

In Appreciation of Harvey Mansfield at 90

COMMENTARY

By [Peter Berkowitz](#) - RCP Contributor
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This is based on a July 6 talk for a panel, “Tocqueville and America” at “[Harvey Mansfield at 90: A Conference on Major Themes of His Work](#),” sponsored by the American Enterprise Institute and the Foundation for Constitutional Government.

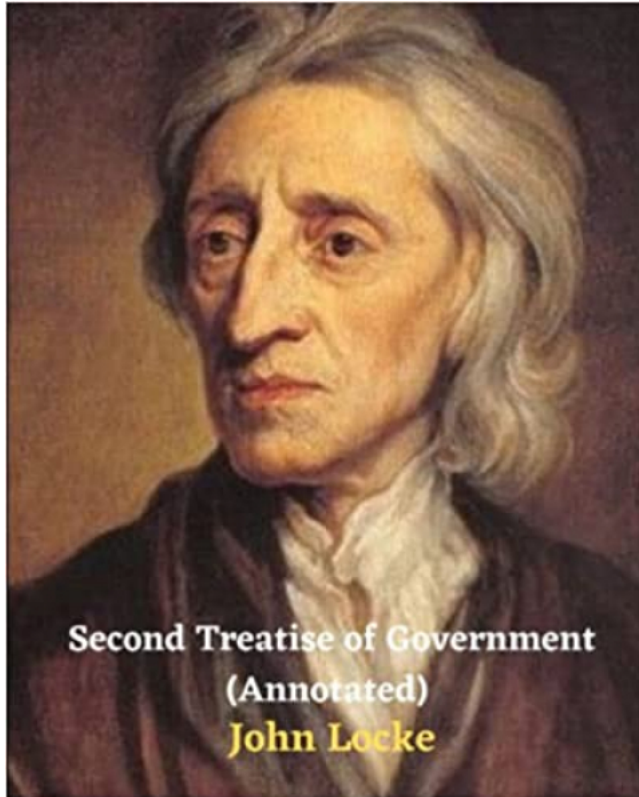
In 1990, I arrived at Harvard’s Department of Government as a young assistant professor. It was my good fortune that Harvey Mansfield invited me to co-teach Gov 1060 and Gov 1061. The sequence, and Harvey’s manner of teaching it, furnished a fitting agenda for a lifetime of learning.

Gov 1060 is offered during the fall semester and introduces classical and medieval political philosophy. Gov 1061 follows in the spring semester. It deals with modern political philosophy, Machiavelli to Nietzsche.

I was a beginner. Harvey was a master. Despite the vast gaps in our experience, our learning, and our accomplishments, Harvey welcomed me to the enterprise as a full partner.

Such generosity of spirit is rare. Especially so in the contemporary academy. Professors and administrators endlessly preach the virtues of democracy and social justice while routinely demonstrating the vices, and perpetuating the institutions, of corrupt aristocracy.

Harvey, thanks again for making room for me in Gov 1060 and 1061. I learned a lot and greatly enjoyed the ride.



Gov 1060 and Gov 1061 students were generally terrific. One reason was Harvey's reputation for tough grading. Another was his bold, incisive, occasionally quirky, and sometimes elusive observations, interpretations, and analyses. As a result, his classes tended to attract a particular type of student – one who likes to test himself or herself against one of Harvard's finest minds. And one ready to risk a hit to his or her GPA for the privilege of accompanying Professor Mansfield on an eye-opening journey through the history of political philosophy.

When we co-taught Gov 1061, Harvey would give the opening lectures on Machiavelli. One year, on the first day of class, after Harvey's riveting but unorthodox introduction, a young

woman approached me. “Excuse me Professor Berkowitz,” she said softly, “may I talk to you for a moment.”

I said, “Sure.”

“I’m only a freshman,” she explained in a diffident voice, “and I’m not sure I should take Gov 1061.”

It was easy to imagine that she felt intimidated. Nevertheless, I asked why she hesitated.

“Because,” she replied, “even though I found Professor Mansfield’s presentation fascinating, and funny, too, I don’t think I fully grasped all his points.”

I smiled. “Don’t worry,” I said, “none of us fully grasp all Professor Mansfield’s points. But if you found his lectures fascinating and if he makes you laugh – rather than recoil in outrage – then I suspect that you have grasped enough already to make the rest of the course worthwhile.”

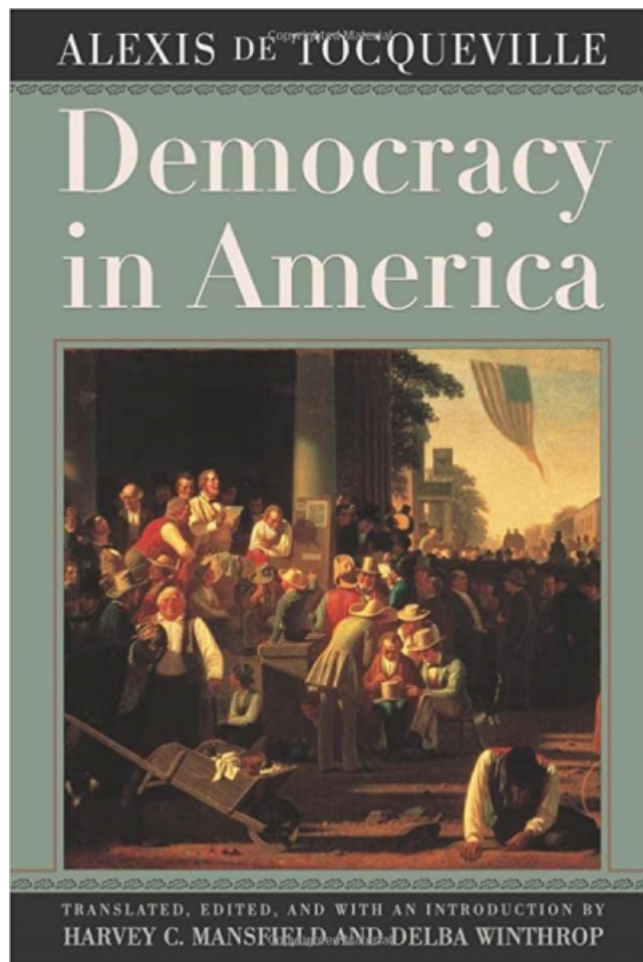
If memory serves, the soft-spoken but intellectually brave young woman earned an A- in the course. And that was before Harvey announced his [two-grade policy](#): one grade that students deserve, and a second, higher grade for their transcripts, more consistent with the university’s wildly inflated grades.

I came to Harvard reasonably well-versed in what we called “the critique of liberalism.” Then as now both left and right promulgated versions of it.

“Liberalism” referred to the modern tradition of freedom. Some say Machiavelli originated it. Others contend that it all started with Hobbes. We can agree, though, that Locke gave seminal expression to modern liberalism’s premises, principles, and aims.

The term “critique” signified that the modern tradition of freedom was a spent force. According to the critique, liberalism flattered and degraded human beings by conceiving of individuals as rational choosers and as self-creating sources of value. It denied our natures as social and political animals. It overlooked duty, dismissed the virtues, and dissolved community, leaving in its ruinous wake isolated and atomized individuals – some restive, acquisitive, and ambitious for wealth, status, and power; others listless, apathetic, and wishing to be left alone. Liberalism was fatally flawed, utterly exhausted, and in need of prompt replacement.

The critique of liberalism – then as now – struck me as powerful. But also both complacent and rash. I was troubled by the critique’s extremism. Could liberalism – which, for Americans through the U.S. Constitution, explicitly limits government’s responsibilities and leaves questions about salvation and human excellence in the hands of individuals, and their families and communities – really be responsible for the principal ills that afflict us? I was vexed by the critique’s political irresponsibility. What would replace liberalism and at what price? And I was put off by the ingratitude. Wasn’t it hypocritical to enjoy the moral and material fruits of the modern tradition of freedom – rights, prosperity, pluralism – while self-righteously denouncing it?



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Harvey's writings present a better way of thinking about our constitutional inheritance. He is among our sharpest critics of liberalism and among our shrewdest defenders of it. The sharpness of the critique goes together with the shrewdness of the defense. To defend liberalism effectively, you must understand it deeply. You must comprehend not only its advantages but also its incomplete assumptions and its overreaching ones, its blind spots, and its temptations. Wasn't it Plato's Socrates – come to think of it in Book I of *The Republic* – who observed that the best doctor also makes the most accomplished poisoner?

Harvey has described himself as writing “in defense of a defensible liberalism.” The liberalism – or what has come to be called liberalism – that we see all around us is in many respects not defensible. That version of liberalism holds that government is not in the first place responsible for securing the rights all citizens equally share but rather for ensuring substantive equality in ever-expanding spheres of life. Indeed, the quest to ensure substantive equality compels government to systematically violate individual rights. Such a liberalism deviates drastically from liberalism’s original premises, principles, and aims. It is those that Harvey has done so much to recover.

Harvey seeks to conserve the modern tradition of freedom at its best. But what standards inform his assessment of what is best in the modern tradition of freedom?

In a short book called “The Spirit of Liberalism,” Harvey characterized himself as “a friend of liberalism.” The liberalism of which Harvey was a friend was the classical liberalism that receives expression in various ways and to different degrees in, among others, Locke, Montesquieu, Smith, Burke, Madison, Mill, and, not least, Tocqueville. This liberalism assumes that human beings are by nature free and equal, that securing freedom is government’s highest task, and that self-government depends on citizens’ character and civil society’s vigor.

To say that Harvey is a friend of liberalism implies that he is not an unqualified proponent of liberalism, even of liberalism well understood. It suggests that he has other friends in the tradition of political philosophy. It indicates that the modern tradition of freedom does not offer the final word on ethics and politics.

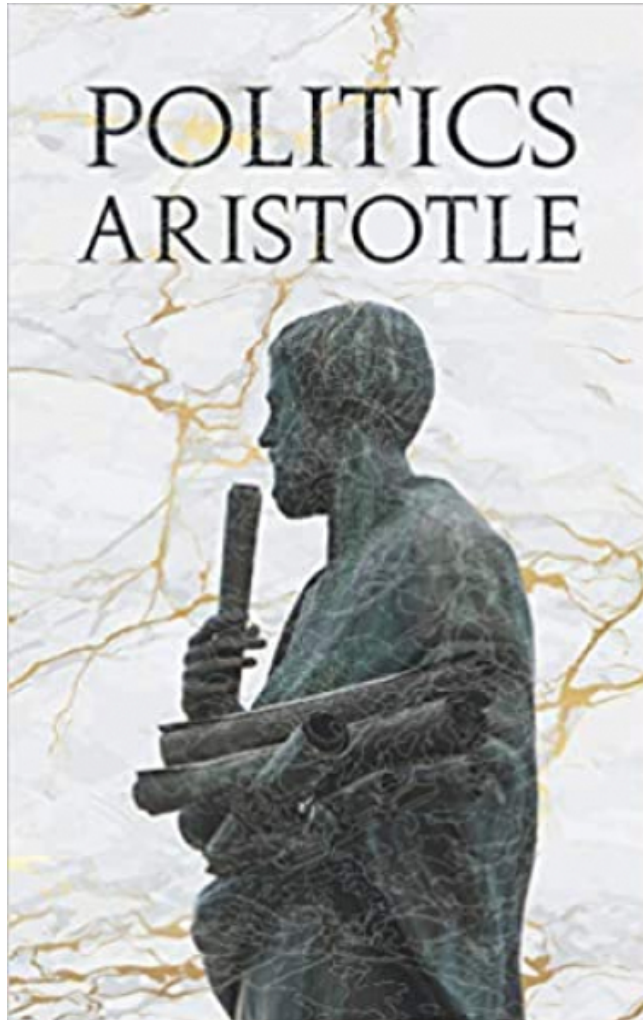
That recalls a great moment in Gov 1061, but one which occurred before my time. I know of it only through legend. But what a legend it is.

According to the tale as it was handed down to me, on the last day of Gov 1061, a precocious student put to Harvey a question that was often on students' minds. "Mr. Mansfield," the student said, "you have been teaching us political philosophy all year long. Every week or two you present a new thinker. You examine each with enthusiasm and care. But they can't all be right. As you have emphasized, the great figures in the history of political philosophy disagree among themselves concerning crucial matters. So, I was wondering: Who is your favorite? Where do you stand?"

Harvey chuckled. He likes precocious students. After a moment's reflection, he replied with a mischievous grin, "Locke in the short run, Aristotle in the long run."

Nietzsche aspired to capture in an aphorism an idea that others required an entire book to express. "Locke in the short run, Aristotle in the long run" comes close to achieving that aspiration.

Why Locke in the short run? Because Locke provides a landmark account of the premises, principles, and aims on which our regime, the American constitutional order, is based. The central ideas of American constitutional government are Lockean ideas – that some rights are so fundamental that they are inherent in all human beings, that government's first duty is to secure those rights and that government is limited by those rights, that government's just powers derive from the consent of the governed. These ideas, instituted through the U.S. Constitution, have conferred on this nation blessings of liberty that it is our duty as citizens to safeguard, more perfectly honor, and transmit.



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Why Aristotle in the long run? Because Aristotle elaborates the standards in light of which all actual regimes – all of which are imperfect in one way or another, including liberal, or rights-protecting democracy – should be judged. By providing an enduring account of the moral and intellectual virtues and the variety of regimes, Aristotle illuminates the alternatives to, and therefore the strengths and weaknesses of, liberal democracy. Through his powerful descriptions of the peaks of human excellence, Aristotle enables the citizens of

liberal democracies, with their families and communities, to pursue happiness by perfecting their natures.

But these reflections, like the aphorism that inspired them, leave something out. In saying that he stood with Locke in the short run and Aristotle in the long run, Harvey silently raised but did not answer an intriguing question. With whom does he stand in the intermediate run?

The answer, I'm guessing, is Tocqueville.

Why Tocqueville in the intermediate run? Because Tocqueville goes beyond Locke's analysis of the formal structure of liberal democracy, but Tocqueville stops short of speculating, in Aristotelian fashion, about the best regime and the outstanding human type. Instead, Tocqueville provides a peerless account of the spirit of liberal democracy in America. Tocqueville explores the necessity, the justice and injustice, and the benefits and the costs of *modern* democracy while bringing into focus the exceptional character of *American* democracy. He illuminates the nongovernmental supports of liberal democracy in America. He throws into sharp relief the unwise impulses and dangerous tendencies that democracy encourages. And he shows how political freedom both tempers the destructive excesses to which democracy is prone and preserves space to honor duty, cultivate the virtues, and accomplish great tasks.

"Locke in the short run, Tocqueville in the intermediate run, Aristotle in the long run." That captures an essential dimension of Harvey's political science. It crystallizes an orientation that enables one, as a good friend, to rise to the

defense of a defensible liberalism. It frames a fitting agenda for a lifetime of learning.

Thank you, Harvey. Thank you very much.

Peter Berkowitz is the Tad and Dianne Taube senior fellow at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University. From 2019 to 2021, he served as director of policy planning at the U.S. State Department. His writings are posted at PeterBerkowitz.com and he can be followed on Twitter [@BerkowitzPeter](https://twitter.com/BerkowitzPeter).