Regimes of Memory
Distance, Identity and the Liberty of the Citizen

NADIA URBINATI

Abstract: The theoretical interpretations of liberalism in its relations to multiculturalism occupy a central role in contemporary political theory. Yet, although arguments of rights and equal respect have provided for reasonable justifications of cultural diversity, daily papers and political columns give us an image of democratic societies that is often intolerant, exclusionary and insensitive to the argument of rights when faced with cultural and religious pluralism. The diachronic rhythm between intellectual reasonableness and widespread opinion often goes unobserved in academic literature. In this chapter I dwell on this unobserved reality and call attention to the phenomenology of subordination that the failure to respect cultural diversity can generate or exacerbate. Relaying upon Alexis de Tocqueville’s analysis of the relationship between the “three races” in America, I render the phenomenology of subordination through the relationship between memory and forgetting and treat the latter as a terrain in which cultural discrimination can occur.

In memory of Vanna Gessa Kurotschka

1. Memory Politics

In the blog www.stranieriinitalia you can read the story of Amilca Ismael, an Italian citizen from Mozambique who has been working in a retirement home for years. Her tale deserves our reflection and I will use it to draw up my line of argument: “When you leave your home country and live in another country for many years, a strange mechanism is set off inside you. It’s because to get into your new life, you need to lay aside your habits and this completely changes your way of thinking and looking at things. But your roots still remain, and this causes you a lot of confusion. [...] Another sad thing is that, despite having an Italian passport, and working like all the Italians and paying my taxes, in short giving my own small contribution to the country, I’m still given the stamp of ‘foreigner.’ It accompanies me in my everyday life and marginalizes me due to my roots and means that people don’t see me for what I really am.”

This tale suggests two lines of discourse, one existential-moral and one political-normative: a) the relationship with one’s roots as the indispensable condition to cultivate one’s memory in a present that generates new and
different memories (hence the irreparable break in the life of an emigrant between her identity before and after, and the consequent impression of never feeling at home); and b) the relationship, in the chosen country, between the widespread culture (often also widespread prejudice) and the laws, a relationship that is contradictory and complex, although this complexity comes to light above all when the widespread culture has to deal with immigrants from non-Western, non-European cultures. Amilca Ismael says that although she is an Italian citizen, in the eyes of Italians the color of her skin and her cultural traditions make her always a foreigner. Her reflection reminds us of what Alexis de Tocqueville diagnosed in his 1831 journey in America. Tocqueville observed how progress in the laws (for example the rejection of slavery in the Northern states of the Union) did not necessarily translate into the widespread culture and customs. When extended to people who do not belong to the same culture or race, Tocqueville commented, inclusion in the citizenry is loath to produce what it produces with the majority national group: equal moral consideration and dignity in addition, and as a necessary complement to equality in the eyes of the law.

The question of the integration of those who are culturally different has been at the core of theoretical-political thinking for several decades and has ripened a current of ideas called multiculturalism, a term that originally denoted cultural pluralism as a problem, so much so that liberal democratic societies had to revise theories as well as change norms in order to find a consistent room for cultural difference and rights that were not tailored on an individualistic assumption. We may regard multiculturalism as the modern frontier of what in the past was religious toleration.1

Toleration, born from Reformation and the end of Europe’s Christian Concord, was the first important testimony of the acceptance of pluralism, the first step towards a notion of civility not just as a compromise with, but also as a recognition of religious difference, and along with this, the individual freedom of religious association and conscience. The acceptance of religious pluralism was anything but painless or simple. Often thought of as the least worst scenario for pragmatic reasons, it was conceived of as the post-factum justification of an event that for some centuries, more or less at least until the 19th century, was considered not a mark of cultural richness and a positive fact, but instead a potential cause of conflict and, as a matter of fact,

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a problem to be solved. The recognition of religious and later on ideological
pluralism was the outcome of a process of liberalization of civil culture and of
democratization of the state, an artificial and political enterprise in relation to
which liberal toleration played an important theoretical and normative role.2

Today we are faced with a new kind of pluralism, cultural and ethnic,
and with the crisis of another kind of Concordia, the concord of the national
 citizenry which was built over the past two centuries. Modern citizenship has
been conceptualized as the unity of the social body on cultural and political
premises; it was the manifestation of a new form of unity at the state level,
after the collapse of European Christian and imperial unity. As historians
have documented, national unification processes have often been the vio-
lent upshot of struggles often justified by intellectual and nationalistic leaders
in the name of a presumed homogenous national culture that preceded the
political nation. Struggles for national independence began with the recogni-
tion of a new collective sovereign: the people or the nation, as an indistinct
unit of equal electors and subjects. The liberal–democratic order was built and
consolidated on this ideological premise, which became also the justificatory
argument for the vindication of political equality of men and women (chil-
dren of the same mother nation) but also of their civic duty of solidarity and
sacrifice. The fact of multiculturalism brought about by migratory processes
calls into question this national concord.3

Like religious pluralism in the 16th and the 17th centuries, the cultural
pluralism of our times is frequently seen as a break in the nation’s ethical-
cultural unity, thus a sign of crisis to be overcome, not a richness to be appre-
ciated and included. How long it will take before multiculturality will be
accepted in Europe, in the same way as religious pluralism was, is difficult
to say. It is also difficult to predict whether this outcome – supposing it will
be achieved – will be arrived at following gradual and painless processes, or
instead along a radical and tragic road. To remain within the analogy with
religious toleration, it is worth remembering that the end of the Christian

1955, vol. 2, ch. 2 and 3; M. Turchetti, “Religious Concord and Political Tolerance in Sixteenth-
a historical construction of the political thought connected to the reform see Q. Skinner, *The
de Science Religieuse*, 38 (1951), pp. 119-20. For an excellent historical analysis of the formation
of a politics of toleration in a Catholic country (France) see R. Golden (ed.), *Church, State and
Society under the Bourbon Kings of France*, Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1982.
University Press, 1995; for a brief summary also see by the same author, Id., “Liberal Theories of
Concord was accompanied by centuries of atrocious violence, demonstrating the deep-rooted idealization that the old continent has always cultivated of its unity in harmony, rather than unity in plurality and through differences.4

So Amilca Ismael’s story can be used as an indication of the beginning of the multicultural process in European civilization (or Italian in this case). It offers us an interesting cue for reading this process either from an existential-moral perspective or from a normative-political one. Political philosophers are generally interested in the latter, because their task is that of assessing the relationship between the universalism of liberal rights and pluralism, namely, between a notion of liberty that is individual and private (freedom as non-interference) and a notion of liberty that instead lays claim to the cultural dimension as the condition for a kind of freedom that presumes the fulfillment of some cultural conditions in order to be enjoyed by the individual (freedom as self-fulfillment).

Multiculturalism as a political theory has followed two routes: one liberal and one communitarian. In the first case, as Will Kymlicka, its main theorist, says, the idea is that individuals are cultural beings, “members with meaningful ways of life across the full range of human activities, including social, educational, religious, recreational, and economic life, encompassing both public and private spheres.” Kymlicka does not argue in favor of permanent group rights for voluntary immigrants but for former colonized people that have been incorporated in the constitutional state. Nevertheless, he acknowledges the value of cultural membership in the individuals’ life, a value that does not disappear even if cultures become more liberal, tolerant and pluralist. To the contrary, there are few examples of national groups that have voluntarily assimilated another culture, although their constitution contemplates universal rights and pluralism. Kymlicka argues for the legitimacy of cultural rights as rights protecting minority cultures from the risk of extinction that individualism and the legal culture of individual rights engender.7 Protecting minority cultures with special rights which derogate from the universal rights contained in the constitutions is therefore instrumental to a primary good: the individual. This notion of multiculturalism is liberal and different from the communitarian

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4 See for example the debate on European Christian identity that accompanied the drafting and approval of the European Union Treaty. In the words of German Chancellor Merkel, “we need a European identity in the form of a constitutional treaty” and this should be connected to Christianity and God, “as the religion has had such an influence on Europe’s history,” quoted in <euobserver.com>, August 29, 2006.
5 Kymlicka, Multicultural Citizenship, p. 76.
6 Ibid., p. 89.
one, according to which, instead, cultural minorities have an autonomous life from the individuals and in order to survive they can “defy” the rights of their individual members, which liberal society wants to protect.\(^8\) Liberal multiculturalism subordinates the protection of the minorities’ rights to the protection of fundamental individual rights and this is why it gives the state the task of defending the latter when the two rights collide. Instead, in the communitarian version the precedence is given to group’s rights, and even when the groups are not given special rights, the liberal State is nonetheless asked not to intervene in the case of a tension between the group’s rights and the rights of its individual members, and to give the groups the power to decide according to their tradition.\(^9\) In the first case, liberalism is applied to the individuals, in the second to the groups, thus generating, as Susan Moller Okin pointed out, a situation that is “inconsistent with the basic liberal value of individual freedom, which entails that group rights should not trump the individual rights of their members.”\(^10\) In one case, the appeal to defend the cultural context is made in the name of a collective good which is assumed to be objective and of superior value to the individual. In the other case, multiculturalism stresses the role of the socio-cultural context as a condition (one of the conditions) thanks to which individuals have the opportunity to develop their choices and enjoy their rights. In this second case, the individual is the centre of interest; nonetheless, this individual is not a simple juridical or political entity but a person or ethical-moral actor who grows and works within a specific context, which contributes in making her liberty both possible and meaningful.\(^11\)

Multiculturalism came about as a contextualist revision of liberal universalism. It makes the claim of fulfilling, not curtailing individual freedom. It argues that outside the cultural context, therefore memory – this is the philosophical premise of multiculturalism –, neither the foundation nor the enjoyment of the individual’s freedom is conceivable. Starting with the work of Alasdair MacIntyre, Michael Sandel, Michael Walzer, Charles Taylor and finally the publication of *Political Liberalism* by John Rawls (1983), the issue of the relationship between the politics of identity and difference and the universalism of democratic citizenship (thus the topic of the forms and limits of cultural pluralism and toleration) has been one of the most-debated issues in

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contemporary political theory. And yet, precisely when theoretical reflection seems to have metabolized multiculturalism and reasoned convincingly to combine differences and right universalism — for example by accepting the idea of social rights —, the European civil society seems instead to have only just discovered with displeasure the existence of the problem of difference. So that which for political theorists and the academic world is a grounded and reasonable norm and fact, for public opinion and the culture of the majority is instead a threat that asks for emergency policies, a violation of an acquired good, that of national identity.

In our academic conferences we discuss about multiculturalism using arguments that appeal to reason; what we see instead in the daily papers and political columns is the photograph of a public opinion that is often intolerant, exclusionary and insensitive to the argument of rights when faced with cultural diversity and religious pluralism. The diachronic rhythm between intellectual reasonableness and widespread opinion often goes unobserved in academic literature. In this chapter I would like to dwell on this unobserved reality.

Thus, instead of discussing the theoretical interpretations of liberalism in its relation to multiculturalism, a task well attained by many contemporary political theorists, I would like to try to shift the attention to the phenomenology of subordination that the failure to respect cultural diversity can generate or exacerbate; finally, I would like to use this phenomenology to highlight the relationship between memory and democracy; in fine, to treat democracy as a regime of memory. The relationship of immigrants with their own culture (memory) and with the culture of the country they live in is the key to this phenomenology, as the short story of Amilca Ismael shows us. When the culture and political power of the majority decree how immigrants must or must not live their everyday lives, the way they can or cannot pray or dress or eat, they are decreeing what they can keep or remember of their original identity, which roots they can bring with them and which they have to leave behind.

The issue of acknowledging cultural difference is not simply a question of norms and procedures. It also outlines a moral and cultural attitude towards those who have different memories and traditions and sets out to decide how those who belong to a foreign culture can form their personality and interact with the hosting society. For immigrants to integrate a compromise is needed between “their” and “our” culture, a compromise that the individual rights contained in democratic constitutions make possible and fair, because they guarantee each person’s freedom to retain the salient features of their culture, the freedom to exercise their religion and not to be discriminated

against due to their language, culture or class. Therefore, I propose thinking of multicultural politics of respect for cultural differences as a politics that tries to regulate the relationship between a person's present life condition and memory, the distance separating her from the culture of the society in which she has chosen to reside and from the culture she has distanced herself from but which she ideally feels she belongs to. The rights that permit all the people to subject to a set of laws to express themselves freely while respecting others' freedom of expression are the “tools” with which a democratic society implements memory politics.

2. Political Regimes and Temporality

In a central chapter of Democracy in America, Alexis de Tocqueville deals with the problem of the relationship between the “races” in the United States, a problem, he writes, which “goes beyond” democracy and pertains to the meeting between European civilization and other civilizations – in particular, the encounter with primitivism (or “barbarians” in the classic sense), an event that was fatal for indigenous or non-Europeans. The indigenous race and the blacks were American but not in a regime of democracy. Tocqueville studied them in their relations with the white Europeans to offer a full “portrait” of democracy while pointing out very sharply that this form of society rested on history and memory, it did not arise from nothing nor could live in any condition. Besides, in the introduction, Tocqueville went back to the crisis of feudalism to explain the origins of equality and the long gestation of democracy. But once started, democracy was to dominate the present and the future: the democratic individual asserted her sovereignty over the present generation and traditions, ruling herself as the arbiter of memory and in this way she created her future in a restless work. Democracy is thus a regime of indefinite perfectibility, to use (as Tocqueville did) an idea by the Marquis de Condorcet. Yet this projection into the future can take on the individualistic and democratic character Tocqueville detected owing to an interpretative relationship with the past that makes memory the work of the present, since the present is the temporal dimension in which the choices of the individual (her freedom) are formulated and shaped.\footnote{I thank Carlo Invernizzi Accetti and Giulia Oskian for inviting me to link the discourse on memory to the future not simple the present, because the future is the temporal dimension within which the democratic individual lives in her task to satisfy her perennial passion for equality.} 

In this contribution I propose to let interact these several dimensions conceptualized by Tocqueville, that is, the portrait of democracy from the inside
(from its citizens’ viewpoint) and the portrait of it from the outside (from the viewpoint of the excluded), through reference to the rule of memory and temporality. If the races tyrannized by the European race give a hint of the limits of democratic inclusion (and in this sense how far democracy can expand), the identity of the democratic individual gives the sense of the internal limits of this social system, limits that are proved by the potential despotic degeneration of the democratic rule. In both cases, the role of memory is crucial. Memory is also crucial, as well as, its opposite, forgetting, the extreme condition which Tocqueville invites us to think of to better understand the abnormal forms that social relations can generate both in the case of the tyrannical subordination of the excluded and the enslaved (the non-democratic “races”), and in the case of the degeneration of democratic individuals into new despots and/or slaves. The relationship between with memory and forgetting which Tocqueville perspicaciously analyzes and which I would like to propose here, materializes as the place where dignity and individual freedom are discriminated against, the boundary against which democracy never ceases to pit itself.

The relationship between politics and memory is the outline that Tocqueville uses to focus on the difference between America and Europe, between decent and perverse democracy (by applying the classical typologies of forms of government, American society could be seen as exemplifying Aristotle’s politeia while the French society looks like its degeneration into a tyrannical democracy). But it is also the outline that allows him to interpret the state of the slaves and the state of the natives, which, as we shall see, are signs of a perversion of civilization, a premonition of the potential for despotism that democracy contains, a clue of how democratic citizens can become due to their own inclination (the last chapter of Democracy in America is anticipated in the chapter on races).

Tocqueville takes up Plato’s intuition according to which democracy is like a “corrective against time,” like the land of the Lotus Eaters where Ulysses and his companions disembarked before arriving in the country of the Cyclops (namely, democracy as a regime of memory that precedes tyranny).14 If aristocracy (which is entrenched in the past, rests on consolidated traditions, and therefore cultural and historic inequalities) is the safest barrier against the democratic passion of equality, the hegemony of the present which dominates democratic citizenship is primed to crumble society into its atomic microcompounds and generate individualism, a restless movement (that recalls Thomas Hobbes’ description of the state of nature) that makes democratic society always in action while anchored on a permanent and unitary force, that of equality. But the loss of authority exposes the individual minds to the

14 Plato, The Republic, 560 c.
sovereignty of the “here” and “now,” thus generating, as Plato had suggested, heedless tyrants who judge by imitative impulse and live off public talk. What authority can intelligence or virtue have once equality has imposed itself over distinction and competence?

Yet if it were possible to pinpoint a fair middle between a society that lives off the past and a society that lives off the present alone, that is where good democracy could be found. This is the methodological outline followed by Tocqueville in his analysis of America, “the only country in which it has been possible to witness the natural and tranquil growth of society, and where the influence exercised on the future condition of states by their origin is clearly distinguishable.”\(^\text{15}\)

In democracies loyalty to the origin implies a condition of equilibrium between past and present, memory and forgetting, not a condition of oblivion or wiping out of memory, and not a condition of calcification of the past either. In short, too long a past is no longer part of memory because it is already a habit or second nature: wrongs seem thus inevitable, differences natural and individuals adapt to living in particular niches and relinquishing being their own sovereign. On the contrary, too recent a past – living off the present alone – is so alive in the imagination that totally dominates the will: so every pretence to remember and live according to models of the past takes the shape of a slight on the citizens’ equality, every difference in consideration appears to be unjustified inequality. To be the condition for good democracy, a politics of the present must not be confused with presentism which is, to use Jon Elster’s words, the direct power of the will, a faculty that is only active in the present and does not accept mediation or indirectness.\(^\text{16}\) So we see that the factor that really distinguishes between good and bad democracy is the importance of the past and its persistence in the memory.

This is the outline of Tocqueville’s portrait of the subordinate “races” (those on the outside) and extreme individualism (those on the inside); an outline that suggests we read the two portraits as mirror images of each other.

### 3. Abnormal Identities

Let us begin with the portrait of democracy from the perspective of those on the outside: in Tocqueville’s case, the black slaves and the natives (or “Indians”}

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as he calls them. The white man has subjugated these two races, uprooting them from their history and their lands. At the basis of this uprooting is not so much leaving their own country (slaves) or moving from one part of their country to another (indigenes), but instead to be put in the condition of not being able to keep their memories, their culture, their language, their religion. The blacks were captured like wild animals, sold and tamed to serve their democratic owners. The taming was carried out systematically, according to a practice that the ancients knew well: transforming people into things. In the *Politics* Aristotle writes that slaves are working tools, wholly dependent on the decisions of those who use them; their intelligence is specialized and narrowly instrumental, not based on memory. They are made similar to things because they are rendered mere executors – work, not activity, is what they do, Hannah Arendt would say.

Having to repeat the same tasks day in, day out, their life has no specification; it is a repetition of sameness that does not create a narrative. The slaves reproduce themselves and reproduce the world of the owners they belong to from the moment they are in the mother’s womb, Tocqueville writes. Among slaves and servants there are no mothers or fathers, just producers of new slaves; there are no families but new slave breeders and sexual encounters for reproductive reasons or to satisfy natural sexual impulse. A life without history because a life of the species, with no individual specification; a life that runs equal to itself always without temporal dimensions and in this sense a life absorbed wholly in the present.

The condition of the black slaves casts light on de-individualization as strategy for despotic dominion, a strategy that Tocqueville would adapt to democracy itself, in spite of or precisely because of its individualistic character. De-individualization is uprooting, a means of robbing the individual of her capacity to personalize her living environment. “Oppression has, at one stroke, deprived the descendants of the Africans of almost all the privileges of humanity. The negro of the United States has lost even the remembrance of his country; the language which his forefathers spoke is never heard around him; he abjured their religion and forgot their customs when he ceased to belong to Africa, without acquiring any claim to European privileges. But he remains half-way between the two communities, isolated between two races; sold by one, repulsed by the other; finding not a spot in the universe to call by the name of country, except the faint image of a home which the shelter of his master’s roof affords.”

Without memories of a land, a language, that is to say, without *mores*, slaves are totally subordinate. They are deprived of all weapons for resistance against

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17 Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, vol. 1, p. 332.
their masters since they have no memories other than those produced within their condition of slavery, memories which lack the value of personal autonomy and responsibility, memories from which slaves cannot draw principles and critical reasons for resistance. White democracy has created a social group that does not incorporate a moral and ethical culture capable of forming democratic individuality or an equilibrium of forgetting and remembrance that Tocqueville regarded as a sign of good democracy. Hence, he commented, even when slavery will no longer exist, the blacks will never be integrated on an equal basis and the fracture will never be repaired. The only conceivable solution will be violence (the civil war would break out thirty years after his journey).

At the opposite extreme, but in a mirror-like image identical to the black slaves, were the American natives. “Savage nations are only controlled by opinion and custom. When the North American Indians had lost the sentiment of attachment to their country; when their families were dispersed, their traditions obscured, and the chain of their recollections broken; when all their habits were changed, and their wants increased beyond measure, European tyranny rendered them more disorderly and less civilized than they were before. [...] The lot of the Negro is placed on the extreme limit of servitude, while that of the Indian lies on the uttermost verge of liberty; and slavery does not produce more fatal effects upon the first than independence upon the second.”

The mirror-like image of the totally dependent and the totally independent brings us directly to Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s second discourse, the text which Tocqueville dipped into in the months when he was writing the first volume of Democracy in America. In this text by Rousseau, the relationship between equality and freedom passes through memory and the relationship between the subject and her environment. His second discourse begins with individuals

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18 Ibid., pp. 333-4.
19 Rousseau and Plato played a crucial role in Tocqueville’s conceptualization of democracy as a regime of memory. La Cordaire defined Tocqueville the “Jean-Jacques Rousseau of Christianity” (Discours de M. La Cordaire [Sur la Morale], in Alexis de Tocqueville, Œuvres Complètes, 18 vols., ed. J.-P. Mayer, Paris: Gallimard, 1951-90, vol.16, pp. 329 e 225). It is interesting to notice that in the very months (in 1835) he was writing the Introduction to the first volume of Democracy in America, he read the Mémoire sur le paupérisme at the Academy. Both in this Mémoire and in the Introduction one detects the same analysis of the origin of inequality, which reveal a direct elaboration from the second Discours of Rousseau (Tocqueville, Mémoire sur le paupérisme, 1835, in Id., Œuvres Complètes, vol. 16, pp. 117-21). Moreover, in the same months he was completing the second volume of Democracy in America, and above all the chapter “plus important” on the influence of equality on mores and the laws, Tocqueville was re-reading Plato and Rousseau as one can see from his letters to Gustave de Beaumont between April and November 1838 (Œuvres Complètes, vol. 8, t. 1, pp. 291-2, 317, 325; his notes on Plato’s dialogues are collected under the title, Analyse de Platon, Ibid., vol. 16, pp. 555-7).
in the state of nature who are equal because do not know who they are. They
do not know who they are because they are independent from each other;
therefore, without a language and without common memories, without the
capacity to recognize one another, each one is identical to the other like undif-
ferentiated bodies and indifferent to each other. Rousseau’s second discourse
ends with socialized individuals who have become equal again, but because
they are servants, because they are nothing. The language these slave beings
use codifies their condition and memories that are only of dependency; they
have no capacity to recognize themselves as autonomous and responsible indi-
viduals, each being identical to the other in the general nothingness of their
social condition.20 While the savage may have been all power and lacking of
civil norms (much like the American Indians), those who become wild again
are never like primitive but are instead like the slaves, because they utterly lack
power due to the total subjection to institutions and norms made by others
against them. In both cases the present dominates them unquestioned, without
allowing the individuals to achieve the capacity for self-reflection.

The Indians described by Tocqueville were free from the “indistinct, inco-
herent notions of right and wrong,” pure in their uncorrupted ignorance and
rudeness, but they had not yet developed a “spirit of analysis” that democracy
needed and therefore could not distinguish between equality of condition and
difference of vocations; they were too free to let themselves go to sociability
and too coarse to understand that it was possible to relinquish force without
ceasing to be free. The encounter with a higher and refined civilization would
have quickly destroyed them because they were like Rousseau’s not-yet-civi-
lized individual: “the Indians, although they are ignorant and poor, are equal
and free,” totally ignorant of class difference and its “unfortunate effect.”21

Between the two extremes of the totally independent and the totally
dependent there was the only class of individuals that could retain a balance
between memory and forgetting, past and present. The Anglo-American pil-
grims, the founders of the “good” democracy, had a moderate individualism
because their community life (municipal towns) was a school of civicness in
which equality was not experienced or practiced to the detriment of individ-
uality (moral responsibility) and memory was no longer, like for their kin in
Europe, a seedbed of resentment for violence they had been subjected to, the
mark of hierarchies and inequalities. In Tocqueville’s discourse, the Anglo-

20 J.-J. Rousseau, Discours sur l’origine et les fondements de l’inégalité parmi les hommes, Amsterdam:
M. M. Rey, 1755; [A Discourse upon the Origin and Foundation of the Inequality among Mankind,
New York: Cosimo Inc., 2008]. The parallel between non-yet-civilized men (different but not
unequal) and the Indians is also mentioned in Tocqueville’s Mémoire sur le paupérisme cited in the
previous footnote.
21 Tocqueville, Democracy in America, vol. 1, pp. 22-3 and 27.
American who had settled in the new continent had the Indians’ qualities of independence without having their faults because they were rich in memory and civility without being oppressed by class divisions; and above all they had no memory of servitude or dependency, but only memories of resistance to the imposition of civil and religious hierarchies. If a comparison could be made between the Europeans and the American Indians, this could be done with the post-revolution French, for no other reason than here the image was upturned: equality in pure and healthy coarseness in the one case and equality of the corrupted coarseness of people who had become barbarians again in the other. In post-Revolution Europe, but actually France, “the natural bond that unites the opinions of man to his tastes, and his actions to his principles, was now broken” everything was dissolved and broken, Tocqueville writes. In his *Voyage au lac Onéida* he tells of the exemplary life of a Frenchman who had left civilization to live in the forest in the hope of re-achieving freedom; however, as a result of his solitary life of unbounded freedom he was no longer a primitive and radiant individual like the natives, but a *revenu sauvage* with the memories of a society dense in hierarchies. The same image returns in the second *Discours* where Rousseau describes the civilized individual as “the extreme point which closes the circle and meets that from which we set out,” savage again, but without the original “purity” of pre-civilized savages.

However that may be, native savages were ruined by their violent encounter with the Europeans; and the African slaves were uprooted from their world to be made dependent on a civilization that was totally alien to them. These two depictions suggest very eloquently to us the phenomenology of freedom and subordination as is caused by dominating memory, or the relation to one’s past. On the other hand, they also suggest that we should consider memory as the medium thanks to which we can either keep a balance between equality and freedom or instead break it with serious damage to both. Uprooting (like in the case of the black slaves) and the loss of memory (like in the case of the Indians) bring about the collapse of freedom that occurs by making individuals indistinct and identical – namely, by making them equal because they are nothing; it causes the fall of freedom into its opposite because upsets the relationship between the individual and the social environment; it tampers with the immaterial world of customs and feelings, or, to use another complex expression, the community of memory.

22 Ibid., p. 28–9.
23 Ibid., p. 11. The most evocative analogy between the Europeans and the savages (both exiled from society but the first also from nature) is provided in *Voyage au lac Onéida*, in Tocqueville, Œuvres complètes, vol. 5, p. 341; [Excursion to Lake Oneida in Id., Democracy in America and Two Essays on America, trans. G. Bevan, London: Penguin Classics, 2003]. Rousseau, *Discours sur l’origine et les fondements de l’inégalité parmi les hommes*, p. 53.
4. Roots That We Take with Us

Anthony Appiah wrote that roots are what we can take with us: these are roots that free us from nature and link us to customs and unwritten norms, defining freedom and therefore opening the way to responsibility. Memory does not lead to an acritical and factual identity with one’s own history; it leads instead to a conscious appropriation, interpretation, restructuring and finally also upheaval of our history. Individuals’ humanity can be violated in two ways: when individuals are fixed to their condition and trapped by a past that they have not chosen (when they pay or submit to the logic of the fate of their birth) or when they are fixed to a present that forces them to forget their roots (when they are forced by unjust laws or the culture of majority to submit to the logic of the majority culture, a force that they do not have the means to resist.)

The analogy of the individual and the tree was a *topos* in the age of Romanticism that Tocqueville belonged to: Wilhelm von Humboldt or John Stuart Mill conceived individuality, as opposed to individualism, as the realization of humanity in a single person; as the outcome of a relationship of creative reflection between the mind and the environment. They conceived the idea of the “sovereignty of the individual” and of moral autonomy in a context of interdependence, outside which there would be either idiotic dependence (the slave’s condition in Tocqueville’s description) or anomic independence (the native’s condition in Tocqueville’s description).

We need to specify what we mean by context. And Mill can help us here because he clearly highlighted the cognitive and explanatory importance of the reference to the context by distinguishing it from its justification. According to Mill, knowledge of history and one’s past was an important corrective device against the anti-historic ésprit critique of the 18th century. Contrary to that narrow view of the Enlightenment, no one acts in isolation and entirely on her own, we read in *Considerations on Representative Government*; this is true for the individuals and the society, because institutions too need time and memory to settle because men “did not wake on a summer morning and find them sprung up.” The problem is that when attention to the context goes beyond understanding social phenomena and is put forward as a philosophy of history, then

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appealing to memory and the context can become a way of justifying the given and this may promote either a disillusioned realism or a demoralizing fatalism. When this happens, the individual becomes a transcription of the community and the group she belongs to, as if there were no mediation between them by personal reflection, namely memory, or the personal reconstruction of meaning that the individual attempts of herself and her environment.

Memory is a work of the present. It marks the freedom of the person as it is reflected in her memories and told in the form of her story. As many scholars of phenomenal consciousness have highlighted, in Giambattista Vico’s new science and in Immanuel Kant’s third critique we find the coordinates for a conception of the subject that holds together singular and perspective feeling and practical knowledge and doing. The genetic perspective is what best allows us to understand the mind’s ability to rise above its environment by understanding it. Of course we are children of our time and place. But we become aware of who we are through a critical examination and transformation of the environment we have been cast into or we find ourselves in by chance. Through the will to understand the individual can make and personalize the world into which they have happened – in this sense, the individual was according to the Romantic a project and a fulfillment at the same time.

Authors like Mill or Tocqueville upheld that individuals can only develop their potentials and become morally autonomous and responsible if they are allowed to spin a critical interaction with their environment in order to be memory-makers, so that they are not subject either to the past (the power of chance and fate) or to the present (the power of the will of the majority or the force of the stronger). The condition of the black slaves and the condition of the American natives were like the photograph of an upturned condition that stripped them of the possibility of conquering their autonomy in a relationship of conscious re-appropriation of their history and of critical interaction with their present.

In order to get a better understanding of the function of balance between mind and environment, present and past, let us look at the third critical figure proposed by Tocqueville, that is, the democratic individual as a condition of individualism or separateness from the others, that is, of idiotic isolation to use an expression by Antonio Gramsci.27

Tocqueville had attributed the subversion of democracy towards the past to an egalitarian passion, the habit of the individuals to believe that their destiny depended on themselves alone, that the whole world – as Walt Whitman had said – began and ended with their existence, as if all generations were contemporary and the future in the hands of the actor. In the end, however, the individual who decreed herself absolute sovereign of her time would discover that she had forgotten not only her forebears but also her peers.

In order to educate the individuals to self-reliance and live their present like “new” beings willing to experiment, it was necessary they were educated to forget the past. “No facts are to me sacred;” we can read in Ralph Waldo Emerson’s essay “Circles,” “none are profane; I simply experiment, an endless seeker, with no Past at my back.” It was not a relativist profession of faith, but a radical change of the evaluative perspective: in the aristocratic order there was an external centripetal force that linked individuals to “something situated outside of themselves,” making them revolve around the most powerful body, the body of class, of the constituted order; in a democratic order it is an internal centripetal force that commands everyone to revolve around its own center, loosening bonds and dissolving ties not legitimated by individual choice or affections. Democracy’s virtue consists in that no one is made succumb to external powers; it is thus liberating for the individual if and to the extent which it educates the latter to be a dissenter, to resist the uniformity force that works in society and would like to make each into like “parlor soldiers,” Emerson wrote.

But for Tocqueville forgetting was the first step towards anomie and conformism, because with the act of declaring herself the master of her own choice, thus the ruler of the future, the individual took upon herself a responsibility under whose weight she could easily succumb because without the support of a community (bonds with the past) she could not find the force to resist the irresistible power of the majority. Swept up alongside the many who got lost and the few who emerged in a social game with no safety net, there was the multitude of those who were too afraid to attempt the extremes and let themselves be transported by the current of society, following the wake of the general opinion, choosing to adapt, todocilely mimic the majority’s models and styles of life. In Tocqueville’s philosophy, the individual came into the world defenseless and wholly needy: from the group she could receive the

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strength that she searched for in vain within herself. Hence, he was convinced that belonging to a community (the weight of history) strengthened individuals rather than humiliate them. It was not necessary for the community to replicate pre-modern forms of communal life. On the contrary, while classes and castes may have been the functional groupings of old aristocratic societies, voluntary and egalitarian associations would be the functional groupings in democratic society. But without these associations, individuals ended up as nothing again, because without the habit of sharing ideas or projects with the others, of building memories together, they would be lost in the great ocean of society, trapped by the present of their immediate and everyday needs, their private world, with no even some public voice.

So the denunciation of the condition of the races that had been deprived of memory and roots met with the denunciation of the negative condition of democratic individualism – all of which were forms of atomism, deracination and domination in the hands of myths-makers or the power of the opinion of the majority. If we shift from Tocqueville’s American past to our present, to the story of the Italian woman with Mozambican origins with whom I began this chapter, we can conclude that although it is presented as a necessary defense policy for preserving the unitary body of the nation, the condition of uprooting that the majority culture and politics want to practice, and actually practice, with immigrants is to all effects a politics of subjection. But more than that, it is the sign of a worrying depiction of the sovereign national body as a unity comprising homogeneous and indistinct individuals, beings who have equal tastes and opinions, and an identical view of the national culture; a unity that is also the outcome of memory erasure, of the immersion of each in an omnivorous and despotic present of economic wellbeing. A political culture that practices disrespect of differences coming from outside is heading fatally towards being disrespectful of its own internal differences. This is why liberal multiculturalism is more than a strategy of respect for the immigrants’ cultures, and more than a contextualized application of liberal rights. It is a cultural project whose aim is to make democratic citizens to acknowledge pluralism as a value, not a second best or a necessity, because a combination of individual freedom and pluralism of traditions and memories, a furtherance of the path that began with religious toleration at the outset of modernity.

(Translated from Italian by Karen Whittle)

Nadia Urbinati
New York, Columbia University
nu15@columbia.edu