

S. Emre Gercek

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Practicing Equality and Sovereignty: Tocqueville on Associations

*Democracy inaugurates the experience of an ungraspable, uncontrollable society in which the people will said to be sovereign, of course, but whose identity will constantly be open to question, whose identity will forever remain latent.*¹

*I have often used the word equality in an absolute sense; and several times have even personified it, so that I have found myself saying that equality did certain things or abstained from others.*²

What distinguishes democracy from other forms of rule is its egalitarian character. Yet, this distinguishing form stands in an uneasy relationship with another fundamental concept of democracy, namely, the sovereignty of people. The latter – sovereignty – has been infamous for its hierarchical, theological, arbitrary and even totalitarian connotations, often summarized in Bodin's formulation: "supreme power to command."³ Inasmuch as the concept of sovereignty conceives rule as a strict and hierarchical distribution of the positions of commanding and being commanded, the inscription of the former concept – equality – to sovereignty of the people creates an immediate tension, rendering democratic sovereignty an inherently paradoxical idea.⁴ Such tension has led ancient and modern critiques of democracy to associate equality with the formlessness or unruly and anarchical tendencies of demos,⁵ making them conclude that because the demos is disorderly or incapable of ruling itself, democratic equality

¹ Claude Lefort, *The Political Forms of Modern Society: Bureaucracy, Democracy, Totalitarianism*, ed. John B. Thompson, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986), 303-4.

² Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. J.P. Mayer (New York: Harper Perennial, 2006), 9.

³ Jean Bodin, *On Sovereignty*, tr. Julian Franklin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 1.

⁴ Etienne Balibar, *Equaliberty: Political Essays* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 42.

⁵ Plato, *Republic*, tr. Christopher Rowe (New York: Penguin, 2012), book 8; Sheldon S. Wolin, "Fugitive Democracy," *Democracy and Difference*, ed. Seyla Benhabib (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996); Sheldon S. Wolin, "Transgression, Equality, and Voice," *Demokratia: A Conversation on Democracies Ancient and Modern*, ed. J. Ober and C. Hedrick (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

in rule is an unsustainable, if not an impossible, political form.⁶ Furthermore, building on this idea of formlessness or incapability, the critiques of democracy claim that democratic sovereignty is inherently prone to populism and tyranny of majority because the aspiration to give demos a collective political form can only be achieved either by a populist general will or a tyrannical majority,⁷ or, even more dangerously, by a totalitarian popular will (“People-as-One”).⁸ Thus, the democratic people emerge onto the scene of politics as a troubling and troubled sovereign – one whose claim to equality leads to two opposing poles of anarchy or totalizing general will.

This paradoxical way of approaching democratic sovereignty is what I seek to problematize in this paper. However, my problematization does not rest on resolving the paradox. Rather, it rests on rethinking equality and sovereignty without implicitly accepting terms of the paradox. In other words, although I find radical democratic theorists’ affirmation of demotic power as an important egalitarian force against dominations inherent in every form of rule valuable, their identification of democratic equality with insurgent or anarchical tendencies of demos does not enable us to approach democratic sovereignty as the ongoing efforts of the people to create forms of egalitarian commonalities. As such, in this paper I aim to rethink the conceptions of equality and sovereignty so that they can be understood together in a way that elucidates and summons a stronger thematization of the ordinary egalitarian efforts of the people for democratic politics.

⁶ I am certainly not suggesting that all democratic theorists find the formless and transgressive character of democracy undesirable. Some radical democratic theorists take these critiques seriously and even accept the charges. But they invert the arguments of the critiques by affirming the “transgressive,” “anarchical” and “insurgent” tendencies of democracy. Wolin, “Transgression, Equality, and Voice;” Antonio Negri, *Insurgencies: Constituent Power and the Modern State*, tr. Maurizio Boscagli, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009); Miguel Abensour, *Democracy against the State: Marx and the Machiavellian Moment*, tr. Max Blechman (Malden, MA: Polity, 2011). Furthermore, some other defenders of democracy argue that anti-democratic arguments emanate from an imposing intellectual “superior knowledge,” stressing that the alleged incapability of democratic people importantly poses radical demands upon such intellectual schemes that claim to achieve the so-called best interests of community. Michael Saward, *The Terms of Democracy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998).

⁷ Phillip Pettit, *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 30.

⁸ Claude Lefort, *Democracy and Political Theory* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988), 13. I must clarify here that Lefort himself is not skeptical or critical of democracy. His aim is to point toward the possible totalitarian tendencies of democracy.

Such rethinking is especially important today, not only because of the increasingly pressing problem of disproportional influence of social and economic inequality over law and policy making,⁹ but also because of the problem of global “neoliberal” subjection of democratic institutions, principles and activities to privatization, economic competition, and inequality.¹⁰ At first glance, the inequalities stemming from contemporary plutocracy and neoliberalism might seem to be about unequal material distribution. However, the problem goes beyond purely socio-economic inequality in the distribution of wealth. Social relations of inequality take various forms including gender, sex, race, ethnicity, religion, and class – a point that evidences that social equality is not as a matter of material redistribution but as a standing in relations of equality to others. This is certainly not to suggest that the issues of material inequality or redistribution cannot be parts of egalitarian demands. Rather, the point is that demands about what/how much one should have are themselves necessarily dependent on conditions of relational standing and power – on the equal power to be sources of demands.¹¹

As democratic theorists have recently started to assert, it is precisely this democratic capacity to people is at stake in contemporary plutocratic and neoliberal societies. Underling the simultaneous erosion of common public concerns and the disenfranchisement of ordinary citizens under pervasive neoliberalism, Jason Frank argues that the contemporary democratic danger is the loss of the “the very idea of collective

⁹ John McCormick, *Machiavellian Democracy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Jeffrey A. Winters, *Oligarchy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Pierre Rosanvallon, *The Society of Equals*, tr. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013); Urbinati, *Democracy Disfigured*; Jeffrey Edward Green, “Liberalism and the Problem of Plutocracy,” *Constellations* doi: 10.1111/1467-8675.12147 (2015); Martin Gilens and Benjamin I. Page. “Testing Theories of American Politics: Elites, Interest Groups and Average Citizens,” *Perspectives on Politics* 12.3 (2014): 564-581.

¹⁰ Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution* (New York: Zone Books, 2015); James Tully, “The Agonistic Freedom of Citizens,” *Public Philosophy in a New Key: Volume 1, Democracy and Civic Freedom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 156-9; Antonio Y. Vázquez-Arroyo, “Liberal Democracy and Neoliberalism: A Critical Juxtaposition,” *New Political Science* 30.2 (2008): 127–59; Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval, *The New Way of the World: On Neoliberal Society* (London: Verso, 2013).

¹¹ Anderson, “What Is the Point of Equality?,” Young, *Justice and Politics of Difference*; Rainer Forst, “Radical Justice: On Iris Marion Young’s Critique of the ‘Distributive Paradigm’” *Constellations* 14.2 (2007): 260-5.

action and of a collective actor capable of forming a common will.”¹² Similarly, James Tully asserts the increasing importance of envisioning ways to “graft democratic practice[s]” onto the global neo-liberal condition.¹³ In other words, contemporary democratic theorists argue that in order to redress contemporary neoliberal inequalities, we must envision ways to reinvigorate the collective subjectivity of ordinary people. My wager is that such envisioning should start with a rethinking of the egalitarian imperatives of democratic sovereignty. Thus the central question I seek in this paper: how can we mobilize the egalitarian imperatives of democratic sovereignty against prevailing social inequalities and oppressions?

My paper, through a historical recovery, seeks to reclaim a conception of democratic equality that emphasizes the empowerment of the egalitarian capacity of the people. I maintain that Tocqueville’s discussion of the “dogma of the sovereignty of the people” and associations teach us that democratic theory should thematize what I would like to call the *practices of equality*: practices which consist of people’s ongoing and ordinary efforts to create and proliferate forms of egalitarian sovereignty.

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Tocqueville’s conceptualization of equality, the nodal concept of his *Democracy in America* (DA),¹⁴ is notoriously difficult. Tocqueville himself admits this difficulty. In conceptualizing equality in an “absolute” or “abstract” way, Tocqueville states that he actually performs the “language of democracy,” in which the abundance of abstract terms both “widens” and “clouds” the scope of thought.¹⁵ Tocqueville’s

¹² Jason Frank, “Collective Actors, Common Desires,” *Political Research Quarterly* 68.3 (2015): 638. Frank here refers to Wendy Brown’s argument that contemporary neoliberalism’s main target is what Brown calls as “homo politicus,” a subject that aspires to demonstrate her democratic sovereignty. Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 86.

¹³ Tully, “The Agonistic Freedom of Citizens,” 156-7. Also see Frank, “Collective Actors, Common Desires,” 637-8.

¹⁴ “[T]he more I studied American society, the more clearly I saw equality of conditions as the creative element from which each particular fact derived, and all my observations constantly returned to this nodal point.” Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 9. As Wolin states, “‘equality of conditions’ appears at the first glance an unfortunate choice,” because it obscures the dynamics Tocqueville aims to convey. Sheldon S. Wolin, *Tocqueville between Two Worlds: The Making of a Political and Theoretical Life* (Princeton University Press, 2009): 125. Similarly, Lefort argues that “equality” may appear just as a “fact” (since this is one of the words Tocqueville uses) but its dynamism and force cannot be grasped without looking at the divergence and convergence of the tendencies behind it. Lefort, “An Exploration of the Flesh of the Social,” 42.

¹⁵ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 481-2.

performative depiction of the democratic way of conceptualizing equality confers a capacious and generative trait on the concept: equality is a “principle,” a “passion” as well as a “taste,” a “fact”, an “opinion,” and, as some commentators especially underscore, a “state of society.”¹⁶ This richness, however, comes at the expense of the clarity of meaning. As François Furet notes, one central question Tocqueville’s conceptualization of equality brings forward is whether equality is a political or social phenomenon: Is it a political principle, a political or social sensibility or a real social condition?¹⁷ Furet’s answer is that Tocqueville’s use of “*democracy* as an approximate substitute of *equality*” is ambiguously situated in both social and political spheres.¹⁸ However, Furet is especially interested in one particular formulation of equality, namely, “egalitarian social state.” Alluding to the beginning of Volume 2/Part 3/Chapter 21 of DA where Tocqueville poses a “democratic state of society” against a “system of castes and classes,” Furet suggests that Tocqueville’s characterization of equality is in fact a “commonsensical one:” “a society in which equality reigns is a society in which class barriers between individuals have disappeared.”¹⁹ What is even more indicative of this characterization, Furet maintains, is Tocqueville’s statement that “when a people has a democratic state of society,” “there are no longer castes or classes in the community.”²⁰ Puzzled by this statement, Furet comments that Tocqueville’s “conceptual system,” in which the real democratic social state and the actors’ perception of this state are not distinguished, demonstrates an “odd” and “temporary” “blindness” to class reality.²¹

I begin this section with these comments of Furet not to agree with him. In fact, as I will explain below with my focus on the images of popular sovereignty, Tocqueville not only distinguishes the perception of social equality from social material inequality but also situates the former as a central

¹⁶ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 659, 57, 505, 576, 660 fn.2 (respectively).

¹⁷ François Furet, “The Conceptual System of *Democracy in America*,” *In the Workshop of History* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984): 167-197.

¹⁸ Furet, “The Conceptual System of *Democracy in America*,” 186, original emphasis.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 660, footnote 2.

²¹ Furet, “The Conceptual System of *Democracy in America*,” 186-7.

motivating force towards social equality despite social inequalities in material conditions.²² However, for now, my intention in turning to Furet is to bring up a persistent puzzle among Tocqueville readers: what does Tocqueville mean by identifying equality with democratic “social state?”

Jean-Claude Lamberti argues that Tocqueville’s conceptualization of equality as a social state refers to the possibility of “social mobility”. Lamberti maintains that social equality does not mean the absence of or democratic dismantling of the existence of classes and social inequalities, but their fixed arrangements and “permanent hierarchies.”²³ Michael Locke McLellan, in a similar vein, argues that Tocqueville’s democracy is “primarily about social relations rather than merely law and government.”²⁴ Like Lamberti, he argues that this social equality is not the “complete equality” but the “hope” of upward mobility that “social fluidity” breeds.²⁵ However, not everyone agrees that Tocqueville sees equality as a social issue. Some readers of Tocqueville refute the “primacy of the social” interpretation of equality and argue that Tocqueville was one of the very few scholars that emphasized the primacy of the political in understanding democratic equality.²⁶ For instance, James Schleifer argues that Tocqueville’s use of equality in DA demonstrates his dissatisfaction with a strictly social definition. According to Schleifer, Tocqueville “devoted considerable mental effort” to specifying the political dimensions of democracy. This effort,

²² To be fair to Furet, I must note that he arrives at a similar conclusion that equality primarily refers to a democratic social perception in Tocqueville’s thought. Where I diverge from Furet is that I do not think that Tocqueville is never interested in the “objective reality” of equality. For Furet, “[Tocqueville] is satisfied with the belief that real social conditions have already begun to level off,” hence “never tried to be specific about this assumption, much less to measure it: it is an existentially, not a statistically obvious fact.” “The Conceptual System of *Democracy in America*,” 189-90. As I will discuss in the following pages, my argument is that Tocqueville is interested in existing, objective social conditions, as evidenced in his discussion of inheritance laws (DA, pp. 51-3) and the rise of industrial aristocracy (DA, p.555-8). But, I argue that Tocqueville’s main question is how equality as a democratic perception leads people to consider themselves to be equal, or to be possibly equal although they live in unequal social material conditions. This interplay of unequal social conditions and people’s perception of equality in Tocqueville’s thought will raise important points about how we can think about egalitarian democratic politics – points Furet does not discuss.

²³ *Ibid*, 46. For the discussion of democratic equality as a dismantling of the aristocratic “permanent hierarchies” in DA, see V2/P3/C5, especially p. 576.

²⁴ Michael Locke McLellan, “The General Will After Rousseau: The Case of Tocqueville,” in James Farr and David Lay Williams eds., *The General Will: The Evolution of a Concept* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2015): 403.

²⁵ McLellan, “The General Will After Rousseau,” 419-20.

²⁶ Welch, “Tocqueville’s Resistance to the Social,” 84.

Schleifer's argument runs, is palpable in his various references to democracy: "dogma of the sovereignty of the people," "principle of majority," "rule of the multitude," and "democratic government"²⁷

I claim that both social equality and political equality play an important role in Tocqueville's understanding of democracy. Despite his primacy of the political argument, Schleifer actually directs us to the place where one can see how Tocqueville understands equality both in its social and political dimension, namely, popular sovereignty. Tocqueville's approach to equality and popular sovereignty, like many of the thinkers of his time was embedded in the debates on the "social question."²⁸ As Robert Castel's work demonstrates, the social question was one of the central debates during the 1830s in the form of the question of pauperism.²⁹ Crucial in the rise of this question was the questioning of the divorce between equality in juridico-political order and inequality in the economic order that carried widespread misery. In other words, the economic inequality became an antinomy in the political foundation of the equal sovereignty of all.³⁰ The fissure between economic inequalities and political equality led thinkers in the 19th century to invent and promote a conception of the social to grapple with addressing this fissure.³¹ These conceptions of social took many forms, and over time the social question became not only a question of poverty but also a question of "repression of vagabondage,"³² "private" versus "social property,"³³ social security,³⁴ and social progress.³⁵ The import of these questions was that social equality became not a matter of material equality,

²⁷ James T. Schleifer, *Making of Tocqueville's Democracy in America* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1999), 328-9.

²⁸ Robert Castel, *From Manual Workers to Wage Laborers: Transformation of the Social Question* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2003); Jacques Donzelot, "The Promotion of the Social," *Economy and Society* 17.3 (1998): 395-427.

²⁹ For a discussion of the question of pauperism in the context of French Revolution, see Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Penguin Books), chapter 2.

³⁰ Donzolet, "The promotion of the social"

³¹ "Ibid."

³² Castel, *From Manual Workers to Wage Laborers*, xx.

³³ Robert Castel, "Emergence and Transformations of Social Property," *Constellations*, 9.3 (2002): 318-334.

³⁴ Donzolet, "The Promotion of the Social"

³⁵ "Ibid."

but, in connection with the idea of popular sovereignty, a matter of ensuring the absence of domination in the society and equal participation in civil life.³⁶

There is one particular aspect of social equality that Tocqueville largely occupied himself with, namely, the perception of social equality. More specifically, Tocqueville's excursion into the "equality of conditions" has one distinctive point, namely, that popular sovereignty is not only a political but also a social phenomenon. Surprisingly though, the democratic perception of popular sovereignty, from where both the perceptions of social and political equality springs, is rarely explored by the readers of Tocqueville.³⁷ Following Tocqueville's use of the term "image,"³⁸ I would like to refer to these two manifestations of popular sovereignty as the political and social images of the people. In its political image, the people refers to the equal self-government of the people without any political privileges or intermediary political bodies.³⁹ The social image of the people is directly related to the political image. In other words, since the aristocratic privileges and intermediate powers are disappearing in democratic people's minds, Tocqueville contends, the "omnipotence and sole authority of society at large" fills their place.⁴⁰ Tocqueville's most explicit reference to the social image of the people comes in the context of this authority of society: "As conditions become more equal among people, individuals seem of less and society of greater importance; or rather, every citizen, having grown like the rest, is lost in the crowd, and nothing stands out conspicuously but the great and imposing image of the people itself."⁴¹

³⁶ Rosanvallon, *The Society of Equals*, 10.

³⁷ To my knowledge, Claude Lefort and Pierre Manent are the only scholars who pay attention to the two images of people. However, Lefort argues that Tocqueville establishes a firm demarcation between the two images of people, which makes him to focus solely on the despotic effects of the social image of people. Lefort, "An Exploration of the Flesh of the Social." Manent, on the other hand, is attentive to the links between two images of the people. However, he does not bring his attention to to bear upon equality. Pierre Manent, *Tocqueville and the Nature of Democracy* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 1996): 7-9.

³⁸ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 669.

³⁹ "[T]he principle of the sovereignty of the people hovers over the whole political system of Anglo-Americans... In the nations where the dogma of the sovereignty of the people prevails, each individual forms an equal part of that society sovereignty and shares equally the government of the state." *Ibid*, 66.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 669.

⁴¹ *Ibid*.

I am aware that in this sentence Tocqueville states the negative impacts of the social image of the people – impacts which eventually lead to a “milder” form of despotism that Tocqueville calls “democratic despotism.”⁴²

it does not break men’s will but softens, bends, and guides it; it seldom enjoins, but often inhibits, action; it does not destroy anything, but prevents much being born; it is not at all tyrannical but it hinders, restrains, enervates, stifles, and stultifies so much that in the end each nation is no more than a flock of timid and hardworking animals with the government as its shepherd⁴³

This democratic kind of novel despotism, Tocqueville envisions, “would resemble parental authority:” Providing security, supplying the necessities and managing principle concerns, this paternal power “covers the whole of social life.”⁴⁴ As the flock and shepherd metaphor indicates, the democratic despotism stems from the withdrawal of the citizens from political concerns and actions, and from “the trouble of thinking.”⁴⁵ Thus, it is not a coercive majority or ruler – the dangerous tendencies critiques of democracy are wont to accuse democracy of bearing as I summarized in the beginning of this paper. Nor it is, as some interpreters of Tocqueville conclude, an anticipation of the totalitarian mass society.⁴⁶ Instead, as Wolin succinctly summarizes, this democratic despotism signals a “neither excitable nor mobilizable” populace. “Passive, even introspective, distracted by the its anxious carving for small pleasures,” this populace “encloses” itself in “a small cocoon of family, friends” and self-interest and disassociates itself from “treating in common common things.”⁴⁷ Therefore, the democratic despotism is not a product of active oppression or shunning of the state or ruler over the people; it is a product of the stagnation of the democratic energy through the passivity and disinterestedness of the people stemming from their delegation of all political activities and concerns to a paternalist state.

⁴² *Ibid*, 691-2.

⁴³ *Ibid*, 692.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*.

⁴⁶ For an example of this interpretation, see: Margie Lloyd, “In Tocqueville’s Shadow: Hannah Arendt’s Liberal Republicanism,” *The Review of Politics* 57.1 (1995): 31–58.

⁴⁷ Wolin, *Tocqueville Between Two Worlds*, 342-3.

It is worth emphasizing again that this new despotism is not a political power that abolishes political equality. The democratic despotism is a democratic equality in servitude and it does not refer to the institution of an unequal social and political order that is similar to the aristocratic order with hierarchical social and political relations. Instead, democratic despotism is a “gentle and peaceful slavery” established by the by people, “under the shadow of the sovereignty of the people” and it exhibits itself most forcefully under the social image of the people, according to Tocqueville, because the “extreme centralization of political power ultimately enervates society.”⁴⁸ In the absence of people’s attention to common concerns, the society, as a signifier of the similarity of opinions, fills the void of the sovereign. Hence, again, the “imposing” social image of the people, which renders society an actor and gives “men [sic] in times of democracy a very high opinion of the prerogatives of society” over individuals.⁴⁹

However, before hastily reducing the social image of the people to democratic despotism, it is crucial to note that Tocqueville allows for a positive force to the social image of the people. Note, for instance, how Tocqueville locates a positive energy in democratic societies: “[Democracy] spreads throughout the social body a restless activity, superabundant force, and energy never found elsewhere, which, however little favored by circumstance, can do wonders. Those are its true advantages.”⁵⁰

Yet, what Tocqueville means by “restless activity” and “superabundant force” and their “advantages” are not immediately clear and require some deciphering. One helpful way would be contrasting these terms to the traits of democratic despotism. First, against the passivity, indifference and stagnancy that sustains the democratic despotism, the social image of the people is dynamic and energetic when it has a “public spirit,” that is, when “each man in his sphere takes an active part in the government of society.”⁵¹ Second, Tocqueville tells us that the true advantages of democracy lie not in the “things done

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 677.

⁴⁹ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 669.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 244.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, 235-7

by the public administration” but rather in “those things done without its help and beyond its sphere.”⁵² Hence against the paternalistic state which reduces politics and “social duties”⁵³ to administration,⁵⁴ here Tocqueville implies that social image of the people can also motivate people to partake in their own common affairs without delegating them to the administration of the state. Tocqueville alludes to this restless activity of the people elsewhere in DA with his term “social machine:” “Nothing strikes a European traveler in the United states more than the absence of what we would call government or administration... [E]verything is in motion around you, but ... [t]he hand directing the social machine constantly slips from notice.”⁵⁵ I concur with Pierre Manent that this invisible hand alludes to what Tocqueville calls the “dogma of the sovereignty of the people.”⁵⁶ In a similar vein, Tocqueville refers to the social image of the people by claiming that in America, “society acts by and for itself,” and it is not a coincidence that this reference comes in the long paragraph where Tocqueville forwards his famous (or infamous) analogy between the people and God:

There are othe[r] [countries] in which power is divided, being at the same time within the society and outside it. Nothing like that can be seen in the United States; *there society acts by and for itself*. There are no authorities except within itself; one can hardly meet anybody who would dare to conceive, much less to suggest seeking power elsewhere. The people take part in the making of the laws by choosing the lawgivers, and they share in their application by electing the agents of the executive power; one might say that they govern themselves. So feeble and restricted is the part left to the administration, so vividly is that administration aware of its popular origin, and so obedient is it to the fount of power. The people reign over the American political world as the God rules over the universe. It is the cause and the end of all things; everything rises out of it and is absorbed back into it.⁵⁷

The theological character Tocqueville attributes to popular sovereignty is troubling, however. It can

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid*, 67.

⁵⁴ Tocqueville makes this distinction between politics and administration clear when he writes, “[w]hat I most admire in America is not the *administrative* but the *political* effects of decentralization. In the United States the motherland’s presence is felt everywhere. It is a subject of concern to the village and to the whole Union. The inhabitants care about each of their country’s interests as if it were their own,” *Ibid*, 95, original emphases.

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 72.

⁵⁶ Manent, *Tocqueville and the Nature of Democracy*, 7-9.

⁵⁷ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 60, my emphasis.

problematize my point that social image of the people bears a positive democratic and egalitarian force. For instance, Jacques Derrida, referring to the last sentence of the passage above, argues that “the democratic God of which Tocqueville speaks, this sovereign cause of itself and end for itself,” puts the superabundant force and energy of democracy in “a circular motion.”⁵⁸ According to Derrida, this circular motion is problematic because it identifies democracy with “symmetry, homogeneity, the same, the like, the semblable or the similar, and even, finally, God, in other words, everything that remains incompatible with, even clashes with, another truth of the democratic, namely, ... heterogeneity, ... , disseminal multiplicity.”⁵⁹ What Derrida’s interpretation implies is that one still claim that Tocqueville’s social image of the people and its “superabundant” force has an inherent dangerous inclination to gamble away its “multiplicity,” “heterogeneity” and “energy,” leading to “homogeneity,” “similar[ity]” and despotism.⁶⁰

Relatedly, one can take Derrida’s interpretation as an evidence of the earlier signs of democratic despotism in Tocqueville’s DA. This reading would go as follows: Although the democratic despotism appears in the book 2 of DA,⁶¹ earlier signs of it can be found in volume 1, which denotes that Tocqueville gradually settled on the idea that the social image of the people inescapably leads to the democratic despotism. For instance, Melvin Richter’s argument that Tocqueville, in his later works, abandons approaching democracy as a social phenomenon in favor of a political redefinition supports such interpretation.⁶² Tocqueville’s reversal of his prioritization of society in favor of politics and government,

⁵⁸ Jacques Derrida, *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005), 13 and 15, respectively.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 14

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ Arguably, in DA book 1, Tocqueville thinks that the ultimate danger stems from democracy is not the democratic despotism but an absolute authority of a ruler (*Democracy in America*, 57) or the tyranny of majority (*Democracy in America*, 254-6). In a sense, Tocqueville alludes to one of the oldest criticisms to democracy (which I mentioned in the beginning of this paper), that is, democracy is inherent prone to absolutism and tyrannical majority.

⁶² Richter writes, “there can be little doubt that after 1840 Tocqueville altered fundamentally not only his analysis of the greatest dangers to liberty in societies characterized by an *etat social democratique*, but also his concept of democracy, which he would ultimately redefine in unequivocally political terms” Melvin Richter, “Tocqueville and Guizot on Democracy: From a Type of Society to a Political Regime,” *History of European Ideas* 30.1. (2004), 78, original emphasis.

Richter adds, is even more explicit in his later work *The Ancien Regime and the Revolution*,⁶³ in which Tocqueville not only reiterates the danger of despotism but also distinctly focuses on the “political dimensions” of democracy (e.g. forms of governments) as a remedy to the despotic tendencies of democratic societies.⁶⁴

If Derrida and Richter are right, Tocqueville, in his later works, renounces the superabundant energy of the social image of the people and concludes that it is anti-political and can only bring equality in servitude. However, I contend that these readings see only one aspect of Tocqueville’s analyses. They fail to take Tocqueville’s “art of contrasts” into consideration, that is, his distinctive style of writing, in which a concept, principle, theme or event is investigated in opposition to another concept, principle, theme, or event.⁶⁵ The merit of this style of writing, as Lefort suggests, lies in its attunement to the inverse but intricately connected *tendencies* inherent in democracy – tendencies that imply temporality, potentiality and directionality. When we approach Tocqueville’s social image of the people within this framework, we can see how popular sovereignty does not only lead to a despotic state of equality but also to a free and egalitarian democratic politics. In other words, Tocqueville’s conception of popular sovereignty bears an “ambivalent potential”⁶⁶ for egalitarian democratic politics since it can either lead to liberty or despotism. Thus, *contra* Derrida and Richter, it is possible to find places in Tocqueville’s work (both in the first and second volume) where the “advantages” of the social image of the people can emerge. We can see this ambivalent potential in three places: Tocqueville’s two conceptions of equality, public opinion, and

⁶³ Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Ancien Régime and the French Revolution*, trans. Gerald E Bevan (New York: Penguin, 2008).

⁶⁴ “Ibid,” 80. Richter builds his argument on François Furet and Françoise Mélonio’s introduction to Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the Revolution, Volume II*, ed. François Furet and Françoise Mélonio, trans. Alan Kahan (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

⁶⁵ Lefort, “An Exploration of the Flesh of the Social,” 37-40.

⁶⁶ This term comes from Seyla Benhabib, “Twilight of Sovereignty or the Emergence of Cosmopolitan Norms? Rethinking Citizenship in Volatile Times,” *Citizenship Studies* 11.1 (February 2007): 21. Although Benhabib uses the term to stress that “there are dangers as well as opportunities created by the weakening of state sovereignty” with the emergence of global and cosmopolitan laws, I think its emphasis on the contrasting tendencies (i.e. dangers and opportunities) fittingly describes Tocqueville’s conceptualization of democratic equality.

associations.

The most overt description of Tocqueville's two conceptions of equality comes in the following passage:

There is indeed a manly and legitimate passion for equality which rouses in all men a desire to be strong and respected. This passion tends to elevate the little man to the rank of the great. But the human heart also nourishes a debased taste for equality, which leads the weak to want to drag the strong down to their level and which induces men to prefer equality in servitude to inequality in freedom⁶⁷

When we unravel the passage, first, we see that equality is characterized as “passion” or “taste.” This is a strong and unceasing passion, according to Tocqueville, because “[o]ne cannot imagine that men [sic] should remain perpetually unequal in just one respect though equal in all others; within a certain time they are bound to become equal in all respects.”⁶⁸ This passion for equality is different than equality as a political principle. Equality can be realized as a political principle, according to Tocqueville, because “rights must be given either to every citizen or to nobody.”⁶⁹ As a passion, though, equality can never be instituted: “democratic institutions awaken and flatter the passion for equality without ever being able to satisfy it entirely. This complete equality is always slipping through people’s fingers at the moment when they think

⁶⁷ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 57. The gendered description of equalities is striking in this passage. Tocqueville attributes manliness to the legitimate and strong passion for equality. As Laura Janara argues, this is a manly passion because “charms” of equality (as a “female lover”) capture the democratic citizens (i.e. men), arising in them an irresistible desire. *Democracy Growing Up: Authority, Autonomy, and Passion in Tocqueville’s Democracy in America*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002): 81. What makes equality a woman? As Janara claims, especially telling is how Tocqueville replaces the debased love for equality with aristocratic maternal care, both preventing people from achieving manly and mature citizenship. *Ibid*, 82. One textual evidence is how Tocqueville thinks that the despotic public opinion is a “mistress.” *Democracy in America*, 435. The gendered characterization of the despotic effects of democracy reveals how Tocqueville orders equality and democracy in accord with heteronormative “symbolic sex-gender which is grounded in hierarchical, dichotomous differentiation.” Janara, *Democracy Growing Up*, 98. Yet, Janara’s analyses also reveal that Tocqueville’s reliance on heteronormative gender binary actually renders the gendered characters of concepts incoherent: manly love for equality brings together manly citizens for a *female* liberty – the last one attributes a multiplicity to the idea of femaleness, allowing it to have not solely despotic characters. *Democracy Growing Up*, 83-4.

⁶⁸ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 56.

⁶⁹ *Ibid*.

to grasp it.”⁷⁰ Elsewhere Tocqueville forwards a similar claim, underlining that equality as a passion is an incessant strive to establish equality: “When inequality is the general rule in society the greatest inequalities attract no attention. When everyone is more or less level, the slightest variation is noticed. Hence the more equal men [sic] are, the more insatiable will be their longing for equality.”⁷¹

Connected to the “superabundant” force Tocqueville finds in democratic societies, this passion is an ambivalent energizing force because it can lead to two contrasting destinations, namely, servitude (or despotism) or freedom. I have discussed the former above, and here we can once again see how equality can lead to democratic despotism. Tocqueville argues that when people realize the “uncertainty” of achieving complete equality, they exhibit “weariness” and “bitterness”⁷² – the sentiments that are caused by what Tocqueville calls the “debased taste of equality” in the passage above. Tocqueville openly declares that the bitterness leads to people’s aversion to any political power superior to the people.⁷³ Although Tocqueville does not overtly explain what exactly he means by weariness, my sense is that he means the rise of individualism under democratic despotism. That is, people, tired of the excitement created by the chance of achieving equality, turn away from public affairs and solely occupy themselves with their private interests.⁷⁴ And when this weariness is combined with the conformism to the social image of the people, the result is the democratic despotism.

However, the latter – “manly and legitimate passion for equality” – allows us to see that Tocqueville favors a sense of democratic equality that leads to liberty. For the sake of doing away with the gendered and heteronormative aspects of the term, henceforth I will refer to this sense of equality as positive equality. Frustratingly, Tocqueville does not immediately qualify this term. It is tempting to argue that Tocqueville refers to an aristocratic sense of grandeur, but the term comes in the section where he summarizes the

⁷⁰ *Ibid*, 198.

⁷¹ *Ibid*, 538.

⁷² *Ibid*, 198.

⁷³ *Ibid*, Volume 2/Part 6/Chapter 2.

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, 510.

“political consequences” of democratic America.⁷⁵ Therefore, Tocqueville must be referring to a democratic passion for positive equality. So, the crucial question is what animates this passion for positive equality and how we can channel it into an egalitarian and free democratic politics?

Tocqueville’s conception of public opinion is crucial at this point for two reasons. First, recall that Tocqueville formulates social image of the people as an opinion. Hence, turning to his conception of public opinion would allow us to see positive potentials of the social image of the people. Second, Tocqueville assigns a remarkable significance to public opinion in producing and sustaining the perception of equality that can lead to a positive sense of equality.

Recall that Tocqueville is highly wary of the “very high opinion of the prerogatives of society” the social image of the people imposes. This wariness should remind us the negative potential of the equalizing force of public opinion, namely, despotism. When Tocqueville takes up the concept of public opinion more explicitly, he reemphasizes that public opinion may put limit on individuals, compelling them to conform to the democratic despotism. Jürgen Habermas underlines precisely this despotic power of the public opinion: “Tocqueville ... treated public opinion more as a compulsion toward conformity than as a critical force.”⁷⁶ Habermas’s reading hinges on two places: when Tocqueville identifies public opinion with the “tyranny of majority”⁷⁷ in DA volume 1 and when Tocqueville underlines the people’s “unlimited confidence in the judgment of public” in democratic societies DA volume 2.⁷⁸ The latter is especially important because it takes us to a crucial place in DA volume 2, where Tocqueville explains how public opinion can animate *both* the positive and debased senses of equality. This place is the relationship between public opinion and people’s perceptions of class differences.

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, 56-7.

⁷⁶ Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 131.

⁷⁷ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 254-6

⁷⁸ *Ibid*, 435.

According to Tocqueville, the “unlimited confidence in the judgment of public” stems from the lack of permanent political and social classes. In his typical fashion, Tocqueville formulates this argument through his play of contrasts:

[M]en [sic] living under an aristocracy are naturally inclined to be guided in their views by a more thoughtful man [sic] or class, and they have little inclination to suppose the masses infallible ... In times of equality men [sic], being so like each other, have no confidence in others, but this likeness leads them to place almost unlimited confidence in the judgment of the public ... So in democracies public opinion has a strange power which aristocratic nations can form no conception.⁷⁹

The difficulty with this passage is that it is not clear whether Tocqueville posits public opinion as a consequence or a cause of the perception of equality. Elsewhere Tocqueville more clearly puts public opinion as the engine of perception of equality: “No matter how wealth or poverty, power or obedience, accidentally put great distances between two men [sic], public opinion... puts them near the common level and creates a sort of fancied equality between them, in spite of the actual inequality of their lives.”⁸⁰ Hence, Tocqueville formulates public opinion as an “all-powerful” equalizing force. It modifies the people’s “judgments” and their “will,” and puts a “certain limit to a man’s worth.”⁸¹ Yet, what is this limit? Is it only the majority opinion which leaves people defenseless in the face of the imposing social image of the people or the tyrannical majority? Or is there also another positive limit?

I argue that there is another limit, namely, citizenship. Consider how Tocqueville raises the importance of citizenship when he discusses master-servant relations:

Why, then, has the [master] the right to command, and what makes the [servant] obey? A temporary and freely made agreement. By nature they are not at all inferior one to the other, and they only become temporarily by contract. Within the terms of the contract, one is servant and the other master; beyond that, they are two citizens, two men [sic].⁸²

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 576-7.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² *Ibid.*, 576.

Tocqueville's observation seems deceptively simple: democratic equality of conditions is marked by political equality in citizenship, notwithstanding the social state of inequality. And even when there are social hierarchies, they are solely contractual and temporary. This reading would be deceptive because it may lead to Lefort's thesis that Tocqueville establishes a "disjunction between the political and social," which conveniently enables Tocqueville to propose a political image of the people that energizes a perception of equality that counter-balances the despotic tendencies of the social image of the people.⁸³

I find this disjunction thesis another version of the insulation attempts demonstrated by the contemporary democratic theorists. It aims to shield the political image of the people from the despotic tendencies of the social image because it reduces the latter to a merely despotic force. Concomitantly, it aims to insulate the superabundant force of the social image of power from becoming political in the form of a centralized despotic state. In doing so, it loses sight of the superabundant force that Tocqueville situates in the social image of people. This oblivion comes at the cost of explaining how political image of the people can energize people's active role in establishing and sustaining equality without delegating every common concern to the state.

I argue that Tocqueville establishes a link between the political and social images that defies such decisive split between social and political images of the people. This link can be found in Tocqueville's equation of "men" to 'citizen' in the passage above. In fact, Tocqueville renders these two terms interchangeable in order to indicate the bidirectional relation between the social and political images of the people. It is easier to see how political equality can extend over the social inequalities, and Tocqueville explains this power of political image of the people when he says how the citizenship keeps the perception of equality powerful despite social inequalities. Note that the opposite can also be true. The superabundant force of the social image of the people⁸⁴ can extend to politics and to the identity of citizenship, transforming

⁸³ Lefort, "An Exploration of the Flesh of the Social," 40.

⁸⁴ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 538.

the meaning of citizenship as an active agent of rule not only in administrative affairs but also in “social duties”⁸⁵ and other common affairs. Tocqueville, as he makes it clearer in the *Ancien Regime and the Revolution*, situates the vitality of democracy in “shared enthusiasms,” “mutual needs,” and “opportunities to act in concert” – which are also the antidotes of democratic despotism.⁸⁶

In light of this bi-directional relation between the social and political equality in popular sovereignty, I would like to reiterate that Tocqueville does not establish a firm democratic disjunction between the social and the political. Quite the contrary. Tocqueville shows us the importance of *articulating* the perceptions of social image and the political image equality for an egalitarian and free democracy. Such example of articulating social and political perceptions of equality can be found in Tocqueville’s discussion of associations.

-II-

Tocqueville’s antidote to servitude under democratic despotism is well known, that is, liberty. “[T]here is only one effective remedy against the evils which evils equality may cause” asserts Tocqueville, “and that is political liberty.”⁸⁷ However, Tocqueville attaches an utmost importance to the *practical* experience of liberty. In a letter to his friend Gustave de Beaumont, Tocqueville writes, “...how difficult it is to establish liberty solidly among people who have lost the practice of it, and even the correct notion of it!”⁸⁸ Similarly, in DA, Tocqueville claims that “Anglo-Americans brought equality of conditions with them to New World” through their practical experience before they maintained the democratic institutions.⁸⁹ As evident, for Tocqueville, the practical experience is a prerequisite for political action. And, “the most natural right of man,” Tocqueville adds, “after that of acting on his own, is that of combining his efforts with those

⁸⁵ *Ibid*, 67.

⁸⁶ Tocqueville, *The Ancien Regime and The French Revolution*, 13.

⁸⁷ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 517. For detailed analysis of the importance of associations in fighting against the democratic despotism, see Dana Villa, *Public Freedom* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008) and Wolin, *Tocqueville Between Two Worlds*.

⁸⁸ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Selected Letters on Politics and Society*, ed. Roger Boesche, trans. James Toupin (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 366.

⁸⁹ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 366.

of his fellows and acting together.”⁹⁰ To attain such action in concert and liberty, Tocqueville advocates a strong case for associations: “Therefore the right of association seems to me by nature almost as inalienable as individual liberty.”⁹¹

These lines clearly maintain that associations are corrective practices against the despotic effects of the “debased” passion of equality. For this reason Tocqueville himself argues that the democratic test is to “develop and improve” associations “at the same speed as equality of conditions.”⁹² Does Tocqueville mean that associations are non-egalitarian practices that fight against the despotic equality? Not quite. Indeed, at times Tocqueville seems to pose liberty and equality as irreconcilable elements of democracy, for instance when writes that “men’s taste for freedom and their taste for equality are in fact distinct, and, I have no hesitation in adding, among democracies they are unequal elements.”⁹³ But Tocqueville also states that the “completest possible form for equality” is when “freedom and equality would meet and blend.” In fact, according to Tocqueville, “democratic peoples are tending toward that ideal” where individuals can be “perfectly free because they are entirely equal” and vice versa.⁹⁴ Therefore, I offer to read association as exemplars of practices of equality that tends toward the “completest” form of equality.

In their most general sense, Tocqueville refers to associations as practices that animate an image of popular sovereignty that combine the principles of equality and liberty. Specifically, though, Tocqueville mentions two types of associations: civil and political. Akin to his use of the two images of the people, Tocqueville does not establish a firm disjunction between the two. Although he gives priority to political associations, his attention to “hidden links” between political and other forms of “associations in civil life” (“industrial,” “moral” and “intellectual” [i.e. “newspapers”]) substantiates his claim that there is an “inevitable connection between these two types of association.”⁹⁵

⁹⁰ *Ibid*, 193.

⁹¹ *Ibid*.

⁹² *Ibid*, 517.

⁹³ *Ibid*, 504.

⁹⁴ *Ibid*.

⁹⁵ *Ibid*, 520.

Civil associations, although they are non-political, are important, according to Tocqueville because they “pave the way for political ones.”⁹⁶ Inasmuch as civil associations combat and defeat individualism and indifference, they teach people the “habits of acting together” for common purposes.⁹⁷ “As soon as common affairs are treated in common,” asserts Tocqueville, “each man [sic] notices that he [sic] is not independent of his fellows as he [sic] used to suppose and that to get their he [sic] must often offer his [sic] aid to them.” Thereby, individuals who take part in “public affairs” turn away from their “private interests and occasionally take a look at something other than themselves.”⁹⁸

Many readers of Tocqueville invoke his accounts of associations as a practice that fights against individualism, albeit with different agendas. Such diversity and lack of consensus behooves me to specify the democratic contribution of seeing associations as practices of equality. For Robert Putnam, associations reveal the lack of “civic engagement” in contemporary democratic America. Focusing solely on civil associations such as sports clubs, parent-teacher associations, and fraternal orders, Putnam argues that the central contribution of associations is “social capital,” which is a resource of civic life, capaciously referring to trust, “generalized reciprocity,”⁹⁹ and networks that would transform individual self-interest into what Tocqueville calls “self-interest rightly understood.”¹⁰⁰ Most problematic in Putnam’s argument is the lack of political associations, which is evident in its failure to acknowledge the political contributions associations can make in terms of democratic participation or resistance or policy-making.¹⁰¹ Tocqueville,

⁹⁶ *Ibid*, 521.

⁹⁷ *Ibid*, 514.

⁹⁸ *Ibid*, 510.

⁹⁹ Here is how Putnam defines generalized reciprocity: “I’ll do for you now, without expecting anything immediately in return and perhaps even without even knowing you, confident that down the road you or someone else will return the favor.” Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000), 134.

¹⁰⁰ Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 135; Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 525.

¹⁰¹ As James Farr argues Putnam’s concept of social capital delegates public activities to secondary position, which is, from a historical point of view, an inversion of the importance attributed to capital and public activity. James Farr, “Social Capital: A Conceptual History,” *Political Theory* 32.1 (2004): 6–33. Farr argues that political economists such as Marx, Alfred Marshall and Edward Bellamy, and John Dewey figured public work and activity primary to social capital. “*Ibid*” 25-6. A similar argument can be made in regards to Putnam’s understanding of associations, for Putnam inverts Tocqueville’s order of primacy by prioritizing civil associations.

on the contrary, emphasizes the importance of associations in relation to the active participation of people in forming an egalitarian public power

If some obstacle blocks the public road halting the circulation of traffic, the neighbours at once form a deliberative body; this improvised assembly produces an executive authority which remedies the trouble before anyone has thought of possibility of some previously constituted authority beyond that of those concerned [...] There is no end which the human will despairs by attaining by the free action of the collective power of individuals.¹⁰²

Associations, in this passage, may appear as mundane and local in terms of their extent and impact. Yet, I contend that the critical force of them becomes evident once we consider the way they are “gifts for action;”¹⁰³ the way they invite the people to act in concert; to tackle collectively with their common affairs. In other words, what I would like to emphasize in this passage is not the technical specifics of “deliberative body”, “assemblies,” “executive authority” or what they might look like or how effective they could be. Rather, I would like to stress how Tocqueville mentions ordinary people’s capacity and orientation to “improvise” free and egalitarian collectivities for constituting political authorities. Tocqueville figures this capacity and orientation of the people as the dissemination of the images of people: “We Europeans think we can make republics by organizing a great political assembly. But on the contrary of all forms of governments a republic is the one that grows most roots in the whole of society. Consider this country [America]! The Republic is everywhere, in the streets as much as in Congress ... The people have something of the republic in the marrow of their bones”¹⁰⁴ As such, associations give people a conception of sovereignty that goes

¹⁰² Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 189-90.

¹⁰³ Arendt, “On Civil Disobedience,” 98.

¹⁰⁴ Tocqueville owes this understanding of sovereignty to his conversations with Franz Lieber. Tocqueville writes in his travel notebooks: “22 Sept. 1831, Mr. [Franz] Lieber ... said to me this evening ... ‘We Europeans think we can make republics by organizing a great political assembly. But on the contrary of all forms of governments a republic is the one that grows most roots in the whole of society. Consider this country [America]! The Republic is everywhere, in the streets as much as in Congress. If there is something blocking the public way, the neighbours on the spot for a body to discuss it; they appoint a commission and put the trouble to rights by their collective effort sensibly directed ... The idea of an authority pre-existent to those who need it, does not come into anybody’s head: The people have

beyond the sovereignty of the majority¹⁰⁵ and the state.¹⁰⁶ This conception of sovereignty aims to empower people by collective action:

Among democratic peoples [sic] associations must take the place of the powerful private persons whom equality of conditions has eliminated. As soon as Americans have conceived a sentiment or an idea that they want to produce before the world, they seek each other out, when they find, they unite. Thenceforth they are no longer isolated individuals, *but a power conspicuous from the distance whose actions serve as an example*; when it speaks, men [sic] listen.¹⁰⁷

For Tocqueville, associations create a power that inspires all other “sorts of undertakings in common,” including the ones in civil affairs¹⁰⁸ – the point Putnam fails to consider. In fact, so powerful political associations are for Tocqueville, he sometimes expresses warns about their potential anarchical effects.¹⁰⁹ Tocqueville adds, “one must understand that unlimited political freedom of association is all forms of liberty the last which a people can sustain.”¹¹⁰ For Tocqueville, political associations are considerably different from civil associations, especially because only political associations can potentially “disturb the state and paralyze industry.”¹¹¹ Yet Tocqueville still advocates for them, because as they vitalize the active engagement of the people in political and civil affairs, they actually guarantee a stable and non-despotic politics.

something of the republic in the marrow of their bones.” Alexis De Tocqueville, *Journey to America*, ed. J.P.Mayer, trans. George Lawrence (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1960), 54-5.

¹⁰⁵ In the volume 1 of DA, Tocqueville focuses on how the right of association is an effective means for “citizens who form the minority” to challenge the authority of the majority, and, concomitantly, to “stimulate competition” in public opinion in order to “discover the arguments most likely to make an impression on the majority,” *Democracy in America*, 193-4.

¹⁰⁶ When Tocqueville moves to the volume 2 of DA, his focus shifts from the tyranny of majority to the despotic state. Hence, Tocqueville submits associations as schools of “common action,” through which citizens learn to take the collective affairs in their hands rather than passively relying on the state. *Democracy in America*, 522.

¹⁰⁷ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 516, my emphasis. My emphasis largely follows Arendt’s emphasis, “On Civil Disobedience,” 98.

¹⁰⁸ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 524.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

How so? According to Tocqueville, the reason why political associations are seen as a threat is because they are “if one may put it so, the only powerful people who aspire to rule the state.”¹¹² However, Tocqueville thinks that inasmuch as political associations animate a formidable image of sovereign people, they guarantee that political power do not fall into despotism or tyranny. “When you see the triumph, to get some politician into the government, or to snatch power from another, it is hard to conceive that men of such independence will not often fall into the abuse of license.”¹¹³ Moreover, because associations entail active involvement of the people in public as well as civil affairs, people “who are so well occupied [in industrial undertakings]” would have “no temptation to disturb the state or to upset public calm by which they profit.”¹¹⁴

However, there is one central question that remains unanswered – and by way of conclusion allow me to turn to that question: How come Tocqueville, who advocates political associations in DA, becomes so vehemently against them in his later writings? To put the same question differently, why does Tocqueville turn against associations when he returns to France?

I take Tocqueville’s inconsistency as a reflection of the intellectual atmosphere of his time, in which the “idiom of associations” expressed various, even conflicting, ideas: “both class militancy and class reconciliation,” “resistance and cooperation” as well as “moral uplift” and “radical social transformation.”¹¹⁵ I take this richness of the term – despite Tocqueville’s protests in the French context – actually as a confirmation of the social and political power of the associations. Tocqueville’s inconsistency and richness of term. Hence, I would like to suggest that my point still holds true: associations can be important historical and theoretical exemplars in reconceptualizing sovereignty as manifold egalitarian actions of ordinary people.

¹¹² *Ibid*, 523.

¹¹³ *Ibid*.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid*, 523-4.

¹¹⁵ Hunt and Sheridan “Corporatism, Association and the Language of Labor in France,” 836.

