

Associationalism and Panopticism in American Democracy: An Analysis of Jewish Power

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Power in a democracy is never stable. By its very nature, democracy invites challenges to those who wield power in it. But its system of power distribution is lasting. How modern liberal democracies create durable governments has been a much-studied question. In particular, the subject of how the majority and minority access and respond to power is of interest. Alexis de Tocqueville was one of the first to study the political structure of the United States and strongly believed associationalism was the key to stabilizing democracy. Through creating associations, political groups can attempt to increase their ranks enough to become the majority over time, removing the need for violent upheaval. Tocqueville's associationalism becomes even more powerful when combined with Michel Foucault's idea of panoptic power. Foucault believed modern societies create panopticons to discipline citizens, using surveillance, normalization, and examination to make power more sustainable. Both mechanisms are means to create secure power structures that make people feel free, and when united create an interesting theory of democratic power. Democracies rely on panoptic power to create good citizens and righteous government, which employs associations as a tool to control citizens. These associations

have important implications for the Jews, a minority that frequently has politics organized against them. Associationalism gives Jews access to political power but also subjects them to panoptic oversight, where their behavior is made to assimilate to a certain collective American standard. The Jewish people have historically exercised political power disproportionately to their size in the US, such as during the second wave of American socialism before World War II, because of their powerful associations.

One of the most important elements of American democracy is associationalism. In Tocqueville's acclaimed book *Democracy in America*, he finds associations to be necessary for democracy to flourish. He defines associations as any visible collective with shared beliefs that joins together to promote the spread of these beliefs.¹ Associations can take many forms and promote many causes, not just political. They solve the crux of the democratic system: how power is exercised. Tocqueville writes that in democracies "all the citizens are independent and feeble; they can do hardly anything by themselves, and none of them can oblige his fellow-men to lend him their assistance. They all, therefore, fall into a state of incapacity, if they do not learn voluntarily to help each other."² Individual citizens are powerless unless they can convince others to join their cause. This means that for associations to be powerful, they must have a significant number of members. The implication of this is that democracies are ruled by majorities. As a

result, associations also work to take power away from the majority.

Associations with minority beliefs demonstrate their resources and try to increase their membership to syphon power from the majority. Indeed, Tocqueville found that minorities “always entertain hopes of drawing over their opponents to their own side, and of afterwards disposing of the supreme power in their name.”³ If political associations always have the chance of becoming the majority, and universal suffrage ensures that every citizen can exercise political power, then there is no need for violent disruption. Power structures are maintained by the employ of associationalism, even if those in power are replaced. By layering Foucault’s theory of panoptic power with associationalism, it becomes even more clear how democracies maintain order and distribute power. But first, it is important to understand how panopticons apply to modern government.

Panopticons are a useful structure for investing power in an instrument rather than a single person. In a democracy, people are supposed to govern themselves, but this requires self-imposed discipline. Michel Foucault analyses how modern societies can achieve effective discipline in his book *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Foucault believed that visibility was the key to creating a system of power that could automatically maintain itself. He points to the panopticon as the perfect architecture to install discipline. A panopticon is a form of prison where a guard from a central tower can see into all of the

inmates. Cells are equipped with two large windows, one for the guard to see through and the other to provide backlight. Each prisoner is rendered perfectly visible to the guard but cannot see fellow prisoners or the guard itself. Because each prisoner knows he is visible to the central tower, he acts as if being under constant surveillance, regardless if the guard is actually present.⁴ The point of this design is, as Foucault explains it, to “arrange things that the surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action; that the perfection of power should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary.”⁵ Panoptic structures of power are any system that achieves these results. The three prongs of this system are surveillance, normalization, and examination. Constant surveillance results in the prisoners always behaving as if they are being watched. This encourages the prisoners to behave like “good” prisoners to avoid punishment, creating normalization. People who wield power then examine whether the correct norms are being followed and alert prisoners how to adjust their behavior. This system has applications far beyond prisons. In Foucault’s theory, the panopticon is “a figure of political technology that may and must be detached from any specific use.”⁶ Any institution that seeks to create self-imposed model behavior can develop a panopticon. In the US, panopticism is used to imbue democratic institutions with power rather than a single person or party.

American democracy depends on panopticism to create a just government, and

associationalism is an apparatus designed to aid this practice. Both Tocqueville and Foucault identified that in aristocratic nations, the elite were in the position to check power and discipline people. Because the elite were the only authority, they could devolve into tyranny and were subject to violent overthrow. Democracies would be susceptible to the same problems of tyranny and instability—even more vulnerable to them than aristocracies—without the existence of panoptic power. One can see through Tocqueville's writings on associations the existence of surveillance, normalization, and examination. Anytime an individual or small association goes against the larger will of society, it can be assured that an association of the majority opinion can form to oppose it. This act of surveillance ensures that citizens follow the social norms of the majority. Tocqueville provides an example, writing that “the children in their games are wont to submit to rules which they have themselves established, and to punish misdemeanors which they have themselves defined.”⁷ Any individual child that would go against the rules can count on the other children joining together to punish them, resulting in their own self-discipline. Associations act as the guard in the central tower of the panopticon, the citizens as the prisoners. Through this practice surveillance and normalization occur. Examination happens when citizens form associations in the attempt to gain political power. If the doctrine of the association is judged by society to be aligned with social norms, it gains more members and consequently political power.

Otherwise, its members are locked out of political power, back under the surveillance of the majority. Just like how Foucault envisioned that any person could look at the panopticon and judge the surveillance, all Americans can see the functioning of their panopticon and determine if it needs adjusting. When the possibility of tyranny is found, new laws or amendments can be proposed to fix the system of power. Term limits, separation of powers, and adjustments to checks and balances protect the US democracy. Since Foucault's panopticon and Tocqueville's definition of associations are both flexible, joining their theories of power is possible without inconsistencies. There is no one model of panoptic power nor one standard association. They are each simply methods of organization. Citizens that excel at creating strong associations, like the Jews, are able to thrive better in the panopticon than others in the minority.

Jews have been more adept than average at forming associations and as a result exercise a disproportionate amount of political power in the US. For centuries, the Jewish community existed as a diaspora people. Without a sovereign nation, Jews adapted and formed a supranational religious organization. By utilizing a system of scripture and recognizing religious leaders, they formed their own collective that withstood a lack of formal political power in Europe. As political theorist Michael Walzer writes in the first volume of his series *The Jewish Political Tradition*, the Jews “made political choices about the

distribution of power and influence; they developed and even enforced a set of laws, taxed their members for the sake of security, welfare, religion, and education, and maintained relations of one sort of another with the non-Jewish authorities.”⁸ Essentially, they formed their own government that lacked traditional sovereignty, which is exactly how Tocqueville defines political associations. Tocqueville writes that political associations are like “a separate nation in the midst of the nation, a government within the Government. Their delegates, like the real delegates of the majority, represent the entire collective force of their party; and they enjoy a certain degree of that national dignity and great influence which belong to the chosen representatives of the people.”⁹ Whether by analyzing the Jewish community as a whole or in subsections, Jewish associations tap into this history of organization. Relative to other immigrant groups, this network is far beyond average. Some non-white, non-legal immigrants also face additional hurdles that the American Jewish community historically did not encounter with the same intensity. While the panopticon ensured that the Jews had to conform to a certain level of American social norms, democracy was an apt system for the Jews to exercise power.

Foucault’s panoptic system of surveillance, normalization, and examination has reshaped Jewish associations. This system permits diversity, but only if it can be watched and monitored. If the structure of the panoptic system is

perceived to be under threat, then diversity is no longer tolerated. Jewish immigrants were well acquainted with balancing societal pressures to assimilate with the goal of preserving their culture. To avoid antisemitism, they adopted American secular customs, but continued many religious practices in private. Ruth Wisse, a Harvard University professor and author, argues in her talk “Jews and Power” that antisemitism is really the organization of politics against the Jews.¹⁰ With this understanding, antisemitism is not just discrimination but rather a political ideology. Anti-Jewish politics have proven to be an enduring organizing force with disastrous consequences for the health of democracy and Jewish political rights. Jewish associations run the risk of appearing to be too close to state power or too resource rich, which can stoke anti-Jewish sentiments. Antisemitism is and has been a persistent barrier to Jewish political power, but American Jews have been successful in creating enough social security to build associations and participate in panoptic surveillance. Jewish associations conform to American norms to avoid being a political target. As Jews and their associations in the US agitate for the realization of their political goals, voters and officials are swayed to their side if they evaluate them as good American citizens. With this history in mind, it is possible to analyze the power and powerlessness of Jews in America.

American Jews would have been powerless if they had not assimilated after immigrating in the 20th century. Paul Jacobs,

a Jewish-American, gives an account of Jewish politics in his memoir "It Wasn't Difficult for Me to Reject Judaism". The account begins by talking about his family's turn away from traditional Judaism. His German immigrant parents struggled to strike a balance between conformity and preservation of Jewish practices. Jacobs found that his family faced "the difficulty of retaining some aspects of Jewishness without being conspicuous Jews."¹¹ Because his family feared how the larger Christian association would treat them, they disciplined themselves into following American norms. He goes on to explain that, "although we were Jewish, we weren't 'Jews', like the men with beards and earlocks or the women with brown wigs who embarrassed me when I saw them on the street or on the subway reading Yiddish newspapers."¹² Jacobs was embarrassed by the otherness of Jews and their refusal to conform. Foucault would point out, visibility is a trap, marking them as "bad" citizens. At a young age, Jacobs is conditioned to know this is not how a proper American citizen behaves. His family felt pressured into American middle-class practices, like celebrating Christmas and disregarding kosher dietary restrictions.¹³ This was indicative of many Jewish families, in particular those from Western Europe. As a result, Jacobs did not find it difficult to reject Judaism. The hypocrisy he perceived in his parents attempt to be both Jewish and non-Jewish caused him to become disillusioned with religion. While Jacobs did not feel particularly Jewish in his youth and was not religious, he later found

the community to be a source of political power.

Jewish associations had incredible power to affect political change. Much of Jacobs' account focuses on his turn to radicalism and his time among Jewish intellectuals. While he attended the prestigious Townsend Harris high school and City College in New York, he found himself surrounded by the Jewish intellectual community.¹⁴ This group of students was extremely leftist, and the socialist message of class warfare resonated with them. In the United States, these movements were marked by strong Jewish participation and leadership. He and his fellow classmates continued to engage in politics after leaving college and joined communist parties.¹⁵ During this time, the US had entered the Great Depression and more importantly news of Nazi Germany's persecution of Jews was spreading. Political and economic forces of the time galvanized many radical Jews further. Jacobs explains this phenomenon succinctly, stating "Hitler was everywhere and focused us to talk continually about politics."¹⁶ Within Jewish associations, fertilization of socialist ideas took place as thinkers discussed and debated. When Franklin Delano Roosevelt became president, Jewish intellectuals saw their chance to influence politics. Many Jews played a prominent part in the formulation and execution of New Deal policies. Americans were forced to reevaluate their politics due to the depression and the message of Jewish radicals resonated as a solution. The New

Deal did not create all the socialist policies radicals like Jacob believed in, but their influence is clear. In historian Leonard Dinnerstein's work "Jews and the New Deal", he found that many Jews entered politics around the time of FDR's presidency and joined the administration, providing much of the willpower behind the New Deal.¹⁷ Roosevelt needed political support and saw Jewish associations as a powerful voting bloc. This ascension to political prominence would not have been possible if Jewish intellectuals did not have the connections formed through associations.

Jews in America have maintained the powerful association forged over centuries of dispersion to their political benefit. Democracies depend on associations to

distribute political power without creating despotism, meaning that the Jews had a powerful tool to engage in politics with. The panoptic structure of power encouraged Jews to resemble the larger Christian, middle class values association to be accepted as American. These systems give power to those in the minority, which insures the fair use of power in a democracy. Despite the years that separate the time of Tocqueville and Foucault, they each were concerned with how enlightened governments create stable power structures. This stability hinges on how the minority interacts with the majority. Jewish participation in US politics shows the incredible strength associations carry, and the cost they pay to sway other Americans to their cause.

NOTES

¹ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, edited by Henry Reeve, 1 and 2, Pennsylvania State University, 2002, 214.

² Tocqueville, 582.

³ Tocqueville, 219.

⁴ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, translated by Alan Sheridan, Vintage Books, 2011, 200.

⁵ Foucault, 201.

⁶ Foucault, 205.

⁷ Tocqueville, 214.

⁸ Michael Walzer, et al, *The Jewish Political Tradition*, Vol. 1, Yale University Press, 2000, xxi.

⁹ Tocqueville, 215.

¹⁰ Ruth Wisse, "Jews and Power," *YouTube*, Tikvah Fund, Apr 8, 2014, https://youtu.be/uB0XMf_nDUI. Accessed 11 Oct. 2018.

¹¹ Paul Jacobs. "'It Wasn't Difficult for Me to Reject Judaism'" (memoir; 1965)," *Jewish Radicals: A Documentary History*: NYU Press, March 24, 2016. *NYU Press Scholarship Online*, <http://nyu.universitypressscholarship.com/view/10.18574/nyu/9780814757437.001.0001/upso-9780814757437-chapter-5>, 75. Accessed 13 Nov. 2018.

¹² Jacobs, 73.

¹³ Jacobs, 72.

¹⁴ Jacobs, 75-77.

¹⁵ Jacobs, 77.

¹⁶ Jacobs, 77.

¹⁷ Leonard Dinnerstein, "Jews and the New Deal," *American Jewish History* 72, no. 4, 1983, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23882507>, 461-462. Accessed 11 Oct. 2018.