burke vaunts tradition for how it represents the particular needs of particular groups, but how can such a vision of tradition apply to the global community? Modern society may still need a common and stable source of beliefs, but it is possible that tradition no longer has the capability to fulfill this role. What, then, would replace it? Should tradition vanish, leaving a chasm that will eagerly fill itself, we must be ready with another source of beliefs, one that can serve a similar purpose and, as Burke says, "preserve the equipoise" of society (B 377).