Freedom and Friendship

James Poulos

In *Democracy in America*, at the close of his comments on the American idea of rights, Alexis de Tocqueville makes an enduring and pregnant remark. “It cannot be repeated too often,” he cautions: “[N]othing is more fertile in marvels than the art of being free, but nothing is harder than freedom’s apprenticeship.”

For Tocqueville, this is high praise indeed. In a little-noticed but crucial footnote, he reveals the master idea behind his vision of how certain virtues lead to liberty. In a democratic age, he says, the characteristic human folly is to seek unity in uniformity. This concept of ours “is almost always sterile, but that of God is immensely fruitful. Men think they prove their greatness by simplifying the means. God’s object is simple but His means infinitely various.”

One need not be religious to understand why Tocqueville uses this distinction to draw a powerful insight about politics in a democratic age. Fulfilling Tocqueville’s prophecy, the spirit of government today is to foster equality by making Americans even more interchangeable than we have become on our own. In thrall to the science of public policy, the social statisticians of the administrative state project a safer and healthier society by plotting us into groups on a trend line. We are individually insignificant, but collectively manipulable. Big data, it turns out, is us.

Apparent exceptions to this rule of uniformity actually cement it in place. The politics of patronage, for instance, uses exclusive access to single out favorites for special privileges. Inclusive access plays a similar role in the politics of diversity. Both of these techniques serve to mask the growing gulf between those who rule and those who, regardless of their privilege, are ruled. The administrators of officialdom may dote

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first on this group, now on that one, but in consequence we all grow ever more equal in our lack of liberty.

Meanwhile, Americans are struggling to distinguish themselves in the marketplace. For many, market forces now impose a shocking and unnerving degree of uniformity. Globalization and the internet, to name two interrelated culprits, lay bare the psychological toll of industriousness and competition on a radically (and universally) level playing field. While a few ambitious and talented souls break out of the pack with astonishing speed and results, the rest face what Tocqueville described as invisible horizontal barriers—far more galling and isolating than the vertical constraints on advancement that buttressed the hierarchies of aristocratic civilization.

Rather than habituating us in the art of being free, the state and the market alike are more apt to mis-educate us. Our sense of personal insignificance, deepened by the uniformity that modern states and markets both impose, leads us to view freedom through a dark lens of urgency and fear. Tocqueville clearly sees these “two tendencies in equality,” the first of which “turns each man’s attention to new thoughts,” while the second “would induce him freely to give up thinking at all.” Overtly, we snatch at the experiences of autonomy and license that still seem open to immediate access. Covertly, we grow convinced that the scope of our choice-making has been dramatically restricted. And it is unthinkable that we could gain the time, the resources, and the peace of mind we’d need to craft long-term plans for achieving independence from that narrow field of imagination.

And so we choose not to. This inability to declare independence puts political freedom beyond our grasp. Today, so many of us have surrendered to these limits that liberty itself is in peril.

Yet a clear answer about how to rescue liberty has not emerged. Tocqueville argued that only the habitual exercise of political rights can make them incarnate in the world. Without the daily discipline of face-to-face association, the idea of liberty will become a dangerous abstraction—a vessel for envious resentment and prideful revenge, as it was in revolutionary France.

Wise as Tocqueville’s counsel may be, his own bracing account of democratic psychology reveals its sharp limitations. It becomes clear through his analysis that the very progress of equality conspires with the human condition to destroy our capacity for learned, skilled freedom.
Though we sense this loss, we console ourselves with the promise of society’s progress toward unity. Of course, full equality never arrives; not only do we feel frustrated by this disillusioning realization, we feel personally slighted and betrayed.

If our psychological energy is turned outward, we have a recipe for harrowing political violence—what Hegel called the “slaughter-bench” of history. But if our fruitless struggles for identity, recognition, and distinction have already left us exhausted, that energy is apt to turn inward. “Each man is forever thrown back on himself alone,” warns Tocqueville, “and there is danger that he may be shut up in the solitude of his own heart.” Rather than arousing a taste for revolution, our feelings of diminishment cripple us with depression—a veritable “disgust with life.”

In this wounded state, how can liberty capture the imagination?

**THE CONSERVATIVE BIND**

This problem involves not just a crisis of citizenship, to be treated with more town halls and get-out-the-vote campaigns, but a crisis of experience. Our habits, sentiments, and mores lead many of us to feel so entitled and autonomous that we repress our lingering wonder about what it would mean to be more truly free. As a result, many of us cannot even ask ourselves what kind of relationship with government we would prefer if we were to achieve that kind of freedom. Knowledge cannot cure a defect of experience. So the problem is not just a problem of ignorance, either.

For political conservatives, this situation is especially poignant. Little is more important to conserve than the habits of life that make freedom intelligible and its art practicable. Yet few things slip away more easily. Even the mere idea of political liberty is fading.

All too fruitlessly, conservatives labor to reverse the trend by urging a return to faith, community, home, or virtue. Above all, however, they urge a return to education—to the authority of life’s formal and informal teachers, without whom character cannot be formed through imitation and remembrance, the foundations of experience.

These cultural projects have had their successes, but their many failures are too pointed to ignore. Perhaps they are not even all that surprising. Long ago, conservatives largely concluded that attempts to understand liberty through immediate personal experience would result in misguided conceptions of freedom. They believed that freedom’s
apprenticeship was hard because it required sustained moral disciplines like humility and patience. In the conservative mind, a good education was the fastest legitimate path to re-rooting us in liberty’s pre-political foundations. At key moments, education could come close to using immediate personal experience to offer access to a more profound understanding of liberty, but education kept a prudent distance from the immediate and personal.

Unfortunately, conservatives have paid dearly to learn their own lessons about the wisdom of this approach. Ordinary people in our democratic age are generally unmoved by conservatives’ calls—whether sophisticated or strident—to become apprentices in the long, difficult study of liberty. Conservatives, in their hearts and minds, know there is no spiritual shortcut to a well-ordered love of equal liberty. But Americans covet nothing so much as shortcuts of the soul. As Tocqueville intimated, they tend to find all propositions implausible if they cannot swiftly and personally experience them for themselves. At the same time, they are constantly driven by urgency and fear to imagine that anything beyond their almost immediate grasp will slip forever beyond their reach. It is no different with freedom—political or otherwise.

So conservatives are caught in a bind, left ruefully unconvinced that the art of liberty can be inculcated without a long, prior habituation to the ways of true personal freedom. Increasingly, conservatives agree that the personal autonomy accessed through the state or the market alone is misleadingly incomplete and all too easily experienced. Conservatives believe that, rather than something due to you as a citizen or a consumer, true personal freedom arises out of you through how you behave with other people. It is not who you are in yourself, but who you are in relation to others. Human freedom may be the warrant of nature and nature’s God, but so is human errancy; our relationships, not our identities, are the site where freedom may appear—though it is by no means certain to do so. If a person’s only relation is an unmediated and uniform relation to the state or the market (a relation in which he is treated more as a party than a person), a seemingly autonomous individual actually experiences an alternately terrifying and stultifying loss of both his identity and his freedom.

Are we, then, indeed reaching a tipping point, wherein too many Americans have become so accustomed to faceless, uniform relationships
that they have become culturally unteachable? Conservatives’ nightmare scenario seems to be coming true.

Paradoxically, conservatives have failed for many years to understand how accepting this seemingly untenable situation actually creates the graceful possibility of a surprising redemption. When conservatives offer answers to the problem of liberty’s decline, they often rely on pedantry and lectures. Restlessly struggling for both work and for leisure, Americans unsurprisingly tune out. But something remarkable happens as conservatives ruminate sadly on this turn of events. They transform from historians, seeking solace in the recovery of old wisdom, into anthropologists, witnessing firsthand, in the present moment, enduring truths about the human condition. As the negative case for liberty makes itself felt through their personal experiences, conservatives come to the brink of understanding how to restore liberty’s place in the popular imagination.

If the direct experience of the absence of liberty is so powerfully authoritative for conservatives, it’s possible that Americans actually can be made to experience the full measure of freedom accurately and authoritatively. And if the turn from history to anthropology is responsible for this insight, it seems reasonable to consider that the study of how we humans tick can reveal the ultimate insight for politically minded conservatives: how freedom well understood can be opened up to experience in an immediate, personal way.

THE MISSING ART OF FREEDOM

Fortuitously, political anthropology is making something of a comeback in conservative circles. In one recent instance, in the Fall 2014 issue of National Affairs, Peter Lawler and Richard Reinsch advanced two important and representative claims. First, they argued, personhood is decisive in American politics because we can’t understand how to be free without understanding how we humans work. Second, and even more important, no anthropology is adequate without an ultimately supernatural account of being human.

Despite the force of this logic, the second claim is now a stumbling block in the popular imagination. It scandalizes so many Americans, in fact, that conservatives struggle to make public gains for ordered liberty even when they carefully invoke personal experiences, like religious conversion, instead of inculcated wisdom. Even then, conservatives
typically do not settle for one-time experiences with the divine. For many Americans, it is simply a non-starter to say they cannot understand freedom without going to church—and routinely, no less!

Indeed, even when conservatives treat religion as just one of several keys to freedom’s pre-political foundations, skepticism—or outright hostility—quickly gathers. For many, the experience of life with family members, neighbors, and other unchosen relationships is too fraught with inequalities of power and status to make sense as a training ground for grasping liberty. Conservatives are not wrong, of course, to suggest that duty plays an innate role in the human condition. But today, a public conversation about freedom that begins with duty is all but guaranteed to fall on deaf ears. Family, church, and neighborhood, no matter how vital they may be, are not effective touchstones for recapturing Americans’ enthusiasm for liberty.

Slipping into anthropological mode, conservatives usually diagnose this as a cultural problem. But they are especially bothered by the knowledge that it is a political problem. It is not just a matter of toughing it out in coarser, baser times. Rather than merely dealing with everyday idiocy, which might not actually destroy liberty, conservatives will have to deal with an idiocracy, which, they sense, certainly shall. For the voluntary associations keeping Americans free will continue to collapse if Americans can’t relate to each other on an issue as fundamental as why and how we humans are free.

This is more than a problem of mismatched ideologies. In practice, too many Americans don’t know how to be free at the most basic level—the level necessary to meet one another face to face, to bear the confidence and courage necessary for the kind of relationships that are the precondition for shared self-governance.

Conservatives thought that education and a return to the ethic of duty could usher the country toward more courage and confidence in one another. But it hasn’t happened, even though Americans themselves are well aware that they are underachieving in strength of character. The signs of it are everywhere—from the droves of faces buried in smartphones and the hate-fueled diatribes filling the internet, to more subtle developments like the culture’s abandonment of formal dating and its elevation of socializing awkwardly in packs.

Although their trajectories seem clear, these trends are fluid and are apt to be boiled down to simplistic talking points. Conservatives are
certainly not alone in wanting to make sense of our turbulent, shadowy times. But instead of returning again and again to tout the relationships of duty and obligation that make Americans so uncomfortable, friends of liberty could focus in on the particular kind of relationship that is missing in every scene of personal unfreedom.

Like the images in a broken mirror, this relationship appears to be everywhere. But, upon closer inspection, we discover that we are seeing only its distorted and phony forms. Its recovery, however, is still within our immediate grasp. We are overlooking an anthropological truth that is hiding in plain sight. The time has come to recognize that the art of being free depends on the art of being friends.

**THE LIMITS OF NATIONAL GREATNESS**

Conservatives are familiar with the proposition that those who don’t know how to be friends are unable to rule and be ruled in turn. The idea reaches back at least to Aristotle. Lincoln extended it clearly into the modern era. Unfortunately, today our concept of friendship has become distorted. It is postmodern in all the wrong ways, both too thick and too thin. Under the pressure of emotionalism on the one hand and rationalism on the other, Americans oscillate between BFFs (“best friends forever”) and attenuated, delete-able “friends” and “followers” on Facebook, Twitter, and other social media.

Friendship is not an inherently political act, as Hannah Arendt and others have sometimes made it seem. Nevertheless, making sense of the pre-political character of friendship is essential to recovering a new birth of freedom in America. Life may often be a misfortune without dutiful relationships rooted in traditional institutions. But to reopen our access to the life of liberty, we need to rediscover how to be friendly, in the mature and fully human sense of the word.

Of course, right at the outset of this journey, conservatives must return to the problem of education. Even among ordinary Americans willing to admit our friendship problem and search for a solution, many cannot be sold on looking backward in time to the wisdom of scholars and thinkers past—whether Tocqueville, Locke, and Smith, or even more obscure figures like Brownson, Bastiat, and Buchanan. Too many of us just don’t have the time, the sophistication, or the trust to make big decisions about how to live based on the lengthy discourses of yore.
That’s not just because we Americans have been educated poorly or disconnected from our own history and culture, although that’s often true. More to the point, as Emerson affirms, it’s because democratization in Tocqueville’s sense makes direct personal experience the “hands and feet to every enterprise” — the overwhelmingly relevant authority for just about all of us. (Indeed, the longing for the “proof” of personal experience is so potent that it has fueled dramatic growth in evangelical and charismatic church attendance. Yet so many Americans seek experiential proof of empowering freedom outside of church that conservatives have been unable to rely on pew and altar to leverage policy toward ordered liberty.)

To be fair, conservatives have experimented in recent years with one approach to recovering liberty through immediate personal experience — the so-called politics of “national greatness.” Here, hope has hinged on yet another Tocquevillean insight. When “skepticism and democracy exist together,” says Tocqueville, statesmen “should always strive to set a distant aim as the object of human efforts; that is their most important business.” In the last decade, liberty-minded political strategists sought to capture the imagination of the American people with the immediacy of a “freedom agenda.” Under George W. Bush, Republicans strained to recapture the taste for liberty with a global war against tyranny abroad and a domestic push for an “ownership society.”

To say the least, patriotic projects like these run the risk of ending in disaster if they are not sustained by the bonds of friendship. From the bitter harvest in Iraq and Afghanistan to the failure of Social Security reform to the overextension of Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, Americans learned through direct experience precisely the opposite of what Bush-era conservatives wanted to teach them.

Remarkably, but unsurprisingly, liberals and moderates have suffered from the same challenges. Barack Obama’s own presidency betrayed Americans yet again under the banner of national greatness, rhetorically repackaged as “winning the future” through “economic patriotism.” Whether ostensibly “conservative” or “progressive,” the politics of national greatness falls prey to a powerful temptation. Instead of ameliorating our urgency and fear by orienting our souls toward distant objectives, today’s leaders play on those very emotions in an effort to win quick, bold victories through the power of the state and the market alike. All the while, the art of friendship atrophies apace, leaving
Americans all the more primed for depression when hubristic policy-making fails.

The lesson for liberty is clear. When it comes to creating the conditions of friendship, both patriotism and political moralism have failed, not just at the national level but within states and localities. No moralistic crusade or nationalistic nostrum, no matter which party has deployed it or what ideology it has relied on, has succeeded in uniting the American people in recent decades. Though those approaches may draw a narrow segment of Americans out of themselves and into public relationships, they do not move and inspire the whole. Instead of fostering mutual courage and confidence, they breed an isolated sense of enmity and insecurity.

**THE LIMITS OF CIVIL RELIGION**

How, then, can freedom be unveiled in friendship in a manner that maintains its pre-political character and clearly conduces to liberty? Among conservatives, there is little disagreement that human freedom and political liberty are constitutive parts of our anthropology. Curiously, that consensus has not refocused attention around the anthropology of friendship. Following Tocqueville, we know that friendship rooted in faith loses its authority when it purports to supervene on political questions. Yet we also know that the art of friendship calls upon resources that seem to transcend our baser nature, in a process that cannot be summoned forth by government. The attempt to use the state to make friends of us all places a supernatural burden on politics, which cannot hope to overcome the pride and envy within everyone.

To proceed, we must resist the temptation to fall back on so-called “civil religion.” For some political philosophers on the right, America is best understood as having been founded on a cosmological proposition—one that the Constitution reflects only incompletely at best. For these conservatives, working in the tradition of Harry Jaffa, equality is a conservative principle. In announcing that principle at the level of anthropological theory, the Declaration of Independence made the American Founding a landmark event in human history. These conservatives see the Declaration as America’s true founding. More than a statement of sovereignty, it is the charter and warrant for an unprecedented project—to create a realm of citizenship in equal freedom, the hallmark of our full humanity. Only through the crises of the
Constitutional Convention and the Civil War was this revolutionary leap toward realizing our inborn destiny truly completed.

Conservatives who advance this narrative do acknowledge that much work remains to be done, thanks to the setbacks of the Progressive Era, the New Deal, the Great Society, and more recent schemes. For their critics, right and left, that concession is not enough. Their cosmological view of the Founding, critics say, attempts to resolve the problem of the relationship between religion and politics by collapsing the two into a single worldview without the sophistication of either realm, properly understood. Regime worship, we are reminded, has led to profound inhumanity in the ancient and modern worlds alike.

These concerns and objections are not farfetched, but they are overdrawn. The challenge facing the political cosmologists of the Declaration is less that their principles will run amok, and more that their paens to our true nature will go unheeded. Simply put, most Americans find impenetrable the claim that only our Founding can explain humanity’s destiny. This is not because they are insufficiently educated or patriotic, but because they still sense, as Tocqueville maintained, that we must gaze further afield than 1776 to make sense of what makes us tick.

As a result, the debate about contemporary applications of the spirit of the founding has reached an impasse—one dominated by all-too-fruitless appeals to old wisdom on one side, cartoonish invocations of the Revolutionary era on another, and snobbish calls to renounce the past entirely on yet a third. Unable to reconcile ourselves with our Founders, we founder.

In what may be a surprise for some, however, at this awkward moment the Founders themselves step forward to show us a way out of the impasse. Hiding in plain sight, in the text of the Declaration itself, the Founders laid bare its pre-political origins—and an anthropology of friendship that points the way back to full freedom in any age.

FOUNDED IN FRIENDSHIP

Reconciliation with the fathers is a primal human challenge. It appears as a central political problem as long ago as Plato. But the stakes are especially high in America, because the United States’ founding embarked the American people on an unprecedented and always uncertain course toward the promise of friendship in equal freedom. As Thomas Jefferson avowed, this ambitious path arose organically, out of
commonplace American experience, mores, and patterns of thinking. “All its authority,” he wrote to Henry Lee, rested “on the harmonizing sentiments of the day.”

What is more, as Jefferson dimly foresaw, the experience of spreading and deepening equality revealed trajectories away from the liberty consensus—trajectories with a powerful pull. America may not be as trapped as Europe is between the yearning for reactionary re-enchantment and the longing for permanent revolution. But Americans are pulled so tightly between a craving for deep unity and a desire for radical individuality that it is making millions of us, as we commonly put it, crazy.

At the same time, however, the Declaration of Independence has not completely lost its potency or its command of our collective memory. It still retains the capacity to capture our shared imagination. What few understand is that it does so above all as poetry, not as politics—because its vision of friendship is more accessible to us now than the memory of the Founding.

Fueled by envy and pride—two of the most perilous pitfalls for potential friends—we too easily to make the mistake of thinking backwards when it comes to the Declaration. Our envy arouses a desire for a sovereign that can overawe even the most ambitious and talented among us. Our pride, meanwhile, demands that this sovereign should recognize us as uniquely special. Both these primal urges would have us declare that politics is prior to friendship. From that standpoint, only the pre-eminent political act, the unification of all by the Founding, could gratify our envy and pride alike, making us equal enough to freely choose friendship.

This logic, much like that of Thomas Hobbes and, later, of Hannah Arendt, is out of place in a discerning assessment of the American character. Perhaps in the Old World, where the pressures and predicaments of memory persist with the weight of millennia, the politics of foundings take on an ultimate anthropological significance. But in the New World, as Tocqueville averred, the scope of political possibility was defined by America’s founding in a truer sense—not through the Declaration, but through the great break made by the Puritans with the false antinomy of re-enchantment and revolution that tyrannized European categories of political thought.

In other words, the political act of the American founding was not the gateway to friendship in equal freedom; rather, the reverse. The
experience of friendship in equal freedom gave rise to a readily authoritative idea of extending that experience into political life.

From this perspective, the Founders’ experience of friendship is of paramount importance today. Indeed, the Founders’ depiction of that experience should deserve our strongest attention. Ranking atop our agenda, to be sure, would be the relevant language within the Declaration itself.

The words are few but crucial. Conspicuously located at the document’s end, they are ready for all to clearly discern. In order to declare the United States of America into being, the Founders say, “we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor.”

Reciprocally pledging our sacred honor, we create our earthly reality through the power of speech alone. Here is an anthropology, and a definition of friendship, as strikingly churchless as it is super-natural. Although consistent with religion and philosophy alike — think of the Gospel of John’s “in the beginning was the Word” or Martin Heidegger’s “language is the house of Being” — it is neither a dogma nor an abstraction. It is the description of direct, firsthand experience — an experience made exceptionally accessible in the American New World, and an experience that may resonate with unique relevance and force in today’s American mind. Right now, in their everyday lives, Americans want to believe that the Founders’ experience, which they often so ardently pursue, really is open to all.

AN ANTHROPOLOGY OF FRIENDSHIP

Doubtless, many are discouraged by the long-documented unraveling of the social and cultural fabric that once drew individuals so reliably out of themselves and into fearless friendship. Critical theorists of race, class, and gender might insist that the Founders’ experience, if it even existed, was a privilege reserved for America’s quasi-aristocratic gentry. Meanwhile, regardless of the particulars of our identity, the rest of us confront awkwardness and antagonism in nearly every aspect of public and private life. We face social disassociation and a degradation of intimacy that seem as inexorable as the ongoing consolidation of our massive, distant, yet invasive new kind of regime. Yet, as David Frum once suggested, it is all but impossible for an individual to attend to the imperatives of political and social decay — especially by forging friendships — if he or she is burdened, as so many are, by the personal obligations created by what we call our “baggage,” our “issues,” or our “drama.”
Neither pundits nor policymakers can lift such millstones away by revising our view of the spirit of the Founding to account fully for its anthropology of friendship. But it is clear that such a renewed view helps show how the experience of friendship can illuminate political liberty in a way that traditional appeals to religion and politics have failed to do.

For America’s political and cultural elite, then, the crucial task is to support venues wherein people can palpably, quickly experience the discovery of their inbuilt freedom to make choices with integrity through the power of speech. For Americans on the left as well as the right, embarking on that mission of support may well require a more magnanimous approach than usual—whether toward traditional organized religion in the first case, or non-traditional and non-Western practices in the latter.