

Faculty Conversations

Dr. Josh Mitchell: a scholar in political thought & western theology



Dr. Joshua Mitchell teaches Voluntary Associations and Democracy for the Institute on Philanthropy and Voluntary Service. He is associate dean of faculty affairs at the Georgetown University School of Foreign Service in Qatar and professor and former chair of the government department at Georgetown University.

He has published three books and is working on a fourth on the 20th century theologian Reinhold Niebuhr. In addition, his writings have appeared in many publications. He was interviewed by TFAS Communications Manager Erin Brett.

Q: Why is it important to teach Tocqueville to students?

A: I have been reading Tocqueville for 25 years. I've taught him for three years in Argentina, and I'm teaching him now in Doha, Qatar. What I find is that of all the theorists in the history of western political thought, the one who most grabs the attention of a global college population is Tocqueville, through his great work, *Democracy in America*.

It's not just because it's about America. It's because, with Tocqueville, you have a man who's wrestling with the end of honor culture, which is what Europe was all about. And he is also wrestling with modernity, but he is not sure how to do it. This is exactly the problem in the Third World today. So what Tocqueville describes as Europe in the 1830s is very similar to the rest of the world now in the beginning of the 21st century. Students understand that.

Q: The class is designed to facilitate discussion on Tocqueville's book. How do you draw the students into that discussion?

A: My task as a teacher is to connect the text with the students' own personal experiences. So, when I teach this book, I move in two directions at once. I try to show them the depth of the text, for example, how you can

spend an hour studying one paragraph, and I also try to show how all of this makes sense in terms of everyday experiences.

The Classics of Western Civilization wouldn't even make sense unless they spoke to contemporary life. So, what I teach has to pass what I call the "experience test." If what this author is saying doesn't meet up with what experience tells us, then we have to dismiss it.

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Q: Looking at our current democracy through Tocqueville's eyes, has the liberty of our citizens eroded in the last half-century, or do you see encouraging trends?

A: The overall trend, which Tocqueville predicted, was that the state would grow stronger, and liberty would be eroded. And that has happened. The federal government is

growing stronger. The rights of the 50 states are being diminished. The court is fairly aggressive these days, and we're moving toward the kind of universal homogenous society that Tocqueville most worried about.

That said, Tocqueville also notes that there is a tremendous reservoir of good habits, which he thought would continue to reproduce, generation to generation. What he really means by these "good habits" is the habit of forming associations – the habit of looking out to other individuals to find the kind of nourishment that we need rather than looking up to the state to produce that for us.

So, while there is this overall trend toward the state growing stronger, both in America and around the world, it's also the case in the United States that we still have tremendous reservoirs of exactly what Tocqueville thought we needed to save democracy.

Q: Are there any other key ideas that you're trying to convey to students?

A: Yes. What Tocqueville understands, and what I think is important for all of us to understand, is that human beings are rational maximizers, but they're also beings with deep memories and habits. One of the great insights that he has is that human beings are imitative – mimetic beings, in Greek. That has all sorts of implications for the so-called "transition to democracy" around the globe. It is not easy in countries that don't have a long democratic history to move toward democracy.

And so, after 1989, when everybody was saying democracy is the only political form that works – that Tocqueville was right, that the age of equality was coming – they

just didn't read Tocqueville closely enough, because Tocqueville himself realizes it's going to take hundreds and hundreds of years to get to global democracy, if it comes at all.

Q: Why do you think voluntary association is important to our democracy?

A: Tocqueville's larger point is that we can move forward politically in two ways. We can look up to the state, or we can look out to our citizens. Tocqueville thought that the only way that we could have a vibrant democracy is to enlist the help of our citizens and not look up to the state to step in and provide for all of our needs.

So, for Tocqueville, voluntary associations are the training in democratic liberty. He makes this very clear in the early part of *Democracy in America*. There's a really happy coincidence between the kind of program that TFAS is running here on philanthropy and Tocqueville's thinking in *Democracy in America*. The students might think they're working for a voluntary organization, but in Tocqueville's account, they're saving democracy.

Q: Have you noticed a change in the opinions and views of your students after taking your course?

A: I think what happens is that there is a lot of skepticism when students come in about how this could possibly be relevant. Once we've laid out the overall theoretical vision that Tocqueville has about the meaning of history, the coming of equality and the relationship between local political life and national political life, they see that Tocqueville's argument has a lot of weight, and that they

actually are doing something far more important than they thought.

Q: You have been teaching recently in Doha, Qatar. How did this assignment come about, and what are your thoughts about this teaching experience?

A: I was born in Cairo in 1955. My father was doing research at that time on Muslim fundamentalism. My family was stationed in Kuwait and Yemen with the Foreign Service in the late 50's and early 60's, so subjects like the Middle East and its prospects for modernizing have been dinnertime conversations for me since I was six years old.

When this assignment came along, I thought, "I've been the Chairman of the government department at Georgetown for three years. I know enough about Georgetown." I needed a bit of a break, and this was a tremendous opportunity. I have two teenage sons and I'd rather be over there with textbooks than have my sons there with bayonets in 10 years.

We have a global challenge. We have to start understanding ideas of other cultures. And my project is to get my Muslim students to begin to think about the history of Western ideas. And, as a counterpoint, I would love to get a kind of great books practice in the Islamic tradition going, and then have a meeting of the minds.

Q: Has teaching for IPVS been fulfilling for you?

A: Yes. When I teach Tocqueville as a regular course at Georgetown, I have some student diversity, but not nearly enough. IPVS is great because I have a real cross section of America.

Not only that, but I also get wonderful students from overseas who are deeply perplexed by America. And nine times out of 10, they will come up to me after class and say, "now I understand what America's all about."

So it's an opportunity to speak to a much larger cross section of the U.S. and also to international students. This is now the second year I've done it, and it's a great joy for me.

Q: You are currently working on a book called "Reinhold Niebuhr and the Politics of Hope." Can you tell us what this is about?

A: Way back in the 80s when I was in graduate school, I'd become fascinated with the great 20th century theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr.

His argument was that the problem with secular democracies is that they oscillate back and forth between deep brooding pessimism about what can happen and completely unwarranted optimism. He thought that Christian hope was a better alternative—the only alternative, in fact. He understood that the great temptation of the modern secular mind is to think in terms of universals: global government, flat taxes, the EU, etc.

Niebuhr is important because he's a corrective to this sort of universalist impulse. He understands that humans are deeply flawed and that governments have to take full cognizance of the fact that they're flawed. He understands that democracy might be the best political form that takes this into account. He thought that we could come to grips with the evils of the world, face them and certainly aspire to universal justice, but understand that all of our efforts are going to fall short.