Miranda Hall

Intro to Political Theory

Brian Duff

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A Boring Utopia (Or How to Be Boring in 3 Easy Steps) 

Karl Marx and Alexis de Tocqueville, two men born in the same time into two very different worlds, yet both had the idealistic notion that a boring, mundane world is one that could be achieved by society, however one of these men could not see the way to gaining this boring lifestyle, and the one that could made it impossible to keep. Marx has developed his idea of a utopia, yet this utopia is boring. He would not admit this, as no man admits his dream is flawed. It is mundane and plain, no clashing of classes or domineering of one unto another. This utopia, where no man is greater than the next holds a challenge for Marx, how does he get around the natural characteristics of man, those of human dominance and greed? Tocqueville has seen a boring, mundane world and thinks of it as not a utopia but as the land those who live there are stuck with, it is America. Mediocre, this is what he would use to describe the American society he observed, they are not rambunctious, or fire starting. Tocqueville sees the obstacles of human greed and dominance, yet he has found ways to control them, however through this control the society meant to be kept as plain and boring falls into the grasp of democratic despotism. Though both of these men dream of this boring world neither is able to achieve their idea. For as difficult as it is to arrive in the boring world, it is just as difficult to stay in it.

What does Marx identify as his utopia, and more so what makes it a boring world? “nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes” (P.160). Though this idea may not seem boring on its surface, it its reality it is. When a man can choose at any time to do what he pleases, he loses the threat of competition. Competition drives a man to do his best and to create new things and ideas. Without this man loses his drive to create new things and therefore falls into the realm of boredom. This idea can also play into Marx’s thoughts on estranged labor and how it does not fit into his ideal society. He believes that “with the increasing value of the world of things proceeds in direct proportion the devaluation of the world of men” (p. 71). As workers produce more things their life force is drained, what makes them interesting and unique, is put into arbitrary objects that they then give to their bosses in hope of not starving. In the bland world Marx envisions there is no estranged labor, people are not forced to work in order to survive they choose to work because they derive pleasure from it. Why then is this style of life, where one works only for pleasure, boring? It is not that the pleasure itself is boring it is that when one has no threat to their survival they may not choose to do the necessary work to produce a functioning society. If no man works and nothing is created then what they are left with is a world where free choice holds all power yet nothing gets done. Marx has clearly developed his idea of a utopia, a boring one at that, he cannot see an easy way to achieve this world as he is bombarded by the human traits of greed and dominance.

Greed and dominance go hand in hand in the eyes of Marx, and is true in the world of man. Those who have power over others use those below to fulfill their greed, yet it is never filled. Their greed continuously increases and is never satiated “The bourgeoisie, during its rule of scarce one hundred years, has created more massive and more colossal productive forces than have all preceding generations together” (p. 477). Greed and dominance when left unchecked can quickly take over ones entire being. Greed and dominance are innate in human interactions. If we look at Rousseau he discusses the downfall of man in his Discourse on the Origin of Inequality. In what he referred to as the hut stage, the second half of it, men become jealous of what others have, jealousy leads to greed, you want what others have and once you have that you only want more. These dangerous characteristics of man lead to the difference between classes, they lead to the sufferings of one to benefit another. The proletariat must beg to be given the materials to create something with their labor that they then must pass this thing that they have put part of themselves into onto someone else. The proletariat does not share in the greed of the bourgeoisie, they do not wish to gain more than the next, they work only to survive. Moreover these workers do not wish to dominate over another man, they wish to survive and eventually to be equal. This lack of greed and dominance makes them a universal class, a class that is nothing but purely human. Marx does not see a way around these basic human qualities, as said before the proletariat are considered a universal class that does not have these characteristics yet they are innate in man. If the roles were switched the proletariat would have these characteristics, it is solely through circumstance that in their current position they do not hold ideals of greed. The only way to change their circumstance is to revolt, yet if they revolt and become those in power, then they will become the producers of greed, a vicious cycle. Though he has created an ideal world it is somewhat of an abstract concept to him that cannot come to fruition due to humans’ insatiable greed and dominance that stems from the production and collection of private property. Tocqueville understands that humans have this greed just as Marx, yet unlike Marx he sees ways to counteract this greed.

America as viewed by Tocqueville is similar to the boring paradise Marx craves. It is mundane and plain, the people are not revolutionary they avoid chaos and maintain their simple lifestyle. This is because in this society they are considered equals, “But their passion for equality is ardent, insatiable, eternal, and invincible. They want equality in freedom, and if they cannot have that, they still want equality in slavery” (p. 506). These people will not be revolutionary so long as they have their equality. They will remain at peace in their boring world unless there comes a threat to their lives as equals. The problem that comes with this non revolutionary people is the possibility of these people becoming so passive that a ruling power can come in and control every aspect of life. Tocqueville talks a lot about a narrow path to freedom, with two fearful options on either side, democratic despotism and anarchy, the buffers he provides to avoid democratic despotism in America not only correct for the greed of men but also may lead to the takeover by democratic despotism.

What are the three steps that Tocqueville lays out to try to keep America mediocre and to control their greed; religion, women, and getting together to talk. These three things help to keep the American man on the narrow path to freedom, however by setting up these buffers it leads to Tocqueville’s biggest fear, democratic despotism. What we see here is that Tocqueville has solved Marx’s problem of being unable to curb the natural human greed. Religion, these are the beginning buffers to maintain freedom, however this is the first step towards utter passivity, this sets a code of ethics and morals that they must follow if they are to be good followers of the faith “It is therefore of immense importance to men to have fixed ideas about God…for doubt about these first principals would leave all their actions to chance and condemn them, more or less, to anarchy and impotence” (p.443). The American people’s religion helps to prevent them from delving into chaos, however it is not the American man who religion helps the most but the American woman. It is the American woman who keeps the man on track, she keeps him from delving into chaos. “In Europe almost all disorders of society are born around the hearth and not far from the nuptial bed” (p291). In Europe the women do not calm their men but rather add more chaos into their lives. Yet the American woman is the opposite, “She judges them without illusion” (p. 590) “She knows beforehand what will be expected of her, and she herself has freely accepted the yoke” (p. 593). The American women freely gives up her freedom in order to be the calming force of men, she returns him to his place of boring mediocrity and helps him to maintain a calm exterior. This seems a beneficial thing, yet as the man’s chaotic life is calmed he becomes more passive. Finally Tocqueville discusses the idea that men should gather and talk to solve issues in society. This keeps men equal and prevents them from becoming revolutionary, however if they are mediocre and the passivity can creep up on them, making it easy for democratic despotism to overtake the society. Democratic despotism will come and destroy the boring world the American society has built. They cannot maintain this peaceful, boring world as the more passive and non-revolutionary they become the more others can step in and control the lives of those around them. Though these steps or buffers help to stop the natural traits of greed and dominance in their lives it allows for utter passivity and for democratic despotism to take over the society, making it no longer the boring world Tocqueville observed.

This boring utopia, a world of peace and calm; a world of mediocrity. This world is not possible to maintain for though one may wish for this peace it is not to be found easily and can be lost easier. This boring world has several blockades to its birth, human’s inborn traits of greed and dominance. Without these things the world would be calm, boring, and at peace. Once one society is able to overcome the hurdles of dominance and greed, it has a new threat of becoming so passive that every person’s live in the society is controlled by another. It is due to human’s natural dominance and greed that causes the boring utopia to be unobtainable, yet it is due to the barriers set up by Tocqueville that causes the world to not be maintainable. Though Marx can see a world of greatness, he is unable to overcome the trials to get there and yet Tocqueville has seen and visited his boring realm but it comes with a great danger, as he protects the society from the looming greed that threatens it, the society becomes a passive entity, much like a child, which is taken over easily by democratic despotism and its controlling nature. Thus, this is why the beauty that one finds in Marx’s paradise is but fleeting and is not one to be caught but for more than a moment.