

Aristocratic and Democratic Tensions: Lessons From Alexis de
Tocqueville and Downton Abbey

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In 1831 Alexis de Tocqueville, a French government official, traveled to the United States ostensibly to investigate the American penal system. Tocqueville's nine-month trip fed the young Frenchman's appetite for knowledge about democracy. Tocqueville's family had lived through the French Revolution and as minor aristocrats had suffered at its hands. Tocqueville viewed the coming of democracy with a "sort of religious terror" at what he took to be an "irresistible revolution" (DIA, 6). In *Democracy in America* he states his goal as, "To instruct democracy, if possible to reanimate its belief, to purify its mores, to regulate its movements, to substitute little by little the science of affairs for its inexperience, and knowledge of its true interests for its blind instincts" (DIA, 7).

Themes that run through the two volumes of *Democracy in America* include the need to tame the excesses of democracy and reintroducing into democracy some of the virtues of the aristocratic regime. Democracy, with its excessive love of both equality and novelty, too hastily rejects the best of aristocracy. In the "Author's Introduction" to *Democracy in America* he writes, "Thus we have abandoned what goods our former state could present without acquiring what useful things the current state could offer; we have destroyed an aristocratic society, and having stopped complacently amid the debris of the former edifice, we seem to want to settle there forever" (DIA, 10).

A typical methodology of Tocqueville, particularly in the second volume of *Democracy in America*, is to compare aristocratic times with democratic times. He assess the characteristics of each, praising democracy when it clearly is an advance on aristocratic times (as with treatment of women, for example), and cautioning democrats when he sees aristocratic virtues discarded too readily (the love of beauty and craftsmanship, for example). In sum, Tocqueville's thought

often tells a story of the movement from aristocratic to democratic regimes and the gains and losses that come from that movement.

The theme of the strain caused by the replacement of aristocracy with democracy is one theme that runs through the British drama *Downton Abbey* (shown in the United States on PBS). Taking place from 1912 to 1925, the show follows the travails of a particular aristocratic family, the Crawleys, whose patriarch, Robert Crawley, is the Earl of Grantham. *Downton Abbey* (usually referred to on the show simply as *Downton*) is the name of their palatial estate. While the central action of the series focuses on the personal lives of both the Crawley family and their household servants, just below the surface is a constant reminder that the English regime is changing. Estates such as *Downton* are becoming increasingly difficult to maintain and social change is undermining the status (both social and political) of the aristocracy. These tensions regularly percolate to the surface as some family members attempt to preserve the old ways while others are more willing to bow to the prevailing winds, sometimes actively encouraging revolutionary ideas. *Downton Abbey* tells a tale over six seasons of an aristocratic household grappling with the unrest caused by a shift from aristocratic times to democratic times.

Many of the themes that arise in Tocqueville's thought are illustrated in the drama of *Downton Abbey*. Changes to family, especially the status of women, the conflict between permanence and progress, local control versus centralization, and even the individual's search for meaning and purpose are addressed within both Tocqueville and *Downton Abbey*. The aim of this paper is to show how *Downton Abbey* illustrates many of Tocqueville's ideas in narrative form. In doing so we will see that as in Tocqueville, *Downton Abbey* gives a mixed assessment of the decline of the aristocracy and its replacement with democracy. While it is fair to say that

the show ultimately sides with democratic mores, it is far from an unmitigated endorsement of the democratic mentality.

The paper begins with a consideration of relevant ideas within the thought of Alexis de Tocqueville, drawing mostly from *Democracy in America* but also using key insights from his later work, *The Old Regime and the Revolution*. The paper focuses on Tocqueville's basic definition of equality and how equality is the essential component of the democratic regime. Along with equality, Tocqueville emphasizes democracy's love of progress and change. One necessary outcome of democratic equality, according to Tocqueville, is individualism. Tocqueville thinks individualism is a pathology of democracy, but Americans in particular have devised cures for the ills of individualism. Equality also reshapes the family, in particular the treatment of women. Another concern of Tocqueville's is the desire to centralize all government, which he believes may lead to a degrading kind of democratic despotism. After this overview of relevant aspects of Tocqueville's thought, the paper illustrates how those themes are articulated in *Downton Abbey*.

Tocqueville on Aristocracy and Democracy

"I confess that in America I saw more than America; I sought there the image of democracy itself, of its penchants, its character, its prejudices, its passions; I wanted to become acquainted with it if only to know at least what we ought to hope or fear from it" (DIA 13). So writes Alexis de Tocqueville in the Introduction to *Democracy in America*. Tocqueville spent his adult life thinking about the ramifications of the coming democratic age. In doing so, he often contrasted democracy with aristocracy, illustrating via comparison and contrast.

The defining characteristic of democracy is a love for equality. He calls the love of equality democracy's "principle passion" (DIA 480). Equality is not simply material equality or

equality before the law, although these are surely components of equality. When Tocqueville speaks of “equality of conditions” what he means is “the right to indulge in the same pleasures, to enter the same professions, to meet in the same places; in a word, to live in the same manner and pursue wealth by the same means” (DIA 479). For example, in contemporary America the wealthy will often wear blue jeans when at leisure, watch the same movies and sporting events as the “common man,” and, most importantly, the wealthy still typically go to work each day. One need only look at the dress and habits of the richest American, Bill Gates, to see that while possessing more money he is not of a different class than his fellow Americans. Few places are truly restricted and even in those the restrictions are based on ability to pay, not on who ones parentage.¹ Tocqueville goes so far as to say that democrats will endure slavery before submitting to inequality. Democratic people want equality and freedom, but “if they cannot get it, they still want it in slavery. They will tolerate poverty, enslavement, barbarism, but they will not tolerate aristocracy” (DIA 492).

One idea that equality “suggests...to the human mind” is that of human perfectibility or improvement (DIA 426). This faith in progress has a nearly religious like quality, indeed it is notable that Tocqueville’s discussion of “indefinite perfectibility” comes at the end of a long discussion of religion. In aristocratic times, says Tocqueville, it is not as though improvement or progress is rejected. Still, “They do not judge it to be indefinite; they conceive of improvement, not change; they imagine the condition of coming societies as better, but not different; and all the while admitting that humanity has made great progress and can make still more, they confine it in advance within certain impassible limits” (DIA 427). Everything has its place, and there is no

¹ One might think of Jane Austen’s novel *Pride and Prejudice* as a contrast. Mr. Gardiner has much more money than his brother-in-law, Mr. Bennet, but because Mr. Gardiner is a lawyer and works for a living there are areas of society that he may not enter while his penurious in-laws, who are gentry and thus socially superior, may.

reason to upset that. This is a particular theme of Tocqueville's: aristocracy sets up certain limits on human actions and ideas, while democracy does not.

Democracy, in contrast, "as classes get closer to each other, as men are mixed tumultuously, and their usages, customs and laws vary, as new facts come up, as new truths are brought to light...the image of an ideal and always fugitive perfection is presented to the human mind." As the old order breaks down, the mind starts to conceive of new ideas, and with the natural limits of aristocracy falling away, the notion of progress without end comes to mind. Democratic man is always testing limits, attempting to create something new. Some of his creations lead to his prosperity, while others may cost him dearly. There is a turmoil in democratic times where the same person may rise and fall multiple times in his life. "Thus, always seeking, falling, righting himself, often disappointed, never discouraged, he tends ceaselessly toward the immense greatness that he glimpses confusedly at the end of the long course that humanity must still traverse" (DIA 427). Tocqueville demonstrates this point by recounting a discussion he has with an American sailor. Tocqueville enquires why American's do not build their ships to last. The sailor responds that the science of navigation and shipbuilding is progressing so fast that any ship built today will be obsolete tomorrow. This is another contrast with aristocratic times, namely aristocrats are more likely to have a sense of timelessness and a greater appreciation for craftsmanship and beauty. Democratic peoples are more likely simply to ask if a thing works or serves a function. In this example, the art of shipbuilding is subsumed into the science of navigation. Novelty and usefulness are indispensable to democratic peoples. We also see that democratic times are likely to be more riotous, characterized by unease as fortunes are regularly made and lost. "Aristocratic nations,"

concludes Tocqueville, “are naturally brought to contract the limits of human perfectibility too much, and democratic nations sometimes extend them beyond measure” (DIA 428).

“People who live in aristocratic times,” says Tocqueville, “are therefore naturally brought to take the superior reason of one man or one class as a guide for their opinions, while they are little disposed to recognize the infallibility of the mass.” But in democratic times “more and more it is opinion that rules.” Opinion has “an infinitely greater power among these peoples than any other.” This is the rule of fashion. Not trusting in one’s own opinion, as equality dictates that no one’s opinion is better than any other, the desire to conform to the opinion of most is the result of “an almost unlimited trust in the judgment of the public.” If a greater number of people believe something, that something must be correct (DIA 409). This is the origin of Tocqueville’s famous “tyranny of the majority.” Unmoored from the surety provided by the thick society of aristocratic times, where each person knows who he is and what he is supposed to do based on his social status, and without the authority of nobles or church, each person is left to his own devices to find truth. However, an individual cannot possibly figure out every (or even most) questions for herself, so she gives herself over to opinion. Opinion that rules without limit is what Tocqueville calls tyranny (ADT 241). It is not government crushing freedom of expression that worries Tocqueville. Tyranny of the majority is “invisible and almost intangible” (DIA 243). It is precisely the lack of ease in democracy, since each is deprived of sure answers to life’s deepest questions, which increases the power of the majority. The worst thing in a democracy is for one to be unpopular or unfashionable, be it in clothes or opinions (DIA 247).

This leads to the notion of individualism. Tocqueville is at pains to differentiate individualism, an essential term in Tocqueville’s thought, from selfishness or egotism. He does not mean “rugged individualism” in which the individual is empowered and is in control of his

life, although these may be aspects of individualism. More precisely, “Individualism is a reflective and peaceable sentiment that disposes each citizen to isolate himself from the mass of those like him and to withdraw to one side with his family and his friends, so that after having thus created a little society for his own use, he willingly abandons society at large to itself” (DIA 482). A person, feeling lost or inefficacious in mass society, withdraws into a private sphere, developing no public virtues.

Tocqueville stresses that while selfishness is in every kind of regime, individualism is unique to democracy. Tocqueville argues, “In aristocratic peoples, families remain in the same state for centuries, and often in the same place. That renders all generations so to speak contemporaries.” Aristocrats feel a duty to both posterity and ancestors. “Classes being very distinct and immobile within an aristocratic people, each of them becomes for whoever makes up a part of it a sort of little native country, more visible and dearer than the big one.” Citizens of an aristocracy are “placed at a fixed post” such that “each of them always perceives higher than himself a man whose protection is necessary to him, and below he finds another whom he can call upon for cooperation” (DIA 483). Each person in an aristocracy exists within a chain of being which defines his relation with his fellows. Again, in this sense each person knows who she is and what she’s supposed to do, as defined by social convention. Her social status, while limiting her, also gives her life meaning and purpose.

These sorts of ties do not exist in democracies. “In democratic centuries...when the duties of each individual toward the species are much clearer, devotion toward one man becomes rarer.” It is easier to love humanity, but not particular humans. People, “no longer attached to one another by any ties of caste, class, guild, or family, are all too inclined to be preoccupied with their own private interests, too given to looking out for themselves alone and withdrawing

into a narrow individualism where all public virtues are smothered” (OR 87). In these times “new families constantly issue from nothing, others constantly fall into it, and those who stay change face; the fabric of time is torn at every moment and the trace of generations is effaced. You easily forget those who have preceded you, and you have no idea of those who will follow you.” Democratic dynamism makes it hard to maintain connection, even with family. The ease of travel and the willingness to relocate for economic reasons increase the cutting of ties with family, place, and the past. Here we see another manifestation of unease or restlessness in democracy. The unsettled nature of democracy makes it more susceptible to this pathology of individualism that, as we will see, leads to democratic despotism.

Tocqueville gives various American remedies to the problem of individualism. Here we will only consider two, namely “free institutions” and association. Regarding the former, Tocqueville argues that the despot “readily pardons the governed for not loving him, provided that they do not love each other.” Thus, democracy encourages the very vices that make despotism thrive. “Despotism raises barriers between them and separates them. Equality disposes them not to think of those like themselves, and for them despotism makes a sort of public virtue of indifference” (DIA 485). Tocqueville thinks that participation in local politics encourages people to overcome some of the ills of individualism. This works best in local politics where people are more likely to see the effect of their actions. “Only with difficulty does one draw a man out of himself to interest him in the destiny of the whole state, because he understands poorly the influence that the destiny of the state can exert on his lot. But should it be necessary to pass a road through his property, he will see at first glance that he has come across a relation between this small public affair and his greatest private affairs.” Tocqueville admires local government, especially New England town meetings, as they provide a “long

succession of little services” that engage a public. People are drawn outside of themselves because they can readily see how their actions affect their town. “Thus by charging the citizens with the administration of small affairs, much more than by leaving the government of great ones to them, one interests them in the public good” (DIA 487). Democracy must resist the temptation to centralization. Says Tocqueville, “Only freedom can bring citizens out of the isolation in which they very independence of their circumstances has led them to live, can daily force them to mingle, to join together through the need to communicate with one another, persuade each other, and satisfy each other in their conduct of their common affairs” (OR 88).

The other cure for individualism we will discuss is free associations. He notes that Americans form associations at an impressive rate. For nearly any purpose in America, one will find an association. He says, “Everywhere that, at the head of a new undertaking, you see the government in France and a great lord in England, count on it that you will perceive an association in the United States” (DIA 489). This is another distinction with aristocratic times. “Aristocratic societies always include within them, in the midst of a multitude of individuals who can do nothing by themselves, a few very powerful and very wealthy citizens; each of these can execute great undertakings by himself.” But in democracy, citizens are “independent and weak.” Association allows the completion of great tasks. If democracy should lose the art of association, it “would soon return to barbarism” (DIA 490). Associations are superior to government, in Tocqueville’s view, as no government could replicate the many small tasks done by American associations. Nor would one want to imbue the government with such power. A government “knows only how to dictate precise rules; it imposes the sentiments and the ideas that it favors, and it is always hard to distinguish its counsels from its orders.” Tocqueville

concludes that the “art of associating” must be developed in “the same ratio as equality of conditions increases” (DIA 492).

If democracy does not protect local government and cultivate association, the result is a stultifying centralization. The French Revolution is surely not far from his mind when he expresses a particular worry that nations that haven’t known freedom suddenly sweep away the previous regime and instill a regime of equality. Tocqueville writes of the Revolution, “[I]f centralization did not perish in the Revolution, it was because centralization itself was the beginning of that Revolution and its sign. And I will add that, when a people has destroyed its aristocracy, it runs towards centralization as if self-impelled” (OR 137).

Centralization seems to play an important role in Tocqueville’s distinction between the unrest and violence of the French Revolution and the rather calm transition from a feudal society in England. Tocqueville describes England as “completely modern” despite still having a powerful aristocracy (OR 105). That power is the key. Tocqueville goes to great lengths to condemn the centralization of French government before and after the Revolution. One manifestation of that centralization is that the French nobles retained privileges without any concomitant responsibilities, earning them the contempt of the populace. “When the nobility possess not only privilege but power, when it governs and administers, its special rights can be both greater and lesser noticed... The nobles had offensive privileges, they possessed burdensome rights, but they assured public order, dispensed justice, executed the law, came to the help of the weak, and ran public affairs.” When the French nobility ceased to perform these tasks, the “weight of its privileges seemed heavier, and finally their very existence seemed incomprehensible” (OR 117). Thus, it is of note that where Tocqueville finds the government in

France, he finds an aristocrat in England. The English aristocracy retained duties that went along with their privileges.

Democratic despotism, arising out of a love of equality mixed with a centralization unmitigated by local government or associations, is “milder, and it would degrade men without tormenting” citizens (DIA 662). “Above these,” writes Tocqueville, “an immense tutelary power is elevated, which alone takes charge of assuring their enjoyments and watching over their fate. It is absolute, detailed, regular, far-seeing, and mild. It would resemble paternal power if, like that it had for its object to prepare men for manhood...it provides for their security, foresees and secures their needs, facilitates their pleasures, conducts their principal affairs, directs their industry, regulates their estates, divided their inheritances; can it not take away from them entirely the trouble of thinking and the pain of living” (DIA 663). One sees a similar discussion in Tocqueville’s presentation of the “physiocrats” of Revolutionary France who, as proto-social scientists, believed society could be arranged intelligently based on abstract rules. “[I]t was for the state to form the citizen’s mind according to a particular model set out in advance; its duty was to fill the citizen’s head with certain ideas and to furnish his heart with certain feelings that it judged necessary” (OR 212). This democratic despotism seems to be the logical outcome of a democracy unseasoned by certain aristocratic virtues.

A final aspect of Tocqueville’s thought relevant to the contrast between aristocracy and democracy is that pertaining to family, especially the role of women. It is here where we see a particularly stark contrast between aristocratic times and democratic times. “In aristocratic peoples, society knows, to tell the truth, only the father.” The father is in charge by right. One might say inequality defines the family. The father is not only the head of the house, but lineage is traced through him. The power of the father “is more respected and more extensive” (DIA

560). “In aristocracies the father is therefore not only the political head of the family; he is the organ of tradition, the interpreter of custom, the arbiter of mores” (DIA 560).

Tocqueville says, “In the aristocratic family as well as in aristocratic society, all places are marked out.” Not only is the father given rank, so are those beneath him. “[A]ge and sex irrevocably fix the rank of each and assure him of certain prerogatives” (DIA 561). For example, the eldest son is the most important of the children, a “chief” in Tocqueville’s phrasing. Sons are favored over daughters, and the eldest son over all children. The eldest son seeks to find fortune for his brothers as “the general brilliance of the house reflects on the one who represents it.” Therefore the family is “tightly bound,” by interest if not by heart (DIA 562).

Tocqueville begins his discussion of the democratic family with the bold statement that, in the Roman sense, the family does not exist in America. The family is merely a slightly tighter collection of individuals. For example, the father’s authority only comes from the physical weakness of his children. Presumably, when children reach maturity they will break away from the family, and the father’s authority will be at an end. This is in contrast with the aristocratic family where even adult children are expected to submit to the authority of the father (DIA 558). As Tocqueville puts it, in the democratic family “the father is only an older and richer citizen than his sons” (DIA 559). Equality has reshaped the family. The father and sons work together to provide for the family. This creates an easy working relationship and promotes an informality of association. The father is neither “master nor magistrate” (DIA 561).

Tocqueville’s conclusions, though, are ambiguous. He writes, “I do not know if, all in all, society loses by this change; but I am brought to believe that the individual gains by it. I think that as mores and laws become more democratic, the relations of father and son become more intimate and sweeter, rule and authority are met with less...and it seems that the natural

bond tightens while the social bond is loosened” (DIA 561). Note that Tocqueville is uncertain whether society is better off for the democratic family. The very characteristic the democratic family promotes, the weakening of “the social bond,” encourages the pathology of individualism that he is at pains to correct elsewhere. The democratic family seems salutary in the particular but problematic in the abstract.

Tocqueville also sees distinctions between aristocracy and democracy regarding the role of women. If asked to what would he “principally attribute the singular prosperity and growing force of [the American] people, I would answer that it is to the superiority of its women” (DIA 576). Tocqueville argues that no society has ever succeeded without morals and women are the protector of morals (DIA 563). They do so by enforcing domestic tranquility. Tocqueville as much as says that American men do not commit adultery at the rate of European women because American women will not let them (DIA 279).

From birth, American women are given wider freedom. Even in childhood, she “thinks for herself, speaks freely, and acts alone.” She is not protected from the vice of the world, thus as she grows into adulthood she has confidence in her ability, and “her confidence seems to be shared by all those who surround her” (DIA 563). The American woman is not demure. She does not show “timidity and ignorance” as do many European women. American women are educated into independence. Because of this, her education includes the skills of “being able to repress in woman the most tyrannical passions of the human heart, and that it was surer to teach her the art of combating them in herself” (DIA 564). The independent self-control by women is what regulates American mores so successfully. While Europeans preach morality to their young women, American women are actually more moral (DIA 567-568).

Again, we see here a difference with aristocratic and democratic society. In aristocratic times, men and women are kept separate. When they marry, it is as often for social status as for any kind of actual affection (DIA 569). Thus, Europeans must often go outside of marriage for actual love.² Even if they do marry for love, their experience of the opposite sex has been so minimal that they often choose badly (DIA 570). This is not so in democratic times. Equality means that Americans base their marriages on mutual affection, not social status.

European men treat women as delicate items that are not to be broken, says Tocqueville. While American women are considered able to judge as well as a man, European women are kept ignorant of the world and often play at acting “futile, weak, and fearful” (DIA 575). The Europeans tend to see women as a fine bottle of Scotch, to be taken down and indulged in when desired and then put back on the shelf. This explains their loose ideas regarding rape, ideas that Tocqueville holds in open contempt. Tocqueville praises America for punishing rape with death while condemning Europe for their contempt for chastity and women (DIA 576).

We can summarize Tocqueville’s thought on the relevant items.³ What are the major characteristics of aristocratic times? Aristocratic peoples tend to value elevation of mind over material goods. They tend to have refined habits. There is a cultivation of the arts and poetry and a pronounced appreciation for beauty and glory. Aristocratic peoples are able to carry on enterprises of great worth. In addition, aristocratic times give individuals meaning by placing them in well-defined social categories, both in public and in the family.

Democracy, on the other hand, is characterized by atomism. Unlike aristocracy, where the ruling classes look over the people like a shepherd over sheep, democracy is characterized by indifference. Each being equal, no one is obliged to do the bidding of another. Second,

² Here one might think of Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* or Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina*.

³ Here I draw heavily from Marvin Zetterbaum’s “Alexis De Tocqueville” in *History of Political Philosophy 3rd Edition*.

democratic individualism causes citizens to reject as authoritative all obligations or articles of faith which have not been submitted to the test of personal inquiry. Finally, democracy has a passion for well-being and material comfort, to the exclusion of concern for public affairs. There is in democracy a strong tendency toward mediocrity. One of the responsibilities of democracy is to rebuild the bonds of the aristocracy, which in aristocratic times were assumed to be natural. Democracy must carve out a place for both liberty and human excellence, for the re-emergence of public virtue, and for the possibility of greatness.

Aristocracy and Democracy in *Downton Abbey*

The six seasons of *Downton Abbey* cover thirteen years in the life of a wealthy aristocratic family living on a grand country estate. The drama of the show follows in roughly equal parts the lives of the ruling family, the Crawleys, and various servants. While primarily concerned with the private lives and relationships of the characters, the show develops a secondary theme, that of the decline of the English aristocracy. The changes of the post-First World War England will eventually devastate wealthy country families such as the Crawleys, leaving them and their servants to find their way in a very different England. As in Tocqueville, the contrast between the “old ways” and “modern ways” continually arises in *Downton Abbey*. This contrast takes on five forms: the challenging of basic aristocratic forms and manners; the upheaval caused by societal (including technological) change; a rising sense of independence that stresses individual choice over class or familial duties; the undermining of the aristocratic family itself (including a changing role of women); and finally a sense of loss of meaning as the thick society of an aristocratic people gives way to the tumult of democratic times. We will consider each in turn.

The first episode of the series begins with the sinking of the Titanic. Robert has three daughters but no son, so the sinking of the Titanic is a particular tragedy for the Crawleys as the two nearest heirs to the estate and title of Earl of Grantham die on the ship. One of these, a young cousin, was to wed Mary, the eldest daughter of Robert Crawley, the lord of the estate. The marriage would have allowed the estate to stay in the hands of the immediate Crawley family, as presumably Mary's son would one day inherit the title. With the two heirs deceased, the next heir is found. Much to the disappointment of the family, it is Matthew Crawley, a distant cousin who is a country lawyer and whose deceased father was a doctor. This is scandalous, as Matthew is decidedly middle-class. Robert declares, in reference to Matthew's father, "It does seem odd that my third cousin should be a doctor."

Matthew travels to the estate and his education into what it is to be an aristocrat begins. "Downton is a great house and Crawleys a great family," Robert tells him, "We live by certain standards that may seem daunting." Matthew finds that even the household servants look down on him due to his middle-class background. Matthew declares that he "won't let them change me" and insists that he will continue his work in the law. He can fulfill his familial responsibilities on the weekend. This confuses the Crawley family, who ask, "What is a weekend?" Lady Mary dismisses Matthew as someone who can't even "hold a knife like a gentleman."

Matthew discovers that what people call each other is of great importance, a point made at various times throughout the series. Robert's youngest daughter, Sybil, ends up courting the family chauffeur, Tom Branson, who represents a triple threat: he is lower class, Irish, and a socialist.⁴ Robert confronts them at one point, asking Branson what he is doing in the main

⁴ Branson also presents a problem in that *Downton Abbey* has two characters named Thomas. His name is Thomas Branson, but is typically called "Tom" or "Branson." There is also a Thomas Barrow, a servant, called either

house. Branson says, “To see Sybil.” “Lady Sybil!” declares Robert, to which the independent minded Sybil responds, “What’s the point of all that nonsense?” Branson continues to flaunt convention, much to the family’s consternation, after he and Sybil marry. For example, he refuses to dress formally for dinner, calling such clothes “the uniform of oppression.” He mistakenly calls Mary, now his sister-in-law, by her first name in front of the butler, Carson, which is a faux pas. His confusion with titles continues when he is gently reprimanded for calling a duchess “your grace” when the particular situation called for merely “Duchess.” This insistence on titles includes the servants. When housemaid Anna becomes Mary’s lady’s maid, she is no longer called “Anna” but “Mrs. Bates” as lady’s maid is a position of higher importance, thus carrying a more formal title (for example, the head housekeeper is “Mrs. Hughes” even though she’s not married). As Tocqueville indicates, aristocratic people are profoundly concerned with forms and position. These conventions instill a kind of order, as well as recognizing certain privileges. Nevertheless, as Sybil’s comment suggests, people are beginning to chafe at the formality of titles.

Only late in the series do people start to question this kind of class system. In the final season, Downton opens itself up to tourists to raise money for the village hospital (one of the estate’s responsibilities). A kitchen maid, Daisy, declares, “I think all these houses should be open to the public. What gives them a right to keep people out?” In response to Daisy, Molesley, a footman with a scholarly streak, says that he is glad that the house will be open as people may appreciate the great craftsmanship and artwork. However, he ponders, people may also start asking why these people have these things.

“Thomas” or “Barrow.” For the sake of this paper, I will generally stick to last names for each character as to avoid confusion.

This questioning of class privilege by Daisy and Molesley is just one indication of a second major theme of the series, that of social upheaval, particularly after the First World War. In the first season, one notices a house bustling with activity, full of housemaids, kitchen maids, footmen, and other help. By the last season, a skeleton staff is running the house as “service” is no longer an attractive job and as aristocratic families struggle to pay for a large staff. The first season introduces Molesley as Matthew’s valet. After Matthew’s death at the end of the third season, Molesley is out of work. His father mentions this to Robert’s mother, Violet, the dowager countess, who says that Molesley is a trained valet and should be able to find work. Mr. Molesley says, “It’s a changing world” and houses cannot afford to hire staff as they used to. Later it is revealed that Grantham House, the family’s London home, no longer has any maid staff, and they contemplate selling the home.

This is a major plot point of the final season as Robert struggles to maintain staff. He notes to the butler, Carson, that when Carson started at Downton the estate had six footmen and five housemaids, but now there are only two of each. Robert wonders aloud to his mother “how much longer can we go along with it all?” The expenses are too high, “the wage bill is three times what it was before the war.” He concludes, “Who lives as we used to now?” Most people are “cutting down.” Violet responds, “It’s seems hard that men and women should lose their livelihoods because it’s gone out of fashion.” In the course of the series, various propertied families are forced to sell out, including Robert’s cousin. While walking into the auction of one of these estates, Edith, Robert’s second daughter, says, “Sic transit gloria mundi,” or “Thus passes the glory of the world.”

Technology also displaces the ways of the past. Early in the series, the house gains electric lighting. Some houses are even getting electricity in the kitchen. “Whatever for?” asks

Daisy. Patmore, the head cook, describes a new telephone as “the cry of the banshee.” Mrs. Patmore is concerned with the advent of toasters and electric mixers. “With all these toasters and mixers and such like we’ll be out of a job,” she astutely observes. She has a similar reaction to the purchase of a refrigerator, knowing that this will put delivery boys out of a job, as the house will no longer be purchasing fresh produce each day. “Mrs. Patmore is not what you’d call a futurist,” says Thomas Barrow as housemaid Baxter sews with a sewing machine, shocking Mrs. Patmore. Further, Robert is dragged by his young niece, Rose, into purchasing a record player and a radio, on which she listens to jazz music. He concedes to the radio only because it will enable him to listen to the king.

A third refrain regarding the shift from aristocracy to democracy is a growing sense of individualism and independence arising from the decline of aristocratic mores.⁵ We see this particularly with the servants. There are many examples, but one is illustrative. In the first season Gwen, a housemaid, desires to learn secretarial skills through a correspondence course. Service “is not what I want to do,” she says. Gwen worries, “I was born to nothing and I will die with nothing.” Born the daughter of a farmer, she cannot escape her fate, she thinks. She is encouraged by Lady Sybil to pursue her dream. At first, Gwen is doubtful, telling Sybil that servants are not like Sybil’s class. “Our dreams almost never come true.” However, she persists. When Sybil’s assistance to Gwen is made known to the family, they are skeptical. Isn’t this deluding Gwen? Matthew’s democratically minded mother, Isobel, asks, “Isn’t the maid a better judge” of her interests?⁶

As the aristocracy’s decline becomes obvious, more and more servants look for alternatives. The servants question the notion that they must spend their life in service, or once a

⁵ Here I am using individualism in the more conventional sense, rather than Tocqueville’s more technical sense.

⁶ As wife of a doctor and mother to a lawyer, Isobel does not have the aristocratic background of Crawleys.

life is chosen no alternative is possible. The idea of self-improvement regardless of social class takes hold. Gwen returns in the final season, now a successful woman married to a man who manages a woman's college. The family appears happy that she has improved her condition, especially Isobel. It appears that class is not an insuperable obstacle to material success. This support for individualism even overtakes the socialist Branson. After living in America a short time, Branson is enamored of American capitalism, despite his socialist sensibilities. He says he does not support capitalism everywhere, but has a particular fondness for American style capitalism "where a hardworking man can go to the top in a single lifetime." Like the American sailor in Tocqueville's discussion of perfectibility, Branson admires a system that allows for easy change, for a kind of unsettledness that allows for a rise in economic standing. Branson does not mention that a fortune can be lost in a single lifetime as well. Across the six seasons, there is a growing awareness that class distinctions are eroding and one's life is more and more in one's own hands.

The fourth major theme regarding regime change is that of the family and the role of women. The default expectation is for highly formal relations between men and women. Robert does not just enter his wife's dressing room; he knocks first. Concerned over Sybil's attendance at raucous political rallies, Robert opines that feminine sensibilities are "more delicate and refined" than the male's. He is astonished that Sybil would go to such rallies without his permission. Mary offers that Sybil is "entitled to her own opinions." The traditionalist Violet responds, "No! She isn't until she is married. Then her husband will tell her what her opinions are." Sybil insists, "I am interested. I am political. I have opinions." This is one of various scenes in which a family member, usually female, questions Robert's authority. Invariably Robert makes some kind of protest based on a father's authority or traditional gender roles, but

he virtually always concedes to the erosion of this authority. We are seeing a shift from an aristocratic family to a democratic family.

The same is true with the rights of the first-born son. Robert laments that he was unable to produce a male heir, which is why the estate is in crisis after the death of the nearest heirs. To keep the estate within his family he either needed a son or have Mary wed the cousin. This, as stated, was the plan before the Titanic tragedy. When Matthew arrives as heir, there is hope that he will wed Mary. While this eventually occurs, at first there is great coldness between Matthew and Mary. During this period, Cora becomes pregnant. Robert is ecstatic that he might have a son, as this will ensure the estate stays in his family. As Cora states, “If there’s a boy the daughters don’t get anything.” When Cora miscarries and it is revealed that the baby was a boy, Robert is devastated. Only Matthew’s marriage to Mary, which produces a son, saves the estate from falling from the immediate Crawley family. Now Mary’s son will get everything at the expense of any other siblings.

The subject of female liberation from traditional roles spans across seasons. To take just one example, the middle Crawley sister, Edith, becomes a newspaper columnist and eventually a magazine editor. Edith’s writing scandalizes Robert, as it is not woman’s role to express opinions, especially political opinions, in public. Once Edith becomes owner of a magazine, she fights with the male editor, as he is unused to taking orders from a woman. Despite being an adult and a businesswoman, the family thinks it worrisome that Edith sometimes stays in London by herself. Edith’s grandmother, Violet, tells Edith that what is good for Edith and the family are “one in the same.” Edith disagrees. She wishes to act independently from the family.

Overall, there is a shift from traditional family and gender roles. No Crawley daughter completely pursues men of the “right” social class. Sybil marries Branson the chauffeur, in spite

of her father's declaration, "I will not allow my daughter to throw away her life." Nevertheless, by series end Branson is a vital part of the family, beloved by all, his lower social origins largely forgotten. Edith owns the magazine due to an affair with a married businessman who fathers a child with her. At his death the magazine is left to Edith. Even the oldest daughter, Mary, weds a second husband (after Matthew's death) who is a racecar driver and who opens an auto shop with Branson in the series finale. Mary also takes on the role of "agent" for the estate, essentially running the day-to-day operations of Downton. In this sense, both Mary and Edith have jobs, court or marry those who are socially beneath them, and all three daughters regularly defy their father, who nearly always acquiesces. Even cousin Rose, who serves as a kind of surrogate daughter to Robert and Cora after Sybil's death, marries a Jew, deeply offending her actual mother.

Finally, Downton Abbey shows aristocratic forms providing meaning and a sense of purpose for various characters. Robert, accused by his mother of insufficient care for the estate, explodes, "I've given my life to Downton! I was born here and I hope to die here. I claim no career beyond the nurture of this house and this estate. It is my third parent and my fourth child." Similarly he says to Matthew when introducing his new heir to the estate, "You see a million bricks that may crumble, a thousand gutters and pipes that may block and leak, and stone that may crack in the frost...I see my life's work." For Robert, Downton is not just a monetary endeavor or an instrument of his own power and ego; he feels a strong obligation to the estate, which includes its servants, tenants, village residents, and to the building and grounds itself. He explicitly says that the estate must be a "major employer" and it pains him to lay off staff or sell land out of economic necessity.

As the estate struggles in later years, Branson and Mary, now aiding in the running of the estate, suggest selling some land to a housing developer. Robert is offended at the idea. Robert refuses to sell property to a housing developer who will build “ugly modern houses.” The housing development will “spoil the village.” Robert argues that they “mustn’t destroy what we are trying to protect.” Robert expresses a willingness to accept less money to protect the beauty and integrity of the estate.

Part of the reason Robert is so dedicated to the estate is, as Tocqueville indicates, he does not see the estate merely in the present, but experiences both the past and the future of the estate as real. This gives him a sense of duty that few modern people have for the house that they simply reside in for a few years. For example, Robert says of the tenant farmers, “We have always worked with the farmers as partners.” He does not want to modernize how Downton estate is run. Where his bourgeois son-in-law Matthew sees need for efficiency, Robert sees a duty to tenants and village. He notes that a deceased farmer’s family has worked on the estate “since the reign of George III.” When Mr. Drew, a farmer on the estate, wants to maintain the farm despite his dead father’s debts, he begs Robert for mercy, arguing that his family has farmed this land “since the Napoleonic wars.” “I am a Yorkshireman,” says Mr. Drew, “this is where I belong.” Robert tells him, “We are in partnership with all our tenants.” On a handshake deal, Robert loans Mr. Drew the money to pay off the farm’s debts. Note that this is not bureaucracy or a mere legal arrangement; it is a personal relationship. Robert tells Mr. Drew, “If we don’t respect the past we’ll find it harder to build our future.”

What of the servants? Early in the series, the cynical Thomas Barrow mocks some of his fellow servants for their devotion to the Crawley family. “They’re just our employers, not our family.” This stands in contrast to Carson, the butler, who says, “They’re all the family I’ve

got.” In the final season, Anna, Mary’s lady’s maid, complains that the new maids no longer live in the house, preferring to live in town. They do not wish to be part of the family.

By the end of the series, Barrow has come around to Carson’s point of view. As the size of the household staff shrinks, Barrow’s job is threatened. He starts looking for other jobs, but finds that his talents (as a footman, valet, and butler) are no longer marketable due to the decline of the great houses. It is plain the Barrow is desperate to save his position at Downton and is in deep despair over his inability to find a home anywhere. His despondency grows so pronounced that he attempts suicide.⁷ When his prospect of leaving seems real (he has accepted a position at another house), he expressed deep sorrow at leaving Downton, lamenting, “This is the first place where I’ve put down some roots.” Barrow finally finds contentment when, due to an illness, Carson can no longer work as the butler and Barrow is hired as his replacement, establishing Barrow as a trusted part of the household. Without his position within the household, Thomas struggles to find meaning. He needs his Downton family.

Perhaps the clearest example of the way in which meaning and purpose arise within an aristocratic structure is the hapless Molesley. When first introduced, Molesley is a butler at Crawley House, where Matthew and his mother come to live when they arrive at Downton. Molesley becomes Matthew’s valet. Matthew, the bourgeois lawyer, is offended at Molesley dressing him and refuses Molesley’s assistance. While thinking he is standing up against privilege, in fact Matthew is deeply wounding Molesley. At one point, he tells Molesley that being a valet is a “very silly occupation for a grown man.” Molesley expresses his frustration to Mr. Bates, Robert Crawley’s valet, saying, “To be honest Mr. Bates, I don’t see the point of it,”

⁷ To be fair, part of Barrow’s depression comes from his homosexuality that ostracizes him from the greater society. Part of his depression is attributed to false allegations of an attempt to seduce another footman, but clearly his uncertain status at Downton and the notion that he is no longer needed there affects him more. I shall discuss Barrow’s homosexuality below.

meaning there is not much use of being a valet to a man who desires independence. He pleads to Matthew, “But this is my job.” He does not just mean that this is how he makes money. He means this is how he finds purpose. Being a valet is a position of honor (which is why a valet is called by his last name, not first) and requires considerable expertise. Matthew is as much as telling Molesley that Molesley’s life serves no purpose, striking at the core of Molesley’s self-worth.

Matthew eventually tells Robert that he wishes to “dispense with [Molesley’s] services” as he is “superfluous.” Robert is nonplussed. He wonders why Matthew would “deprive a man of his living when he’s done nothing wrong.” Noting that Matthew’s mother “derives satisfaction” from working at the hospital, Robert adds, “Would you really deny the same to poor old Molesley?” He continues with a larger point, educating Matthew on what it means to be Earl of Grantham. “And when you are master here, is the butler to be dismissed, or the footmen? How many maids or kitchen staff will be allowed to stay, or must everyone be driven out? We all have different parts to play, Matthew, and we must all be allowed to play them.” Here Robert wishes to make two points. First, that the lord of the estate has duties to those under him, namely to see to their livelihood. With his privilege comes important duties to dozens of people and families. Second, and more to the immediate point, Molesley, in being a valet, has a “part to play.” Each social position dictates a role for the participant in that position. Because Molesley identifies being a valet with who he is and what he is supposed to do, to deny him that is to deny his life has any meaning.

This becomes clearer when eventually Molesley does lose his job as the result of Matthew’s untimely death. Deprived of his position he declares, “Lately I can’t seem to see where I am going.” He doesn’t know who he is or what he is supposed to do. He is humiliated

into becoming a manual laborer, humiliating not simply because he does not like the job, although that's true, but because he sees being a valet as who he is. He later accepts a position at Downton as a footman, which is a demotion from valet, but at least he finds this work meaningful. He is much closer to playing the part he is meant to play.

One can see how the social structure of Downton redounds to the benefit of many. At Downton each person has a role and then seeks to perform that role excellently, developing a kind of virtue. This is true of both lord and servant. The individual gains strength by having a definitive role, rather than being left without guidance to create a self. The Downton community works based on personal relationships, recognizing the personal and relational nature of humanity, rather than seeing each other as simply numbers, or customers, or commodities. The Downton community contains a strong narrative aspect with each person playing a particular role. This is a world that appreciates excellence, that sustains beauty, and where life is filled with purpose.

Conclusion

Of course, the peroration above is a rosy depiction of aristocratic society. *Downton Abbey* is a television show, not to be taken seriously as a depiction of aristocratic society. For every decent Crawley family, in reality there surely was another family capable of using its power and privilege for great cruelty. Even within the *Downton* universe we see indications of the cruelty of a traditional society. One example is that of Thomas Barrow, a homosexual closeted out of social necessity. Thomas carries this as a considerable burden. To be sure, as a character Thomas Barrow is complex as he is a cynical, conniving, and sometimes a quite wicked man. Nevertheless, he is tortured by his homosexuality. He finds it difficult to find male companionship, let alone romantic love, as other men typically hold him in distrust. Sometimes

this is open disgust, especially from Carson. At one point Barrow makes himself seriously ill by injecting himself with a concoction that promises to “cure” homosexuality. While Barrow brings much of his unhappiness on himself, part of his cruel character comes from society ostracizing him. A similar tale is told in a side story of Ethel, a housemaid who gets pregnant out of wedlock. She is ruined as a woman, losing her job at Downton and ultimately resorting to prostitution. She struggles to find any work. Only out of the generosity of Isobel Crawley does she reenter service, although Ethel decides that she should find a position away from the village as she regularly incurs insults from the locals. To maintain the stability of society, those who violate convention like Ethel and Thomas Barrow must pay heavy penalties.

In this way, *Downton Abbey* is a sophisticated production, being alternately sympathetic and critical of its subject. The point here, though, is not to criticize the historical accuracy of *Downton*, but to consider why it gained such popularity among viewers who likely reject most of the era’s sensibilities. What this paper has tried to show is that Alexis de Tocqueville offers us a discerning take on the blessings and curses of both aristocratic and democratic regimes.

First, we can use Tocqueville simply descriptively. Tocqueville’s thought regarding the two regimes gives us an interpretive scheme to assess the action of *Downton Abbey*. Tocqueville’s discussion of class, family, and women allow us to better appreciate and place within a philosophical context the action of *Downton*, while *Downton* gives a dramatization of central themes in Tocqueville’s thoughts. Often dramatized depictions of philosophical ideas are more persuasive than the more didactic method of philosophers.

Let us mention a few examples. It is Tocqueville’s contention that aristocrats have decidedly different habits and manners than lower classes. We see this in *Downton* as the forms of address, dress, places of the house where individuals are welcome, are determined by social

status, not just wealth. Even impoverished aristocrats retain privileges, while those held in high esteem today, such as doctors and lawyers, are social inferiors compared to some. Regarding Tocqueville's discussion of perfection, we note Robert's dedication to the beauty and character of his estate, in contrast to Matthew's focus on utility. Further, Robert, as Tocqueville describes of English aristocrats, is behind great philanthropic works such as maintaining the village hospital or paying for the local World War One memorial. Robert, Lord Grantham, still provides a service that might provide some justification for his privileges, unlike the French nobles Tocqueville derides. We see Robert's status as father decaying as his children, all female, regularly defy him and liberate themselves from the family and gender norms.

Secondly, we can use both Tocqueville and *Downton* as tools of democratic theory. If we find certain aspects of the *Downton's* aristocratic world attractive, why? If we view *Downton Abbey* with some wistfulness, what is it that we think we have lost? Here Tocqueville is helpful. We who live in a democratic age hardly need to be told what aristocratic societies did poorly. The prejudices of our age educate us to that end. For most, it is hardly a remarkable feat of moral imagination to sympathize with Barrow and his persecution as a homosexual, or Lady Sybil having her marriage choices (unsuccessfully) dictated by her father. This, however, is precisely Tocqueville's project. The democratic age that he sees ordained by providence does not need instruction on the ways in which democracy is superior to aristocracy. What the age needs is guidance on the virtues of aristocracy and vices of democracy. Here *Downton Abbey* and Tocqueville are useful.

For example, the physical beauty of the Downton estate (Highclere Castle in real life) remind us of a civilization that took beauty and craftsmanship seriously. Tocqueville wishes to remind citizens of democracy that aesthetic claims have value as well as claims of economy and

utility. Residents of a commercial, material, throwaway culture might find this alluring. Both Robert and tenant farmers are dedicated to improving their property because to them they own the property in trust, to care for in the name of their ancestors and for the good of their posterity. A people with no familial ties to a place, devoted to convenience, comfort, and utility, are unlikely to create great art. Contemporary people make AT&T Stadium. Aristocratic people make the cathedral at Chartres.⁸

Similarly, the benefits of greater freedom of individual choice are obvious to democrats. Yet, democracy often hides the costs. Tocqueville reminds us that democratic individuals look for meaning and purpose in their lives. Given no meaning by their commercial culture, deracinated democratic citizens will resort to tyranny of the majority (i.e., fashion) in order to avoid despondency. In some respects, Rose depicts tyranny of fashion, being overly concerned with having the right hairstyle, wearing the right clothes, listening to the right music. In Rose, we can see the beginnings of a youth culture, based on fashion and commerce, dictating to an adult culture more dedicated to mature, aesthetic ideals.

Downton Abbey illustrates the yearning for meaning, mostly from the lower classes, as a high structured society starts to collapse. The result of decline on social forms is not always blissful liberation (bliss typically the experience of the wealthy and/or educated elite) but a deep anxiety and sense of lack of direction. The tumult and uncertainty inspires fear as well as hope. Tocqueville worries that obsession with materialism and tyranny of the majority will replace the sense of meaning given in aristocratic times. In *Downton*, we are informed that servants are harder to come by because workers value the independence of living in town and the better pay of working in shops. Convenience, comfort, and material concerns outweigh the willingness to

⁸ For those confused by the first reference, AT&T Stadium is where the Dallas Cowboys play their home football games.

dedicate one's self to a family. It is notable that working in a great house is called "service." This word has a double meaning. Of course it means that people are "servants," but also that they are providing a service to the estate and community, not merely working for themselves. As Robert's sense of duty to Downton shows, he thinks he is "in service" as well.

Even more provocatively, we might ask if the familial and sexual freedom evidenced in *Downton* is an unmitigated good. It is likely on these matters that the democratic shift depicted in *Downton* gets the most contemporary applause, so it is here, in the interest of overcoming our prejudices, that we should be the most skeptical. Recall that Tocqueville is agnostic about the good of the democratic family. While he is quite sure individuals benefit, he is unsure society does. In *Downton Abbey*, the relations between family members are hardly the cool relations Tocqueville suggests is typical of aristocracy. In addition, Robert Crawley's authority as *paterfamilias* is regularly undermined. Like Tevye in *Fiddler on the Roof*, Robert sees each daughter (or daughter-surrogate in Rose) marry outside their class (at least on second marriage for Mary). The exception is ironically Edith, the chronically luckless Crawley daughter, who marries a marquis, and so gains a title. It is worth noting, however, when she falls in love with her husband, Bertie Pelham, he is untitled and only a confluence of unexpected events gain him a rise to aristocracy. Further, Edith has borne a child from a previous lover, Michael Gregson, who was married while carrying on his affair with Edith. Gregson's death leaves Edith abandoned. She pretends to adopt the child as a ward so as to avoid the scandal of sexual misadventure.

Tocqueville's fear seems to be that this weakening of family ties will play into the individualism of democracy. To that extent, the family ceases to be a bulwark against democratic despotism as its functions are subsumed by the state. As stated, the character of Rose in particular exemplifies the sort of democratic character Tocqueville fears most: frivolous,

rebellious for the sake of rebellion, obsessed with fashion, with no perceptible appreciation of the beautiful or permanent things. She is taken on by the Crawleys as her own parents are divorcing and unable to give her any guidance. This is a clear sign of family decay and the preference for individual satisfaction over duty. Rose is substantially unaffected, marrying into another aristocratic family (albeit a Jewish family, thus problematic for many). Yet, this is an example of an earlier point: the decay of order rarely hits the wealthy and elite hard as they have connections and money to “ride the wave.” This is less often the case for those not as fortunate, those who continue to bear the brunt of decline of the family begun in the 20th Century.

Tocqueville is a friend to democracy, but believes that this requires one to be a moderate friend to democracy. A friend tells the truth, even when it is uncomfortable. Both Tocqueville and *Downton Abbey* remind those with ears to hear and eyes to see that democracy is a limited good. It is good only to the extent that it facilitates human greatness. To do so it must mitigate its own faults while retaining the best of the previous regime.

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