What Good is a Liberal Arts Education?: Tocqueville and Education as a Public Good

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All men who live in democratic times contract more or less the intellectual habits of the industrial and commercial classes; their minds take a serious, calculating, and positive turn; they willingly turn themselves away from the ideal to direct themselves toward some visible and proximate goal that presents itself as the natural and necessary object of their desires. Equality does not destroy imagination in this way, but limits it and permits it to fly only while skimming the earth. (Alexis de Tocqueville, Of Democracy in America, pg. 571)

With high unemployment and rising tuition, many argue against the practicality of studying the liberal arts. Critics ask, for example, what financial dividends are realized when a student spends four years studying the writings of authors such as Shakespeare or Plato? Understanding liberal education strictly in terms of its financial benefit, however, is to pervert the purpose of the liberal arts. A better way to conceive of liberal education is the way in which Alexis de Tocqueville describes the role of classical education in a democracy in his Democracy in America. Regarding the classics, he says it is desirable for society that students be permitted to pursue topics for which they have natural inclinations – whether or not these fields of study have an immediate practical
application. Drawing from Tocqueville’s chapters on classical education, literature, the sciences, and the arts, I argue that the liberal arts should be seen as an important component of combatting the defects of democracy.

Although the nature of democracy necessitates that most education be geared toward practical purposes, a subset of education focused exclusively on developing students’ intellectual capacities counterbalances the materialistic and individualistic nature of democracy. Specifically, an education in the classics for Tocqueville – and a liberal arts education for our purposes – brings students to contemplate ideas outside of a purely material and self-centered existence.

Tocqueville explains that democracy has an acutely materialistic nature. The object of people’s ambitions in democracy as opposed to aristocracy has shifted from honor and greatness to the accumulation of wealth. In an age of equality all have the opportunity to become rich, as well as the ability to lose their wealth. Democratic minds turn away from the ideal and commit themselves toward “some visible and proximate goal” (571). The pursuit of material well-being becomes the passion that dominates democratic minds.

Tocqueville commends the high level of motivation of Americans, but explains that a society focused solely on material well-being is unsustainable (522). Overemphasis on materialism presents a serious threat to a society, particularly one focused on well-being or in our words, the “pursuit of happiness.” A purely materialistic outlook on life actually makes material well-being less attainable because people lose the ability to think imaginatively, a basic skill needed to advance material wealth. Tocqueville says people whose sole
motivation is either obtaining or protecting their material interests become unable to apply themselves to “more difficult and greater undertaking[s]” (506). They become too preoccupied with materials in and of themselves to engage in other activities that spur the creative thinking it takes to further material enjoyment. For example, people become obsessed with their television itself, and neglect any intellectual engagement with its content, which if engaged in, could develop the critical thinking skills necessary for imagining something much better than simply increasing the diameter of the screen. Tocqueville warns that if men are ever satisfied with simply material goods, “little by little they would lose the art of producing them” (522).

Further, a life of excessive materialism disregards an important component of what it means to be a human being. He says they will suppress their ability to contemplate an existence outside the immediate needs of the body, their distinguishing characteristic as human beings. This intellectual ability leads to levels of enjoyment for humans greater than animals could ever perceive, and if unpracticed, men are led to experience life “without discernment and without progress, like brutes” (522).

Another democratic characteristic Tocqueville identifies is individualism, which intensifies in democracy because people consider all to be equal and consequently equally capable of ruling themselves. Distinguishing individualism from selfishness, he says individualism is a “peaceable sentiment” that disposes each citizen to isolate himself within a small circle of friends and family and “willingly abandon[...] society at large to itself” (482). As with materialism,
extreme individualism is a grave threat to a good society. It is rooted in the idea that because everyone is equal, they are also free to do as they please, but freedom itself is threatened by this approach. Because people wish to enjoy their materialistic and individualistic lifestyles, an attractive political option is to withdraw from public affairs, which can lead to centralized power (646). People become less engaged in politics and community affairs, which undermines the basic principle of a participatory democracy. Freedom is endangered in a society where people willingly give up the right to rule themselves – a situation Tocqueville fears and calls “soft despotism” (648).

Political scientist Robert Putnam argues that civic engagement in America indeed has declined at an alarming rate since Tocqueville’s time (Bowling Alone). Tocqueville says it is essential that members of a democracy recognize the importance of civic engagement for the well-being of the whole (503). Because people who disregard society at large can easily be exploited, the freedom of these closed-minded people is endangered (502). A possible remedy is for people to remain informed through theoretical education that emphasizes awareness of ideas and causes greater than themselves.

The way classical education benefits democracy is by its incorporation of skill sets that counteract the tendency in democracy to disregard theoretical concepts. A classical curriculum leads its students to contemplate the immaterial, exercise precision, and develop a holistic perspective of one’s place in the world. The purpose of a classical education is the search for ideal beauty (451), a meticulous project often disregarded in the fast-paced, haphazard nature of
democracy. Because Americans are focused more on the practical than the theoretical, art is cultivated for economic gain and thus less beautifully than aristocratic art, which conversely has the aim to “make the best possible, not the quickest or the cheapest” (438). Literature has become an industry with a purpose of producing mass quantities rather than great works. Classical education, on the other hand, is focused on uncovering what is great or perfect.

Tocqueville argues that the overemphasis on practicality in America pushes the content of its entertainment in the opposite direction. Democratic peoples have humdrum, one-dimensional lives, which means followers of poetry and theatre desire unrealistic and extreme content over pieces that invoke contemplation. Tocqueville discredits democratic poetry for this reason, saying it is prone to “lose itself in the clouds” (464). Classical literature however, aims at greatness rather than astonishment, and follows literary conventions and forms rather than the whims of its audience. Further, theoretical studies are essential in developing the sciences, which are susceptible to coming to a standstill under overt pragmatism. Tocqueville says this occurred in China, which transitioned from greatness to mere industry, preserving the scientific method, while losing science itself (438).

Studying the classics and theoretical topics are important because free people must know how to think for themselves. Students of the classics are focused on personal intellectual development, but in the process they become more informed citizens, better equipped to vote intelligently and contribute their ideas to society. Pursuing theoretical concepts enables students to transcend
harmful democratic trends, such as materialism and individualism. Not everyone in a democratic society will have the desire or capacity to pursue topics such as the purpose of life or the theme of Aristophanes’ *Clouds*. However, some will have the inclination to study theoretical topics, and preventing the development of their minds by discrediting subjects without an immediate, practical output perilously impedes the depth of ideas.

I am a product of a liberal arts education. I entered college with the intention of studying business, because I was told that this was the best way to get the most out of my education. However, I found myself to be intrigued by other fields of study such as philosophy and politics, which a liberal arts curriculum allowed me to explore alongside my business track. I experienced intimate interaction with classical texts in a Political Theory course, which led me to change my focus to Political Philosophy. My perspectives are being shaped through contemplation of abstract concepts, which stimulate my passion for ideas outside a purely material existence. For instance, when I analyzed the perfect society with Plato in his *Republic* I for a time transcended my material and immediate existence and contemplated the ideal, the purpose of a classical education in Tocqueville’s description.

Through Sophocles’ *Antigone* I was introduced to the idea of the inseparability between the individual and the political order. Just as Antigone and Haemon tragically discovered, the individual is intimately tied to the people and phenomena around him or her. My international politics classes also clarified how actions (or inaction) affect other people and other societies. My liberal education
also instilled critical thinking skills, appreciation for beauty, tolerance, and respect for diversity. These values became an essential component of who I am and have much more staying power than a well-paying job, especially in today’s unstable economy. Studying the topics I am naturally drawn to is in reality the way to get the most out of my education, and to hopefully contribute the most of which I am capable to society. The classics and my liberal education as a whole have propelled me to become a thoughtful and active citizen.

Tocqueville is optimistic about the fact that education in democracy permits a greater number of people to participate in intellectual pursuits and thus has the potential to produce a more numerous force than aristocracies at cultivating the sciences, literature, and the arts. However, without equal opportunity programs for the financially needy, this higher aim for liberal arts education becomes less likely. In order to create the strongest body of students and preserve institutions that truly value studying the Classics, admissions programs should place students’ capacity and willingness to adopt the liberal arts philosophy over their ability to pay. Without the need-blind program at my school, a liberal arts education would have been completely unfeasible.

Many claim that an education in the Classics is a waste of time since the subject matter often does not relate to the students’ future jobs. However, offering degree programs that teach the students to contemplate the immaterial does not mean liberal arts institutions must abandon financial stewardship or that completing a liberal arts education cannot translate into money-making ventures. In fact, it often does. It simply requires institutions to remember that the true
purpose of the liberal arts has nothing to do with financial success, prestigious degrees, or obtaining sought-after jobs. These are the means, and very far from the ends. A liberal arts education with loftier goals produces a public good because as Tocqueville indicates, people who select their studies out of personal interest rather than external objectives become cognizant of a world outside themselves, an essential component for members of a liberal democracy.

I have thus adopted the view similar to Tocqueville that rather than an overly pragmatic approach, liberal education in America should adopt the aim of elevating society to a grander existence. Materialism and individualism present real threats to American democracy, and liberal arts programs counter these tendencies and thus are an indispensable component of higher education. Measuring liberal arts programs by their immediate financial dividends is to disregard their classical origin, valuing the liberal arts as product rather than intellectual fulfillment. Instead of bending over backward to adapt liberal arts programs to match the needs of the economy – which compromises quality – or fudging the figures reported for college rankings to maintain an attractive label for students’ resumes, a different approach altogether should be taken. The project should be to assess whether students, faculty, and institutions as a whole are dedicated to the true purpose of the liberal arts. In order for the liberal arts to flourish in a meaningful way, its participants must be wholly dedicated to studying for the sake of studying itself. If the liberal arts maintain this higher aim for education, the effect will be an expansion of the intellectual capacity for individuals, and ultimately for society as a whole.
Works Cited


Putnam, Robert. *Bowling Alone*. 