Popular Sovereignty and Functional Political Institutions: Macintyre & Tocqueville on The Viability of Citizenship in Modern Liberal Democracies

Soberanía popular e instituciones políticas funcionales: MacIntyre y Tocqueville sobre la viabilidad de la ciudadanía en las democracias modernas liberales

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Abstract: Tocqueville’s exploration of the art of freedom has significant parallels with MacIntyre’s conception of practical rationality. Exploring these parallels and differences provides valuable insights for deliberations on the common good within contemporary political contexts. At first glance, MacIntyre clearly appears skeptical about the ability of liberal political institutions to uphold genuine common good. However, a closer examination of his ideas suggests a more nuanced perspective. Within the delicate fabric of local communities, rational deliberation may be possible –even when sustained by liberal political institutions– thus offering a pathway to the realization of genuine common good. This nuanced perspective to some extent aligns with Tocqueville’s insights, creating important parallels in their political implications. Both authors, for example, contend that tempering individualism is essential for the emergence of a robust notion of freedom and, consequently, a salutary understanding of the common good. Notably, for both Tocqueville and MacIntyre, local communities play a crucial role in contributing to that effect. In this light, fostering the conditions for local communities to thrive is more beneficial in today’s political landscape than advocating for a radical replacement of liberal political frameworks.

Keywords: Tocqueville, MacIntyre, Liberalism, Freedom, Citizenship
MacIntyre’s critique of modernity is importantly embodied by his conviction regarding the inherent incapacity of liberal political institutions to facilitate the pursuit of genuine human good. He contends that the rationalist efforts of the Enlightenment resulted in an all-encompassing individualism that has rendered man largely incapable of engaging in morally worthy endeavors, and thus, of achieving true human flourishing. According to MacIntyre, any political order based on those principles—such is apparently the case of modern liberal nation states—is bound to fail as they lack the ability to genuinely deliberate on the common good.

While MacIntyre unequivocally asserts that modern nation-states cannot be considered authentic political communities and do little to encourage their formation, there are certain nuances in his stance when he discusses viable alternatives to the existing order. In his work “Dependent Rational Animals”, for instance, MacIntyre acknowledges the important “public goods” provided by nation-states and their ability to fulfill “crucial needs.” He recognizes that the modern state is not going away. Furthermore, reluctantly, he is willing to admit some of its salutary potential or, at the very least, its ineluctable nature. Under certain conditions, MacIntyre suggests that genuine political communities could emerge within the state, allowing for shared deliberative activity that may lead to the pursuit of “just generosity” as their guiding telos. However, achieving this outcome is extremely difficult and far from certain. Nevertheless, it is this modest room for hope that MacIntyre leaves, which I will explore further in this brief paper. I will try to show that the consequences that can be drawn from this perspective are fundamentally not at odds with what I interpret as Tocqueville’s peculiar liberalism. The main ar-
argument that I will expound on, therefore, is that both authors ultimately have, for analogous reasons, a similar understanding of the potential and importance of local communities in modern political realms. While Tocqueville’s position regarding this question has been explored extensively\(^1\), Macintyre’s scant, if ambiguous, treatment of the matter—as Mark Murphy, for instance, has correctly pointed out (Murphy, 2003: 170)\(^2\) requires further unraveling in order for its significance to be grasped more fully. Looking at the affinities that both authors have regarding this question especially aims to begin to expand our understanding of important political implications that may be derived from Macintyre’s thought.

In short, in examining MacIntyre’s ideas that relate to political reality, I aim to outline a parallel between his radical critique of modernity—a critique which some of its most essential terms, at least for the scope of this paper, I have already mentioned—and Tocqueville’s ultimate cautious endorsement of it. Tocqueville, although primarily constructing his account on sociological and historical grounds as opposed to philosophical ones, arrives at very similar conclusions about the potential consequences of individualism and its impact on the concept of the common good and modern political institutions. However, Tocqueville will be more optimistic as he will explicitly suggest that modern democratic man, within modern political institutions, could potentially successfully work towards a genuine common good, thus making real freedom possible. What he defines as the “art of being free” can be learned, if certain delicate yet effective conditions are upheld to temper the individualistic and materialistic tendencies inherent in democratic conditions. And as I will also try to convey, Macintyre’s presentation of the salutary potential of intermediate associations within the modern state, is not far from what Tocqueville conceived as the main vehicle for the learning of freedom.

At a point in which the liberal political world order is being faced with challenges of different natures, exploring ideas of what could ameliorate its defects, may be of greater use than hoping for a comprehensive—desirable as it may be—replacement of it. To this end, the French author seems to provide

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\(^1\) See, for example, Maletz (2001), Villa (2006) or Craiutu (2008).

\(^2\) Also, Hibbs (2004: 363, 365 and 374, for instance) can be said to make a generally related claim to the effect that, given MacIntyre’s almost exclusive emphasis on the common good as the vantage point of his political analysis—as opposed to regime analysis—tends to favor, at best, a reductionist study of modern political orders. MacIntyre’s proposal, being fundamentally a virtue ethics one, has an important “lacuna concerning politics” as it has a difficult time providing a basis for deriving a “viable political theory” from his treatment of virtue.
a thorough, and presumably hopeful, insight. An insight which fundamental consequences Macintyre seems to share, even if perhaps reluctantly.

I will now turn to further delve into what constitutes the essence of Macintyre’s critique of political modernity focusing on his impugnation of individualism, and will then turn to outlining some of the essential features of what I construe is Tocqueville’s peculiar liberal project. In doing so, the importance that both authors ascribe to local communities will hopefully become apparent. I will end by briefly referencing how moderate optimism towards the role of intermediate associations as freedom enabling loci, may contribute more to reforming failed liberal dynamics, than longing for a comprehensive replacement of liberal institutions.

I. MACINTYRE’S INDIVIDUALISM

In *After Virtue*, Macintyre provides a compelling account of how the Enlightenment unraveled a set of conditions that derived in a state of utter moral confusion, thus making coherent discourse about the common good all but impossible. One of the most consequential effects of this, if not the most consequential of them all, was the emergence of what he defines as an emotivist self. The modern self, he will say, is a self that “finds no limits set to that on which it may pass judgement” (MacIntyre, 1981: 31-32), and that all of his judgements have to be derived from a “purely universal and abstract point of view that is totally detached from all social particularity.” (MacIntyre, 1981: 31-32). The latter is the case, he will explain, because “The self is now thought of as lacking any necessary social identity, because the kind of social identity that it once enjoyed is no longer available; the self is now thought of as criterionless, because the kind of telos in terms of which it once judged and acted is no longer to be credible” (MacIntyre, 1981: 33). The pervasive prevalence of flawed moral doctrines, which MacIntyre so thoroughly expounds in his best-known work, was what facilitated the appearance of this telos-less modern self. This type of self is one that thinks of him or herself as fundamentally self-sufficient. In other words, modern individuals think of themselves as detached from their social relationships: therefore, any notion of collectivity or civil society, can only be understood as the sum of individual identities. In turn, any notion of a common good can only be predicated as the addition of individual goods. MacIntyre defines this as the “minimalist conception” of the common good (MacIntyre, 1998b: 242). For MacIntyre, the latter is a terrible mistake with far-reaching detrimental consequences.
In his interesting text on Marx’s theses on Feuerbach, MacIntyre will explain why any individualist notion of the individual, so to speak, and any subsequent reasoning from the standpoint of civil society, is fundamentally flawed. To this effect he will elucidate that “to regard individuals as distinct and apart from their social relationships is a mistake of theory, but not only a theoretical mistake. It is a mistake embodied in institutionalized social life.” He will continue saying that “Civil society is characterized not only by its abstract individualism, but by a particular way of envisaging the relationship between all theory, including social theory, and practice.” (MacIntyre, 1998a: 229). Marx, MacIntyre says, was able to hint at the problematic character of civil society understood in the terms that were just explained. However, he thinks that he did not pursue the argument to its final consequences, which, in his opinion, would have led him to endorse an Aristotelian understanding of internal goods and objective activity. About the consequential concept of objective activity Macintyre will explain that it “is activity in which the end or aim of the activity is such that by making that end their own, individuals are able to achieve something of universal worth embodied in some particular form of practice through cooperation with other such individuals” (MacIntyre, 1998a: 225). Objective activity is then, what allows for a truly shared notion of what is beneficial to the individuals that make up a genuine political community. In other words, it is the *telos* without which no authentic concept of common good may thrive.

The modern state is fundamentally flawed, then, because of its inherent incapacity to create the conditions in which that objective activity is feasible, in turn due to the atomized conception of the individual intrinsic to it. Therefore, “the modern state cannot provide a political framework informed by the just generosity necessary to achieve the common goods of *networks of giving and receiving*” (MacIntyre, 1999: 133). So, what may enable what he describes as just generosity? What can foster and procure “networks of giving and receiving”? In *Politics, Philosophy and the Common Good*, for example, he will helpfully explain how is it that, through what he refers to as practical rationality, such networks can thrive, thus permitting genuine conceptions of the common good to be worked out and institutionalized. Practical rationality—which we will see closely resembles Tocqueville’s “art of being free” – he says,

is a property of individuals-in-their-social-relationships rather than of individuals-as-such. To be practically rational I must learn what my good is in different types of situations and I can only achieve that through inter-
action with others in which I learn from those others and they from me… Such practical learning is a kind of learning that takes place in and through activity, and in and through reflection upon that activity, in the course of both communal and individual deliberation (MacIntyre, 1998b: 243).

MacIntyre believes that no coherent and effective notion of the common good can be devised because large-scale market economies are entwined with modern statehood. In these conditions, only minimalist notions of the common good can be upheld, and henceforth, that there are no institutional settings in which the latter may be credibly questioned. Unless there is

a type of institutional arena in which plain persons –neither engaged in academic pursuits nor professionals of political life– are able to engage together in systematic reasoned debate, designed to arrive at a rationally well-founded common mind on how to answer questions about the relationship of politics to the claims of rival and alternative ways of life, each with its own conception of the virtues and of the common good” (MacIntyre, 1998b: 239).

Yet, in Dependent Rational Animals he will acknowledge that

There are numerous crucial needs of local communities that can only be met by making use of state resources and invoking the intervention of state agencies. But it is the quality of the politics of local communities that will be crucial in defining those needs adequately and in seeing to it that they are met. (MacIntyre, 1999: 142).

Only local communities may create the conditions in which a fruitful debate can take place. Fundamentally, local communities enable face-to-face encounters and there are no competing interests. Economic considerations are subordinated to social and moral considerations, and thus, networks of giving and receiving can actually thrive. In that same work he will say that recent political philosophy has rarely explored

Questions about the common goods of associations and relationships that are intermediate between on the one hand the nation-state and on the other the individual and the nuclear family. Yet it is with just this intermediate area that we shall need to be concerned, since those whose relationships embody both a recognition of the independence of practical reasoners and an acknowledgement of the facts of human dependence, and for whom therefore the virtue of just generosity is a key virtue, presup-
pose in their activities, explicitly, or more usually implicitly, the sharing of a common good that is constitutive of a type of association that can be realized neither in the forms of the modern state nor in those of the contemporary family (MacIntyre, 1999: 130).

But it seems to me that precisely Tocqueville is a good example of someone that having a liberal mindset—even of a new kind, as he described it (Tocqueville, 1861: 402)—understood the importance of intermediate associations with great clarity. We will see that for him, while sharing important aspects of MacIntyre’s diagnosis of modernity, intermediate associations within a functioning state, and aided by less tangible cultural influences, may permit the flourishing of a genuinely free society that works towards achieving its common good.

II. TOCQUEVILLE’S INDIVIDUALISM

For Tocqueville, modernity propelled the inevitable advent of equality of conditions, and with it arrived a very fragile but real prospect for freedom. Two necessary corollaries of democratic conditions, the Frenchman believed, would be individualism and materialism. Genuine freedom, and therefore, a real common good, could be worked out if both, individualism and materialism, would be properly reigned in and channelled by learning “the art of being free”. So, unlike for MacIntyre, while individualism did pose a challenge to genuine freedom, without it being a good in and of itself—as other nineteenth century liberals believed—it was inevitable and potentially salutary. Furthermore, he will affirm in an article, for example, that some form of individualism does present the possibility of a truer idea of freedom: one that indeed presupposes freely understanding one’s individual dignity to be best preserved when associating with one’s fellow citizens (Tocqueville, 1836, as cited in Manent, 1996)3.

In his opus magnum, Democracy in America, Tocqueville4 presents a very thorough explanation of how the social changes that equalization of conditions gives rise to, make individualism and materialism natural by-products of it. And there he will also expound on the elements that, for example, aided

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3 The article is called “The social and political state of France before and after 1789”. According to Manent (1996:19), Tocqueville published it in 1836, after Democracy in America.
4 From this point on, all references to Tocqueville’s (2000) Democracy in America, will appear as DA.
early Americans in managing both of them, thus amounting to their mastery of freedom’s very fine art. Primarily, their management was enabled by a set of social conditions that preceded the foundation of their country. But an equally consequential artful work was required by those who designed the formal political institutions that could potentially safeguard and effectively advance the flourishing of freedom, and henceforth, a genuine procurement of the common good. One of the most important elements that contributed to properly orienting democratic tendencies, is one of Tocqueville’s best-known concepts: “self-interest well understood”.

At one point of his Democracy he will clearly say, for instance, that “not being very lofty” and “very accommodating to the weaknesses of men”, enlightened self-interest became “the clear and sure” remedy against individualism that Americans, and by extent all democratic peoples, could recourse to restrain excessive individualism and, to some extent, also materialism (DA: 502). Broadly put, self-interest well understood would amount to realizing that one’s personal interest is best served when getting involved with one’s fellow citizens. That is why, therefore, he will also unequivocally say that Americans defeated individualism through “the art of association” (DA: 486). It may appear then that Tocqueville’s “self-interest well understood” is another way of construing what MacIntyre describes as the minimalist approach to the common good. Furthermore, the mere notion of “self-interest” may come across as fundamentally at odds with MacIntyre’s critique of individualism and civil society that I previously outlined. But if that was the case, then what I stated the object of this paper to be, would be defeated. Tocqueville’s apparent unequivocal endorsement of “self-interest well understood” has led some of his readers to construe his approach as an articulation of the minimalist notion of the common good. But his qualifications about it are more important than what it prima facie appears.

I can only introduce some of those qualifications and outline their relevance towards portraying a more accurate notion of Tocqueville’s peculiar liberalism, which in turn entails learning the art of freedom. And to fathom Tocqueville’s reservations towards self-interest well understood, one has to at least have a sense of what he argues are the democratic origins of individualism and materialism. With a clearer picture of the latter in mind, a better sense can be made, first, of the insufficiency of self-interest well understood as a

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5 For instance, Zuckert (1981), or Mc lendon (2006). For a detailed account about this, see Martinez (2023).
check to individualism; second, of the nature of other influences that would have to necessarily work in tandem with it; and third, of his resolute commendation of early American political institutions.

One has to begin by saying that, for Tocqueville, selfishness is one of the most harmful vices to human flourishing. Individualism, while being related to selfishness, is not exactly the same: it can lead to isolation and selfishness, but when properly managed, it can also lead to freedom. Individualism, Tocqueville believes, is of democratic origin. And while

Selfishness is born of a blind instinct; individualism proceeds from an erroneous judgement rather than a depraved sentiment. It has its source in defects of the mind as much as in the vices of the heart... Selfishness withers the seed of all the virtues; individualism at first dries up only the source of public virtues; but in the long term it attacks and destroys all the others and will finally be absorbed in selfishness (DA: 482-483).

The erroneous judgement from which individualism emerges is to believe that one can be self-sufficient. Something that is very likely to happen in democratic times because “the bond of human affections is extended and loosened” (DA: 483). Furthermore, he will continue saying that

individualism is a reflective and peaceable sentiment that disposes each citizen to isolate himself from the mass of those like him and to withdraw to one side with his family and his friends, so that after having thus created a little society for his own use, he willingly abandons society at large to itself.

In aristocratic times, individualism, and selfishness more broadly, were remedied by a natural possibility of transcendence – understood to an important extent simply as a going-out-of-the-self capacity– woven into the workings of those societies. People thought of their identity to be fully connected to their social relations and their place in society (just as we saw, MacIntyre thought individuals should understand their identities: that is as “individuals-in-their-social-relationships”). Everyone comprehended their personal good to be that of fulfilling the responsibilities and duties derived from their locus in society. People were “almost always bound in a tight manner to something that [was] placed outside of them, and they [were] often disposed to forget themselves” (DA: 483). That attitude, usually entailed “sacrificing personal enjoyments for beings who no longer exist or who do not yet exist” (DA: 483) and that would lead to the “reciprocal action of men upon one another” (DA:
491). All of the latter was enabled, Tocqueville believes, by what he describes as the “fabric of time”. Whereas in aristocracies he will say that there was “chain that went from peasant up to the king; democracy breaks the chain and sets each link apart” (DA: 483).

By enlightening their self-interest, however, early Americans crafted an important but insufficient cornerstone for freedom to be able to flourish. And because a genuine common good in equality of conditions could only be achieved in freedom, they were on the right path to achieve that as well. Tocqueville hoped, and purportedly also saw instances in which, what arose from calculation, developed into generous care for one another (DA: 488). Concretely, he said the latter would take place, for instance, in political associations like the New England townships, in which a setting of fruitful rational and practical deliberation would, according to him, certainly take place. In such a context, other intermediate associations with multiple goals would develop, but all of them aligned to a shared political telos intelligible through the participation of the citizens in the self-government of the community. In MacInteryean terms, in the townships of New England, objective activity was actually possible.

Tocqueville believed that “Sentiments and ideas renew themselves, the heart is enlarged, and the human mind is developed only by the reciprocal action of men upon one another” (DA: 491), and self-interest –as well understood as it possibly could be– was not enough to foment that. In America, religion played a role arguably irreplaceable in cementing the possibility of transcendence that self-interest well understood insufficiently attended to. The puritan religion of the New England settlers, for instance, fomented the notion that “there are a great number of sacrifices that can find their recompense only in the other world” (DA: 504). And in so doing it was able to check the tendency towards materialism, and buttressed the vital persuasion about man’s very modest and dependent condition. Having a shared transcendent narrative fomented the free association of citizens willing to work towards a genuine common good. In their case, therefore, what could arise from calculation, “by dint of working for the good of one’s fellow citizen” a real “habit and taste for serving them would develop.” (DA: 488). All of this amounted to having, Tocqueville believes, a truly sovereign people duly safeguarded by the federal-republican constitution that derived therefrom.

Having mores – “habits of the heart and of the mind”– and political institutions friendly to genuine freedom and the common good would be possible in modern nation states, if a clear idea of a shared telos could be devised.
Tocqueville, as well as MacIntyre, understood that hardly could there ever be a bigger “if” in what has to do with the prospects of genuine human flourishing. But for Tocqueville, the influence that an adequate religion—I explain elsewhere why he ultimately rendered Protestantism as an insufficiently strong civil religion, for example—as well as the interested procuring of social involvement in public matters, had the real potential of properly orienting the inevitable advance of equality of conditions towards crafting adequate political instances in which the common good can actually be possible. In a letter to his more sceptical friend Arthur de Gobineau, Tocqueville voices his conviction that freedom, as difficult as it may be, is possible. And in modern conditions, unless societies are able to grasp its meaning—something that can only be done through the practice of it—the common good has very little prospects of it being procured. To that effect, he expressed:

I believe that they can be turned, as all men can, to some account, by an appeal to their natural integrity and to their good sense. I want to treat them as men, in effect. I may be wrong. But I follow the consequences of my principles and, moreover, I find a profound pleasure in following them. You profoundly despise the human species, at least ours; you believe it not only fallen but also incapable of ever raising itself up. Its very constitution condemns it to servitude. It is very natural that in order at least to maintain a little order in this rabble, the government of the saber and even of the baton seems to you to have some very good aspects. I nonetheless do not believe that, in what concerns you, you are tempted to offer your back in order to render a personal homage to your principles. For myself, feeling that I have neither the right nor the taste to entertain such opinions on my race and on my country, I think that it is not necessary to despair of them. In my eyes, human societies like individuals become something only to the practice of liberty. That liberty is more difficult to establish and to maintain in democratic societies like ours than in certain aristocratic societies that preceded us, I have always said. But that it is impossible I will never be so rash as to think.

For both authors, therefore, it can be said that finding ways to remedy the excessive individualism that arises from the modern state of moral confusion is utterly essential to establishing genuine political communities in which

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6 Tocqueville to Gobineau, January 24, 1857 (Tocqueville, 1985: 347).
the common good is actually possible. Only a shared narrative can enable a working telos that in turn provides individuals with a solid buttress for their identities. For Tocqueville, the involvement of early Americans in their public local affairs, allowed them to become a truly sovereign people capable of self-government. In MacIntyrean terms, it made them capable of objective activity. Preserving that would depend on being able to recognize the importance of intermediate instances –and other preceding institutions that made such instances viable like family and religion– and crafting a political design in which administrative centralization could be decidedly kept at bay. For Americans, a federal republican design is what best suited their social state. In other places, legislative moderation and prudence may dictate other arrangements that could be more in accordance with their own culture. But learning to be free through the practical involvement that intermediate associations allowed for, would have to be at the core of any modern way of life in which freedom and the common good are the ultimate goals. I have tried to show that MacIntyre does not seem to disagree with this peculiar version of liberalism, as construed by Tocqueville.

III. CITIZENSHIP AND FREEDOM IN TODAY’S LIBERAL DEMOCRACIES

In recent years, the voices that in different ways echo MacIntyre’s claim that liberalism is fundamentally incapable of sustaining political orders in which the common good is plausible have gained momentum. Not only have these critiques become more relevant in academia. Politicians across the spectrum have increasingly endorsed a sceptic discourse towards the idea that functional political institutions –that is institutions that effectively enable genuine common good– can be built upon liberal principles. Contemporary academic critiques such as that articulated by Adrian Vermeule (2020) or Patrick Deneen (2019, 2023), for example, call for post-liberal alternatives that essentially strive for a total makeover, on the one hand, of what is understood as freedom and the common good, and on the other, of the institutional setting that would enable them. Though presumably MacIntyre would largely agree with their basis for radically impugning liberalism, I doubt that he would unabashedly share some of the prescriptions they put forward to achieve their desired post-liberal order. For once, for example, Vermeule’s common good

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7 The examples range from Brazil’s Bolsonaro to Viktor Orban in Hungary. See for instance Plattner (2019).
constitutionalism, does not seem to ascribe too much importance to the ‘fruitful debate’ that MacIntyre thinks could, and should, actually take place in local communities. Rather, the viability of such type of constitutionalism, Vermeule thinks, depends on the willingness and resoluteness of an adequate leader – “just authority” – to impose it. Evidently, to these voices, the “end of history”, as Francis Fukuyama (1989) famously stated, is not as definite as he purportedly made it to be. While MacIntyre certainly refutes the desirability of liberalism, he also acknowledges that, in some ways, it is ineluctable and potentially, though extremely limitedly, workable. Some of the implications of the latter claim, I have argued, make MacIntyre’s arguments reminiscent of Tocqueville’s moderate endorsement of liberalism.

I have attempted to show thus far, therefore, that Macintyre does seem to leave some room for a rebirth of practical rationality, and with it of a common good, even within contemporary liberal boundaries, such as that of the nation state. The latter could potentially occur if the importance of local communities is grasped, and henceforth, dutifully promoted. Furthermore, another point of evidence to sustain this can be found, I believe, towards the very end of After Virtue. Immediately prior to his famous saying that we are waiting for another St. Benedict, he infers that local communities may be viable in the current imperfect liberal context, just as they similarly resisted the demise of the Roman Empire, hence allowing civilization to survive through the dark ages:

What matters at this stage is the construction of local forms of community within which civility and the intellectual and moral life can be sustained through the new dark ages which are already upon us. And if the tradition of the virtues was able to survive the horrors of the last dark ages, we are not entirely without grounds for hope. This time however the barbarians are not waiting beyond the frontiers; they have already been governing us for quite some time. And it is our lack of consciousness of this that constitutes part of our predicament. We are waiting not for a Godot, but for another –doubtless very different– St. Benedict (MacIntyre, 1981: 305).

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Contrary to legislative moderation, for Vermeule (2020), legislative audacity, so to speak, is what is required. Something similar is what underlies Deneen’s (2023) possibility of a regime change –his version of a revival of the mixed regime– also seems to entail a largely top-down solution.
Whether one thinks liberalism is irredeemable or the means to flourishing societies, something that is clear, is that polarization has significantly increased in most western liberal democracies, largely as a result of the loosening of social bonds, and derived thereof, of genuinely common objectives. What is evident, in other words, is that individuals—and groups of individuals—increasingly see themselves as incapable of interacting with other individuals that do not share elements of their perceived identity. As was previously explained, both MacIntyre and Tocqueville can be said to share the essential conviction that to regard individuals as detached from social relationships is a mistake. A mistake that, undeniably—and for some classical liberals, also unapologetically—liberalism tends to engender. But if, as also understood by both, there are instances like local communities that not only can survive in liberal institutional frameworks such as nation states, but can actually foment an adequate functioning of the latter, then perhaps further attention ought to be paid to what facilitates their development. Therefore, more than seeking a solution from above that comprehensively replaces liberal institutions, a more realistic—and no small or futile—endeavor would be to strive for settings that make liberal pluralism functional: that is settings where debate and discussion is possible and actually fruitful⁹. It was also previously explained, early American townships, Tocqueville believes, were prime examples of the latter. In today’s world, deepening our knowledge of constitutional and legal implications of how freedom of association could be further strengthened, and thus, administrative centralization diminished, could effectively work towards a genuine understanding of freedom and the common good. This is because, the art of association is, fundamentally, the art of freedom, and both authors seem to essentially agree on that: just as for Tocqueville “the heart is enlarged, and the human mind is developed only by the reciprocal action of men upon one another” (DA: 491), for MacIntyre “to be practically rational [we] must learn what [our] good is in different types of situations and [we] can only achieve that through interaction with others in which [we] learn from those others and they from [us] (MacIntyre, 1998: 243).

In short, in modern democratic conditions, freedom and the common good could certainly be viable, but achieving them would require the very dif-

⁹ Jacob Levy (2017) has a thorough and in my view very insightful work on the natural tension between liberalism and different notions of the good. He explores the importance and implications of freedom of association, and its relevance within pluralistic societies in turn immersed in liberal institutional frameworks.
difficult preservation of very fragile institutions. It would almost require –I think Tocqueville would agree– living by Utopian standards. But as MacIntyre has said, “living by Utopian standards is not utopian” (MacIntyre, 1999:145) and working towards the common good, requires that we have those standards in mind when looking at the design of our political institutions.
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