

### Regarding Benedict and Tocqueville, Porchers and PoMoCons

[Coda to a 2010 lecture never given, due to an on-site attack of appendicitis;  
in memory of Peter Lawler]

In the opening chapter of my book *Till We Have Built Jerusalem*, writing about the kind of culture needed to promote both the formal order of traditional urbanism and the Aristotelian tradition's understanding of the *telos* of urbanism, I concluded by noting that I vacillate between what I called "The Tocqueville Scenario" and "The Benedict Scenario." Both presume that the best life for human beings is the life of virtue lived in community, but the Tocqueville Scenario posits that within liberal culture it is and remains possible to live lives of moral and intellectual virtue in community with others, whereas the Benedict scenario posits that living a life of moral and intellectual virtue in community with others requires some large measure of forsaking liberal culture for just such a life, with the Benedictine monastic communities of the 6<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> centuries serving as a kind of metaphor for such a scenario.

Now well into the back nine of my life, I continue to vacillate between what I think would be best for me, my loved ones, my friends, my students to *do*; though realistically, I would have to say there can be no doubt I am biographically and existentially tilted in the direction of Tocqueville --- though that may simply be a matter of my character flaws. But in terms of the culture, I have ceased to think of these two scenarios as either / or options, and instead have come to think that the future of traditional architectural and urban culture is more likely a both / and proposition. And in this, I think there are parallels with the controversy, famous in some circles, between the writers of the Front Porch Republic blog and the writers of the *First Things* blog Post-Modern Conservative.

The Porchers champion Place, Limits, Liberty---and by implication small intentional communities with an active relationship to agriculture; whereas the PoMoCons not only aspire but profess to be more cosmopolitan, more engaged with the forces of modern life and economic prosperity, and more engaged with the realm of *realpolitik*. What the two parties have in common is a conviction of the centrality of the virtues to human well-being, as well as a tendency to insult one another as only members of the same family can.

It is not my calling to make Porchers and PoMoCons like each other---and maybe they don't dislike each other all that much. But I do have an observation to make from the perspective of an urbanist: viz., that they both operate with central metaphors drawn from traditional urbanism, and that both of their urbanisms can be accounted for by a Rural-to-Urban Transect. In the case of the Porchers, "the front porch" denotes a place that mediates between the public realm of the street or square and the private

realm of the family home; and in the case of the PoMoCons, writing from a journalistic base famous for its metaphor of “the naked public square.” Somehow, neither side is inclined to launch their polemic either from or to the shopping mall or the parking lot.

The PoMoCons tend to dis-respect the Porchers interest in place; but this I think is simply short sighted, and represents a blindness to the richness of and a commitment to human efforts to love the places we occupy and to make them beautiful. In thinking however about these two competing virtue parties, it seems to me that the PoMoCons, perhaps, are the Tocquevillians and the Porchers are the Benedictines. In the PoMoCon paradigm, I can imagine persons living well in communities of virtue in existing traditional urban neighborhoods, *tending to* but nevertheless *consuming* a traditional formal order created once-upon-a-time by pre-modern architectural sensibilities. What I don't think can happen in the PoMoCon world is for these communities either to be genuinely self-governing, or able to establish and nourish a traditional culture of building and place making. PoMoCons can consume and even care for traditional architecture and urbanism, I just don't think they can produce them.

As I imagine the formal and spatial context of the Porcher paradigm, persons would live well in communities of virtue, perhaps not unlike the PoMoCons; but they would do so in small towns, or perhaps other kinds of intentional communities occupying smaller precincts within larger human settlements. Unlike the PoMoCons however, because of their size, and because they are communities of place, the Porchers could be self-governing; and might also, perhaps, be able to re-create, nourish, and sustain a genuine culture of traditional building.

But this is just speculation; my best guess so far.