

The Moral Center and America's Future

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THERE WAS A TIME not so long ago when Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* and James Bryce's *American Commonwealth* would be mentioned in the same breath as the two most insightful works on the character and operations of American democracy. No longer is this the case. Tocqueville's work, particularly given the lavish attention devoted to it in recent decades, has almost totally eclipsed Bryce's. Indeed, it is safe to say, many graduate students in the field of American Government—not to mention their professors—are not familiar with the contents of *The American Commonwealth*. What is more, I venture to say in this connection that the edition under review is likely to be the last. Even in the unlikely event of a renewed and widespread interest in the work, this Liberty Classics edition, using the updated third edition last published by Macmillan in 1941, is definitive. As a bonus, it contains extensive reviews of *The American Commonwealth* by Lord Acton and Woodrow Wilson that appeared in 1889, along with a most interesting essay by Bryce, "The Predictions of Hamilton and de Tocqueville," the outgrowth of a seminar he conducted on

Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* at Johns Hopkins University in 1883. In short, with this edition, beautifully produced and sold at cost, there simply is no need for another.

Bryce was thirty-three years old when he first visited the United States in 1870, returning in 1881 and, again, in 1883-84. All told, as Gary McDowell points out in his superb and highly informative introduction, Bryce spent only nine months in the United States during these visitations. The first edition was published in the United States in two volumes in 1888. New editions appeared in 1893 and 1910, with the changes in and additions to the third edition in 1910 being the most substantial. Revisions to the third edition were made in 1913, 1914, and 1920, just two years prior to his death. In light of the fact that Bryce served as the British ambassador to the United States from 1906-1913, there can be no question that his revised third edition sets forth his most informed and deliberative assessments and reflections.

The two volumes of *The American Commonwealth* are divided into six major parts: "The National Government"; "The State Governments"; "The Party System"; "Public Opinion"; "Illustration and Reflections"; and "Social Institutions." There are appendices to both volumes; the appendices to volume one are by far the

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more extensive, with excerpts from state constitutions, extracts from the rules of the Senate, the Articles of Confederation, and, *inter alia*, a description of the Canadian Constitution of 1867. It is a massive work consisting of 123 chapters, most ranging between four to six thousand words, and running over 1500 well-filled pages. Few, I dare say, will last the course if they set out to read it from cover to cover. In fact, I believe, individuals will profit most by "dipping" into these volumes; that is, looking over the table of contents and giving free rein to their curiosity and interests.

In terms of emphasis, Bryce devotes thirty-five chapters to the national government, covering virtually every aspect of its institutions and operations. Indeed, the scope and depth of Bryce's coverage of our national system puts virtually every modern American Government college text to shame. Next in coverage, twenty-three chapters, comes political parties, with the remaining chapters divided about equally between the remaining four parts. With respect to focus, the differences between Bryce and Tocqueville are readily apparent to even the most casual student. Tocqueville, for example, devotes only a single, short chapter to political parties and four chapters to structure and functions of the national government.

Bryce's purpose—and one of the reasons these volumes are so massive—was "To provide...a general view of the United States both as a government and as a nation." In this endeavor he wanted to be "comprehensive," not "exhaustive." "I shall endeavor," he wrote in the introductory chapter to the third edition, "to omit nothing which seems necessary to make the political life and the national character and tendencies of the Americans intelligible to Europeans." This meant, he acknowledged, that he would touch upon subjects "only distantly connected with government or politics." The

fact is that *The American Commonwealth* is consciously organized so that the focus on purely political institutions recedes as the work progresses. Bryce starts with the most obvious, national and state institutions, and then moves to less well-defined areas in an effort to place these institutions into a broader perspective. His first step beyond institutions is to examine political parties that constitute what he calls "a second body of political machinery."

Next, both "above" and "beyond" political parties, he maintains, stands "public opinion"—"the ultimate force in the conduct of affairs," "the mind and conscience of the whole nation," "the central point of the whole American polity"—a force to which political parties must bend. From this point on, however, Bryce's procedure becomes murkier and we enter the realm (parts V and VI) that embraces the "distantly connected" topics such as religion, oratory, the institutions of higher education, immigration, the status of the negro, reflections on the strengths and weaknesses of American democracies, Wall Street, and a host of other relatively discrete subjects and concerns. Bryce recognized that the further he moved from institutions the more his quest for comprehensiveness would be tempered by the limitations of his own knowledge and experience. He confessed, in this regard, that many topics, perhaps as relevant as those he does discuss, were "pass[ed] lightly over" for lack of "minute acquaintance with them as would make my observations profitable."

Bryce's approach involves more than a concern for comprehensiveness. He sought, above all, to provide his readers with the "raw materials" from which they might draw their own conclusions. This much he tells us at the outset by way of indicating why he rejected Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* as a model for his undertaking. Here he points out that Tocqueville viewed America as an "ideal

democracy, fraught with lessons for Europe, and above all for his own France." From Bryce's perspective Tocqueville was not really intent upon providing a "comprehensive description of the country and its people. Rather, he contends, Tocqueville's work is "a treatise, full of fine observation and elevated thinking, upon democracy, a treatise whose conclusions are illustrated from America, but are founded, not so much on an analysis of American phenomena, as on general views of democracy" drawn from "the circumstances of France." Continuing in this vein, Bryce writes that he strove "to avoid the temptations of the deductive method" by "simply" presenting the "facts of the case, arranging and connecting them as best" he could so that they would "speak for themselves." He will not, he insists, attempt to press "upon the reader" his "own conclusions"; he will be "pleased" if those with a "philosophic turn" can "safely build theories for themselves" on the materials provided in his work rather than "take from it theories ready made."

Actually, in his 1883 article, "The Predictions of Hamilton and de Tocqueville," we find that his case against *Democracy in America* involves more than Tocqueville's approach. Here Bryce contends that Tocqueville simply could not grasp the "essential identity of the American people" because "he did not know England." True, he concedes, Tocqueville had studied English history and did possess a knowledge of England "far beyond" that "of most cultivated foreigners." Yet, he maintains, Tocqueville knew little about the "ideas and habits" of the English middle class whose attitudes and aspirations closely resembled those of the very "Americans" Tocqueville set out to describe. Nor, Bryce continues, was Tocqueville familiar with the intricacies of "English politics and the workings of the English courts" necessary for an understanding of American institutions.

In its most comprehensive form Bryce's indictment clearly suggests that Tocqueville could not fully understand the American people and their institutions because he could not grasp, "as perhaps no one but an Englishman or an American can grasp, the truth that the American people is the English people, modified in some directions by the circumstances of its colonial life and its more popular government, but in essentials the same." Towards the end of his introductory chapter, Bryce again strongly implies that the detachment and the inquisitiveness necessary for true understanding of the American people and their institutions is possible only "with some practical knowledge of English politics and English law." This suggests—somewhat at odds with what he writes elsewhere—that a proper background, disposition, and knowledge are needed to determine what "raw data" are most important and that, in addition, something more than just the "raw data" is necessary for a genuine understanding of any regime. In sum, Bryce does not overcome certain methodological difficulties in his own approach.

Bryce's analysis and observations in the "Illustrations and Reflections" section (part V) come closest to resembling Tocqueville's, though even here he is usually careful to provide evidence or examples to back up his positions. In one chapter, "The Supposed Faults of Democracy," for example, he inquires whether a "Jealousy of Greatness" and a "desire to level down," democratic tendencies that Tocqueville had detected in the United States, are still to be found in American democracy. On this score, he perceives "a tendency," most pronounced in the West, "to dislike, possibly to resent, any outward manifestation of social superiority." On the other hand, he points out that, particularly in the East, "the wealthy" show no fear in displaying their riches. Such, he observes,

is evident to "anyone" who walks "down Fifth Avenue in New York ... or who watches in Newport...the lavish expenditures upon servants, horses, carriage, and luxuries of every kind." "No spot in Europe," he continues, "conveys an equal impression of the lust of the eyes and pride of life, of boundless wealth and a boundless desire for enjoyment, as does Ocean Drive at Newport on an afternoon in August." He finds that the "men who possess great fortunes," far from being envied, are admired; they are examples which inspire "ambitious youth in dry goods stores or traffic clerks on a railroad." And, as far as "intellectual eminence" is concerned, Bryce finds that it "excites no jealousy"; that, in fact, "it is more admired and respected" in the United States "than in Europe." In all, he finds that Tocqueville's worst fears simply have not come to pass.

The faults traditionally associated with democracy such as "tyranny of the majority," "love of novelty," the "passion for destroying old institutions," the "influence of demagogues," the propensity to be "misled," "disregard for authority," Bryce notes, are not to be found in American democracy. He even outlines in a separate chapter the "merits" and "strengths" that "flow from the rule of public opinion, from the temper, habit, and ideas of the people." He is impressed by the "stability" of the people, their deep "attachment to the form their national life has taken." This much he finds manifested in the "solidity of the system" that managed to survive the Civil War, "changed only in a few points which have not greatly affected the balance of national and state powers." That the nation emerged unscathed from the disputed Hayes/Tilden election of 1876, the kind of dispute that might well have been the undoing of other regimes, he takes as further evidence of this "solidity." He remarks on the disposition of Americans "to obey the law," though he appends a

qualification to this in the 1914 revision in remarking on the increasing lawlessness in "labor disputes." He observes that "the political ideas of the American people" are marked by a "broad simplicity" coupled with "a courageous consistency" on the part of the people "in carrying them out."

Bryce is quick to add that the Americans are unlike the French; that is, Americans, as he puts it, "have little taste either for assuming abstract propositions or for syllogistically deducing practical conclusion therefrom." Rather, he explains, their consistency is of another order, namely, that of sticking to principles such as a "boundless freedom of the press" even when abuses would seem to dictate the need for restrictions. He remarks at some length on the "unity" of the American people that allows them to meet crises and emergencies as one; a unity due in part to the "absence of class divisions and jealousies." This unity is reinforced by what he perceives to be an underlying and pervasive sense of "fraternity" characterized by a feeling of "human fellowship," mutual respect, and "a recognition of the duty of mutual help owed by man to man" that is stronger in the United States "than anywhere in the Old World."

Certain of the strengths of American democracy that Bryce deals with parallel those identified by Tocqueville. He quotes at length and approvingly from an address by Harvard president Charles W. Eliot that stressed the virtues of voluntarism and the growth of intermediary institutions through private initiative. In Eliot's words, "the establishment and support of religious institutions—churches, seminaries, and religious charities" was an unprecedented achievement. No less remarkable, in his view, was "The endowment of institutions of education, including libraries and museums," by private, voluntary efforts and contributions. As Bryce notes in this connection,

"The number of gifts for benevolent and other public purposes, the number of education, artistic, literary, and scientific foundations, is larger than even in Britain, the wealthiest and most liberal of European countries." In other words, one of the chief virtues of American democracy in Bryce's estimation was the vitality of the social sector, as distinct from the public or governmental sector, in providing institutions that would both elevate the character of the people and tend to their wants.

Bryce, of course, did not think all was sweetness and light in the United States. To comprehend what he believed to be the chief drawbacks and weaknesses of American democracy, we can work outward from the best known chapter of *The American Commonwealth*, "Why Great Men Are Not Chosen President." Here, at an early point in his discourse, Bryce sets forth a theme that recurs throughout, namely, "the proportion of first-rate ability drawn into politics is smaller in America than in most European countries." Why is this so? Leaving to one side Bryce's observations about the electibility of "eminent men" and the political considerations surrounding presidential politics, many of which are still evident today, the major reasons, on his showing, would appear to be institutional. To begin with, "the methods and habits of Congress" allow "fewer opportunities for personal distinction," so that individuals who might want to "commend" themselves to their countrymen "by eminent capacity in thought, in speech, or in administration" will not find this a suitable avenue. Moreover, he acknowledges that "a president need not be a man of brilliant intellectual gifts"; his "main duties" are routine in nature, most of them similar to those of "the chairman of a commercial company or the manager of a railway." The most important qualities for a president are "Firmness, common sense, and most of

all honesty, an honesty above all suspicion of personal interest."

Later, well into volume two, Bryce amplifies on the interrelationship between institutions and the calibre of office holders. To begin with, he remarks that qualities such as dignity, expansiveness of outlook, sense of obligation that should be engendered by election to high office are weak among office holders in America, far weaker than in Europe "where the traditions of aristocracy survive." Governors, cabinet officers, senators, and "sometimes even a president," "so far from magnifying" their offices and "making [them] honorable," often aspire to be regarded as one of the masses, as "mere creature[s] of the popular vote." In turn, the press tends to treat office holders contemptuously, assuming them "to be selfish and cynical" and, on occasion, ridiculing "disinterested virtue" even "where it exists." Partly because of this political environment, Bryce argues, the American people tend to overreach, to deal directly with intricate matters, primarily those dealing with the administration of policies, about which they have insufficient knowledge and competence.

Turning to the institutional side, Bryce feels that our constitutional separation of powers, a legislature "disjoined from the administrative offices," has contributed to this overreach. In any event, unlike the practice in parliamentary systems that mitigates the "evils" of "passion," "haste or ignorance" through the delegation of power to those of "eminent fitness" by the elected representatives, he views the American system as relying largely on representatives, many of them beholden to corrupt "local machines" and possessing only average "ability and experience." Because the masses "undervalue...skill and knowledge," because they believe "that any citizen is good enough for any political work," "the educated and wealthy," according to Bryce's reasoning, show a "comparative

indifference to political life." "Since the masses do not look for guidance," he writes, "they do not come forward to give it."

If Tocqueville looked at America through a French prism, it is equally true that Bryce's perspective is that of a friendly and sympathetic English aristocrat. Likewise, particularly in his observations on political parties and the state and national governments, he was influenced by the nascent "good government" wing of "progressivism." This is most apparent in his insistence that policy execution is largely a scientific endeavor that should be undertaken and supervised only by "experts." Nevertheless, he is objective enough to picture a nation in transition; one in which commercial development, with new and improved means of transportation and communication, linked with the goals of progressivism are leading to the centralization of power that we witness today.

In Bryce's account, though, we still see glimpses of the system established by the Philadelphia Constitution, most notably the absence of massive and "positive" national government with comprehensive plans intended to realize eco-

nomical and political "justice." We can almost picture from his account a busy, productive, private sector operating free from the restraints of centralized bureaucracies. And from his account we can also gauge just how far our values have changed over the course of the twentieth century. Bryce, who stressed the need for immigrants to assimilate to the American culture—and was pleased to observe that they did so—might be more than mildly shocked to hear about ballots being printed in foreign languages, lest we deprive certain ethnic groups of their "civil rights." Likewise, he might be a little perplexed that so many of our intellectual leaders, particularly in the regions of higher education, extol the virtues of cultural "diversity."

James Bryce's relatively optimistic view of America's future relies on the tacit premise that its people will retain the moral center, inherited largely from their English forebears. His work, then, is valuable, if only to remind us of that heritage. It is also foreboding in suggesting that without this moral center troubled times await the American commonwealth.