

# Freedom: More Social than Political

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In 1849, Herman Melville authored a poorly received romance of Polynesian adventure, which interwove threads of socio-political commentary through the use of thinly veiled fictional countries and personalities. Unabashedly referencing America, Melville reproached his contemporaries and cautioned that, “freedom is more social than political.”

Indeed, freedom is more social than political; it is in the social sphere that the seeds of democracy are sewn. Political science would label this phenomenon civil society—a field that has recently come to popularity in the policymaking circles of Washington, New York, and Brussels.

Contemporaneous with the application of civil-societal principles to developing and democratizing states, a parallel discussion has emerged in America, where many have witnessed the dissolution of the colorful social fabric that has defined this country since its birth.

It was Alexis de Tocqueville, who in his inquiry *On Democracy in America*, took note of a distinctly American civil society: “Americans of all ages, all stations in life, and all types of dispositions are forever forming associations. There are not only commercial and industrial associations in which all take part, but others of a thousand types—religious, moral, serious, futile, very general and very limited, immensely large and very minute. ...Nothing, in my view,

deserves more attention than the intellectual and moral associations in America.”

At its inception and throughout its early history, America was the *tabula rasa* for the Enlightenment philosophies of Western Europe. Where European civil society was colored by its past, America cultivated a distinctively fresh and innovative form so admired by Tocqueville. Where in Europe change could not be engendered but by the powerful few or the revolutionary masses, in America change could arise through the efforts of peaceful and constructive civic organizations integrated into American democracy.

But before delving into philosophical theorizing, it is first necessary to postulate the terms of civil society. As seen through the Tocquevillian lens, civil society is a realm of humanity distinct from the state that functions to, despite the inevitable differences of man, create a shared set of values, norms, and beliefs in support of the democratic tradition.

To take a more demonstrative approach, civil society today can be witnessed in churches of all denominations, the Red Cross, the Boy Scouts, trade unions, PTA meetings, professional associations, sports clubs, and anywhere else where citizens come together in an arena of voluntary collective action. These institutions provide grounds for civic participation on democratic

terms, which in turn educate the citizenry and inculcate a shared set of foundational values regarding democracy and public debate.

At this point, critics and proponents of the individual may jump to conclusions and avow the stance that such institutions represent “destructive cultural conditioning”. Yet such basic civic virtues do not deride the inevitable differences of man, but rather protect such differences through the inculcation of democratic mediating structures such as tolerance and broadmindedness.

While democratic government is defined by its acceptance and moderating tendencies, its survival unavoidably requires a pro-democratically socialized citizenry to meet the demands of democratic citizenship—and the demands are indeed great and the privilege too often taken for granted.

So if then one were to take issue with the necessity of civil society as the underpinning institution of American democracy, then such a critic would, this author contends, necessarily have to take issue with the democratic process and present a more suitable arrangement by which to govern the citizenry and to protect life and liberty. And in the well-known words of Sir Winston Churchill: “democracy is the worst form of government except all the others that have been tried.”

Civil society has other benefits too. In expanding on Tocqueville’s interpretation and introducing the views of prominent American political scientist Robert Putnam, the realm of civil society creates social capital. Akin in premise to financial or political capital, social capital is created by the values and experiences gained from the interaction among citizens and results in various forms of trust that facilitate cooperation for mutual benefit.

In sum, civil society is critical element of American democracy. Instilling the virtues of democratic tolerance, debate, and representation, civil society is a vital force undergirding

our republic. Moreover, it creates the social capital and resultant trust of social cohesion and a free, yet ordered democratic society.

But to invoke the imagery of Herman Melville’s literary universe—the vast and uncontainable seas—America is adrift absent her roots. Contemporary America has witnessed the decomposition of our social fabric. A phenomenon well documented in Robert Putnam’s book entitled *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, participation in traditional civil societal institutions is on the decline. What is more, no countervailing institutions or mechanisms have cropped up to fill this void.

Solid statistical analysis demonstrates that there has been a marked decline of membership in service groups, professional societies, religious organizations, fraternal groups, and other civil societal institutions over the past 50 or so years.

Even more disconcerting in Putnam’s view is that more Americans are bowling alone than ever before. While more Americans are bowling today than three decades previous, many fewer are participating in organized bowling leagues. In Putnam’s estimation, this is indicative of contemporary America’s trend to be less connected to and less invested in neighbors, friends, society, and American democracy.

If, therefore, freedom is more social than political, and American democracy is predicated on the positive normative functions and social capital of civil society, then some commentators have speculated that America is approaching an impending social crisis. The result? A pathological social order.

Yet for some, the decline of American civil society is a calculated and desired endgame. They see the separation of individual ties to people, places, community, and so forth—the uprooting of civil society—as a precondition for “progressive action”.

In this state of affairs, people are separated from one another and unchecked individualism arises to defy the foundational virtues of a civil,

tolerant, democratic society. Peaceful, organic, democratic change cannot be engendered through civil societal organizations, but only by means of violence, protest, and revolution. In doing this, one flies in the face of the principles of American democratic institutions. Thus, in order to defy the roots of democracy, one must be disposed to argue for a new, superceding system of government protecting the rights that we hold to be inalienable.

To disambiguate the portrayal of individualism stated above, in the traditional scheme of American democracy, the individual is to be highly valued. Indeed, recognition and admiration of the initiative of the individual has been the foundation of American ingenuity and entrepreneurship that has set us apart from other nations and has made the “American experiment” a successful one. Yet an individual severed from civil society, from the moderating democratic virtues of liberty, debate, and tolerance is no more than a tyrant. He is thus because, devoid of democratic civic virtue, he cannot accept an opinion other than his own and he knows of no other way to achieve his goals than through chaotic revolution.

At best, an America absent civil society, in the words of John Rawls, would entail “a voluntary scheme [whose] members are autonomous and the obligations they recognize self-imposed.” At worst, however, an American citizenry unequipped with the basic civic virtues of debate, tolerance, and democratic principle, would be prone to unchecked and unquestioning social movements whose power would be usurped by a tyrannical few.

In the wisdom of Tocqueville: “Despotism, by its very nature suspicious, sees the isolation of men as the best guarantee of its own permanence.” To disengage from civil society, for truly every man to be his own island, is to make America susceptible to the tyrant—whoever he may be, whenever he may arise, and from wherever he may hail.

Indeed, civil society as an arena for learned civic virtue and crosscutting, reinforcing social trust, is the underpinning soul of America’s defense against tyranny. Qualities such as independence, self-reliance, debate and tolerance are molded within the civil-societal sphere—whether through the Boy Scouts, church groups, PTA meetings, or any other institution where men and women come together to comprehend and to confront the vital demands of American citizenship.

“It is not unknown . . . that in these boisterous days, the lessons of history are almost discarded, as superseded by present experiences.” Herman Melville wrote these words more than 150 years ago. Yet, like a tuning fork rediscovered, Melville’s admonition finds new resonance in an America that has drifted even further from the tonalities of tradition.

In a time of selfish individualism, and eroding social traditions, we could do worse than to return to the American values so admired by de Tocqueville (yet in Melville’s view already slipping away)—to a strong civil society informed by public spiritedness, tolerance, debate, and engagement. Before we plunge headlong into an untested political agenda, let us first understand our social roots, and appreciate the values that have carried our nation thus far.

As a free and united people let us at least comprehend and perhaps revere Tocqueville’s fundamental belief that “if men are to remain civilized or to become civilized, the art of association must develop and improve among them at the same speed as equality of conditions spreads.”

Perhaps then, through a rediscovery of this all-but-forgotten “art of association,” America may come about to meet the winds of change and chart the seas behind her and those to come.

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