Review

Aron and Tocqueville: Liberty and Equality: A Review Essay

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Raymond Aron and Alexis de Tocqueville were two of the most important French thinkers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Although there are significant differences between them in terms of the times in which they lived and the types of books that they wrote, there are a number of convictions that they shared. Among these, the most important was their shared belief in the ideas and ideals of freedom and equality. Both of these concepts were found in the American and French Revolutions but Tocqueville approached it from his early nineteenth century perspective of democracy in America and Aron considered it in light of the twentieth century Europe. There are two new books which reflect the themes of freedom and equality: *Liberty and Equality* which is a new English translation of Aron's final lecture in Paris and *The Man Who Understood Democracy* which is Olivier Zunz' biography of Tocqueville. Both are superb books which help enlarge and illuminate Aron's and Tocqueville's ideas about freedom and equality.

ARON: LIBERTY AND EQUALITY

Raymond Aron's preoccupation with the notion of liberty intensified during the Second World War. Although he had been concerned with political responsibility in the early years that Hitler was in power, that preoccupation grew during the war. The concern with freedom never left him and he lectured on it numerous times, especially in the Thomas Jefferson lectures that he gave in California in 1963 (Aron 1965). The lecture that is translated here was his final lecture in Paris. It was the last lecture in a series of eighteen that focused on the themes of liberty and equality which he delivered on April 4, 1978. The original recording of the Collège de France lecture was lost but Pierre Manent and Giulio di Ligio managed to decipher and transcribe a handwritten manuscript. Both Manet and di Ligio admit there might be some shortcomings with their French edition, both are convinced of the importance of Aron's lecture.

Liberty and Equality has five parts: the first three are brief: the Translator's Note, the Translator's Acknowledgements, and a Preface. The other two are lengthy in comparison: Aron's lecture and an Epilogue. The work was translated by Samuel Garrett Zeitlin who provides an account of his translating practices. Zeitlin maintains that Aron's lecture is not like Twitter but is more like Pericles. It is a lecture that reflected the "high diction appropriate to a lecture at the height of the French academic system (Aron 2023, p. vi). It is Zeitlin's intention to "offer a close and accurate translation of the French original within

the limits of contemporary English" (Aron 2023, p. v). The Translator's Acknowledgements is also brief yet Zeitlin acknowledges the helpful comments from 25 people, the love of his family, and has dedicated his translation to two of his former professors.

In the original French edition, the lengthy discussion by Pierre Manet precedes Aron's lecture whereas in the English translation it is the Epilogue. I will follow the English version by discussing it after the examination of the lecture. However, I will discuss the Preface by Mark Lilla at the end of the section because it serves as an appropriate transition to the Tocqueville biography.

The title in French and in English is a bit misleading; instead of an essay on liberty, Aron insists that he should be talking about liberties. He has three types in mind: personal liberties, political liberties, and social liberties. Personal liberties include the right to security, the right to free movement, and the right to employment of our choosing. Political liberties include the right to vote, the right to protest, and the right to assemble. Social liberties include the right to health care and the right to education. It also includes the collective right to organize or to unionize (Aron 2023, pp. 10-15). Aron then declares that these liberties can be placed in either the category of formal liberties or the category of material or real liberties. He must have discussed this in a previous lecture because he assumes that his audience is familiar with the two categories. They were not new to Aron because he had distinguished between them in the 1963 Jefferson lectures that he gave in California. Personal liberties are real liberties; they are not formal but are concrete. An example is to move to another city, another state, another country. Political liberties are more difficult to place in one class or another. They are clearly personal in the sense that each individual has the right to vote but they are also formal in the sense that voting is not just concrete but formal because it is symbolic (Aron 2023, pp. 15-18; see Adair-Toteff 2019, pp. 152-153).

Aron notes that there are two issues: One, which of these liberties are truly essential and two, what is the relationship between the political liberties and the social liberties. The first has the problem of what counts as the essential liberty given that there are the three types. The second has the problem of which has priority—the state or society (Aron 2023, pp. 27-29). Aron does not spend much time on the first and the time he devotes to the second is spent mostly on Marxism. But it leads to the problem of exploitation and he offers a joke from the Soviet Union: What's the difference between capitalism and socialism? The answer is "In the one case, it's the exploitation of man by man, in the other, it's the reverse" (Aron 2023, p. 34). Aron identifies two issues from the idea of exploitation: that it leads to the unfortunate confusion of liberty and equality: one may be free to attend a university but that does not mean that one has the same power of learning than anyone else (Aron 2023, pp. 37-39). This leads to the second issue and that is the contemporary rejection of the idea of power. This is the idea of the "good society" in which all are equal. Aron rejects this ideal as an ideological dream (Aron 2023, pp. 40-44).

Aron moves to his final point and that is the relation between political liberty and philosophical liberty. He suggests that it is the philosopher who provides both the richer and the simpler notion of liberty: richer because it is the idea of "mastery of reason or of the will over the passions" and simpler because it is more precise than mere choice. It is evident that Aron prefers philosophical liberty for more than these two reasons; for the philosopher the "reasonable man is a postulate" but for the political thinker the "free man" is an objective. He suggests that freedom today is not obeying laws but engaging in hedonistic behavior; there is no longer such a thing as virtue. Aron concludes his lecture by offering a number of observations: his account of liberties is restricted to western democracies and therefore is neither universal nor abstract. Nor does he want to impart any wisdom regarding liberty; rather, he wants to remind us that we should reflect on our good fortune to enjoy our liberties because it is "a privilege rare in history and rare in space" (Aron 2023, pp. 45-55). It is this concern with the fragility of liberty that Aron shares with Tocqueville.

Pierre Manent's contribution is almost as long as Aron's lecture and is well worth reading carefully. Manent not only discusses Aron's essay but he places it in some important contexts. In one way he explains that Aron had disavowed his French professor's apolitical naivety and the years that he spent in Germany in the early 1930s taught him the importance of political realistic thinking and an appreciation for Weber's scholarly analysis (Aron 2023, pp. 60-62). Manent maintains that Aron abandoned Weber because of his

immoderate attitude and bellicose approach (Aron 2023, pp. 92-93). Manet may not be so convincing about this, but he needs to show that Aron replaced Weber with Aristotle. He claims that Aron learned much from studying Aristotle's philosophy and he points in particular to three different things. First, like Aristotle, Aron starts from what is, which is certainly true in both cases. But Manent insists that that means "to begin from 'opinions'" and while that is true for Aristotle, it is not so evident in Aron's case. (Aron 2023, pp. 89-92). Second, both Aron and Aristotle do not refrain from value judgments and this clearly distinguishes Aron from Weber who insisted that value judgments had no place in scholarship. However, Weber thought that value judgments do have a place in politics. Third, Manent claims that Aron also thought in terms of virtue and again there is a similarity between Aron and Aristotle (Aron 2023, pp. 90-91). Manent is on more solid ground when he suggests that Aron regards people as more than individuals in that they need to be part of a group; that is, a political collective. This emphasis is revealed in Manent's claim that Aron is a "liberal *classical* thinker rather than a classical *liberal* thinker." Manent is also correct to insist that unlike some thinkers, Aron never longed for the past but embraced the present. History may not be as important to Aron as philosophy but it has its uses (Aron 2023, pp. 83-84). Manent is correct in distinguishing Aron from John Locke over the latter's insistence on individual rights. He is also correct to show that Aron might have learned from Kant but that he believed that morality was more than following rules (Aron 2023, pp. 85-86). Manet is certainly right to claim that Aron was always preoccupied with politics and that Aron's subtitle to his memoirs was *50 Years of Political Reflection* but it meant *50 Years of Political Education* because Aron recognized that political philosophy was observing and thinking about humans and that meant continuously learning (Aron 2023, p. 58). One may not agree with every claim that Pierre Manent makes in his essay, but all of them compel one to think more about what Aron wrote.

The comments by Mark Lilla serve to accomplish a number of functions in a brief span. They serve to remind us that Aron was a scholar who was often misunderstood—many of his compatriots regarded him as a conservative because he objected to Marxist ideology. Lilla argues that Aron's critics misinterpreted Aron's positions and that he was a genuine liberal. Aron learned in the 1930s that democracy was intended to "prevent political life from descending into a raw struggle of all against all." But he also learned how fragile democracy was when confronted with myths and distortions (Aron 2023, pp. xii-xiii). Lilla insists that Aron was right to call himself a liberal because he reminds us that the French liberal tradition differs from the Anglo-American one. While both traditions emphasize democracy and individual rights, the French tradition also extolls codes, habits rituals, and beliefs. Lilla emphasizes that Aron is a democrat in the French tradition that is more sociological than moralistic—the tradition which began with Alexis de Tocqueville (Aron 2023, p. xv).

TOCQUEVILLE: EQUALITY AND LIBERTY

There is a degree of difficulty in distilling the contents of *Liberty and Equality* but that pales in contrast to attempting to examine a book as large as Olivier Zunz' biography of Tocqueville. The "Note on Sources" is six pages, the index is 22 pages, and there some fifty pages of notes. The main text is 350 pages divided into a Prologue, 11 chapters, and an Epilogue. The inside cover blurb notes that this is "a definitive biography" of Alexis de Tocqueville and it clearly is. However, Zunz is careful in determining how much time to devote to the different stages of Tocqueville's life. For example, there are under eight pages covering Tocqueville's life from birth until he was sixteen and then twenty pages from then until just prior to his twenty-sixth birthday (Zunz 2022, pp. 8-15, 15-35). In contrast, Zunz spends almost 100 pages on the years between 1835 and 1848 (Zunz 2022, pp. 162-256). We tend to think of Tocqueville as the author of *Democracy in America* but Zunz spends much of his book detailing the private and public aspects of Tocqueville's life. He spells out how often Tocqueville was ill; that he continuously suffered from stomach ailments and severe breathing problems caused by tuberculosis. Zunz also details Tocqueville's marriage to a middle-class English woman by the name Mary Mottley. Tocqueville had met her while in England in 1835 and they married in late October of that year. Zunz describes how Tocqueville's family objected to his choice of wife and that the

marriage was not blissful. On one hand, Tocqueville was controlling but on the other hand he was considerate regarding her health. While he was "critical of his wife's every move" he traveled with her to Switzerland for a cure (Zunz 2022, pp. 164-166). Zunz spends more time in discussing Tocqueville's politics.

In 1836 Tocqueville decided that he wanted to enter politics and those interested in this aspect of his life will find Zunz' account detailed and full. Those who are more interested in Tocqueville as a person will find his account even more rewarding and that is because Zunz provides an almost psychological account of the man. Zunz describes how Tocqueville began his initial attempt to gain office was marked by timidity. But he also shows how Tocqueville quickly learned from his mistakes; Tocqueville finally won a seat in the assembly in the March 1839 election. What Zunz also demonstrates is how independent and honest Tocqueville always was and how that was in marked contrast to other politicians at the time (Zunz 2022, pp. 171-172, 179-180, 197). Unlike many of his contemporaries, Tocqueville was genuinely interested in the welfare of the French people. Zunz writes about Tocqueville's various investigations into penal reform as well as on electoral reform. He also recounts how Tocqueville achieved considerable success in both being reelected and in promoting a better government (Zunz 2022, pp. 203-212, 221-224). One of Tocqueville's greatest challenges was to argue for the abolition of slavery in the French colonies (Zunz 2022, pp. 216-233).

Zunz does not shy away from pointing out Tocqueville's failings. One of the largest failings was Tocqueville's conviction that having colonies was not only just but was beneficial and Zunz points out that this was nowhere as clear as in Tocqueville's belief in subjugating Algeria. He explains that Tocqueville justified this by comparing Algeria to the American frontier (Zunz 2022, pp. 243-256). Zunz also does not refrain from pointing out that Tocqueville could change his mind quickly. This is evident in his account of how Tocqueville went from condemning the 1848 Revolution to promoting it (Zunz 2022, pp. 261-268). But as Louis Napoléon had taken power Tocqueville believed that he could be an asset; he wanted to become minister of education but instead was appointed minister of foreign affairs. Zunz notes that this was short-lived: from June 3 to October 29, 1849 when Louis Napoléon dismissed the entire cabinet (Zunz 2022, pp. 276-280).

Tocqueville felt depressed after his dismissal but Zunz explains that the depression was also caused by his declining health. Tocqueville suffered his first bout of tuberculosis in March 1850 (Zunz 2022, pp. 281-282, 287, 301). The retirement from politics and declining health prompted Tocqueville to devote his remaining time to the study of history. But Zunz also points out that his political circle shrank and his relations with his brothers grew worse (Zunz 2022, pp. 288-290). Zunz details how France's turn to the Right prompted Tocqueville to look to the past to explain why France was forever giving up on democracy. The result was *The Ancient Régime and the Revolution* which was published in June, 1856 (Zunz 2022, p. 316).

Zunz recounts Tocqueville's father's death in 1856 and how afterward he was able to restore good relations with his brothers. But Tocqueville's tuberculosis returned in July 1858 and the next ten months saw periods in which he was debilitated and other times was able to take daily walks. In February and March of 1859 Tocqueville seemed to have recovered but it was momentary. Tocqueville died on April 16, 1859—as a Catholic. Earlier Zunz had discussed Tocqueville's conversations with several people about Christianity in general and Catholicism in particular, but he notes that it was Marie who had convinced him to receive communion (Zunz 2022, pp. 340-345). He may have died finally convinced of religion but he was always committed to democracy. It was democracy and its insistence on equality that was the thread that ran through Tocqueville's writings and that is the idea that informs most of Zunz' biography. The focal point of that was Tocqueville's travels to the United States and the writing of the two volumes of *Democracy in America*.

That Tocqueville would decide that at age twenty-five was rather astonishing. Zunz notes that Tocqueville had a protected childhood and was not of robust health (Zunz 2022, pp. 8-12). But in 1830 he was realizing that he had no future in France and decided that he and his friend Gustav Beaumont would travel across much of the United States and investigate the different penal systems (Zunz 2022, pp. 31-35). They left on April 2, 1831 arriving in Newport, Rhode Island on May 9. They would travel North from May

until October and then head South from October until February. Tocqueville and Beaumont would not depart for France until February 20, 1832.

Tocqueville began his travels in New York City and he visited jails as well as the elite but he also found time to read in a New York City institution the Athenaeum. It was not all work: Tocqueville and Beaumont attended a number of balls but the social events were not always to their liking. They disapproved of the food they were served and they were somewhat concerned about various toasts. They also realized that their ideas of American women were not matched by reality: the women were "remarkably unsheltered." Tocqueville also failed to appreciate the importance of New York City for shipping and he had much to learn about the city's penal system. As much as he thought he was understanding American democracy, he had "blind spots." These included his inability to grasp the fact that despite being an open society, there were secret societies and that there were fissures within political parties (Zunz 2022, pp. 43-53). In his travels across New York to Michigan Tocqueville encountered a number of Native Americans and he was appalled how badly they were treated. They crossed into Canada and were surprised to see how feudal it was and how dominant the Catholic Church was (Zunz 2022, pp. 66-70).

Tocqueville left Quebec and traveled to Boston and Zunz emphasized the contrast Tocqueville saw between the "powerlessness" of the French Canadians and the apparent "intellectual superiority" of the New Englanders (Zunz 2022, pp. 70-71). From Boston, Tocqueville and Beaumont traveled to Philadelphia and then to Cincinnati and then down to Nashville. Zunz is at his best in describing Tocqueville's physical and mental health: after the coach broke down Tocqueville "fell sick. Shivering and without appetite, he could not go on." When Tocqueville had become depressed earlier in Philadelphia he had written in his notebooks that the "three 'human miseries'" were diseases, death, and doubt (Zunz 2022, p. 91). Tocqueville saw disease and death when he returned to France in May 1832 because it was in the middle of a cholera epidemic (Zunz 2022, p. 101). Zunz ensures that his reader gains a balanced view of Tocqueville—as much as he suffered from bouts of depression, he also had hope: late in life Tocqueville noted that he had written *Democracy in America* with "'faith in a cause and hope'" (Zunz 2022, p. 117). Zunz comments on his writing schedule but what is more interesting is his account of Tocqueville's writing style—he had an "innate penchant for complexity" and that leads to doubt. Friends advised him to read Montesquieu, Rousseau, and Pascal (Zunz 2022, pp. 119-120). Zunz is also at his best when discussing Tocqueville's views about the American political principles (Zunz 2022, pp. 122-127). Less successful is Zunz' account of Tocqueville's fears regarding the "tyranny of the majority"—not because it is mistaken; rather, it is too brief (Zunz 2022, pp. 128-129).

Zunz again excels at describing Tocqueville's doubts about the publication and response to *Democracy in America*. He quotes Tocqueville's "'The best thing that can happen to me is if no one reads my book'" but adds that "His enthusiastic readers did not cooperate." Zunz maintains that Tocqueville's success was founded on two things: the excellence of the book and that it appeared at the right time as the Franco-American relationship was imperiled. A conflict between President Andrew Jackson and the French government had drawn French interest in America; hence in Tocqueville's book, but it also generated anti-American feelings (Zunz 2022, pp. 133, 141). But, the book was favorably received by not just in France but in England. Tocqueville and Beaumont travelled to England in 1835 where Tocqueville met with John Stuart Mill. It was Mill who wrote a review which was a "magisterial introduction to *Democracy in America* for the British public." (Zunz 2022, pp. 149, 151). The purpose of the visit to England was to investigate the poverty and inequality in England and Ireland. Regarding Ireland, Tocqueville observed that it had "'all of the evils of aristocracy without any of its advantages,' generating extreme poverty and taking no blame for it" (Zunz 2022, p. 157). The Americans blamed France for the indemnity quarrel and that was part of the reason that Tocqueville was having difficulties finding an American publisher. With some major intervention by some notable political players, a highjacked version of the English translation was published in 1838. Zunz clarified that America did not recognize international copyright until the 1890s and adds that "Tocqueville never earned any money from the American editions of his book" (Zunz 2022, pp. 160-161). Tocqueville was

born an aristocrat but he believed in democracy. As Zunz asserts in his Prologue, Tocqueville believed in democracy because it promoted liberty and equality (Zunz 2022, pp. 1, 7).

If there is a flaw in *The Man Who Understood Democracy* it is Zunz' occasional tendency to fault Tocqueville. Zunz criticized him for his "blind spots" which not only included those already mentioned but others like his dismissal of how solitary confinement caused mental suffering and his failure to have "connected the dots" about how Southern slavery was more than a matter of climate (Zunz 2022, pp. 86-95).

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Given that Aron and Tocqueville are two of the most famous French thinkers, it is notable there has not been much written about Aron's reception of Tocqueville's thought. This is not the place to discuss this neglect but it is an appropriate place to mention one of Aron's final comments about his illustrious predecessor. The inaugural issue of *The Tocqueville Review* began with an essay by Aron on Tocqueville. In "Tocqueville Retrouvé" he maintained that Tocqueville's writings were often referred to in America, less so in England, but were mostly ignored in France. He concluded his essay with the suggestion that a biography of Tocqueville was still warranted and added that the Americans and the English are the best at writing biographies (Aron 1979, pp. 10-11, 22-23). Olivier Zunz taught in the United States for many years but he was born and educated in France. His biography proves that in this one instance Aron was mistaken. In the "Introduction" to the same issue of *The Tocqueville Review* the editor indicated that it was fitting that Aron wrote the lead article because his talents, analyses, and his tone "deserves to be called the modern-day Tocqueville" (Editor 1979, p. 7). There is no doubt about that assessment but as Aron's essay and Zunz' biography demonstrate, Aron and Tocqueville were more than scholars investigating the meaning and significance of the ideas of liberty and equality. Aron emphasized liberty while Tocqueville stressed equality; but they were ardent defenders of both of these ideals.

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