

Lesson Three Worksheet: The Power of the Majority over Thought (teacher version)

“Of the Power Exercised by the Majority in America over Thought”

[The section is taken from Volume I, Chapter 7, of *Democracy in America*, [“Of the Tyranny of the Majority.”](#) The recent critical edition published by the Liberty Fund, translated by James Schleifer and freely available online, has been used. However, the text has been rearranged and academic vocabulary terms have been bolded and defined. Students should be encouraged to look up words they do not know as this will help them better understand the passage.]

[Contrast of European and American Society]

When you come to examine how thought is exercised in the United States, you notice very clearly to what extent the power of the majority surpasses all the powers that we know in Europe.

Thought is an invisible and almost imperceptible power that scoffs at all tyrannies [that scoffs amid chains and executioners. Today, the most absolute sovereigns of Europe cannot prevent certain ideas hostile to their authority from circulating silently within their States and even within their courts. It is not the same in America; as long as the majority is uncertain, people speak; but as soon as the majority has irrevocably decided, everyone is silent, and friends as well as enemies then seem to climb on board together. The reason for this is simple. There is no monarch so absolute that he can gather in his hands all of society’s forces and vanquish opposition in the way that a majority vested with the right to make and execute laws can [at will, vested with the right and the force].

A king, moreover, has only a physical power that acts on deeds and cannot reach wills; but the majority is vested with a strength simultaneously physical and moral, which acts on the will as well as on actions and which at the same time prevents the deed and the desire to do it.

I know of no country where, in general, there reigns less independence of mind and true freedom of discussion than in America.

There is no religious or political theory that may not be freely preached in the constitutional States of Europe and that does not penetrate into the others and I do not know of a European people so powerful and so strong that it is not forced from time to time to hear hard truths. It is not this way in America; for there is no country in Europe so subject to a single power that someone who wants to speak the truth does not find some support capable of insuring him against the results of his independence. If he has the misfortune to live under an absolute government, he often has the people for him; if he lives in a free country, he can find shelter, as needed, behind royal authority. The aristocratic part of society sustains him in democratic countries, and democracy in the others. But within a democracy organized as that of the United States, only a single power is found, a single element of strength and success, and nothing outside of it.

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Text-Dependent Question	Evidence-Based Answer
Why is the power of the majority over thought so much more absolute in democratic America than in the monarchies of Europe?	The “absolute” monarchies of Europe cannot control all of their society’s forces nor crush all opposition. In these monarchies there are multiple, independent, and legitimate centers of power. There is nothing comparable in the structure of American society. All power derives from the people: they are the only legitimate authority.
What does Tocqueville mean by the physical and moral power of the majority?	He means both the power of the law and the power of societal norms and customs. He also means psychological power.
What is lacking in American society that is found in Europe that allows for more freedom of thought there?	There are multiple clashing centers of power in European society. The creative tensions offer support to the opponents of the dominant political powers.

[How Freedom of Thought is Limited]

In America, the majority draws a formidable circle around thought. Within these limits, the writer is free; but woe to him if he dares to go beyond them. It isn't that he has to fear an auto-da-fé, but he is exposed to all types of distasteful things and to everyday persecutions. A political career is closed to him; he has offended the only power that has the ability to open it to him. Everything is denied him, even glory. Before publishing his opinions, he believed he had some partisans; it seems to him that he has them no longer, now that he has revealed himself to all; for those who censure him speak openly, and those who think as he does, without having his courage, keep quiet and distance themselves. He gives in; finally, under the daily effort, he yields and returns to silence, as though he felt remorse for having told the truth.

Chains and executioners, those are the crude instruments formerly used by tyranny; but today civilization has perfected even despotism itself, which seemed however to have nothing more to learn.

Princes had, so to speak, materialized violence; the democratic republics of today have made violence as entirely intellectual as the human will that it wants to constrain. Under the absolute government of one man, despotism, to reach the soul, crudely struck the body; and the soul, escaping from these blows, rose gloriously above it; but in democratic republics, tyranny does not proceed in this way; it leaves the body alone and goes right to the soul. The master no longer says: You will think like me or die; he says: You

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are free not to think as I do; your life, your goods, everything remains with you; but from this day on you are a stranger among us. You will keep your privileges as a citizen, but they will become useless to you. If you aspire to be the choice of your fellow citizens, they will not choose you, and if you ask only for their esteem, they will still pretend to refuse it to you. You will remain among men, but you will lose your rights to humanity. When you approach your fellows, they will flee from you like an impure being. And those who believe in your innocence, even they will [419] abandon you, for people would flee from them in turn. Go in peace; I spare your life, but I leave you a life worse than death.

Absolute monarchies had dishonored despotism. Let us be careful that democratic republics do not rehabilitate it, and that, while making despotism heavier for some, they do not, in the eyes of the greatest number, remove its odious aspect and its degrading character.

Text-Dependent Question	Evidence-Based Answer
What does Tocqueville mean by the “formidable circle around thought”?	Tocqueville is talking about the way public opinion reaches a consensus on a range of issues. This consensus then becomes fixed and cannot be directly challenged safely without great expense to the challenger.
How do authors gradually realize that they are not going to change the mind of the public?	At first an author who steps out of the “circle of thought” will assume he may have some supporters, but he soon undergoes “everyday persecutions” and “all types of distasteful things”. He is crushed by the silence or contempt of the crowd.
How does the majority treat those outside this circle of thought?	The majority no longer considers the individual or group to be legitimate. They ostracize the offenders.

[Literary Genius and Freedom of Mind]

Among the proudest nations of the Old World, books have been published that intended faithfully to portray the vices and absurdities of their contemporaries ... Molière criticized the court in the plays that he had performed before the courtiers. But the dominating power in the United States does not understand being played in this way. The slightest reproach wounds it; the smallest biting truth shocks it, and everything from the forms of its language to its most solid virtues must be praised. No writer, no matter how famous, can escape this obligation to heap praise upon his fellow citizens. So the majority lives in perpetual self-adoration; only foreigners or experience can bring certain truths to the ears of Americans.

If America has not yet had great writers, we do not have to look elsewhere for the reasons: literary genius does not exist without freedom of the mind, and there is no freedom of the mind in America.

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The Inquisition was never able to prevent the circulation in Spain of books opposed to the religion of the greatest number. The dominion of the majority does better in the United States: it has removed even the thought of publishing such books. Unbelievers are found in America, but unbelief finds, so to speak, no organ there.

You see governments that strive to protect morals by condemning the authors of licentious books. In the United States, no one is condemned for this kind of work; but no one is tempted to write them. It is not that all citizens have pure morals, but the majority is steady in its morals.

Here, the use of power is undoubtedly good. I am, consequently, speaking only about the power itself. This irresistible power is an unremitting fact, and its good usage is only an accident.

Text-Dependent Question	Evidence-Based Answer
What role does literature play in European monarchies?	Books were written and circulated that openly criticize and make fun of the vices of the ruling classes.
What seems to be the reason Americans don't like criticism? Why does Tocqueville think he will be successful with his criticism?	Criticism is dangerous to writers so it is rare for them to apply it to the American people. Tocqueville suggest that perhaps a foreigner can tell the truth. Note however, that his criticism appears towards the end of the first volume of his long book.
Why does Tocqueville think in 1835 that there are no great writers in America?	Great writers need a certain independence of mind which American writers lack. These writers learn that to be successful they must never get too far away from the deeply held beliefs of the people, and never challenge them directly. They themselves engage in self-censorship.

Academic Vocabulary

Imperceptible

Courts

Irrevocably

Vanquish

Simultaneously

Formidable

Auto-da-fé

Definitions

incapable of being perceived

residence or establishment of monarch

not capable of being changed

to defeat

at the same time

very powerful or strong

burning of a heretic

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Partisans	supporters of one party
Remorse	guilt
Self-adoration	worship of self
Inquisition	an institution established for the suppression of heresy. It was adopted into ecclesiastical criminal law (c. 1231) by Pope Gregory IX.