

# The Political Forum

*A review of social and political trends and events  
impacting the world's financial markets*

---

Mark L. Melcher  
Publisher  
[melcher@thepoliticalforum.com](mailto:melcher@thepoliticalforum.com)

Stephen R. Soukup  
Senior Editor  
[soukup@thepoliticalforum.com](mailto:soukup@thepoliticalforum.com)

Friday, September 26, 2003

## A REPRINT FROM A PIECE PUBLISHED JANUARY 21, 1998

**“THE POOR HAVE US ALWAYS WITH THEM.”**

**Mark L. Melcher  
Stephen R. Soukup**

Imagine, if you will, how excited liberals would become if someone discovered a cache of previously unseen episodes of *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, or an undiscovered *objet d'art* by the artist-icon of the left, Robert Mapplethorpe. They would be “tickled pink,” so to speak. Now, imagine the similar delight that would overwhelm a conservative who discovered a virtually unknown and previously only narrowly distributed volume from the eminent 19th century political observer and scholar Alexis de Tocqueville.

Well, gentle reader, the latter is exactly what has happened. And my colleague Steve Soukup and I have been busting at the seams to tell you about it ever since we heard late last year that Chicago's Ivan R. Dee publishers released a new edition of Seymour Drescher's 1968 translation of the heretofore unheralded *Memoir on Pauperism*.

This short account of observations made during Tocqueville's first visit to Great Britain is simply terrific. And it is as fresh, insightful and pertinent as it was when the great French aristocrat made his trip to Albion over 160 years ago.

The ostensible purpose of Tocqueville's *Memoir* was to address the paradox presented by the vast number of “paupers” that populated England, despite the fact that that nation was at the forefront of the industrial movement and was, therefore, the wealthiest nation on earth at the time.

---

*Note: My title quote comes from Saki's great novelette, “The Unbearable Bassington.” The speaker is the irrepressible Lady Caroline, one of my favorite characters in all of English literature, who is offput by the insufferable Ida's ranting about her “charity” work (“I'm dining early. I have to give an address to some charwomen afterwards.”), and observes wryly, “No one has ever said it, but how painfully true it is that the poor have us always with them.”*

---

Subscriptions to The Political Forum are available by contacting:  
The Political Forum  
8563 Senedo Rd., Mt. Jackson, Virginia 22842  
Tel 540-477-9762, Fax 540-477-3359, Email [melcher@thepoliticalforum.com](mailto:melcher@thepoliticalforum.com),  
or visit us at [www.thepoliticalforum.com](http://www.thepoliticalforum.com)

Tocqueville writes, “Cross the English countryside and you will think yourself transported into the Eden of modern civilization – magnificently maintained roads, clean new houses, well-fed cattle roaming rich meadows . . . more dazzling wealth than in any other country in the world.” But, he continues, “look more closely at the villages: examine the parish registers, and you will discover with indescribable astonishment that one-sixth of the inhabitants of this flourishing kingdom” are so poor as to be classified paupers or indigents.

Tocqueville wastes little time in finding a culprit on which to lay the blame for this seemingly contradictory set of circumstances. That which is responsible for the teeming throngs of paupers, he says, is England’s generous “Poor Law,” or, as we know it today, government-sponsored welfare.

Before delving too deeply into the problems associated with public charity, however, Tocqueville issues to his readers a caveat of sorts, in which he cautions them not to instinctually feel too badly for the English poor. He warns that it is genuinely unfair to compare the poor of a wealthy nation like England to the poor of a not so well-to-do nation such as, he says, Spain or Portugal.

“The more prosperous a society is,” Tocqueville writes, “the more diversified and more durable become the enjoyments of the greatest number, the more they simulate true necessity through habit and imitation.” He continues.

The English poor appear almost rich to the French poor: and the latter are so regarded by the Spanish poor. What the Englishman lacks has never been possessed by the Frenchman. . . . Among very civilized peoples, the lack of multitude of things causes poverty: in the savage state, poverty consists only in not finding something to eat.

That having been said, Tocqueville moves on to tackle the problems created by public charity. He begins his attack on welfare by first acknowledging that he understands from whence the impetus to aid the poor by use of public funds comes.

At first glance there is no idea that seems more beautiful and grander than that of public charity. . . . At the same time that it assures the rich the enjoyment of their wealth, society guarantees the poor against the excessive misery. It asks some to give of their surplus in order to allow others basic necessities. This is certainly a moving and elevating sight.

But, he continues. “experience . . . destroys these beautiful illusions.” Indeed, public charity was, according to Tocqueville, responsible for a number of the social maladies that plagued 19th century England. These include.

✍ **The Idleness Of The Poor.** “Man,” Tocqueville argues, “has a natural passion for idleness. There are, however, two incentives to work: the need to live and the desire to improve the conditions of life. Experience has proven that the majority of men can be sufficiently motivated to work only by the first of these incentives.” In other words, if one provides guaranteed public charity to meet basic needs (food, clothing, shelter, etc.), one likewise takes away the primary motivation to work. “Any measure that establishes legal charity on a permanent basis and gives

it an administrative form thereby creates an idle and lazy class living at the expense of the industrial and working class.”

✍ **The Destruction Of Morality.** Tocqueville suggests that the morality of the indigent class (and thereby of society as a whole) suffers when public charity is the norm. “If you closely observe the condition of populations among whom such legislation has long been in force, you will easily discover that the effects are not less unfortunate for morality than for public prosperity, and that it depraves men even more than it impoverishes them.”

Where public charity is the law, he continues, “the number of illegitimate children and criminals grows rapidly and continuously . . .” And the reason indigent women continue to have illegitimate offspring is that, under the system of public charity, “illegitimate pregnancy must almost always improve their material condition . . .

✍ **Disincentives To Save.** Tocqueville continues his philippic on public charity by noting that the English system was also deleterious because it destroyed “the spirit of foresight” and made the idea of saving “more and more alien to the poor.” Why, one could legitimately ask, should I save for the future? Should misfortune befall me, the government would be mandated to rescue me from my mean estate.

✍ **The Dissolution Of Shame.** When, Tocqueville argues, public charity becomes a “right,” it loses its stigma. People no longer suffer embarrassment at their inability to support themselves or their children. Of one welfare claimant whose public plea he actually witnessed, Tocqueville wrote, “he does not blush to claim public charity, which has lost all of its afflicting and humiliating character in the people’s eyes.”

This, Tocqueville claims, is detrimental because it reduces the incentives to find work and leaves the system open to rampant abuse. If there is no shame associated with seeking assistance, then all, including those not truly needy, will seek aid and will lack sufficient motivation to remove themselves from the public dole.

✍ **Increased Class Conflict And Destruction Of The Bond Between Rich And Poor.** Private charity, the system replaced by the Poor Law, Tocqueville suggests, “established valuable ties between the rich and the poor. The deed itself involves the giver in the fate of the one whose poverty he has chosen to alleviate. The latter . . . feels inspired by gratitude . . .”

Public charity, in contrast, “strips the man of wealth of a part of his surplus without consulting him, and he sees the poor man only as a greedy stranger invited by the legislator to share his wealth. The poor man, on the other hand, feels no gratitude for a benefit that no one can refuse him and that could not satisfy him in any case.”

Public charity “breaks the only link which could be established between them [rich and poor]. It ranges each one under a banner, tallies them, and, bringing them face to face, prepares them for combat.” In short, “it inflames society’s sores.”

Tocqueville contrasts public charity with private charity even further by suggesting that private charity is a “manly and reasoned virtue,” but its public counterpart is simply a “weak and

unreflecting inclination.” In essence, giving to someone of your own free will is a truly noble deed, but asking government to perform this task with public funds is an unfeeling cop-out.

The conclusion of Tocqueville’s *Memoir on Pauperism* bears a great resemblance to its introduction, in that it issues to readers a caveat. Whereas the warning issued at the beginning cautions against judging English paupers too easily, the one at the end asks that readers not judge the author himself too harshly.

Anticipating the cries of his opponents, Tocqueville readily admits that the government should indeed play a role in taking care of the palpably needy. He writes, “I recognize not only the utility but the necessity of public charity.” But, he argues, it should be confined to such “inevitable evils as the helplessness of infancy, the decrepitude of old age, sickness, insanity.”

Tocqueville makes only one small reference to the United States in this volume. He notes that “circumstances, as in America, can prevent the seed [of welfare] from developing rapidly, but they cannot destroy it, and if the present generation escapes its influence, it will devour the well-being of generations to come.”

And lo, like so many of Tocqueville’s predictions about the United States in his most famous work, *Democracy in America*, this too has come to pass. And the tragedy of it all is that the well-being of these “generations to come” was devoured not because *no one* paid heed to Tocqueville’s insightful warnings, but because *some* people didn’t, and still won’t.

Who are these people, you ask? Well, Representative J. C. Watts (R., Okla.), one of the most respected young congressmen on Capitol Hill, described the ones with whom he is familiar as “poverty pimps.” Over two centuries ago, Rousseau referred to them as those who “boast of loving everyone in order to have the right to love no one.”

And there is no good excuse for the actions of these people. For indeed, American literature is full of warnings that echo and document the truth in Tocqueville’s words, if not as eloquently, then certainly as forcefully. My favorite comes from President Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

In an address to Congress in 1935, the founder of America’s modern social welfare state himself warned that, “Continued dependence on relief induces a spiritual and moral disintegration fundamentally destructive to the national fiber. To dole out relief in this way is to administer a narcotic, a subtle destroyer of the ‘human spirit.’”

It is, I believe, one of the saddest, and most remarkable, lessons from history, that wisdom about the nature of mankind seems never to become a permanent foundation upon which new wisdom can be formulated.

Science marches onward, constantly building upon discoveries made by prior generations, whether toward some tragic or utopian end no one knows. But in the great sphere of social relations, each new generation of mankind seems destined to make the same tragic mistakes, groping for truths that were discovered by men and women centuries earlier; truths that are readily available in volumes both ancient and modern, but which are ignored due to a panoply of human frailties, which include willful ignorance and overweening hubris.

I could not even begin to catalogue the volumes of readily available evidence that support Tocqueville's observations. But before closing I will point out just a few that have crossed my desk, and Steve's, in the past year or so.

Tocqueville commented on the comparative level of comfort of the English paupers ("The English poor appear almost rich to the French poor . . ."). In an article I wrote, dated October 30, 1996, entitled "The Good, The Bad, And The Ugly . . . And The Stupid And 'The Poor'," we noted a similar trend in American society, citing a Heritage Foundation report that indicated, among other things, the following.

Ninety one percent [of American poor] have a color television. Twenty nine percent own two or more color televisions . . . 'Poor' Americans live in larger houses or apartments, eat more meat, and are more likely to own cars and dishwashers than is the general population in Western Europe . . .

[The] average consumption of protein, vitamins, and minerals is virtually the same for poor and middle-class children, and in most cases is well above recommended norms. Poor children today are in fact super-nourished, growing up to be on average one inch taller and ten pounds heavier than the GIs who stormed the beaches of Normandy in World War II.

Tocqueville noted that the moral character of the poor falters under the public charity system ("The number of illegitimate children and criminals grows rapidly and continuously . . ."). In January 22, 1997, Steve and I wrote an article entitled "Coming Soon To Your Neighborhood . . . The Superpredators." We cited a number of revered experts on juvenile crime and public morality, many of whom indicated that as society's morality continues to break down, the violence and frequency of crime (especially juvenile crime) will continue to flourish.

One such expert, John Dilulio, a professor at Princeton University and the director of the Brookings Institute's Center for Public Management, blamed the increased virulence of crimes committed by youths on "moral poverty," which he alleged is the result of children growing up in "abusive, violence-ridden, fatherless, Godless, and jobless settings," more often than not linked directly to public charity.

Tocqueville also noted that public charity foments enmity between the classes. (It "breaks the only link which could be established between them [rich and poor]. It ranges each one under a banner, tallies them, and, bringing them face to face, prepares them for combat.") Once again, the class-warfare rhetoric of the old-left welfare devotees has been previously noted in these pages. In an August 6, 1997, article entitled "In The Midst Of Calm And Easy Circumstances," we remarked upon the frequency with which the champions of the welfare state resort to class-baiting as the public relations tactic of choice.

This trend among Democrats seems to have begun when First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton began liberally sprinkling her speeches during the 1992 campaign with polarizing phrases like "the decade of greed," "the rich," and "unconscionable profits," and began implying that she and Bill would, if elected, smite the "greedy . . ."

But the cause has been taken up aggressively by such leading Democrats as House Minority Leader Dick Gephardt (Mo.) and Senate Minority Leader Tom Daschle (D, SD), whose political speeches are so laced with references to “the rich” and wild charges that Republicans “want to tear apart the social contract” that even *Business Week* recently discussed in an article “the success of the Democrats’ class warfare rhetoric.”

A recent issue of *U.S. News and World Report* (dated January 12, 1998) contained an article by David Whitman, entitled “Despite Tough Talk, States Avoid Workfare,” in which he discussed the failure of most states to implement the welfare reforms mandated by federal legislation that were to have taken effect no later than October 22 of last year. Rather than comply with the “workfare” dictum and make welfare recipients work in return for public assistance, most states have simply granted recipients waivers, allowing them to remain jobless. “Massachusetts,” he wrote, “which has one of the most extensive workfare programs, has excused 82% of the 72,500 families on the rolls from the 60-day workfare deadline.” It seems that the “idle poor” to which Tocqueville referred also have a contemporary facsimile.

Finally, just last week, I read somewhere that by October 1, 2002, food stamps will have been replaced, across the nation, by ATM-like “dignity cards,” in an effort to, among other things, “remove the stigma of receiving aid.” This, of course, brings to mind Tocqueville’s warning that the dissolution of shame connected with welfare acceptance is detrimental because it reduces the incentives to find work and leaves the system open to rampant abuse. If there is no shame associated with seeking assistance, then all, including those not truly needy will seek aid and will lack sufficient motivation.

Yes indeed, there are striking parallels between the results of the English Poor Laws, as seen by Tocqueville, and their modem U.S. equivalents. And yes, they are being ignored, as is this final thought by the great French social observer on the flaws inherent in systems of public charity.

Any permanent, regular administrative system whose aim will be to provide for the needs of the poor will breed more miseries than it can cure, will deprave the population that it wants to help and comfort, will in time reduce the rich to being no more than the tenant-farmers of the poor, will dry up the sources of savings, will stop the accumulation of capital, will retard the development of trade, [and] will benumb human industry and activity.

Nicely put, Alexis Charles Henri Clerel de Tocqueville.

---

**THE POLITICAL FORUM**

Copyright 2003 . The Political Forum. 8563 Senedo Road, Mt. Jackson, Virginia 22842, tel. 540-477-9762, fax 540-477-3359. All rights reserved. Information contained herein is based on data obtained from recognized services, issuer reports or communications, or other sources believed to be reliable. However, such information has not been verified by us, and we do not make any representations as to its accuracy or completeness, and we are not responsible for typographical errors. Any statements nonfactual in nature constitute only current opinions which are subject to change without notice.