

Christopher Britt Arredondo

Imperial Idiocy

A Reflection on Forced Displacement in the Americas

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Christopher Britt Arredondo. –

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For Marina and Adrian

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INTRODUCTION: IMPERIAL VIOLENCE

*“It’s part of morality not to
be at home in one’s home.”*

—Theodor Adorno

1

For the ancient Greeks, idiocy was a punishment. It was a ban. Idiots were free men who had been banished from public life because, out of preference for their own private interests, they had refused to participate actively in the self-governance of the *polis*. This banishment from public life was equivalent to the loss of sovereignty and, consequently, to the reduction of one’s life to the pursuit of a private, domestic, and ultimately trivial happiness.¹ Although as a punishment idiocy was reserved for individuals, the Greeks also understood that when their republics succumbed to tyranny everyone would suffer this punishment equally. For insofar as the tyrant deprived them of access to the public realm, confined them to the privacy of their households, and demanded to be the only one in charge of public affairs, he reduced everyone around him to a state of idiocy.² Tyrants, the ancient Greeks understood, stunted human development while promoting morally despicable behavior that was politically dangerous.³

For similar reasons, modern political theorists, from Montesquieu to Weber, have denounced the idiocy that is one of tyranny’s more striking moral and political consequences. Montesquieu, for instance, condemned monarchical absolutism as doubly despotic, arguing that it enslaved its subjects not only with fear but also avarice; Marx, likewise, criticized the despotism of capital, arguing that it alienated, isolated, and rendered the working classes powerless; and for his part Weber warned against the impersonal and bureaucratic tyranny of centralized public administrations. But of all the modern political philosophers who have theorized tyranny, it is surely Alexis de Tocqueville who has done the most to develop the notion that modern tyranny achieves stability and longevity be-

¹ Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought*. (New York: Penguin) 1993 [1954], p.290.

² Arendt, p.290.

³ Roger Boesche, *Theories of Tyranny from Plato to Arendt*. (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State UP) 1996, p.60.

cause its coercive power does not rest on fear alone but also, and indeed in some cases even more so, on the gratification of self-interested and depoliticized idiots.

In *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville argued that idiocy in modern democracies differed from that of the ancient Greek *polis* in one crucial aspect: at issue was not the idiocy of selfish individuals, but of venal, corruptible, and bribable masses. “There is a very dangerous phase in the life of democratic peoples,” he writes in this sense; it arises “when the taste for physical pleasures has grown more rapidly than either education or experience of free institutions.” The time then comes, reasons Tocqueville:

“when men are carried away and lose control of themselves ... Intent only on getting rich ... they find it a tiresome inconvenience to exercise political rights ... Such folk think that they are following the doctrine of self-interest, but they have a very crude idea thereof, and the better to guard their interests, they neglect the chief of them, that is, to remain their own masters.”

Here, Tocqueville characterizes idiocy as mob mentality; it is the crude, uneducated, and reckless selfishness of the profiteering masses. The moral and political danger inherent in this idiocy of the selfish masses, he further argues, is that it summons tyranny.

“If, at this critical moment, an able and ambitious man once gets power, he finds the way open for usurpations of every sort ... A nation, which asks nothing from the government beyond the maintenance of order, is already a slave in the bottom of its heart. It is a slave to prosperity, and the road is free for the man [i.e., the tyrant] to tie the fetters”.⁴

Idiocy, reasons Tocqueville, results from a bribe. In exchange for prosperity, the masses accept the imposition of a regime of security that places undue restraints on their civil liberties and political freedoms. Selfishly satisfied with a life of consumption and happily relieved of the burdens of self-governance, the idiot masses create their own tyrants.

Although Tocqueville had in mind modern democracies of the late nineteenth century, the tyranny of idiocy that he describes is equally pertinent to more recent times. During the Cold War era, for instance, C. Wright Mills reached the disheartening conclusion that political culture in the United States had devolved into a decadent state of idiocy. “Disengaged from prevailing allegiances and inattentive to political concerns,” U.S. citizens had become, in Mills’ estimation, “strangers to politics.”⁵ They had, in this sense, ceased to think of politics as a

⁴ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*. (Garden City, New Jersey: Doubleday) 1969, p.40.

⁵ C. Wright Mills, *White Collar: The American Middle Classes*. (New York: Oxford UP) 1951, p.28.