The racial attitudes of de Tocqueville and Mill

by Forrest Cameranesi

In this essay I will examine the racial attitudes of famed political writers John Stuart Mill and Alexis de Tocqueville in light of the conception of racism as laid out by George M. Fredrickson in his book “Racism: A Short History”. By Fredrickson’s definition, racism is not, as the common conception may hold, based solely on skin color or any other genetic, inherited, biological factors. To Fredrickson, notions of race can be also be built upon linguistic, religious, or otherwise cultural, non-biological differences (Fredrickson 3, 7-8). But just holding such notions of ‘race’, be they biologically or culturally defined, is not enough to constitute racism. Fredrickson most succinctly sums up his notion of the concept of ‘racism’ thus: “It is when differences that might otherwise be considered ethnocultural are regarded as innate, indelible, and unchangeable that a racist attitude or ideology can be said to exist.” (Fredrickson 5).

In other words, it is not merely the feeling that ‘you are different from me and I strongly dislike you for that’ which constitutes racism; Fredrickson calls that merely “xenophobia” (Fredrickson 6), from Greek, meaning a fear of the different, alien, or other. Racism is not even a position that such dislike of the ‘other’ is grounded on some objective inferiority of their culture (or conversely, some superiority of one’s own). That, Fredrickson suggests, might more properly be called “culturalism” (Fredrickson 7); the position that one culture is objectively superior to all others, and thus that members other cultures are somehow in the wrong. Rather, racism as Fredrickson understands only exists in the feeling that ‘you are innately and permanently different, and thus are innately and permanently inferior’; a sense of biological or cultural determinism which inalterably classifies people as fit for different social strata (Fredrickson 6), or in some cases, as unfit to exist at all.

I find Fredrickson’s definition of racism thoroughly satisfying, and a much-needed
clarification of thought and language in an age where merely expressing a dislike for the customs, music, or festivities of another cultural group — even while still wholeheartedly supporting their right to express themselves that way — will sometimes be called racist. Perhaps worse still, we live today in an age where many here in the powerful western nations are so terrified of the specter of our past racism that some will even justify various practices in other nations, which we domestically would call despicable abridgments of the rights of those they are practiced upon, on the grounds that denying the practitioners their traditions, as objectively horrible as they may seem to us, would be a form of racism. I feel that we need to carefully distinguish objectively justified, universalistic normative attitudes about various practices in different cultures, and personal taste regarding the appeal of various foreign cultural elements, from unjustified intolerance of harmless cultural differences (culturalism) and from the attribution to such differences of an unalterable, biological nature (racism) — and I feel that Fredrickson’s definition of racism, and his suggestion of the label of “culturalism” to cover intolerance which is not essentialist, are a step in that direction. So with that concept of racism laid out, let us now examine the racial attitudes of de Tocqueville and Mill, and see whether or not those attitudes are in fact racist by Fredrickson’s definition.

In *Democracy in America*, Chapter XVIII, Alexis de Tocqueville describes the plight of the Native Americans and of the black slaves in the United States as it stood in 1830, particularly as regards the orientation of these groups towards the process of ‘civilization’. Civilization, as de Tocqueville seems to understands it, involves settled life, as in cities and towns, and as opposed to a nomadic, wandering life (Tocqueville 369); but more importantly, de Tocqueville’s concept of civilization involves industry, self-discipline, and hard work driven toward progress and development. This conception of civilization is, quite importantly, not something that is exclusive to or synonymous with white, European, or Western culture. It is not even something which the more affluent European social strata have more of; in fact quite the opposite
(Tocqueville 370). To de Tocqueville, not all white people are civilized, and the particular examples he gives are the European aristocrats (his own peers) and the slave-holding plantation owners of the American south, both groups which live lives of leisure and disdain the industrious, disciplined labor that is necessary for civilization, looking down upon it as something which is beneath them, fit for lower classes or slaves.

As regards the nonwhite races in America, de Tocqueville appears to have great sympathy for the ‘Negro’ and ‘Indian’ (e.g. Tocqueville 360, 368), and it seems that even though he calls them uncivilized, and holds civilization as a positive, desirable quality, he does not hold them as altogether lesser people, neither inherently nor even incidentally. Most importantly, he sees both groups as civilizable in principle — that is, the Indian and the Negros could, if given the appropriate opportunity (and with sufficient cooperation on their part), become civilized — and thus by Fredrickson’s definition he is clearly not racist, for whatever differences there are between whites and nonwhites are not held to be fixed and unalterable. However, he does hold both nonwhite races in America to be at present (in his time) uncivilized, and he is highly pessimistic about their fates in the face of the march of civilization across America, which de Tocqueville sees as an unstoppable force which both Indians and Negros, for their respective reasons, face great challenges in becoming one with. Still, his expectation or prediction that these races, as a matter of contingent fact, will not become civilized (due to various factors both external and internal to them), is not the same as saying that by their very essence they cannot become civilized; and thus de Tocqueville cannot properly be called a racist.

De Tocqueville sees the Indians as akin to his own peers in France, the aristocratic nobility. By his description both the Indians and the French aristocrats are proud peoples who prefer to spend their time in exciting and ‘noble’ activities such as hunting and fighting, who very much disdain the boring, monotonous labor of industry, which they see as indignant and demeaning (Tocqueville 370-371). It is for this reason that de Tocqueville considers them
uncivilized — the Indian and the aristocrat alike. Also for this reason, he foresees that the Indians will continue to resist the process of civilization, despite their capability of it (Tocqueville 371), much as many of the European aristocrats have; and that this resistance will be their downfall, as the civilized life is far more productive than the uncivilized one. In emphasis of this latter point, de Tocqueville relates the tale of his trip down the Ohio river (Tocqueville 386-389). On one shore lay the slave-state of Kentucky, which as a slave state was largely uncivilized (in this sense of being full of productive, self-driven activity), and thus Kentucky lay quiet, sparsely populated, and still mostly forested. Meanwhile on the other shore lay the slave-free state of Ohio, where the entire populace was forced to work for their living, having no recourse to slave labor; thus creating a far busier, more industrious land with many populous urban areas simply bustling with productive activities. This evident difference in productive capacities between civilized and uncivilized peoples renders the civilized U.S. settlers and the government backing them far more powerful than the hunter-gatherer societies of the Native Americans, and thus if the latter refuse to civilize themselves, they will be, if not defeated in outright conflict, then at the least out-competed for natural resources by the expanding United States civilization (Tocqueville 368, 380). Looking back on the nearly two centuries of history since de Tocqueville’s writing, it seems unfortunate that this prediction of his has come true, and the native populations of North America are now largely exterminated or at least displaced from their lands, having been pushed further and further west as the United States civilization progressed. Likewise, it seems that most of those who have survived have indeed adopted the ways of civilization, as many of the natives of Mexico and California took up the Spanish ways during the days of the missionaries and conquistadors, and thus the natives of those lands became a part of that civilization.

As with the Indians, de Tocqueville seems to have sympathy for the plight of the Negros, speaking quite poorly of the conditions of slavery in which they live (Tocqueville 360), and holding that the black slaves could, if freed, become civilized and thus fully the equals of the
whites who at the time were their masters. Further, he holds that this situation would, if successfully brought about, be for the benefit of blacks and whites alike, rendering the former slave states as civilized as the free states, as illustrated in his trip down the Ohio River. However, as with the Indians, de Tocqueville sees very little hope for the future of the Negros, despite their potential for civilization. As de Tocqueville sees it, since the percentage of black slaves in the southern states was much greater than that of the northern states, the freeing of southern slaves would give rise to the ‘problem of the masses’; the concern that political equality will bring with it the downfall of society to the lowest common denominator, or worse, the upheaval of society as the masses use their newfound power to exact revenge upon their former masters. In this instance, the concern is that if merely future generations were to be set free, as was the practice in the northern states, the great many slaves still in chains would begin to realize their plight, and such apparent inequality would drive them to revolt. Alternatively, if all slaves were set free immediately, they would find themselves as a class wholly deprived of all wealth and property, all of it being owned by their former masters; and so destitute and poor, yet granted newfound political power, the blacks of the south might use that power to take what they lacked from their former masters by force.

The only alternatives to these scenarios, de Tocqueville claims, are either the complete separation of the two races, which he deems impossible due to the sheer numbers of people involved and the lack of any place to put them or means of getting them there; or the complete intermingling of the two, which he finds highly improbably due to the sheer repugnance that the whites feel toward the blacks (Tocqueville 398-399). Thus it seems to de Tocqueville that the slave states in America face the uncomfortable dilemma of either plunging their society into ruin if slavery is abolished, or of maintaining the immoral system of slavery in place. Fortunately, unlike his predictions regarding the Indians, this prediction of de Tocqueville’s has not been borne out. Since the time of his writing, slavery has been completely and at once abolished from
America by the 13th Amendment, and as de Tocqueville expected, great economic hardship befell the freed slaves, and the whites’ repugnance toward dark-skinned people did greatly hinder the freed slaves’ integration into mainstream American society. However, rather than leading to revolt as de Tocqueville predicted, nonviolent civil rights movements such as those of Martin Luther King, Jr., et al, brought about — at least in most of America — the eventual breakdown of the extralegal cultural barriers which had held blacks separate from and unequal to whites. Today, with black and white society largely integrated, the grandchildren of former black slaves now take up occupations alongside the descendants of their former masters; and as de Tocqueville foresaw in the case of this unlikely event, it has been for the benefit of both black and white alike.

In the final analysis, it seems to me that de Tocqueville is not at all a racist. He speaks sometimes in ways that today would imply racism, for instance calling white people more ‘intelligent’; but by context he seems, to me, to be speaking of education as a matter of cultural influence, rather than of intelligence as an innate capacity. This is evidenced by his comparison of the “savage culture” which children of mixed European-Indian heritage inherit from the Indian side, with the “intelligence” (i.e. education) they get from their European side (Tocqueville 371). Further, though he does paint large demographics with a very broad brush, portraying whites, Indians, and Negros as homogeneous groups, that sort of sweeping generalization is acceptable for the sort of broad analysis he is doing, particularly in an era where detailed demographic surveys on a continental scale would be highly unfeasible. Likewise, his approach lacks the ‘emic’ touch of modern anthropology, failing to capture the viewpoint of the Native Americans and black slaves themselves, and thus de Tocqueville inevitably presents a European, aristocratic bias; but this is not a particular failing of de Tocqueville himself, but rather, one of the anthropological method of his day, which always examined foreign cultures from the outside, rather than from within their own cultural context. What is most important in the end is that de Tocqueville does not paint the ethnic groups he examines as inalterably inferior, even though he
does depict them as generally in need of certain cultural improvements (namely, civilization). He even foresees great challenges for their accomplishing those improvement, and further still, he expresses a pessimistic attitude toward the likelihood of those challenges ever being overcome. But, as he does allow for the possibility of those improvements occurring, de Tocqueville is not, properly speaking, racist.

Let us turn now to John Stuart Mill, who also concerns himself with the relation of civilization to the various races of the world. To Mill, civilization is most importantly understood as a prerequisite for self-government, in that the self-discipline that is core to civilization solves the problem of the masses. That is to say that Mill believes that a populace which is not so self-disciplined will decay into social and economic ruin if discipline is not imposed from outside (Mill 414-415); and so in order to warrant allowing people to be free from such external imposition of discipline, those people must be able to discipline themselves — in other words, they must become civilized. Thus, as democracy “lowers the eminences” to the common level, civilization must “raise the plains” of that common level (Mill 126), lest the process of democratization merely lower everyone altogether and bring that society to ruin.

As regards race and civilization, Mill does not see this self-discipline as a distinctly European characteristic. According to Mill, Europeans are merely historically lucky to have become civilized; they were the right people in the right circumstances at the right time. Were it not for the fortuitous history of the Roman Empire (with it’s emphasis on law and order), the Germanic barbarians who brought it down (with their love of liberty), and the rise of Christianity (with it’s notions of an absolute authority beyond Earthly powers), Europeans would not have had the necessary concepts and attitudes to become civilized of their own accord. Further, Mill holds that Europe is still (at the time of his writing) not completely civilized, with vestiges of barbarism still lingering in the old feudal structures; and further, that this process of civilization is not manifest destiny for the western world, but could still be stalled or even reversed by
conservative interests, if liberal-minded people are not careful. Thus Mill seems not to be
essentialist in his notions of civilization, holding that it is simply a certain (albeit superior) way
of life which is not inherently European, but potentially open to anyone; and so by
Fredrickson’s definition, Mill cannot be called a racist. However, Mill does have a rather
condescending attitude toward the incidental characteristics of non-European races — namely,
their lack of civilization — and as a consequence of those attitudes he prescribes what most
today would consider ghastly political policies of colonial despotism in the name of progress,
improvement, development, and ultimately, civilization.

Though his ultimate goal in his prescribed policies is to bring freedom to these uncivilized
peoples, he holds that the freedom thus aimed for is a ‘better kind of freedom’ than that which
they currently enjoy. While Mill is thought of in contemporary times as the bastion of liberty, he
also places great emphasis on the ‘improvement’ of uncivilized societies; for it is only within an
‘improved’ society, i.e. a civilized one, that liberty leads to further improvement, rather than
social stagnation or decay; and Mill holds that, if necessary, liberty can be initially withheld from
an uncivilized people in order to ‘improve’ them to the point that liberty will do them well (Mill
376). Mill speaks of many non-Europeans as “races in their childhood”, and holds that they thus
ought to be treated as children — with the civilized white people in the role of the parents, of
course. And so, just as parents are expected to command and discipline their children until those
children have developed good habits, eventually growing mature enough to be let free to manage
their own lives, Mill believes that it is permissible, in fact even obligatory, that a civilized people
should conquer and dominate an uncivilized one until the latter has developed the self-discipline,
the ‘cultural maturity’ one might say, to govern themselves freely.

Thus while Mill is not racist by Fredrickson’s definition — and I am inclined still to
consider Fredrickson’s definition of racism as correct — he is highly discriminatory in another
way, and Fredrickson himself does seem to allow that a non-racist attitudes may still be an
“attitude that often creates conflict and misery” (Fredrickson 7). However, in that context Fredrickson is speaking of what he suggests be called “culturalism”, which seems to me importantly different from Mill’s attitude. Mill’s attitude seems, to me, more like what I called in the introduction to this paper an “objectively justified, universalistic normative attitude”, though I argue that Mill’s justification is not always sufficient to support the particular positions he espouses. But he is at least attempting to provide justification in terms of universal abstract concepts and qualification which could just as well condemn the future practices of his own people; for example, if the conservatives in his Britain had won out. Mill is not saying that the British way of life is the correct way of life in every regard, and all peoples ought to emulate it. He is laying out a broad philosophical framework which, amongst many other things, relates the feasibility of self-government to a people’s level of self-discipline or civilization; and within that broad framework, many highly un-British practices would be tolerable. It is much akin to liberalism itself, which decrees that certain hard and fast, universal rights and obligations belong to all people, and that the neglect of such rights and obligations is a universal crime; yet still, in the midst of these strict universal laws thus declared, liberalism allows vast swaths of personal freedom, more so than any of its competitors, and in fact such freedom is it’s very namesake. Likewise, Mill’s attitude that people ought to be civilized (and are lacking something to the extent that they are not) seems not so much a declaration that uncivilized peoples’ ways of life are wholly wrong, and that they ought to be more like Mill’s people, as it is a declaration that for a people to flourish and be truly free, they must have the self-discipline which is civilization; and within those broad confines, any old cultural idiosyncrasies are fine.

But as regards Mill’s particular conclusions about how civilized peoples ought to treat uncivilized ones, I must strongly disagree with Mill. While I will agree as far as the analogy of ‘uncivilized’ (undisciplined) people with children goes, I would argue that that parallel reflects as much on the way that we ought to treat children as it does on the way that we ought to treat less-
civilized peoples. Namely, I believe we ought to treat children the same as we ought to treat everyone else: offering them our protection, aid, and guidance where they will accept it, and otherwise leaving them to learn on their own, even from their mistakes, only stepping in to stop them from harming others or from utterly destroying themselves. Applied to international relations, this approach would still allow us in the civilized world to entreat and trade with ‘uncivilized’ peoples, provided we do so peaceably. It would allow us to send scholars and even (non-coercive) missionaries and the like to exchange ideas with those peoples, even so far as arguing that those people ought to adopt our customs and ideas; though of course those arguments must stand of fall on their own rational merit and never be pushed by the threat of force. My approach would even allow us to intervene in foreign political affairs, to the extent of defending one group from an aggressive enemy, or liberating an oppressed people from despotic rule — provided that at least some portion of the population is in fact, by their own admission and to our outsiders’ eyes, being oppressed, and our intervention is both warranted by our own liberal standards and welcomed by those we seek to aid. But outright conquest and despotic rule, even in the name of some greater good such as ‘civilization’ or ‘improvement’, I find morally unjustifiable. Though as a utilitarian Mill would be inclined to disagree, I must assert that the ends to not always justify the means, or more precisely, that one’s means must always be in the spirit of one’s ends, and thus despotic means cannot be used toward liberal ends. Thus, while I cannot rightly call Mill a racist per se, nor even necessarily a culturalist, and while I do agree to a limited extent with his civilizationist attitudes (inasmuch as I too consider self-discipline, or ‘civilization’, a necessary condition for the successful self-government of a people), I strongly disapprove of many of his policies regarding the treatment of ‘uncivilized’ peoples.
Works Cited:

Fredrickson, George M. *Racism: A Short History*.
