

Soft Despotism Without the State

By: Kate Ferenchick

Alexis de Tocqueville, a Frenchman, came to America in the 1800s and wrote a book: *Democracy in America*. Through this book, he covered traits on American democracy with both the benefits and fallbacks. One fallback was soft despotism, in which we would not be conquered by a dictator by force, but rather by a slow, comforting paternal-type figure. He believed we would get so caught up in our individualism, equality, and material comfort, that we would slowly allow the state to take control. While we may see this in government (especially considering the decreasing voter turnout by percent), it has derived in the markets instead. Rather than soft despotism rooted in government, it is seen in our growing compliance to corporations.

This idea came from being annoyed with the clear increase in ads on all streaming platforms, having to now pay a premium to remove these recently added ads. I then started thinking about the NYtimes adding the paywall to their mini crossword, then the aggressive monetization of duolingo, and so on. At first (and rightfully so), I got annoyed at these companies. But I then realized: can we really be mad at these companies, when we are so compliant to pay for this once-free content?

This is based on our perception of comfort. We are willing to “obey” these companies as long as we can continue the feeling of convenience using them. Instead of protesting this clear greed, humans are so compliant to accept this (although there may be complaining), choosing comfort over resistance. In a Tocqueville framework, we have become so dependent on these platforms, we allow it to slowly (instead of removing, like governments) use monetization to convert dependency into tolerated extraction.

As we become increasingly reliant on platforms such as social media ones, we allow them to subject us to more ads, marketing opportunities, and other nuances. We accept the manipulative design as the actual platform provides goods and convenience to us, even when it is taking them away. Like soft despotism, we do not notice this shift (or if we do, we do not act on it beyond getting annoyed occasionally) due to the tradeoff we feel it offers.

Humans have increasingly allowed the idea of comfort to justify deeper issues. Beyond ads and this monetization, we prefer endlessly scrolling, hiding in our rooms, and avoiding tasks that may cause suffering over challenging tasks that will allow us to grow, as it provides comfort, which the brain craves. It is a difficult cycle to break, but we must establish a boundary between comfort and preventing growth to ensure we are not sucked into more inconvenience.

Tocqueville’s soft despotism is seen in the 21st century through our tradeoff with corporations, but hits a deeper issue humans are facing. Giving into the increase in ads gives us a glimpse into

the larger issue at hand: comfort is valuable, but when prioritized above all else, it can become a negative force. We have become so compliant with intrusions if it provides us pleasure and comfort, even when it prevents growth and facing hard issues for our own development.