

Introduction

Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*

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Alexis de Tocqueville was born on July 29, 1805, and died in his fifty-fourth year on April 16, 1859: not a long life, and one often afflicted with ill health.¹ He was born a French aristocrat and lived as one; he was also a liberal who both rejected the old regime of aristocracy and doubted the revolution that overturned it. An aristocratic liberal he was, and a Frenchman who knew America so well as to deserve a place in American political thought.

His *Democracy in America* is at once the best book ever written on democracy and the best book ever written on America. Tocqueville connects the two subjects in his "Introduction," and in his title, by observing that America is the land of democracy. It is the country where democracy is least hindered and most perfected—where democracy is at its most characteristic and at its best. Today that claim might be contested, but it is at least arguable. If the twentieth century was an American century, it is because the work of America—not altogether unsuccessful—has been to keep democracy strong where it is alive and to promote it where it is weak or nonexistent. Somehow, even into the twenty-first century, democracy is still in America.

Tocqueville's book has acquired the authority of a classic. It is cited with approval by politicians—by all American presidents since Eisenhower—as well as by professors in many fields. Universal accord in its praise suggests that it has something for everyone. But it also suggests that readers tolerate, or perhaps simply overlook, the less welcome passages that their political and scholarly opponents are citing. It is quite striking that both Left and Right appeal to *Democracy in America* for support of their contrary policies. Tocqueville seems to have achieved the goal, expressed at the end of his "Introduction," of standing above the parties of the day. Yet his widespread appeal should not mask the controversial and unsettling character of the work.

Tocqueville's Trip to America

Before writing *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville took a trip to America of a little more than nine months in the company of his friend Gustave de Beaumont (1802–1866).² Like Tocqueville, Beaumont was a magistrate; the two had studied law together and served on the same court at Versailles.³ In 1830, they came to America as collaborators in a grand project to see "what a great republic is," as Tocqueville put it in a letter to another friend.⁴

Tocqueville was drawn to America to observe the future society of "almost complete equality of social conditions" toward which he believed Europe was moving inexorably. Although he said later that he did not go to America with the idea of writing a book, it seems clear that he and

Beaumont went with a large joint project in mind, for both refer to it in contemporaneous letters. They also had a definite smaller project to study penal reform in America, which Tocqueville described as a "pretext" for the voyage.⁵ During the nine-month trip in America, Tocqueville and Beaumont followed an efficient itinerary. With time out for rest, research, and conversation with useful or important Americans, they still went almost everywhere. Starting from New York, they traveled upstate to Buffalo, proceeding through the Great Lakes to the frontier, as it was then, in Michigan and Wisconsin. There followed two weeks in Canada, from which they descended to Boston and Philadelphia and Baltimore. Next they went west to Pittsburgh and Cincinnati; then south to Nashville, Memphis, and New Orleans; then north through the southeastern states to Washington; and at last back to New York, from where they returned to France. Like tourists seeking characteristic experiences, they rode on steamboats (one of which sank) and stayed in a log cabin. They found it easy to gain access to prominent Americans, and they met with John Quincy Adams, Andrew Jackson, Albert Gallatin, James Kent, Francis Lieber, Daniel Webster, Sam Houston, Roger Taney, Charles Carroll, and many others less well known.⁶ They both kept journals, and Tocqueville's has been published under the title *Journey to America*.⁷ It contains notes for the two books he was to write and was not intended for publication. Though full of interest, the notes are mostly not composed or developed, and the result cannot be considered part of the abundant contemporary travel literature on America produced by English and French writers who came to have a look at the new democracy. Among those diaries, Tocqueville would have been especially mindful of Chateaubriand's *Voyage to America* (1827), with its brilliant reflections on democracy.

The two volumes of *Democracy in America* were published five years apart, in 1835 and 1840. They had different contents and different receptions. The first volume, with its lively picturing of America, was a sensation and made Tocqueville famous. The second volume, with its somber analysis of democracy, was received without enthusiasm, an event that somewhat disconcerted its author.⁸ In a letter to John Stuart Mill (written in 1840 after the second volume came out), Tocqueville observed that Mill was the only one to have understood him. He went on to muse that there was something obscure and problematic in the second volume that "does not capture the mind of the crowd," and that he had wanted to portray the "general traits of democratic societies of which no complete model yet exists." In response, Mill assured him that the thoughts in the second volume were deeper and more recondite than those in the first.⁹

The polish, style, and insight of *Democracy in America* obscure the research that preceded it.¹⁰ Footnotes that document his research can be found in some chapters of the first volume (DA I 1.1, 1.2, 1.5, 1.8, 2.10), and there are longer endnotes that both document and elaborate it. But there are long stretches of text, especially in the second volume, that seem to flow directly from his mind, unmediated by previous scholarship and unsubstantiated by reference to sources. The original working manuscript for the book tells a different story, however.¹¹ It shows how well he had studied; how far he had cast his net for fact and opinion; how ingeniously he had sought and produced the telling example; how surely he had reduced the manifold to the salient; how thoroughly he had prepared his generalizations; and how carefully he had formulated them.

Tocqueville's Liberalism

When Tocqueville wrote his book, it was to speak reprovably, and sometimes severely, to the partisans of his day for and against democracy. Although the Old Regime has now faded into unremembered history and everyone has followed Tocqueville's advice to accept democracy, partisans remain within it, and they still divide over whether to restrain democracy or push it

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further. Tocqueville has something dismaying, but instructive, to say to both parties. He knows the extent of democracy in America because he sees better than we the resistances to it in America. He came to America to examine democracy up close and to be sure of what he thought he might find. Unlike other visitors, he knew that America was not merely derivative of Europe. It was not behind but ahead of Europe and in that sense exceptional. Tocqueville takes the measure of America's boast, repeated on the first page of *The Federalist*, to set an example for all mankind. He makes his ambition the study of America's ambition, in both cases an ambition that leaves others free. It is open to any country to surpass America if it can, and it is possible that some writer, some day, will write a better book on democracy in America than this one.

Today, Tocqueville seems readily accessible to us. His recognition of the democratic revolution and its problems appears right on the mark, and the success of most of his predictions seems uncanny. (He was, however, wrong about a coming war between the races: *DA* I 2.10.) On the Left in America, he is the philosopher of community and civic engagement who warns against the appearance of an industrial aristocracy and against the bourgeois or commercial passion for material well-being: in sum, he is for democratic citizenship. On the Right, he is quoted for his strictures on "Big Government" and his liking for decentralized administration as well as for celebrating individual energy and opposing egalitarian excess: he is a balanced liberal, defending both freedom and moderation. For both parties he is welcome in an era when democracy has defeated the totalitarians and is no longer under challenge to its existence, but faces new threats to its security from external enemies as well as challenges from those within who no longer take modern progress for granted as good.

In France, Tocqueville came into vogue in the 1970s and is now a strong presence. He benefits from national pride which, not only in France, has often been less than discerning. Although *Democracy in America* was a huge success when it first appeared, soon thereafter Tocqueville was allowed to fall into neglect. His books were not read and his style, his importance, and his insight were slighted. After World War II, Marxism, existentialism, and deconstructionism were on stage in France and liberalism was in hiding. Then French scholars and intellectuals were awakened to their heritage of nineteenth-century liberals, and above all to the discomfiting sagacity of Tocqueville, always more sensitive than reassuring. But after much false assurance from ready solutions, the wary observation and cool advice of liberalism can come as a relief.

Yet Tocqueville, a liberal, does not build his understanding of democracy on the liberal state of nature first conceived by Thomas Hobbes, Benedict Spinoza, and John Locke. He does not refer to that concept in *Democracy in America*.¹² His liberalism thus differs from that of James Madison. From his viewpoint, Madison's liberalism seemed lacking in concrete observation of America, above all of the democratic revolution there. In *The Federalist* no. 10, Madison's most famous statement of his liberalism, he distinguishes a democracy from a republic in which the people rule indirectly through their representatives. Representation works best, Madison says, in large, heterogeneous countries with many conflicting interests and sects that make it difficult to form a majority faction, the bane of popular government.

Tocqueville does not share Madison's confidence that the problem can be solved. He fears majority tyranny in America and actually sees it at work there in public opinion. For him, the danger is not so much factious interest or passion as the degradation of souls in democracy, a risk to which Madison does not directly refer but which Tocqueville states prominently in his "Introduction" to *Democracy in America*. As a sign of his fear, he habitually calls the American government a "democratic republic," thus spanning and overriding the distinction that Madison was at pains to establish. A modern republic, Tocqueville means to say, cannot help being a democracy, and a modern democracy necessarily has a hard task in getting equal citizens to

accept authority without feeling they have been subjected and degraded. Madison's reliance on the state of nature was a way of avoiding examination of the human soul, for in that early liberal concept the soul disappears as a whole while being divided into disconnected passions such as fear, vanity, or pity. Tocqueville looks at the whole soul and at all of democracy. He considers individual, society, and government as involved with one another without the simplifying state-of-nature abstraction.

Tocqueville learned from fellow liberals, even as he departed from them. His work should be compared to that of two French contemporaries, Benjamin Constant (1767–1830) and François Guizot (1787–1874); to that of his friend in England, John Stuart Mill (1806–1873); and especially to those of three French philosophers—Pascal, Montesquieu, and Rousseau—who, he said, are “three men with whom I live a little every day.” Of these only Montesquieu is a liberal, but Pascal and Rousseau helped to give Tocqueville's liberalism its particular cast.

Tocqueville's Political Science

We may preface our study of Tocqueville's text with remarks on his method—his political science. Hardly any statement of his is more prominent and provocative than the assertion in the “Introduction” to *Democracy in America* that “a new political science is needed for a world altogether new.” What political science is that? Tocqueville does not tell us. Nowhere in the book does he elaborate this new political science; in fact, he does not refer to it again. “Political science” per se is spoken of four other times in the first volume and not at all in the second. After raising our expectations, Tocqueville disappoints them, or perhaps he returns them to us for elaboration. That he offers no methodology or compendium of axioms may be the first lesson of his new political science. It is neither to consist in abstraction nor is it to be made by or for disinterested observers. The new political science is for use in a new world.

The new world cannot be other than the world made by the democratic revolution—our world, the Western world, the modern world. The four references to “political science” following in the first volume cite inventions of modern political science already known and applied, such as the advantage of bicameralism, the novelty of American federalism, and the neutralizing of press bias (*DA* I 1.5, 1.8 [twice], 2.3). These institutional devices, though important, are not the “new political science” that Tocqueville calls for. They are items of the kind recommended in *The Federalist*, designed as brakes on the headlong rush of democracy toward its desires. A new political science, however, would need to explain democracy before it considered how to keep it in check. Without taking credit for his discoveries, Tocqueville gives political science three new features not seen before—the concept of the social state (*état social*), the notion of those like oneself (*semblables*), and the practice of making predictions.

What is the social state? The answer Tocqueville gives when introducing the concept is that it is both product and cause (*DA* I 1.3). It is the product of a fact or of laws or of both together which then becomes the “first cause” of most of the laws, customs, and ideas that regulate nations, modifying those it does not produce. Exceptions do occur; the social state is not historically determined of necessity. With this deliberate confusion of causality, Tocqueville refuses to go back to a prior event or condition that would establish the primacy of politics over society. There is no founding in the classical sense in Tocqueville, a planned beginning that gives a certain form and principle of rule to society. He speaks of the American Revolution and Constitution, but not as that sort of formative event. The Constitution is rather the work of a “great people, warned by its legislators” of a problem requiring a remedy (*DA* I 1.8).

More significant, apparently, than the Founding was the point of departure of the American people a century and a half earlier when the Puritans arrived. The American point of departure—not the later, more deliberate Founding—is the key, Tocqueville says, to almost the whole of his work. Americans did not make themselves democrats but came to America as democrats. America, to which the Puritans came for a reason, is the only nation whose point of departure is clear rather than shrouded in ignorance and fable.

If one puts together the democratic social state with the sovereignty of the people in a democracy, the result is the power of public opinion in democracies, of which Tocqueville makes so much. Public opinion is milder and less explicit than political authority, yet more confining than mere social agreement. It is the political and social combined, with a shift of weight from the former to the latter. "Public" opinion takes opinion out of private society and places it in broad daylight, to use one of Tocqueville's favorite phrases. Public and private are blurred together, and it becomes clear that democracy is government by public opinion. Private opinion—in the sense of what might be reserved to oneself against what most people think—tends to disappear; it proves to have required an aristocratic social state in which independent nobles had the standing to say what they pleased. This shows us why Tocqueville puts little trust in the power of representative institutions to hold out against the people's desires: public opinion makes the people's representatives conform to their desires regardless of the apparent latitude that representative offices with constitutional terms might seem to afford. He would have seen the public opinion polls of our day as vivid confirmation, with the aid of science, of the trend he saw already in his day.

The democratic social state comprises those like oneself (*semblables*). Tocqueville sees in democracy not only self and other but a third thing, those like oneself.¹³ This notion may be taken as a second original feature of Tocqueville's new political science. Since all individuals in a democracy regard themselves and are accepted as equal, other individuals are not really different from oneself but similar. They are not really *other* in the deep sense implied by the dichotomy of self-other to be found in Hegel's theory or its variants. Here there is no real reconciliation between self and other in which one self finds itself in the other. Rather, that reconciliation is assumed from the beginning. The democrat considers others to be like himself, and if they are truly different, he *sees* them to be like himself regardless. He ignores or flattens out any differences that might call equality into question. Humanity consists of those like oneself: thus, compassion for those in distress is not demeaning and admiration for those who have done better is not humiliating. Envy is more likely, however. With the notion of *semblables*, humanity goes from biological or philosophical abstraction to political fact; for if one's countrymen are like oneself, so too are persons in all countries. Tocqueville speaks of appealing, in matters of justice, from the jury of one's fellow citizens to that of all humanity (*DA I 2.7*). It is not that democratic patriotism cannot exist; on the contrary, it can be more fervent than any previous patriotism. But it has to come to terms with humanity by claiming superior progress instead of insisting on excluding others by virtue of some permanent inequality such as race or nation.

Tocqueville's new political science makes predictions. These are not mere implicit predictions that we might infer; he repeatedly mentions trends or results that he "predicts," "augurs," or "foresees." He does not try to anticipate the scientific prediction of some political science in our day by seeking to establish exact or determinate outcomes. He says that it is imprudent "to want to limit the possible and to judge the future" (*DA I 1.8*); thus, prediction is not the object of his political science. His most famous particular prediction occurs at the end of the first volume. America and Russia, he says, stand for the democratic future, the one with freedom, the other with servitude. Each seems to have been called "by a secret design of Providence" to hold in its hands "the destinies of half the world" (*DA I 2.10*). During the Cold War, this picture

seemed uncannily true to fact, but now we see that it was a representation. It represents an undetermined choice for us attributed by Tocqueville to Providence, not political science strictly. And his most general prediction, that of the democratic revolution, he calls a "providential fact" (*DA Intro.*).

Tocqueville's predictions and his mention of Providence belong together, however, because they are designed to remind us of a given fact: the democratic revolution. His political science is designed for this circumstance, and it does not attempt to rise above circumstance or to prescribe for a variety of circumstances. Tocqueville writes for a foreseeable epoch in history, the democratic era, and he does not try to see beyond the foreseeable as did the ancients. If he does not accept the democratic belief in indefinite progress, he does base his political science on linear history, from aristocracy to democracy, rather than on the nature of man as holding the potential for several regimes and several histories. In his prediction, he ministers to our human desire, common to both science and religion, to know what will befall us in the future. At the same time, forcing us to keep in mind the outstanding fact of our time, he requires us to make our choices without indulging our wishes. He reminds opponents of democracy that they must come to terms with democracy, and he tells proponents that democracy too can lead to despotism. By opening our mind to the new world of democracy and closing it to the old aristocratic world, he sharpens our choices. His political science has the focus of a statesman.

Although Tocqueville was a liberal (as we have said), he did not adhere to what might be called the formal liberalism of John Locke and his followers in Tocqueville's time and ours. He did not think it necessary or wise to lay down universal principles or rights to serve as the formal basis of politics, nor to leave the actual exercise of those rights unspecified, open to experience, and free to be applied as circumstances permit. His political science is concerned with the society actually inspired by liberal principles.

Tocqueville shows that equality in the state of nature of formal liberalism tends to become equality in society too. He does not speak of the state of nature, but he makes clear that the formal principle of equality has a constant democratizing effect. The fact that equality is not perfect, that all citizens are not equally secure, does not mean that equality does not exist; on the contrary, it creates pressure to perfect equality (*DA II 4.3*). It cannot be said too often that democracy, or modern democracy, is a democratic revolution. One could call it an institutionalized revolution if it were not apparent that the revolution operates against every institution so as to make it more democratic.

Tocqueville addresses a topic left undiscussed, for the most part, in formal liberalism—the actual capacity of individuals to exercise their rights and stand up in their defense. Liberalism assumes that by relying on the desire for self-preservation, supposed to be active in everyone, one need not enter into the question of capacity. Marxists and others who demand more democracy make the same assumption that everyone's capacity for exercising rights is or can be made adequate. But Tocqueville does not. He argues that modern democracy makes its people increasingly incapable as citizens as they become more isolated and weak.

The Democratic Revolution

"A great democratic revolution is taking place among us": that is the beginning and the guiding thought of *Democracy in America*. The democratic revolution is new and first seen to its astonishing extent in the United States. But it is also seven hundred years old, the time from which the aristocratic power of a few feudal families began to be challenged. A kind of democratic equality appeared in the clergy, which was open to all. Then it passed to lawyers, who

checked the power of barons, and to merchants, whose wealth introduced a rival influence to that of arms. Competition between the king and the nobles led both, especially the former, to raise the condition of the people, and events from the Crusades to the discovery of America turned to the advantage of equality. Not least, the Enlightenment made intelligence a social force with which to be reckoned.

These groups—clergy, lawyers, merchants, and experts of all kinds—might seem to have brought only rival inequalities to that of the feudal lords who ruled aristocracies. But for Tocqueville, feudal lords are the essential inequality on which inequality as a principle depends. They hold landed property and they acquire it by inheritance. They sit on their lands; the other groups rise from social conditions that invite movement and offer opportunity. Opportunity makes for equality even though it leads to new inequalities because you feel that someone risen from your status is like yourself (*semblable*). The new elites (as we would call them) bring ever-increasing equality of conditions.

Tocqueville defines the democratic revolution historically and socially rather than politically. In the "Introduction" to *Democracy in America*, he does not speak of the French Revolution and only alludes to the conflict that the coming of democracy has brought in Europe by contrast to America. In the *Old Regime and the Revolution*, the burden of his argument is to show that the French Revolution was a long time in coming, that it merely culminated changes toward democracy initiated under the monarchy.¹⁴ This "gradual development" makes it possible to call democracy "a providential fact" (*DA* Intro.). Although the changes Tocqueville mentions were made politically, they were not made intentionally to bring about democracy, and if they seem to have been coordinated, this could have happened only through a higher power than political choice.

Democracy in America contains a chapter on "Why great revolutions will become rare" (*DA* II 3.21). The reason given is that in democracies, interests take precedence over passions and beliefs are stubbornly held. The great majority are in the middle class, neither rich nor poor, very much attached to their property and consequently desirous of order. Democracies are stable—all too stable perhaps. They may have been introduced by a great revolution such as the French Revolution, but once made, democracies last. America, the model of democracy, did not reach that state by revolution: "The great advantage of the Americans is to have arrived at democracy without having to suffer democratic revolutions, and to be born equal instead of becoming so" (*DA* II 2.3).

Tyranny of the Majority

Tocqueville's theme in *Democracy in America* is what is to be hoped for and what to be feared from the democratic revolution (*DA* I Intro.; II 4.1, 4.5, 4.6). In the book, he describes two particular threats that democracy poses to independence and dignity: "tyranny of the majority" and "mild despotism," the latter of which he also calls "democratic" or "administrative" despotism. Although Tocqueville's name is associated with both terms, "tyranny of the majority" is discussed only in the first volume and "mild despotism" is found only in the second. He explains that a more detailed examination of the subject and "five years of new meditations" changed the object of his fears (*DA* II 4.6).¹⁵ The phenomenon long conceived of as tyranny of the majority turns out to be more complex in the modern democratic world, and Tocqueville deepened his appreciation of its new character, even if his prescribed remedies for the two ills do not differ substantially.

For Tocqueville, the *foundation* of American democracy, as distinguished from its point of departure, is the principle or dogma of the sovereignty of the people, first announced in the fourth

chapter of the book, and reiterated near the end of the first volume (*DA I 2.10*): "Providence has given to each individual, whoever he may be, the degree of reason necessary for him to be able to direct himself in things that interest him exclusively. Such is the great maxim on which civil and political society in the United States rests. . . . Extended to the entirety of the nation, it becomes the dogma of the sovereignty of the people." In politics, this means that each individual is supposed to be "as enlightened, as virtuous, as strong as any other of those like him," and he obeys society not because he is less capable than another man of governing himself but because union with those like him appears useful to him (*DA I 1.5*).

While even the most ardent democrat might well doubt that each individual is really as enlightened and as virtuous as every other, Tocqueville shows how the principle of popular sovereignty can work rather well in America, particularly in the New England township of which he paints a vivid, if idealized, picture (*DA I 1.5*). Here citizens take common decisions in frequent town meetings and then execute them through the numerous, short-term elective offices that many of them come to hold. When exercising sovereignty in this way, the people's reason is informed by firsthand knowledge and keen interest; they know how badly a road or a school is needed and how well its costs can be borne. And because the consequences of choices are readily visible, choosing well seems worth the time and effort; good results evoke personal pride (*DA I 1.5, 2.6*). Ambition is piqued, and it gravitates toward these offices, which afford independence and power. Yet since the objects of township concern remain modest, ambition stays within manageable bounds. Moreover, insofar as it personifies the sovereignty of the people, the township itself becomes an object of affection. In the township, the will of the majority may not always be prudent or just, but it is more or less well-informed, animated by interest and pride, relatively benign, and in any case, not always very effective (*DA I 1.5, 2.8*). Were tyranny to occur here, it would be petty and intrusive; but there is rarely cause or opportunity for such oppression, and occasional injustices are scarcely noticeable (*DA I 1.5, 1.8*). Here one finds democratic self-government at its best (*DA I 1.8*).

Beyond the township, however, the majority's willfulness has potential to do great harm, not only to minorities but also to itself (*DA I 1.8*), as Tocqueville shows in the second part of Volume One. It was the hope of America's Founders that republican forms, especially representative institutions and an "enlarged orbit" for the union of states, would remedy the defects of popular government by diminishing opportunities for demagogic manipulation of factious majorities; perhaps these forms would improve the quality of public deliberations (*The Federalist* nos. 9–10). Tocqueville gives little cause for optimism on these points (*DA I 1.8, 2.5*). He himself praises many of America's republican forms, notably the political practices of its Puritan settlers and the New England township, already in place when the federal constitution was drafted, and the Founders' specific constitutional provisions designed to curb majoritarian and legislative tyranny. Although the commendation is restated near the end of part two (*DA I 2.9*), the intervening lengthy discussion of how democracy tends to work in practice raises doubts about whether even these praiseworthy forms of democracy will be adequate to contain the matter of democracy—the people's actual sovereign will.

Earnest and able democratic citizens will often lack the time to choose representatives wisely. Others will be given to envy of those who they suspect really are their betters. And these better men will not be inclined to stand for election, preferring to make their fortunes by relying on themselves. Moreover, well-meaning but untutored, unsure, or merely busy, citizens can easily be led astray by political partisans; and in a democracy, they tend to be swayed by partisans who advocate the unlimited expansion of popular power (*DA I 2.2*). Democratic citizens will constantly be urged, and tempted, to press for increasing the power of the majority

without being able to assure its wisdom or justice. Thus, contrary to widespread hopes, elections will not by themselves serve to bring "enlightened statesmen" to the helm.

Meanwhile, those who are elected will remain subject to envy and personal distrust. Every instance of petty corruption in which they might indulge will exacerbate ill will toward themselves and other elected officials, precisely because it is petty and therefore readily intelligible to ordinary citizens. Such distrust will, however, not prevent their being allowed considerable arbitrary authority to be used for good or ill; for the majority prizes arbitrariness to further its ends, and it knows well the punishment it can inflict at the next election on those who violate its sometimes misplaced trust or who merely displease it now. It will show itself quite tolerant of lawlessness when used in its name (*DA I 2.5, 2.7*).

For these reasons, the majority's government is as likely to be poorly administered as the majority is likely to be willful and undisciplined; it will often be lacking in apparent purpose and sustained effort, inexpert, and wasteful (*DA I 2.5*). One may suppose that democratic government will rarely be effective, efficient, or economical, even if it does not always produce tyranny. The majority itself will want to ignore its own laws and policies when inconvenienced by them or to change them hurriedly to suit its convenience and change them again according to newer convenience. This means that democracy's elected representatives, however feckless, will always find much to do. Democratic government will have an appearance of restive, almost anarchic, activity; one will easily remark a superficial legislative and administrative instability (*DA I 1.8, 2.5, 2.7, 2.9, 2.10*), which is especially worrisome because it reflects and aggravates democracy's tendency to regard the formalities of government as mere inconveniences (*DA I 2.8, II 4.7*). Beneath appearances, however, Tocqueville perceives a deeper and no less worrisome stability, or even immobility.

As Tocqueville describes the workings of America's majoritarian government and anticipates the future, he emphasizes not so much its incompetence as its omnipotence and its potential for tyranny or despotism.¹⁶ In the modern world, the will of the majority comes to exercise a kind of "moral empire" previously unknown (*DA I 2.7*), a new authority that has two sources. Never before had the principle that everyone is as enlightened, as virtuous, and as strong as anyone else been accepted (*DA II 1.3*). Nor does Tocqueville himself accept it (*DA I 1.3, II 2.13*). In the ancient world, the special claims of the rich and well born, as well as those reputed for virtue or wisdom, were considered legitimate both in theory and fact. Tocqueville sees that in the politics of democracy, no minority whose opinions or interests are held to merit respect will stand ready to offer an obstacle to the majority's will. Once the dogma of equality is established, it becomes difficult to see why a greater number of supposedly equally enlightened and virtuous voters is not always more right than a lesser number. Indeed, it becomes all but impossible to see how wrong opinions could ever arise except from malicious intent. On what basis could some few correctly discern legitimate interests that differ from those of the majority?

The majority's moral authority will be further enhanced where no viable aristocracy has ever existed, as in the United States, by the notion that the *interests*, and not just the opinions, of the many should always prevail over those of the few. Where there is no aristocratic few long acknowledged to be distinctive, all are presumed to have the same interests, and all are therefore potential members of the majority. Though this situation might seem harmonious and beneficial, it worries Tocqueville. He sees that in the politics of democracy, no minority whose opinions or interests are held to merit respect will stand ready to offer an obstacle to the majority's will. Should someone nonetheless doubt the majority's wisdom or justice, and still feel the need to hear concerns that might once have been voiced by an aristocracy, these doubts can be expressed effectively only by objecting that a particular pronouncement of the majority has not been sufficiently inclusive (*DA I 2.7*). While such objections may suffice to improve the majority's

judgment in any given instance, they may also serve to strengthen its authority in the long term. In a footnote to his discussion of majority tyranny, Tocqueville gives two examples of it: in Baltimore, two journalists who opposed the War of 1812 were killed by a mob of supporters of the war; and in Philadelphia, black freedmen were invariably too intimidated to exercise their right to vote (*DA I 2.7*).

Pride and Race in America

Tocqueville's second example of majority tyranny, racial discrimination, is one he returns to at length. Volume One of *Democracy in America* ends with a very long chapter ostensibly treating subjects that are American, in particular, rather than democratic, in general. More precisely, its theme is the races or peoples that inhabit the New World, or one might say, the modern world; thus, its theme is broader as well as narrower than democracy. In the narrower sense, Tocqueville looks at what the unfettered will of the American people—in effect, the white or “Anglo-American” majority—had thus far wrought, for good and ill, including the most egregious examples of its tyranny: virtual extermination of the Indians and enslavement of blacks. Tocqueville calls this tyranny, and he shows its effects on the tyrant as well as on its victims. In the broader sense, one can see more clearly how the seed of tyranny, “the right and the ability to do everything,” germinates especially in modern peoples. Modern philosophy posits that there are in principle no limits on human will—for that is one meaning of the sovereignty of the people (*DA I 1.4*)—and the political forms of modern democracy are inadequate to contain a people's willfulness.

Tocqueville's account of the plight of the Indians chillingly brings to light the ease and hypocrisy with which majority tyranny comes to be exercised in the New World. Anglo-Americans, motivated not by ill will, much less by racial hatred or prejudice, but merely by greed and contempt, not only denied Native Americans their rights but were well on their way to exterminating them “with marvelous facility—tranquilly, legally, philanthropically, without spilling blood, without violating a single one of the great principles of morality in the eyes of the world” (*DA I 2.10*). How could this have happened? The Anglo-Americans, superior in modern learning and soon in strength as well, destroyed the wild game on which the Indians lived, thereby driving them from their traditional hunting grounds and leaving them to face death at nature's hand. They contemptuously dismissed the Indians' appeals to justice and common humanity. The Indian, for his part, was easily enough corrupted by modern man's luxuries; but at the same time, he was too proud of his traditional ways, too trusting in nature's goodness, to learn new arts to satisfy new desires or new arguments to counter new sophistries.

For his extermination of the Indian, the Anglo-American would pay little or no price. But in his enslavement of the black, Tocqueville saw the greatest threat to the United States. Here tyranny comes to follow a logic of its own when human will no longer sees any prohibitions arising from “nature and humanity.” What Tocqueville saw occurring in the American South was, he says, “the most horrible and the most natural consequence of slavery” (*DA I 2.10*).

In *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville does not address the question of the natural inferiority of blacks; he attributes the character of the American black to the effects of tyranny.¹⁷ As Tocqueville found him, the slave had neither the pride befitting a human being nor cause for such pride, having been deprived of almost all the “privileges of humanity”—family, homeland, language, religion, mores, even ownership of his person (*DA I 2.10*). Having lost virtually all pride in himself, he had lost the ambition to acquire the skills and habits that would enable him to set and accomplish goals and exhibit virtues in which he might reasonably take pride. “The very use of thought seem[ed] to him a useless gift of Providence” (*DA I 2.10*). His only experience of

uncoerced behavior was servile imitation of his master, which was an expression of his shame, the last remnant of his human pride. Unaccustomed to hearing reason's voice, he would, if freed, likely give himself over entirely to his own needs or desires as to a new master. Thus, tyranny had denied the black not only responsibility for his actions but also a suitable model of responsible behavior; he effectively lacked the moral and intellectual faculties that justify human pride.

Once slavery had been reintroduced into the modern world and was now limited to blacks, it became all but impossible to dissociate the master's prejudice against his legal inferior from racial prejudice. The master deemed his black slave his moral and intellectual inferior, and the racial stigma could not then be overlooked. Moreover, these two prejudices were to be reinforced by what Tocqueville curiously refers to as "the prejudice of the white." What does Tocqueville mean by this? He remarks that democratic freedom gives rise to a certain individual haughtiness: "the white man in the United States is proud of his race and proud of himself" (DA I 2.10). The rest of the chapter on the New World treats the survival of the Union and of republican institutions, and the spirit of its commerce—all matters that concern the pride of white Americans. Above all, Tocqueville's Anglo-Americans are united among themselves and separated from all other peoples by a sentiment of pride in the success of their democracy, a success which they attribute to reason. They take pride in placing "moral authority in universal reason, as they do political power in the universality of citizens" (DA I 2.10).

From Tocqueville's contrast of the white man to the black and the Indian, we can infer that the distinctiveness of the white lies in the superiority not only of his way of life but also of the kind of pride he takes in it. His pride in reason, he believes, enables him to sustain his way of life. Yet in the account of the vitality of the American Union and republic, Tocqueville also suggests that in fact the (white) American necessarily misconceives both the source and extent of his pride. He puts his faith in universal reason, which in practice is the majority's reason. According to Tocqueville, this is at least in part a mistake. He is impressed with how well American democracy has prospered, but the explanation he leads his reader to supply is that in America, willfulness has been kept vigorous and informed by salutary mores and political institutions—not that the majority has always acted reasonably. The majority nonetheless believes it has acted reasonably, and there is some value in that misconception. Things are much worse when a majority loses sight of that desideratum and severs the connection between its will and reason.

When Tocqueville reviews the Union's prospects for the future, he notes that for good and ill, a willfulness or restiveness has animated Americans; they exhibit "*decentralizing* passions" (DA I 2.10). Their lives have been shaped not simply by needs but also informed by mores. Mores, one might say, "habits of the heart" (DA I 2.9), consist of certain distinct forms peculiar to a people of which they are proud: they are forms of pride.¹⁸ They are at a distance from and sometimes at odds with needs, which as such are nothing to be proud of. Adhering to mores enables men to meet their needs as they wish; it allows them, to some extent, to dissociate themselves from their needs, to have an opportunity to take a critical look at them, and to form an opinion about them. The diversity of mores in America suggests a degree of freedom from needs, which are universal. The states and regions to which the hearts of Tocqueville's Americans were then still attached had served to preserve their distinctive forms of pride.

From the Proud Majority to a Herd

Tocqueville begins his second volume (DA II 1.1) by drawing a distinction between modern politics, which is suffused with, if not actually derived from, philosophic doctrine, and pre-

modern politics, which was not. Americans practice the new politics, which takes as its foundation the principle that one should rely only on the effort of one's own reason, not on the opinions of others—whether fellow citizens or forebears. At the same time, Americans are unaware of their dependence on philosophic doctrine. Tocqueville now looks at this principle, the sovereignty of the people, under a different name—individualism—and comes to a different conclusion (*DA* II 2.2). He shows how the very principle that seems to support majority rule, and even majority tyranny, threatens eventually to transform a willful or restive and proud democratic majority into a “herd of timid and industrious animals” living under a new sort of despotism (*DA* II 4.6). The second volume is Tocqueville's reflection on the likely *practical* consequences of modern political theory—of its effects on the human soul, on reason and sentiment, and consequently on habits or mores, and thereby on politics.

In speaking of the modern principle as individualism, Tocqueville attributes it to an erroneous judgment (*DA* II 2.2). Although similar to the sentiment of self-love or self-preference, it is not so much a sentiment as a conviction that one should live one's life without paying serious attention to anyone but oneself, or at most to one's family and friends. How can this peculiarly modern sensibility sustain society and political life?

When modern political theory begins by positing autonomous individuals living in a state of nature, its purpose is to show us that it is reasonable even for those who most pride themselves on their power and capability to leave this natural state once and for all, to agree to live as members of some polity with laws, moral rules, customs, and authorities of various sorts, accepting these as legitimate and authoritative. But in the democratic practice Tocqueville describes, each individual insists, in effect, that his consent to depart from the state of nature be obtained in each instance and in each aspect of life. Forget the sovereign! Every act tends to be referred to the pretension of each to be capable of a rational determination of his own interests. Far from convincing the individual to leave the state of nature, modern political theory induces him to hold on to it.

What consequences might follow from this frame of mind? To say it more harshly than Tocqueville ever would have said it: the fundamental principle of modern democratic life is untenable; it is not true that each and every human being can judge everything for himself. What then can individuals do?

First, the weight of judging for oneself is eased somewhat by simplification. By making broad generalizations, relying on “general ideas” (*DA* II 1.3), one can bring oneself to believe that *similar* facts and beings are actually identical or equal. This makes thinking a bit easier. Since this manner of thinking permits the organization of a large number of facts, it may also facilitate the scientific progress on which the modern world prides itself. But excessive use of general ideas may also stem from haste or laziness, and so lead to intellectual sloppiness (see also *DA* II 3.15). And of course, generalizations, particularly about people, can sometimes be inaccurate.

Effective relief can also be found by seeking refuge in public opinion (*DA* II 1.2). An individual looks around and sees many other people holding more or less similar opinions, and their similarity makes them more credible. What everyone thinks must be so! At the same time, no particular person claims responsibility for these common opinions; thus, no one's pride is at risk in adopting them. Modern democracy, Tocqueville predicts, will be characterized by an unprecedented respect for public opinion. Already in the first volume, Tocqueville claimed to find less real freedom of thought in America than in any other time or place.

Yet the most problematic movements of the democratic intellect will start in philosophy and then eventually proceed to politics (*DA* II 1.7, 1.17, 1.20). We are told that democrats increasingly depend on an anonymous public opinion, that they rely excessively on general ideas; and

then that they may succumb to a tendency Tocqueville calls "pantheism," in which the distinctiveness not merely of individual men, but of man, is lost to sight.

As conditions become more equal and each man in particular becomes more like all the others, weaker and smaller, one gets used to no longer viewing citizens so as to consider only the people; one forgets individuals so as to think only of the species.

In these times the human mind loves to embrace a host of diverse objects at once; . . . it willingly seeks to enlarge and simplify its thought by enclosing God and the universe within a single whole.

One must not be confused by the fact that Tocqueville's notion of "individualism" accuses democrats of living only for themselves and a close circle around them, while that of "pantheism" accuses them of forgetting the individual. The individual described under "individualism" has, in his weakness and vulnerability, lost his individuality. He seeks his identity in the very universal, mass forces to which he regards himself as subject. Democracy creates individuals, then leaves them unprotected so that, abetted by pantheism and "democratic historians," they easily fall into individualism.

Near the end of part one (*DA* II 1.20), Tocqueville makes clear the threat that pantheistic opinions pose to democratic politics. This he does in an uncharacteristically vigorous attack on "democratic historians"—who seem to include social and political scientists as well as those influenced by them.¹⁹ Democratic historians trace all events to a few general causes or to historical systems rather than to influential individuals. By denying power to some individuals, they bring people to believe that no one acts voluntarily—that whole peoples, even the whole human race, are moved as if in obedience to a power above or below them. Worse, one attributes to that power an inexorable necessity that forecloses human choice. In this view, politics is meaningless and human freedom is impossible. It is a view of history that Tocqueville deems both inaccurate and harmful. But it could also be self-fulfilling, because people under its influence who *could* act decisively might abandon their attempts as futile.

Self-Interest Well Understood

Individualistic Americans bring themselves to cooperate with one another by means of a doctrine, made famous by this book, that Tocqueville calls "self-interest well understood." Tocqueville endorses the doctrine, but we should note first that it may easily worsen the evil he has termed "individualism." The purpose of the doctrine is to persuade democrats to sacrifice some of their private interests for the sake of preserving the rest of them, and in this it succeeds. Thus, it is an improvement on self-interest poorly understood, a strict utilitarianism which declares that "the useful is never dishonest." Self-interest well understood is "of all philosophic theories the most appropriate to the *needs* of men in our time," in part because it "marvelously accommodat[es] to the *weaknesses* of men" (*DA* II 2.8, emphasis added). Yet for this very reason, the theory risks making men even more aware of their needs and weaknesses and may appear to legitimate all means of alleviating them.

Mores, the habits of the heart of a people, the unreflective ways in which its citizens relate to one another, reveal the thoughts and sentiments of democratic individuals. Some of these manifestations are at first surprising. If in part two Tocqueville points out the dangers of excessive or wrong-headed democratic passions, in part three he shows how the excesses of individualism, egalitarianism, and materialism culminate, paradoxically, in democratic apathy.

Compassion, for example, forges a new sort of moral bond among democratic citizens, mitigating their individualism. But it does so in a way that is inseparable from egalitarianism and perfectly compatible, despite what one might think, with individualism. Compassion is literally an ability to feel what another human being is feeling, and it requires an act of imagination to put oneself in the place of another. This act is made possible, indeed effortless, by the equality and similarity that democracy brings, or more precisely by the dogmatic belief in equality on which it rests and by the customs and conventions of equality that it produces and maintains. For the same reasons, the fellow feeling it evokes is indiscriminating and shallow. Of Americans, Tocqueville says that "each of them can judge the sensations of all the others in a moment: he casts a rapid glance at himself; that is enough for him" (*DA II 3.1*).

As with individualism, democracy's facile compassion reveals the difference between the political principle of equality—which is strength—and the actual sense of weakness men feel when they are equal. In principle, the equality that Tocqueville's Americans recognize is an equal ability to reason about their own affairs. In fact, they are in the habit of acting on the neediness they feel. Since each person is all too aware of his own misery—that is, his needs and unsatisfied desires—he makes a "tacit and *almost involuntary* accord" with others to lend a support now that he hopes later to claim for himself in turn (*DA II 3.4*, emphasis added). Democracy's sense of justice and the explicit and intentional agreements that articulate it tend to be constituted with a view to "permanent and general needs" of the human race (*DA II 3.18*). However much claims of compassion and justice derive from needs, the surest bonds between democratic citizens apart from family relations are not these but fragile and narrow ones established by contracts (*DA II 3.5*) and cemented by money (*DA II 3.7*).

Thus, the daily life of a democratic society is, paradoxically, antithetical to the capability and strength of individuals that it presupposes. Tocqueville laments that moralists of our time constantly complain of pride. It is true enough that there is "no one who does not believe himself to be worth more than his neighbor," but this same man nonetheless diminishes both himself and his neighbor by "settling into mediocre desires." What democratic men most lack is pride. "I would willingly trade several of our small virtues for this vice" (*DA II 3.19*). What does remain of pride, having few reasonable expectations in politics, is mostly turned to business, where it may still be honored (*DA II 3.18–20*)—or in rare cases, pride becomes dangerously unruly, militaristic, and revolutionary (*DA II 3.21, 3.26*; Tocqueville's note XXVII, p. 704).

The citizen of democracies has contrary instincts, his sense of independence contending with his weakness. "In this extremity, he naturally turns his regard to the immense being that rises alone in the midst of universal debasement" (*DA II 4.3*). This immense being—replacing God—is the state.²⁰ The new mild despotism, as Tocqueville refers to it, will not be oppressive. It will care for citizens, ever attentive to the obvious needs of all and responsive to various pressures to satisfy unfulfilled desires. But by relieving individuals of the necessity of thinking and acting on their own, it gradually "rob[s] each of them of several of the principal attributes of humanity" and finally "reduces each nation to being nothing more than a herd of timid and industrious animals of which the government is the shepherd" (*DA II 4.7*).

Remedies for Majority Tyranny and Mild Despotism

Majority tyranny is the rule of a restive, prideful, often unreasonable people; mild despotism is efficient ministration by the "immense being" to the not unreasonable, though ultimately shortsighted, needs and desires of a tamed—nay, humbled—mass. Neither is to be desired. Yet if Tocqueville cannot approve of majority tyranny, he surely prefers the instinct animating it—

"intractability" (*DA* II 4.1)—to the apathy that sustains democratic despotism. In the first volume, Tocqueville elaborates several of the institutional means Americans employ to temper majority tyranny: what he calls "decentralized administration" in federalism, local self-government, judges and juries. He also speaks at length of the benefits of their mores, especially their religion, and of their habits of political activity. Near the end of the second volume, he specifies the means necessary to avert mild despotism: associations—among which he includes local government, a free press, an independent judiciary, respect for forms and formalities, in general, and for individual rights, in particular.

In the end, Tocqueville can praise the intractability to which democracy gives rise and on which it thrives, the same intractability that can animate majority tyranny, because he sees in it an untaught instinct for political freedom (*DA* II 4.1). He can, and does, praise American democracy for educating that instinct. Mild despotism is a "schoolmaster" (*DA* II 4.4, 4.6; see also Tocqueville's note I, p. 677) that all but suppresses political freedom; but townships, the judiciary, and associations are also said to be schools—schools of freedom (*DA* I 1.2, 1.5, 2.8; II 2.5). Moreover, the Americans have teachings, notably the idea of rights and the doctrine of self-interest well understood, that are put to work in these schools (*DA* I 2.6, II 2.8).

For Tocqueville, what we now refer to as "voluntary associations" are an indispensable supplement to government in a democracy, though not a substitute for it. On the contrary, he contends that "civil" associations could not easily be maintained without institutions of self-government (*DA* II 2.7). Tocqueville is a critic of big government, not of all government; he even grants that in democracies "the sovereign must be more uniform, more centralized, more extended, more penetrating, and more powerful" (*DA* II 4.7). What matters is how the sovereign's power is structured—how it is divided among secondary powers—to preserve some degree of individual independence. A democratic sovereign can enable and encourage citizens to do more for themselves, while for that reason doing what it must do more effectively.

In Tocqueville's judgment, dependence on a "general will" such as that proposed by Rousseau effectively vitiates each person's awareness of his or her particular interests and abilities, and thus increases the extent of everyone's dependence and degradation. He proposes instead mutual but partial dependence in the form of participation in associations of all sorts, from private contractual agreements to interest groups to political institutions and organizations.

Least obvious, most instructive, and potentially most valuable are the associations Tocqueville's Americans form for moral and intellectual ends. In bringing to the public eye new, uncommon sentiments and ideas, individuals influence one another, persuade others, perhaps even change mores and ultimately laws; thus, "the heart is enlarged, and the human mind is developed" (*DA* II 2.5). These associations can be understood as political in the sense that they are means of self-government which supplement or in fact replace, to some extent, government as ordinarily construed. When democratic citizens associate to make a display of their own abstinence from liquor in the hope of encouraging temperance in others, they behave, Tocqueville notes, as an aristocratic lord once might have done for those who looked up to him (*DA* II 2.5, 2.7, 4.6). In this example, both the association of ordinary, equal democratic citizens and the aristocratic lord rely on an informal mode of governing that is meant to work primarily by shaping mores. This tempers the democratic inclination to rely on more authoritarian methods of discouraging drunkenness found in early American Puritan legislation and in post-Revolutionary American and French bureaucratic regulation (*DA* I 1.2, 2.4, 2.5, 2.6; II 2.5). Finally, in uniting over a moral issue, they may also help to temper democracy's greater intoxications, individualism and materialism (see *DA* II 2.3, 2.10).

Among political associations proper, the township is a primary school in freedom; and citizens who attend it acquire the taste for freedom and its exercise (*DA* I 1.5). They come to

appreciate how their choices might affect the world. The township is individual choice and responsibility, shared and writ large: A school, once built, stands.

Similarly, the jury is a free school, "the most energetic means of making the people reign, [and] the most efficacious means of teaching them to reign" (*DA I 2.8*). An independent judiciary gives even the weakest citizen an established weapon with which to fight the tyranny of either government or society. But the weapon will be powerful only as long as judicial niceties (i.e., formal rights and procedures) are respected. Fortunately, the American democracy Tocqueville saw had a distinct, and large, class of lawyers and judges, who by professional training and personal interest were encouraged to maintain this respect in society. It could also avail itself of county administrators called justices of the peace, who combine a respect for formalities, which poses an obstacle to despotism, with worldly common sense (*DA I 1.5*).

If townships and juries are schools of freedom, political associations like interest groups and parties, too, are "great schools, free of charge, where all citizens come to learn the general theory of association" (*DA II 2.7*). Political associations bring citizens together in a way that neither democratic compassion nor mild despotism's schoolmaster can do: "A political association draws a multitude of individuals outside themselves at the same time; however separated they are naturally by age, mind, fortune, it brings them together and puts them in contact. They meet each other once and learn to find each other always." Political associations energize citizens and then force them to reason about what is required to organize common efforts. This organization of efforts does not require a sacrifice of self-interest, nor is it begun by a facile identification of one's own interests with the interests of everyone. Otherwise different but similarly interested selves unite to advance one shared goal that is nonetheless recognized as partisan or partial. Thus, deliberation on how to link partial interests to what really might be general interests in a democracy is promoted over the unreflective and abstract identification of needs characteristic of democratic compassion. Political associations are free schools: they are free because they are inexpensive and relatively painless ways of exercising the habits of freedom; they are schools because they employ and instill reasonable expectations about what makes freedom possible for individuals and political communities.

Tocqueville is celebrated as the great advocate of civil associations and political participation, especially at the local level. But to cast him as a decentralizer and privatizer and nothing more is not enough. Even as he fears and denounces big government, Tocqueville insists on the value of great nations. This does not necessarily mean militarism, but it does mean "think[ing] a little more of making great men" (*DA II 4.7*). In France's case and, we can suppose, in America's as well, he understands that national greatness requires a vigorous defense of the principles of the Revolution in the world for the sake of the nation's soul.²¹ Sustaining the independence and dignity of individuals must always be a matter for national attention, even when best accomplished by decentralized means.

The Virtue of Women

No survey of the schooling done by American associations would be complete without a peek inside the "conjugal association"; for, Tocqueville says, all that influences the condition of women has "great political interest in my eyes" (*DA II 3.9, 3.12*).

Not only does Tocqueville compare American attitudes about marriage and relations between men and women in society favorably with aristocratic patriarchalism, but he also presents a picture quite unlike the democratic egalitarianism of the late twentieth century. Within marriage as he portrays it, spouses are faithful to one another, with little or no public tolerance

for infidelity. This he attributes partly to America's being religious, partly to its being commercial, but mostly to the fact that democrats marry by choice, not by parental arrangement, and that they choose with few if any arbitrary barriers—for example, between social or economic classes. American marriages join hearts, not bloodlines or bank accounts. And since the parties contract freely, it does not seem unreasonable for public opinion to hold them to their choices by frowning on adultery and divorce.

Americans hold that nature has made men and women so physically and morally different that one ought to put their different natural abilities to different uses. What are these natural physical and moral differences? Strikingly, Tocqueville says nothing of the most obvious physical difference, that women bear children; he merely suggests that women might be less suited for hard physical labor. And he is so far from finding moral differences that he speaks at length of women's courage and strength of will, of their *virile* habits and energy, of their *manly* reason; they show themselves to be *like*, not unlike, men in heart and mind (*DA* II 3.9–12). American men are nonetheless said to recognize their wives' intelligence and resolve, to esteem them, as well as to respect their freedom. Perhaps, then, they can seek from such women in private the kind of advice that democratic individualism and egalitarianism deny them in public.

Contrary to what his Americans claim, Tocqueville shows that American women are intellectually and morally *similar* to men, and arguably superior. He himself never says that it is natural for women as distinguished from men to live a private and subordinate life in the sense that their natures (as mothers) suit them to it. Insofar as Tocqueville approves of American attitudes toward women, he seems to approve of the assignment of "gender roles," as we would now say. What he shows is that in America, public policy first mistakes or at least greatly exaggerates the significance of natural differences and then goes on to make them the basis of a great conventional inequality. "The true notion of democratic progress" requiring different treatment for the sexes obviously violates the democratic dogma of the natural similarity of all human beings. At the same time, it inverts the notion of natural aristocracy, where the naturally, not conventionally, best rule. For the intellectual and moral superiority of women is, by convention, denied a title to political authority. Democratic progress seems to require that natural superiorities be fostered, yet in the case of women, be obscured from public view. How can this be justified?

Tocqueville's characterization of American men, especially in the chapters on women, is hardly flattering. These men exhaust themselves and their wives in a relentless, ever restive, unsatisfying, and ultimately petty pursuit of material well-being. They are decent, to be sure, if for no other reason than that they are too prosaic to imagine any really interesting indecencies in which to indulge; but they do not seem to be especially admirable or even happy human beings. Women, for their part, seem to spend their youths happily flirting and their married lives resolutely, even proudly, but sadly, packing and unpacking family copies of the Bible and Shakespeare as their husbands move on to the next business venture. What Tocqueville refers to as women's making "a sort of glory for themselves out of the voluntary abandonment of their wills" we might call inordinate passivity (*DA* II 3.12). It is difficult to imagine a vigorous society composed entirely of individuals resembling either American men or women as described.

For Tocqueville, democratic society is characterized by excessive individualism, egalitarianism, and materialism, and by an ever greater centralization of power. Each in its way contributes to the destruction of democratic freedom. If democratic society is to check its own excesses, it will do so in part by diffusing, or decentralizing, public power by employing associations, and in part by appreciating the limits on it that lie so to speak behind and above public life.

Behind public life lies the family. The nineteenth-century American marriage Tocqueville describes is one important aspect of modern democratic life that had not yet been thoroughly

politicized. Here, one may hope to experience not an abstract compassion but “the sort of profound, regular, and peaceful affection that makes up the charm and security of life.” Here, the frenetic activity of men may be restrained, ultimately for the sake of allowing them to focus and deploy their energies more effectively in places where social and political power can reach the goals set. This distinction between domains may be beneficial to all, even if a line drawn along gender seems arbitrary.

Above public life, so to speak, lies religion. Even in democracy, human beings may experience a dissatisfaction with existence that serves to remind them that there are yearnings that go beyond material well-being and even justice. To fulfill such yearnings the indefinite extension of public power would be useless. And where political power should not venture, religion is there to provide individuals with what guidance they might need.

The Superiority of Practice

Democracy in America shows the superiority of American practice to democratic theory, partly because some aspects of American practice had not yet been transformed by democratic theory, partly because practice tends to correct theory (*DA* II 2.4). Nonetheless, America’s vocational schools of freedom do teach two doctrines: “self-interest well understood” and the idea of rights.

How can the doctrine of self-interest well understood be helpful? Tocqueville presents self-interest well understood as a moral doctrine universally accepted in America. It is meant to replace older moral teachings that urged almost divine selflessness or praised the beauty of virtue and the glory of sacrifice. The new moralists defend virtue as useful, and one learns to think not only that one always prefers oneself but also that it is part of one’s interest to see that one’s “particular interest is to do good” (*DA* II 2.8). Americans take to explaining everything they do by means of self-interest, even denying that they are ever given to the “disinterested and unreflective sparks that are natural to man.” In so doing, “they would rather do honor to their philosophy than to themselves.” This, Tocqueville says, is to do themselves an injustice. It is also to contradict their doctrine by honoring it above their interests, or to demonstrate that honoring something above oneself and one’s interests is in one’s interest.

Tocqueville contends that self-interest well understood is the moral doctrine best suited to modern democratic times, even though it is neither complete nor altogether self-evident. But it is “clear and sure”; and since it “marvelously accommodat[es] to the weaknesses of men, it obtains a great empire with ease” (*DA* II 2.8). It is unlikely to produce either true or lofty virtue, but it is nonetheless well suited to democracy because it is accessible to everyone and shows all how to behave well enough: “Consider some individuals, they are lowered. View the species, it is elevated” (*DA* II 2.8).

The doctrine of self-interest runs a risk in making citizens well aware of their needs and in appealing to them; they will very likely think too much about their needs. But it also urges on citizens the importance of attending to their needs in a responsible way. No less than older moral doctrines or democratic compassion, it is meant to prompt democrats to come to one another’s aid. And it is more compatible than the alternatives with democratic self-government. Free political institutions and the habit of participating in them are still necessary to show democratic citizens what useful things they can do for themselves by combining their efforts. Self-interest *well understood* would keep citizens from being overwhelmed by their needs and succumbing to dependence on a schoolmaster government that might otherwise be understood as serving them.

How does the idea of rights support association and self-government? Near the end of *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville makes a remark that might strike Americans today as strange: "Another instinct very natural to democratic peoples and very dangerous is the one that brings them to scorn individual rights and hold them of little account. . . . [T]he very idea of these sorts of rights constantly tends to be distorted and lost among us" (*DA* II 4.7). Tocqueville insists that democracy is naturally hostile to individual rights, that rights are aristocratic in origin and character (*DA* II 4.4).

For Tocqueville, rights are essentially political, not social or economic, in content and in consequence. They make possible self-government and political responsibility, giving citizens more self-confidence and making them less cynical or resentful toward government. The newer, more cherished rights of late twentieth-century America—reproductive rights, the rights of various sorts of minorities, and increasingly, environmental and health-related rights—have, on the whole, the object of security, freedom from risk. Some are understood to be entitlements, rights whose existence depends on a governmental program and often a governmental expenditure. To rights of this sort American democracy seems far from hostile. The fact that Tocqueville seems to have been so wrong about how rights would come to be viewed suggests either that his predictions have gone awry or that they were all too accurate.

When Tocqueville elaborates at the end of the book on the means of forestalling the new despotism (*DA* II 4.7), he refers to his project as a "holy enterprise," although he does not speak of American religious mores. Insofar as Tocqueville has hopes for religion, they are of two sorts. Religion may diminish the threat of mild despotism by reminding citizens of the seriousness of life outside the busy search for material well-being in democracies. Belief in the soul and its afterlife may moderate materialism; and the sure answers any religion offers to the hardest questions can strengthen individual judgment in both private and public life (*DA* II 1.5). In these ways, religion may forestall democrats' psychological and intellectual susceptibility to mild despotism. But once again, Tocqueville's objective in strengthening the personal or nonpublic as against the public can only be one aspect of religion's potential benefit, since he also condemns those who neglect public concerns.²² His second hope for religion is that it may serve as a reminder of what transcends the mediocrity of democratic public life, and thus of a greatness not usually within its scope.

In the second volume of *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville refers to religion as "the most precious inheritance from aristocratic centuries," as if it were foreign to democratic eras (*DA* II 2.15). And in the "Introduction" to the book, he makes it a question whether religion can be relied on to play an important role elsewhere in the modern world. He claims to have learned from American democracy that religion can remain vital in the new world if it is kept separate from politics. In America, clergy were precluded by custom, if not law, from holding political office; they entered into partisan political controversies no further than to support the general view that republicanism is a good thing. Later (*DA* II 1.2), Tocqueville clarifies his characterization of the separation of church and state, showing that it cannot be complete because at the base of politics and religion is one public opinion that sustains them both. He expects democracy to transform religion to make its form and content more consistent with democracy; and by 1830, American religion had made that accommodation. Religion, like family, may be separate from government, but both are parts of *self-government*; thus, the separation must itself be understood politically. This is how Tocqueville can say that religion ought to be considered as "the first of [America's] political institutions" (*DA* I 2.9).

When Tocqueville calls the reader's attention to Americans' insistence on separating church and state, he makes it clear that he thinks that the human power released by modern philosophy needs to impose some sense of limitation on itself. Yet the purpose of his recommendation of

self-limitation is to keep democratic political power vigorous within its proper sphere (*DA* I 2.9). Modern political theory was meant to increase human power and give men better control of events; in practice, however, the instability of democracy may give greater scope to chance than was seen in political life when people did not believe everything was in their control, but was instead at the mercy of higher powers. From democratic instability arises the possibility of a majoritarian politics characterized by a continuous, meaningless flux. The flux may seem to justify an apathy that leaves the field to passionate, if fleetingly aroused, majorities; then, in the end, it subsides into mild despotism.

What is necessary, Tocqueville insists, is for democratic governments to set distant goals, goals to be achieved by moderate, yet steadfast, efforts. Surprisingly, however, Tocqueville specifies no great project. Instead, he suggests the seemingly limited, not to say modest, task of seeing to it that political office come only as a reward for skill and effort, for moderate ambition—and not for pleasing the people. But this modest goal is in truth an infinite one that calls forth continuous diligence. There will always be elections that can be won by pleasing the people; and winning the favor of the people, especially of a democratic people with unstable desires, will depend in large part on chance. It is beyond the capacity of a democracy to reward virtue regularly. Partial success is within reach to the extent that political institutions and mores can be well shaped; but without the support of a greater power, the goal will always remain elusive. Insofar as men do act confidently in the hope that virtue will be rewarded—accomplishing much along the way—they will, in effect, have returned to a kind of religious faith from which politics may benefit politically.

Tocqueville learned to admire democracy, sincerely, if not wholeheartedly: it would be different from aristocracy, with its own virtues and vices, its own good and bad penchants, its own ideas, its own sort of greatness and beauty, neither incontrovertibly superior nor inferior to what had preceded it (*DA* II 4.8). The fact that he criticizes democracy does not mean that he does not also speak ill of aristocracy or that he could not speak better of democracy, had he not deliberately left that to others (*DA* II Notice). In the end, Tocqueville was a democrat, and more of a democrat than many of his contemporaries. Because he insisted that only political freedom could remedy the ills to which equality of conditions gives rise (*DA* II 2.4), he hopefully accepted that equality and despite his fears, embraced the political freedom that democracy promised.

Notes

1. This chapter is condensed from the authors' "Introduction" to a translation of Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000). All references in the text are to this edition, hereafter cited as *DA*, followed by volume, part, and chapter number.

2. The following discussion is based on George W. Pierson, *Tocqueville in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, [1938] 1996); James T. Schleifer, *The Making of Tocqueville's "Democracy in America"* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980); and André Jardin, *Tocqueville: A Biography*, trans. L. Davis (New York: Farrar Straus, 1988).

3. Jardin, *Tocqueville: A Biography*, 79–84.

4. Quoted in Jardin, *Tocqueville: A Biography*, 90.

5. Letter to Louis de Kergorlay of January 1835, Alexis de Tocqueville, *Selected Letters on Politics and Society*, ed. Roger Boesche (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 93–96; Alexis de Tocqueville, *Oeuvres complètes*, 18 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1961–1998), 13.1:373–75, hereafter cited as *OC*. See also Jardin, *Tocqueville: A Biography*, 93.

6. Pierson, *Tocqueville in America*, 782–86.

7. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Journey to America*, ed. J. P. Mayer (London: Faber and Faber, 1959); also Alexis de Tocqueville, *Oeuvres*, 2 vols., ed. A. Jardin (Paris: Gallimard, éd. Pléiade, 1991–1992), 1:29–413, hereafter cited as *Oeuvres*.

8. In a deleted fragment, Tocqueville wrote of the two volumes: "The first book more American than democratic. This one more democratic than American." See Schleifer, *The Making of "Democracy in America"*, 29, and also Jardin, *Tocqueville: A Biography*, 271–76.

9. Letter to John Stuart Mill, October 10, 1840 (*OC* 6.1:329–31); in reply to Mill's letter of May 11, 1840, to Tocqueville, in which he says: "You have changed the face of political philosophy" (*OC* 6.1:328).

10. Jean-Claude Lamberti's *Notice* in *DA*, *Oeuvres*, 2:904; Jardin, *Tocqueville: A Biography*, 201.

11. The manuscript given to the printer has not survived, but Tocqueville's working manuscripts are preserved at the Beinecke Library at Yale. See *Oeuvres*, 2:934.

12. See *DA* II 2.1 for the closest approximation to the state of nature; in I 2.10, Tocqueville says that a republic is "the natural state of the Americans," and in that chapter he also gives an account of the origin of sovereignty without referring to the state of nature.

13. See Pierre Manent, *Tocqueville and the Nature of Democracy*, trans. J. Waggoner (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1996), 48.

14. Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the Revolution*, trans. A. Kahan (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), I 5, II 5, marvelously prefigured twenty years earlier in the essay Tocqueville had written for John Stuart Mill: "Social and Political Condition of France," in *OC* 2.1:65.

15. In the margin, Tocqueville notes: "New despotism. It is in the portrayal of this that resides all the originality and depth of my idea. What I wrote in my first work was hackneyed and superficial." Cited in Jean-Claude Lamberti, "Two Ways of Conceiving the Republic," in *Interpreting Tocqueville's "Democracy in America"*, ed. Ken Masugi (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1991), 18.

16. The term "tyranny of the majority" is used in I 2.4, 2.7 (four times), 2.8. "Despotism of the majority" is used in I 1.8, 2.7, 2.9. The "omnipotence" of the people or the majority is mentioned in I 1.8, 2 Intro., 2.4, 2.7 (eight times).

17. In a letter to his friend Arthur de Gobineau, November 17, 1853 (*Selected Letters*, 297–301; *OC* 9:201–4), Tocqueville criticizes the racialist theories of Gobineau's *Essai sur l'inégalité des races humaines* (1853) as "very probably false and very certainly pernicious."

18. Robert Bellah has made Tocqueville's phrase current; see Robert N. Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton, *Habits of the Heart* (New York: Harper and Row, 1985).

19. For a similar attack on historians of the French Revolution of 1848, see *Recollections of Alexis de Tocqueville [Souvenirs]*, ed. J. P. Mayer (London: Harvill Press, 1948), 67–75.

20. Rousseau's Savoyard Vicar refers to God as the *Etre immense*; *Emile*, in Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Oeuvres complètes*, 5 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, Pléiade ed., 1959–1995), 4:592. See also Descartes's description of God as "Immense, incomprehensible and infinite" in *Meditations* IV. Our thanks to Terence Marshall for these references. Tocqueville himself also uses the term in describing the pantheistic conception of the whole, which incorporates all of creation and the Creator himself (*DA* II 1.7).

21. While arguing in the Chamber of Deputies for the abolition of slavery in the French colonies, Tocqueville reminded his colleagues that the idea of freedom and therefore the "great idea [of abolition] is not only your property, it is not only among the mother ideas of your Revolution, but it lives or it dies in your hearts, depending on whether one sees living or reborn there all the elevated sentiments, all the noble instincts that your Revolution developed, those noble instincts by which you have done everything great that you have accomplished in the world and without which, I do not fear to say, you will do nothing and you will be nothing." "Intervention dans la discussion de la loi sur le régime des esclaves dans les colonies," in *OC* 3.1:125–26.

22. For an emphatic restatement of this point, see *The Old Regime*, 86–89.