

MODERN AGE

A QUARTERLY REVIEW



Liberty and Equality as Absolutes

STEPHEN J. TONSOR

OF THE REVOLUTIONARY TRIAD of "Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity" only liberty and equality have, in America, achieved constitutional status and genuine political visibility. Moreover, even liberty and equality have remained largely undefined and their consequences unexplored. In America we have always tended to vagueness; fudging the issues and glossing over the differences. There is evidence in the recent past that this evasion of discussion and debate, this pragmatic indifference to definition, is coming to an end. One of the consequences of the "age of ideology" in which we live is that the issues have generally been sharpened and the public polarized around competing alternatives.

This has been particularly true of the questions of liberty and equality and the public policies which involve their definition. It is not an exaggeration to say that nearly every important problem which we face, internationally or domestically, has at its heart either one or both of these two guiding principles of American political life. And suddenly we have discovered that either liberty or equality if pursued to its ultimate expression involves costs which we cannot afford or are unwilling to pay.

In the past, as I stated, it was possible to fudge the issue either by disguising or evading the costs or by pretending with the help of happy circumstance that it was not true that every increment of equality involved a diminution of liberty. Let me offer a few examples of this, to use a Marxist phrase, "sharpening of the antitheses," this growing unease with liberty and equality conceived as absolutes.

In a remarkable book, *People of Plenty: Economic Abundance and the American Character*,¹ David Potter argued in 1954 that America had never really faced up to the question of equalitarianism because America had been able through natural abundance and technological tricks to evade that issue, had been able to fudge and gloss over this hard question.

Potter wrote: "Not only has the presence of more than enough seats, more than enough rewards for those who strive, made the maintenance of a democratic system possible in America; it has also given a characteristic tone to American equalitarianism as distinguished from the equalitarianism of the Old World. Essentially, the difference is that Europe has always conceived of redistribution of wealth as

necessitating the expropriation of some and the aggrandizement of others; but America has conceived of it primarily in terms of giving to some without taking from others. . . . Occasionally, one encounters the statement that Americans believe in leveling up rather than in leveling down. The truth of the assertion is more or less self-evident, but the basic meaning is less so. Clearly, if one is leveling a fixed number of items, say personal incomes, the very process of leveling implies the reduction of the higher ones. But in order to raise the lower without reducing the higher, to level *up*, it is necessary to increase the total of all the incomes—that is to introduce new factors instead of solving the problem with the factors originally given. And it is by this stratagem of refusing to accept the factors given, of drawing on nature's surplus and on technological tricks, that America has often dealt with her problems of social reform."²

But let us suppose that the number of seats is not indefinitely expandable, that nature in her gifts of resources is not endlessly bounteous, that scientists and technologists are not infinitely ingenious. What then? Then one might assume that the debate as to the nature of equality would be sharpened and that in America it would take the same forms of class conflict as it has taken in Europe.

Another American historian, David Donald, has recently suggested that this precisely is what has happened. America's bounty, America's good luck has been running out according to Donald. The energy crisis is only the tip of the iceberg. According to Donald America's future is dark and is apt to be filled with social commotion, disappointed hopes and class conflict. I happen to disagree with David Donald and all those other prophets of gloom who suggest that America is moving from an era of abundance into an era of scarcity. Nonetheless, it is obvious that in some areas of our national lives there will be fewer seats and there will be less abundance than our intensified demands for equality will accept. The great danger in a democratic society of too many chiefs and no Indians, is moreover, no longer a chimera.

Let us take the example of fewer seats, in

this case seats in medical school, in law school or in status or prestige locations generally. Whatever the Supreme Court had decided or may decide, our society is deeply divided over the question of whether status may be divorced from performance; as to whether achievement may be penalized in the quest for equality. It does indeed seem to me that the mood of the 70's is one in which the older easy assumptions that liberty and equality cost nothing more than political rhetoric have gone by the board. Moreover, the relationship of equality to abundance raises another set of interesting problems. If the American attitude toward the achievement of equality has in substantial measure been determined by abundance, as Potter maintained, we now find ourselves in the curious position of being increasingly aware that abundance is dependent upon inequality.

Although David Potter was a great social scientist and one of the first among the historians to develop the implications of social-scientific evidence and theory for the study of history he never dealt with the relationship of the quest for dominance and hierarchical status systems to democratic society. In Potter's day the revolution produced by ethology and sociobiology in the social sciences was only beginning to make itself felt.³ Today it seems obvious to many social scientists that both order and abundance are dependent upon the efficient functioning of dominance systems in human society. So much is this the case that Lionel Tiger has described dominance systems as the "spinal cord of the human community."

The American economist Arthur M. Okun, chairman of the president's council of economic advisors in the administration of Lyndon B. Johnson, in a recent book, *Equality and Efficiency*,⁴ has adumbrated for us a rule that we should "promote equality up to the point where the added benefits of more equality are just matched by the added costs of greater inefficiency." One is forced by the evidence to argue that productivity is at least in substantial measure due to differential status and material rewards; that in society there is a point of diminishing returns at which every increase in equality results in a decline of social utility or productivity. It is possible to argue with great

cogency that in the Western world we have reached the point at which increasing equality can only be purchased at great cost to the commonweal.

I have called attention to these two instances only in order to point out that the debate concerning liberty and equality has reached a new level of intensity. This new level is not the consequence of theoretical and philosophical interest alone but is a reflection of the economic, political, cultural and moral problems which confront our society. It is increasingly clear that life in a society where the hand of the craftsman and the artist have lost their cunning because skill goes unrewarded, where excellence and performance are penalized and in which low status is equated with entitlement may not be life in the good society. One might however, as easily have given innumerable instances where the claims to absolute liberty have been challenged by the need for social utility or the pragmatic values of the commonwealth.

Even though we have entered on an era in which the level of the intensity of the debate over liberty and equality as absolutes has reached an unprecedented height the discussion is not a new one. No one foresaw the ultimate implications of this question more clearly or assessed the costs of liberty and equality more accurately than did Alexis de Tocqueville when he published the first part of *Democracy in America* in 1835. In that work Tocqueville raised the perennial problems associated with liberty and equality with a greater sharpness and clarity than any American observer of his own or later times. This sharpness was possible only because Tocqueville's European experience prevented his fudging and glossing over the question.

For Tocqueville the development of democracy was inevitable and ineluctable. Here is what he said in the introduction to *Democracy in America*, expressing the belief that if God is for it who can be against it? "The various occurrences of national existence have everywhere turned to the advantage of democracy; all men have aided it by their exertions, both those who have intentionally labored in its cause and those who have served it unwittingly;

those who have fought for it and even those who have declared themselves its opponents have all driven along in the same direction, have all labored to one end; some unknowingly and some despite themselves, all have been blind instruments in the hands of God.

"The gradual development of the principle of equality is, therefore a providential fact: it is universal, it is lasting, it constantly eludes all human interference, and all events as well as all men contribute to its progress."⁵

One might assume that in view of Tocqueville's assumption of God's approval of the increasing liberty and equality of mankind no problems remained to bedevil the democratic era into which mankind was entering. Quite to the contrary; it was precisely the uninterrupted and unlimited extension of liberty and equality; the absolute claims of liberty and equality in democratic society that Tocqueville saw as the fundamental threat to the civil order in the Western world.

At the very end of *Democracy in America* Tocqueville returns to those doubts and fears which he has expressed throughout the two volumes of his work. His conclusions are expressed in the strongest and most alarming language:

"I think then that the species of oppression by which democratic nations are menaced is unlike anything that ever before existed in the world; our contemporaries will find no prototype in their memories. I seek in vain for an expression that will convey the whole of the idea I have formed of it; the old words *despotism* and *tyranny* are inappropriate: the thing itself is new, and since I cannot name, I must attempt to define it.

"I seek to trace the novel features under which despotism may appear in the world. The first thing that strikes the observation is an innumerable multitude of men, all equal and alike, incessantly endeavoring to procure the petty and paltry pleasures with which they glut their lives. Each of them, living apart, is a stranger to the fate of all the rest; his children and his private friends constitute to him the whole of mankind. As for the rest of his fellow citizens, he is close to them, but he does not feel them; he exists only in himself and for

himself alone; and if his kindred still remain to him, he may be said at any rate to have lost his country.

“Above this race of men stands an immense and tutelary power, which takes upon itself alone to secure their gratifications and to watch over their fate. That power is absolute, minute, regular, provident and mild. It would be like the authority of a parent if, like that authority, its object was to prepare men for manhood; but it seeks, on the contrary, to keep them in perpetual childhood; it is well content that the people should rejoice, provided they think of nothing but rejoicing. . . .

“Thus it every day renders the exercise of the free agency of man less useful and less frequent; it circumscribes the will within a narrower range and gradually robs a man of all the uses of himself. The principle of equality has prepared men for these things, it has predisposed men to endure them and often to look on them as benefits.

“After having thus successively taken each member of the community in its powerful grasp and fashioned him at will, the supreme power then extends its arm over the whole community. It covers the surface of society with a network of small complicated rules, minute and uniform, through which the most original minds and the most energetic characters cannot penetrate, to rise above the crowd. The will of man is not shattered, but softened, bent, and guided; men are seldom forced by it to act, but they are constantly restrained from acting. Such a power does not destroy, but it prevents existence; it does not tyrannize, but it compresses, enervates, extinguishes, and stupefies a people, till each nation is reduced to nothing better than a flock of timid and industrious animals of which the government is the shepherd.

“I have always thought that servitude of the regular, quiet, and gentle kind which I have just described might be combined more easily than is commonly believed with some of the outward forms of freedom, and that it might even establish itself under the wing of the sovereignty of the people.

“Our contemporaries are constantly excited by two conflicting passions; they want to be

led, and they wish to remain free. As they cannot destroy either the one or the other of these contrary propensities, they strive to satisfy them both at once. They devise a sole, tutelary, and all powerful form of government, but elected by the people. They combine the principle of centralization and that of popular sovereignty; this gives them a respite: they console themselves for being in tutelage by the reflection that they have chosen their own guardians. Every man allows himself to be put in leading strings, because he sees that it is not a person or a class of persons, but the people at large who hold the end of his chain.”⁶

I have quoted Tocqueville at length in order to reveal the full force of his argument. He asserts boldly that the tendency in democratic societies is to pursue equality so relentlessly that meaningful liberty is abandoned and all that remains of freedom is plebiscitary democracy affirming in an all but meaningless fashion the will of the state. It is often argued that Tocqueville's great fear was for the tyranny of the majority. Yes, indeed, he did fear the tyranny of the majority but more than that he feared the power of the centralized, bureaucratic state exercising enormous power over the naked and defenseless individual citizen. He saw, moreover, that this power resulted from the unchecked quest on the part of the individual for equality of condition.

Both liberty and equality, precisely because they are such essential goods, in a sense like the very air we breathe or the water we drink, seem to us unproblematical, beyond the hazards of superfluity and without cost. How dismaying then to hear that one can have too much liberty, that equality may dissolve the structures of society and that every increment of equality implies the diminution of someone's liberty.

We seldom think long or seriously about the fact that the intrusive and destructive power of the modern authoritarian and bureaucratic state is a reflection and implementation of the desire for equality of condition on the part of the citizenry. From time to time we are permitted to rattle our bureaucratic chains and we all rejoice, as Tocqueville pointed out, that we are enslaved to the people rather than to a class or

an individual even though our status may be less free and more circumscribed than the status of our forefathers in oligarchic and class dominated societies. We have now reached a point in our life as a people in which we shall be called with ever greater frequency to assess the costs of added equalization. This is the case because, as I suggested at the outset, equality is becoming increasingly expensive in terms of the other values we shall have to sacrifice in order to obtain it.

One might assume from all I have stated thus far that the difficulties in the American polity all arise from the relentless quest for equality. Libertarians, especially those of Ayn Rand's persuasion, often seem to be arguing that if only we set equality aside and make liberty the relentless focus of our political and social activity all will be well. The fact is that liberty is no less problematical as a political absolute than is equality. In 1941, Eric Fromm, close on the experience of totalitarian Germany wrote a brilliant book: *Escape from Freedom*. In that book Fromm depicted what might be described as the psychic and social costs of freedom and offered the opinion that in the modern era these costs had been so high that many Westerners, unable to pay the costs of freedom, had retreated into authoritarianism and totalitarianism.

Historically the same ineluctable forces which Tocqueville had described as having produced equality and democracy had struck off the shackles of traditional society. When social status and hierarchy had been dissolved ordinary men were liberated, but liberated for what and at what cost? Anomie and alienation are the key phrases of the contemporary era and both of these psychological and social states are the direct consequences of this liberation.

Let us look more closely at the process of liberation and the consequences of freedom and then attempt to assess whether or not freedom is absolute or only relative. Permit me to call attention once more to a book by the American historian David Potter. When Potter died in February of 1971 the field of American history lost one of its most creative, responsible and original thinkers. In January and February

of 1963 Potter had delivered the commonwealth fund lectures at University College, London. He had chosen as his topic for the series, "The Compulsions of Voluntaristic Society: Individual Freedom and Its Limitations in American Life."⁷ The topic was not a new one to Potter. Indeed, the question was the steady preoccupation of his intellectual and personal life. It is well to remind ourselves before I quote from this book that David Potter alone of all the prominent American historians publicly endorsed Senator Barry Goldwater in his unsuccessful candidacy for the presidency of the United States in 1964.

In his commonwealth lectures Potter describes at length the long process of liberation from the forms of traditional society, the transition from custom to contract, from status to alienation. His description was not new and can hardly be called original. At the end of the nineteenth century Jacob Burckhardt in his essay, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, had recognized as the distinctively modern note the dissolution of corporate identities and the substitution and growth of individualism. Nineteenth century German sociology, particularly the work of Savigny, Tonnies, Sombart and Weber, recognized the socially transforming nature of the dissolution of community.

Potter describes the cohesiveness of medieval life with its articulated pattern of customary obligations and community integration. To be sure, men and women living in such a tightly woven community were not fully "individuated." There was a cost but there were also rewards of a very considerable nature. The Reformation, the Renaissance and particularly the evolution of capitalism disrupted these age-old patterns of traditional society. Here is the culminating passage in which Potter describes this process of social dissolution. "These developments tended to set men in impersonal and antagonistic relation to one another. They forced each man to realize that he stood apart from other men. If he was a resourceful person, this realization would probably foster his individuality by emancipating him from the network of ties with which society held him in his arbitrarily designated

role. It would provide him maximum room for psychological growth and make him, in the fullest sense, a free man. But if he was a weak person, he would probably see such changes, not as presenting him with an opportunity to be free, but rather as threatening him with unbearable insecurity. And there would be a disposition to flee from such a threat by submitting himself to some kind of comforting authority.”⁸

Potter’s argument has been made for nearly two hundred years by historians, theologians, social theorists, sociologists and economists; by men of the right as well as men of the left and all the points in between. Even allowing for the fact that this picture of the medieval past which Potter presents may be, (in fact, is), a romantic idealization we are compelled by the weight of the evidence and the force of the testimony to admit that there is a great deal of truth in this account of the way in which the collapse of community and the fall from status and hierarchy has not freed men but has isolated and alienated them.

Perhaps in no other society has the impact of these great social changes been so pervasive as in America. The dominant themes in our literature have been the quest for freedom and the fear of isolation. The American landscape; powerful, immense, diverse but unarticulated and undefined has only served to exaggerate both freedom and isolation. The fate of Europeans coming into this landscape, often from finely articulated peasant communities and finding that the freedom of this strange new land dissolved their loves and their communal ties is one of the great themes of our literature. Willa Cather speaks most eloquently in her novels on this subject.

In the American character the desire for freedom, freedoms of the most radical nature, is held in tension by the great and compelling fear of isolation. The followers of John Humphry Noyes sought to dissolve the marriage bond and abolish the nuclear family but they sought to do so within the confines of community. Nowhere else in the modern world has the desire for radical freedom been so often expressed in communitarian and sectarian terms. Even those who fled the restrictive atmosphere of Sauk Center and Spoon River for the liberty

and bright lights of Minneapolis and New York, those who fled Main Street in the twenties for the greater freedom of the Left Bank; even they thought they would find in New York or Paris a community of the pure-thinking and the like-minded, and they frequently did.

This tension between liberty and community has been much heightened in the period which has followed on World War II. Even the primary certainties and the primary communities of family and religion have threatened to give way. The value structures of previous millennia have either been abandoned or systematically questioned and our America may be on the point of becoming the world’s first antinomian culture. Rapid geographical and social mobility have threatened to dissolve the last vestiges of political community. It is ironic that the individuality produced by the dissolution of traditional society has increasingly been swallowed up in mass institutional, economic and political forms. No one doubts that there has been an enormous increase of freedom accompanying these developments but it has been a freedom purchased at the cost of anomie and alienation. David Potter quite perceptively asks: “The question is whether this urge to escape has become a willingness to surrender—whether the American has freed himself from formal authority only to enthrall himself to other, perhaps more insidious tyrannies.”⁹

It may very well be that we have come to the awareness in the United States that freedom aside from the context of community is meaningless. If we men are indeed, as Aristotle affirmed, “political animals” then liberty which is purchased at the price of the common good and at the expense of commonly perceived values can only result in anomie and isolation. If this is true the great social debate in the next decade will center on the reconciliation of liberty and equality and the definition of the social limits of freedom.

It has generally been assumed in the contemporary era that equality of condition has been more important to men than the condition of assured status. That is to say that both political and economic equality is more important than a role in community defined by status.

The fact is that individuals and societies are dependent for their orderly functioning on status and are very reluctant to abandon status either in the name of liberty or equality.

In primitive societies where levels of consumption throughout the group are roughly equal it is interesting to note that differences in status remain very great. After all, the consumption of goods is a very inadequate way to designate status, if for no other reason than that the human organism is capable of only limited consumption. While the consumption of goods is limited the desire for status is nearly infinite. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries scarcity on the one hand and superfluity because of economic concentration on the other made it possible to define status and hence political power in terms of the ability to consume. It is because of this that Thorstein Veblen could speak of "conspicuous consumption" as one of the demonstrations of status in the nineteenth century. The transition from relative scarcity to relative abundance in the twentieth century has made it increasingly difficult to define status and consequently power in terms of consumption. This accounts for the fact, I believe, that the children of the rich; the Rockefellers, the Kennedys, the Heinzes, and numerous others have attempted in our day to translate nineteenth century status based upon wealth and consumption into twentieth century status based upon politics. This particular maneuver is very tricky and difficult and there is no great possibility of success but the fact that the rich bother at all to make it indicates that equality of economic condition or equality of consumption are not the most important considerations either for individuals or society as a whole.

To fall out of status, to be isolated and alone may be perceived as a social evil far greater than either inequality of condition or loss of liberty. Libertarians and men of the right need to take this matter seriously lest in the name of liberty they create a world where no liberty can exist.

Both liberty and equality, whatever their status as ideal concepts, are social creations. They cannot be divorced from the social reality, the contextual matrix in which they are

embedded. When they are considered in abstraction, as the absolutes of closet philosophers, they lose their meaning. Edmund Burke realized this long ago when he wrote in a much quoted passage in which he discussed the natural rights philosophy of the French revolutionaries: "Government is not made in virtue of natural rights, which may and do exist in total independence of it—and exist in much greater clearness, and in a much greater degree of abstract perfection; but their abstract perfection is their practical defect. By having a right to everything they want everything. . . . But as the liberties and restrictions vary with times and circumstances, and admit of infinite modifications, they cannot be settled upon any abstract rule, and nothing is so foolish as to discuss them upon that principle."

This, it seems to me, is the great defect of John Rawls' *A Theory of Justice*, and Robert Nozick's *Anarchy, State and Utopia*. They belong to the shadowy world of abstract philosophy rather than the realm of ethics, politics and history. Their abstract perfection is, indeed, their practical defect.

Liberty and equality are what some philosophers call "grading" terms, that is terms comparing quantities or the availability of some commonly held good or commodity either available or accessible. It is at least questionable, in my mind, whether or not they can be discussed at all intelligently in abstraction from the particular instance.

Edmund Burke went over this ground frequently but nowhere more eloquently than when he wrote in his *Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs* (1791): "It is not worth our while to discuss, like sophisters, whether, in no case some evil for the sake of some benefit is to be tolerated. Nothing universal can be rationally affirmed on any moral or any political subject. Pure metaphysical abstraction does not belong to these matters. The lines of morality are not like the ideal lines of mathematics. They are broad and deep as well as long. They admit of exceptions; they demand modifications. These exceptions and modifications are not made by the process of logic, but by rules of prudence. Prudence is not only the first in rank of the

virtues political and moral, but she is the director, the regulator, the standard of them all. Metaphysics cannot live without definition; but Prudence is cautious how she defines . . .”

If I am not mistaken we Americans are now embarked on an exploration of the limits of liberty and equality. The debate will stretch at least over the next decade. No one can now

foresee the end or anticipate the passion and intensity which it will generate. Perhaps the time has come while the political passions are still gathering momentum to remember that our object in civil society is the common good and that the common good can only be achieved by the exercise of prudence rather than the pursuit of abstractions.

¹David M. Potter, *People of Plenty: Economic Abundance and the American Character* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954). ²*Ibid.*, pp. 118-121. ³For two treatments of dominance systems in human society and their implications see: George Maclay and Humphry Knipe, *The Dominant Man: The Pecking Order in Human Society* (New York: Delta Publishing Co., 1974), and Lionel Tiger and Robin Fox, *The Imperial Animal* (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1974). ⁴Arthur M. Okun,

Equality and Efficiency (London: Allen and Unwin, 1976). ⁵Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, The Henry Reeve text as revised by Francis Bowen now further corrected and edited with introduction, editorial notes and bibliographies by Phillips Bradley (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966), Vol. I, p. 6. ⁶*Ibid.*, Vol. II, pp. 318-319. ⁷David M. Potter, *Freedom and Its Limitations in American Life*, edited by Don E. Fehrenbacher (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1976). ⁸*Ibid.*, p. 25. ⁹*Ibid.*, p. 34.