

Notes to the Teacher: Why Tocqueville is So Critical of American Democracy

It is in the realm of thought that Tocqueville believes the danger of majority tyranny is most serious. Students may be surprised by the very extreme arguments and statements in this section: the majority in America is much more capable of exercising its power than any European monarch, however absolute; “I do not know any country where, in general, less independence of mind and genuine freedom of discussion reign than in America”; and, “there is no freedom of mind in America.” He even says that freedom is more at risk in America than when Europe was under the Inquisition!

Tocqueville is making several points: (1) the so-called absolute monarchs cannot control all of their society’s forces because those forces have legitimacy and independent status by law; (2) in America there are no such independent powers since everything derives its legitimacy from the people; (3) the monarch has only physical power over individuals, but a democratic majority has moral and psychological power that “prevents the deed and the desire to do it;” and finally, (4) writers are much more dependent in America than in Europe and that has consequences for literature and life.

European monarchs had to contend with powerful rivals groups—even within their courts; with the independent and clashing powers of the various clerical groups and religious establishments; the pride of the nobles; and the power of the rising merchant class; as well as the balance of power among neighboring nations. The creative tension of complex, opposing forces encouraged and supported a kind of vigorous independence of thought and encouragement of opposing points of view. There was nothing like this in Jacksonian America as Tocqueville saw it.

In American society, where there is only the majority, they monopolize all physical and moral power as “the People”. Tocqueville even compares the majority power to the Inquisition, that infamous tribunal of the Catholic Church established for the hunting out and suppression of heresy. Does he mean that writers (and journalists, novelists, artists, etc.) are tortured or burned at the stake in America? No, he does not mean the majority acts with crude force on the bodies of men. Rather it acts through a sort of social ostracism or peer pressure. One cannot have a public career in America without winning over the majority, so if one says anything that seriously displeases them, one’s career is over.

English literature teachers might point to the [case of Herman Melville](#). His masterpiece, *Moby-Dick*, was largely rejected by the public and the critics for its unconventional form and dark themes. Melville spent the rest of his life battling obscurity and financial ruin despite writing some of his most important works, such as “Bartleby the Scrivener,” “Benito Cereno,” and *Billy Budd*.

Tocqueville continues his argument: Because writers know they must please the public, they don’t even think of writing things critical of the majority: there is much self-censorship in America. The teacher should make sure students understand that it is not through violence, but through this more subtle psychological mechanism that independent thought is truly stifled.

In making the case that there is “no” freedom of thought in America, Tocqueville suggests that Americans do not like to have their vices and ridiculousness pointed out: Americans do not like to have the people criticized or mocked. Only a foreigner such as Tocqueville would dare tell hard truths to

Tocqueville: Lesson Three. The Power of the Majority over Thought

Americans. But note that he waits till almost the end of a very long volume to advance his criticism of democracy. Point out to students that Tocqueville reserves harsh criticism of the treatment of Native American and blacks for the final chapter.

Ask your students whether all this is still true. Have them think of the way politicians appeal to “the American people” in their speeches. Do politicians ever criticize the American people? If so, how and for what? Students can also think of comedies on television: Are there any that mock, not just this or that particular group (like bumbling fathers or yuppies in New York City), but the American people itself?