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**ALEXIS DE TOCQUEVILLE AS A CRITIC OF MODERNITY:
ON LIBERTY AND THE POLITICAL THOUGHT**

*MODERNİTE ELEŞTİRMENİ OLARAK ALEXIS DE TOCQUEVILLE:
ÖZGÜRLÜK VE POLİTİK DÜŞÜNCE ÜZERİNE*

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Abstract

Alexis de Tocqueville is one of the leading representatives of aristocratic liberal tradition starting from Henri de Boulainvilliers and Montesquieu. The views of aristocratic liberals criticizing the effects of modernism on social and political developments have affected current political discussions as well. The results about the negative effects of political and cultural centralization were main concerns. Furthermore, a discrete difference came into question between the perceptions of modern humanistic tradition and aristocratic liberals. The major reason for being in a counter-view in the discussions of political and cultural issues is the differences in their humanistic stance. Due to its democratic attitude, modern humanism tends to curtail individuals' freedom. It realizes this restriction by pushing individuals to sustain an average life with the help of social contract. In opposition to that, aristocratic liberals identify self-development. An individual cannot facilitate his or her self-development when enforced to sustain an average life. Therefore, to ensure self-development, they stand up for that individuals should be assured in terms of their autonomy

and authenticity with negative freedoms. In this sense, Tocqueville criticizes modernism as it centralizes everything and removes potentials of freedom. This criticism holds its increasing validity in the present conditions which centralization become a reality in global extent.

Key Words: Humanism, French Revolution, Aristotelianism, modernity, modern politics

Öz

Alexis de Tocqueville, Henri de Boulainvilliers ve Montesquieu'den kendisine kadar uzanan aristokratik liberal geleneğin başlıca temsilcilerindendir. Modernliğin sosyal ve politik gelişmeler üzerindeki etkilerine yönelik ilk eleştirileri yapan aristokratik liberallerin geliştirdikleri düşünceler günümüzdeki politik tartışmaları da etkilemektedir. Siyasal ve kültürel merkezleşmenin neden olacağı sonuçların olumsuzlukları başlıca kaygıdır. Ayrıca modern hümanist gelenek ile aristokratik liberallerin hümanizmi algılayışları arasında keskin bir farklılık söz konusudur. Hümanist yaklaşımları arasındaki farklılıklar politika ve kültür sahasındaki tartışmalarda karşıt kutuplarda yer almalarının başlıca sebebidir. Modern hümanizm demokratik niteliğinden dolayı kişilerin özgürlük sahalarını sınırlama eğilimindedir. Bunu, kişileri sosyal sözleşme vasıtasıyla sürekli olarak belirli bir ortalama da yer almaya zorlayarak gerçekleştirir. Buna karşıt, aristokratik liberaller öz-gelişimi başlıca amaç olarak belirlerler. İnsanın öz-gelişimi belirli bir ortalama da yer almaya zorlandığında gerçekleştirilemez. Bu nedenle öz-gelişimin temin edilebilmesi için kişilerin negatif özgürlükler vasıtasıyla otonomilerinin ve özgünlüklerinin güvenceye alınması gerektiğini savunurlar. Bu çerçevede, Tocqueville modernliği, her şeyi merkezleştirerek özgürlüğün olanaklarını kaldırıyor olmakla eleştirir. Bu eleştirisi, merkezleşmenin global bir ölçekte gerçekleşmekte olduğu günümüz koşullarında, geçerliliğini arttırarak sürdürmektedir. Siyaset sahasının kontrolsüz bir biçimde genişletilerek, kişilerin gerçek anlamda etkileşimde bulunamayacakları bir kaos ortamına dönüşmesi, modern siyasetin en önemli neticelerindendir. Böylece, devlet, kişisel tercihlerin bir kenara bırakıldığı ve genel iradenin hakim olduğu modern siyasal yapının her türlü olanağından faydalanabilme imkanına kavuşur. Buna karşı, yerelliklerin güvenceye alındığı ve siyaset alanının sınırlandırıldığı bir siyasal sistemin tesisi zaruridir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Hümanizm, Fransız Devrimi, Aristotelesçilik, modernlik, modern politika

Introduction

Today, Alexis de Tocqueville's critique of modernity effects the discussions about citizenship and welfare state. The dissociation of social and political bonds

draws further attention to Tocqueville's critique of modernity and democracy. However, Tocqueville's critique of modernity and democracy, which presents us a unique historical analysis of social and political developments in the 19th century, needs serious revision. In this way, it can be used more effectively in the analysis of modern political problems. Moreover, it can help the development of a normative perspective for the social and political analysis of our age. Besides, the liberal values indicated in Tocqueville's political thought, mainly depend on modern humanist values. These values are shaped around the ideal of individual self-development. Thus, how the individual is construed and placed within social life should be explained. In this way the reconstruction of the critique of democracy in accordance with normative values can be realized.

I. Tocqueville and the Problems of Modernism

Tocqueville's approach to liberty and democracy took shape as the critique of the ideals of the French Revolution and the enlightenment. For this, he first analyzed the social and political problems of the 19th century with an anthropological approach. He thought that these problems, which still conserve their significance, arose from the dominance of the middle class and the central power of the state. According to him, the formation of the relationships between these constituted the basic parameters of modern political life. Besides, Tocqueville thought that the denominational interests that had triggered the French Revolution were effective on the social and political problems in the 19th century. The denominational problems, which first occurred between the aristocracy and the middle class and then between the bourgeoisie and the people, was another phenomenon that effected the 19th century political life.

Man's being the subject of scientific investigations along with his actions in the world, caused the dispersion of the paradigms that perceive knowledge as something which has absolute existence out of the humanistic existence and which is tried to be attained. Human agency's being the subject of scientific investigations and the development of social sciences is nourished by the positive and negative responses to the French Revolution's shattering effects on the social life. The social and cultural transformations caused by the French Revolution constitute the central problems of 19th century European political thought. Being the mainstream thinkers of this period, Alexis de Tocqueville (1805-59), Jacob Burckhardt (1818-97), and John Stuart Mill (1806-73) share a common interest regarding the political, social, cultural, and intellectual developments caused by the French Revolution (Brogan, 1971:290; Gossman, 2002:554; Anderson, 2006:15). This interest in the human agency, human existence and man's actions in the world is nourished by the structural transformation of the modern perception of learning. It is remarkable that all three thinkers are

pessimistic towards the modernization processes. This results from the rigor of the transformations and from the fact that to be able to make predictions for the future became impossible since the possibility of a stable life was destroyed.

Another remarkable point is that all three thinkers focused on the experiences in France, rather than the modernization practices that took place in England. This rather results from the fact that the modernization practices in France are associated with "revolution," whereas the ones in England depend on reforms. In this sense, the experience of French modernization has been scary for the social scientists. This is one of the reasons why Buckhardt, Mill and Tocqueville find the developments oriented in the creation of modern society in England more affirmative. According to them, modernization and the French Revolution caused a deep disengagement from every political, social, cultural and intellectual thing that had been constructed until that day. They tried to discover the pathological consequences of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution and this disengagement. They emphasized the fact that the modernization process is a result of an ongoing process. Buckhardt suggests that the roots of the modern spirit are indisputably based on the Renaissance. There is no doubt that Buckhardt's best known contribution is that he classifies the Renaissance as a period when individual was discovered. (Garner, 1990:49) Tocqueville, on the other hand, focuses on the connection and the contributions of absolute monarchy, which reached the peak of its development in 17th and 18th centuries, to the modern transformations.

The critiques of modernity, the French Revolution, and the individual's new position within social life led to the revision of the process. As long as man is enlightened about his own existence, he gains awareness about the value of humanistic existence. However, for this, the political rights of representation and the civil society should function as an intercessor between the selfish individualism and the universalism of the state. Tocqueville's *"Old Regime and the Revolution"* presents us an archaeological analysis of individualism (1955). His main aim here is to highlight the function of the political and cultural values, which faded way with modernity, in social life. At the end of 18th century, the collapse of the aristocratic order was complete. It is crystal clear that Tocqueville is aware of the fact that the transformation of the aristocratic society in to a democratic modern society was inevitable and irreversible. This is a tendency of his, which can be observed in every single work by him (Tocqueville, 1955; 1959; 1985; 2000). He is also aware that the new democratic age did not only account for a political transformation. The basic building blocks of the world of culture and learning were also subjected to a structural transformation. The number of the subjects who took part in the construction and communication of knowledge concerning political, social, cultural and intellectual issues rapidly increased. Thus, social sciences focused on how to control the process. This is a problem which also includes the control of knowledge.

During the last 20 years of the 18th century and the first half of the 19th century, there occurred an intense attack on the state structures, the Church,

education and art that were inherited from the Middle Ages. This tendency, which accounts for a deep disengagement with the former periods, was nourished by the hope that the future would be much better. The optimism of the Enlightenment philosopher could only have been realized only if a new phase had been opened and basic structures of learning had been transformed. Tocqueville was deeply concerned and suspicious about the developments that took place in the early 19th century and that caused the ruining of tradition. The feeling that the world one is standing on was drifting away, was shared by the intellectuals of this period. German philosophy, as well, has similar tendencies as Tocqueville.

The main tendency of the nineteenth century intellectual world was to reason. This tendency which depended on the belief that man was good by birth continued its development in conjunction with the optimism about human existence. This tendency which enabled the development of democratic social state, paved the way for the political, social, cultural and scientific developments that would enable people to make the decisions about how their lives were going to be shaped. Rousseau was the main representative of optimism. He believed that the good was inherent in the core of human existence. The thing that should be done to bring it into existence is to encourage it and to wipe away the burdens before it. Within twenty five years before the Revolution, people were living in a cultural environment which was proud of human existence. This ethos would make the Revolution inevitable. This led to a series of transformations that would enable the valuing of public opinion in the resolving of the political problems in the field of political sciences. The consistency of a political idea in itself and its persuasiveness was not enough to resolve the political problems anymore. How people's social interests were shaped became subordinated to the processes of mutual debates. In modern circumstances, this resulted from the fact that knowledge was being constructed in a mutual and cooperative way. Before the French Revolution, the knowledge concerning what kind of life style was desired depended on religious and traditional knowledge. However, nineteenth century philosophers reached a consensus that public opinion had become the determinant power. The cultural roots of the fact that public opinion surveys are highly valued today depend on the ethos that emerged with the French Revolution.

II. Modernity, Humanism and Democracy

The nineteenth century cultural world depended on the ideals of liberty, individuality and nonuniformity. The root of this term, which was also of the components of modern culture, goes back to the humanist tradition. Humanism is a concept which has deep traces in the history of modern thought. The development of the beliefs in the nineteenth century that man's actions within nature and the social

life would provide a more liveable world in the future, carries the influence of the Renaissance humanism (Kahan, 1992:81). This concept, which is very crucial in order to understand the nineteenth century and the modern culture, stretches as far back to Renaissance, Ancient Greece and the Roman culture.

Especially the philosophers, in the nineteenth century, derived the humanist values they had from the new urban humanism which had developed during the span between the Renaissance and the eighteenth century. Burckhardt's *"Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy"* is the most typical example of this (1928). Besides they reinterpreted the humanist values of the ancient times. This new humanist tradition, which actually continued its development especially in the new modern cities, carried Machievallist characteristics. However, they also made contributions to the earlier tradition of the humanist political discourse. The concepts of natural rights doctrine, commerce society, utilitarianism, moral idealism, historicism, and fallibilism, which are the grounds for this new humanist culture, were shaped in the process between the Enlightenment and the French Revolution. Furthermore, these concepts enabled the legitimization of the modern political movements. The combination of these aspects of the modern thought, grants the modern humanism the quality of "modern"ity.

The roots of the old humanist tradition, which was also carried on in the nineteenth century, goes back to the Ancient Greece and Rome. The principal indicator of being educated and an intellectual in Western Europe was to know Latin and Greek. The knowledge about the ancient world constituted the Europe's common language, common metaphors, and the roots of political and philosophical opinion. The whole elite education system of the nineteenth century was focused on the teaching of classical languages and literature. Indeed, before the WW I almost all the works of the classical world was translated into the basic national languages in Europe. The reason for this deep interest in the ancient world was the commonalities it had with the cultural atmosphere of the modern world. Basically, Greece and Rome were taken to be identical with modern Europe.

However, no matter how deep the nineteenth century philosophers' interest in the beliefs and values of the ancient world might be, they were well aware of the fact that the cultural developments of their own age possibly had completely different consequences. The sharp differentiation, thus, between the classical age and the modern world occurred in this century. The most outstanding indicators of this can be observed in the economical, political and artistic developments.

Tocqueville, who thought that the ideals and the thought structure of the modern age was nourished by the ancient world on the one hand, and that on the other hand, it was constructing a totally different world, asserts that it was not right to evaluate the democratic experience in America within the same scope of the classical age democracies. According to him, although modern thought and democracy had various similarities with the values and the culture of the ancient

world, if one is to understand it can only achieve it by carrying on their investigation with new categories of thought. For this reason, Tocqueville disaffirms the tendencies that propose to construct an interchangeability between Florence democracy and the nineteenth century European democracy.

However, though the nineteenth century philosophers were feeling that a great change and transformation was taking place, they compared their own age with the classical age and tried to understand the differences. So they continued the classicist tradition of the Europe high education system and placed great emphasis on ancient literature and philosophy. But, realizing the value of the difference of the modern humanism from both the ancient world and the Renaissance humanism, they became the primary bearers of this. In time, the classical humanism turned out to be a research field that enabled them to explore the roots of their own humanism.

The perception of Aristotelian human nature had a great impact on the nineteenth century world of thought. This perception harbours teleological features, as well. But the defining characteristic of the perception of the Aristotelian human nature is its notion of freedom (Kahan, 1992:84). In this perception, liberty, individuality and diversity which are the primal values of human existence, are based on "the idea of human nature." Plato, in his *Republic*, suggests that the best kind of city consortium should exactly be like the unity of individual human existence. Aristotle, on the other hand, criticizes this approach in his work, entitled, *Politics*. According to him, the city does not have to hold a unity in terms of neither the individual nor the household. Of course a harmonious relationship should be established between the individual and the city. But, the establishment of an organic unity is not necessary. The unity of the city qualitatively consisted of different individual unities (Mayhew, 1997:229-230). However, the probability of the completion of the human existence that could be realized by this means is only possible if man could express himself in the highest sense and could reach real criteria that could only be defined with goodness and virtue. This perception, which also constitutes the building blocks of the modern democratic and universalist thoughts, puts an emphasis on subjectivity, and being self sustaining individuals. This perception about the human nature, which was also suggested and supported by Romanticism, Rousseau and Kant, completes the concepts of modern individuality (Kahan, 1992:83). Though Aristotelianism prevents the political participation of some individuals and groups, it has democratic potential. It determined that framework of contemporary democracy. Aristotelian political order brings together the differences of the political functions and virtues in a way that it creates the possibility of different groups or communities to live altogether. The most significant progress and novelty that were enabled by the modern democracy culture was egalitarianism. In effect, the concept of the Aristotelean human nature includes the concept of liberty but excludes

the concept of equality. When examined through the Aristotelean point of view, 'equality' brings forth various inconveniences for the continuity of social life. Modern society continued its development with the expansion of commercial life and thus the widespread expansion of the activities of production. This expansion ruled out the existence of the traditional cast structures. In the political sense, on the other hand, legally it enabled the equality of all citizens. The city life which flourished with modernity, the nation state systems that emerged from the unity within the cities, and the modern world system moved forward with the individuals coming together as equals and conducting trade. This commercial structure of modern society is an annihilation of human virtue in the society and politics from the perspective of classical humanist approach.

Conclusion

The most significant difference that differentiates the Renaissance Humanism from the ancient humanism is just that it does not offer a civic characteristic but that, on the other hand, it strongly emphasizes an individualistic education program. This education program depended on literary studies, rhetoric, and the teaching of ethics. This happened to be a threshold for the humanist tradition in the eighteenth century which was in a way shaped as an activity of self-definition. This also paved the legitimate way for individuals' ability to participate in the social life as a political subject. In this process, the old and new thoughts came together and created a new cultural atmosphere. The most important issue among the humanist traditions was how the projects and the interests of the autonomous individual could possibly be coordinated within the boundaries of the legal and state actions. The fact that Mill was suspicious of "individualism," which was passionately embraced by the English liberals, shows to what extent this problem was important in the nineteenth century world of thought. (Mill, 1965; 1973; 1977) In order to provide individuals' autonomy and independence in an absolute way, the state was obliged to establish abstract systems. In natural circumstances, legal and criminal adjustments were needed to protect the individual against whom his interests were in conflict. For this reason, the existence of the state was indispensable. However, the operation of the state bureaucracy could turn out to be a threat to the individual's autonomy. The fact that the realization of individual's autonomy was only possible with the existence of the state also caused it to have an existence which was devoid of virtue and liberty. Doubtlessly, this is one of the most important paradigms of political philosophy. For the modern humanists, a free and virtuous life was only possible in a political community which consisted of free individuals that came together in equal circumstances. The obligatory mutual interconnectedness of all the members of a political community comes before the establishment of all laws. For, the acceptance of individuals to obey certain laws, requires the coordinative establishment of laws. This is necessary in order to enable the legitimization of dependence, to some extent. The individuals cannot realize a humane existence as long as the legitimate grounds for

being dependent to a certain extent, is set. The structures of absolute power, such as tyranny and dictatorship, pose an obstacle to the realization of a humane existence.

In this sense, Tocqueville takes a dignified stance against the opposition forming modern democratic societies. This opposition, Kant channeled his efforts to solve, takes a start with the discussion between Descartes and Hobbes. Tocqueville observed Cartesian philosophy turned into a kind of culture in the USA (Hebert, 2007:526). He worries about the results of this situation. The main difference between Descartes and Tocqueville is related to what is human nature. He thinks that philosophic individualism of Descartes entails the relationship of individuals with external world to become an instrumental structure. According to him, the human nature notion of Descartes degrades individuals to a creature which can communicate with the external world within the context of subjective interests and functions. However, Tocqueville has another notion about the human nature. To Tocqueville, human existence has the qualifications providing us to live thanks to communication and interaction with the other things. It is for sure that people desire to be happy. However, this cannot be realized with subjective activities. The subject desires to exhibit itself and its productions in public space after realizing its originality in its own center. Within the demands of public, the realization of existence put authenticity and individualism at risk, and confining individual into a specific field is against to the nature of people. In this sense, while protecting self-development ideal against to centralization tendency of modern politics, we need to stand up to the attitudes toward disabling individuals by isolating them in their specific field. Modern politics tends to degrade coordination and negotiation of individuals who bring out the rules of life with mutual empathy. The results of that might be devastating. Therefore, Tocqueville has a suspicion about devastating tendencies of modern politics (Dijn, 2008: 142) as modern life gradually enforces different time and space for an interaction. The lives of individuals become defenseless for other spaces. Under these circumstances, it is inevitable to result in new style totalitarianism when 'locality' shaped by different interests, benefit and needs as a solution is enforced for centralist coordination and general will.

Ethic politics are expected not to enforce people for leaving their global references aside, and attending coordination and harmony. Therefore, Tocqueville supports the view that the space and authenticity of individuals are to be assured against to the effects of external world within the framework of liberal freedom in the modern world that different spaces have an effect on each other culturally and economically. It is just possible with liberal freedom to preserve their spaces that individuals, groups and communities are able to protect their originality against to centralist tendencies that will leave all people without identity, civilization and tradition by obtaining concessions from all parties with empathy and negotiation.

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