

# Why Read Tocqueville's Democracy in America?

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The young aristocrat Alexis de Tocqueville, sketch by an unknown artist.

Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University

*The following remarks on a famous work by Alexis de Tocqueville (1805 - 1859) were presented as a lecture to the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences Scholars Program at the University of Sydney, 24th April, 2015.*

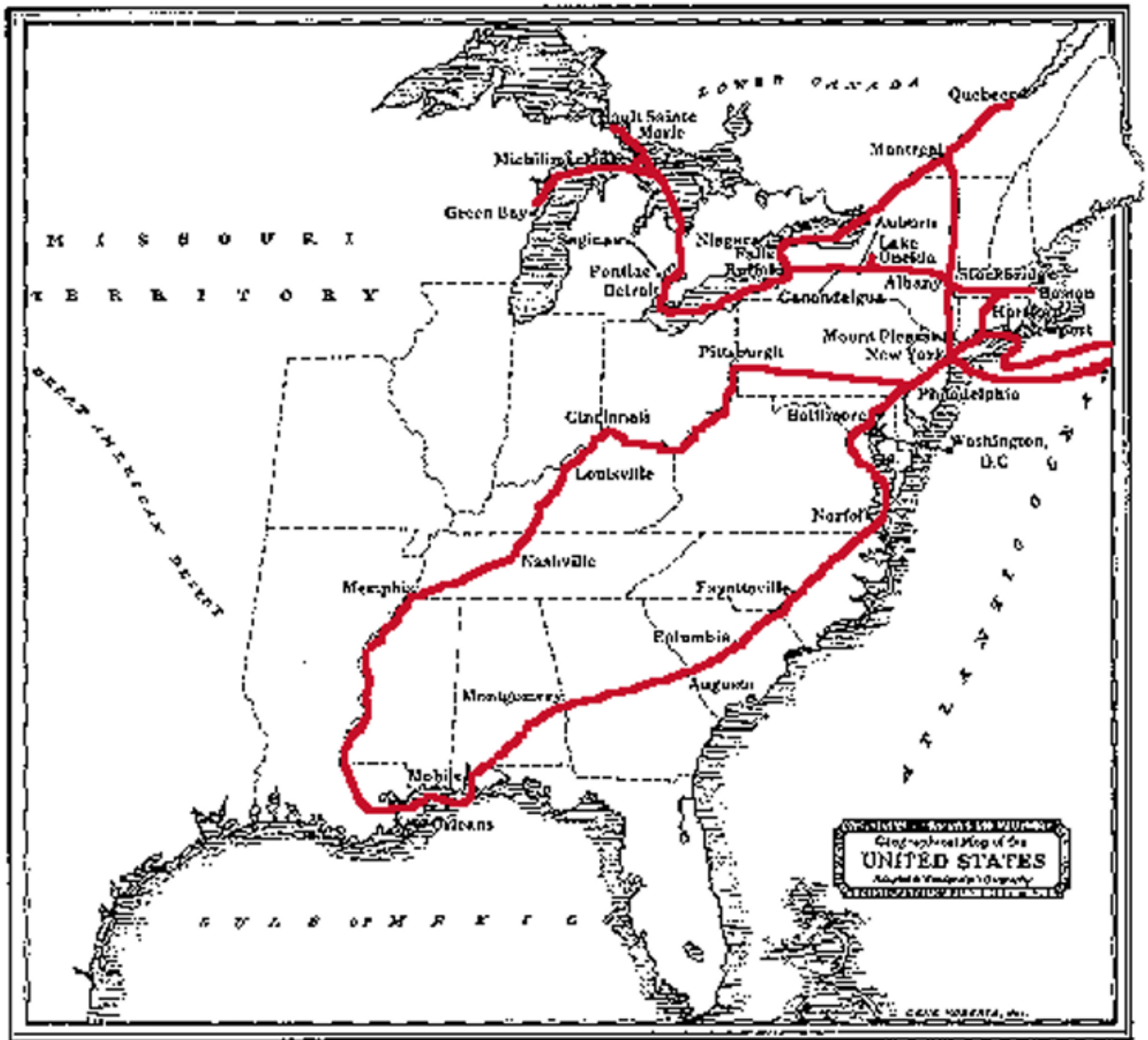
Alexis de Tocqueville's four-volume *Democracy in America* (1835-1840) is commonly said to be among the greatest works of nineteenth-century political writing. Its daring conjectures, elegant prose, formidable length and narrative complexity make it a masterpiece, yet exactly those qualities have together ensured, through time, that opinions greatly differ about the roots of its greatness.

Some observers cautiously mine the text for its fresh insights on such perennial themes as liberty of the press, the tyranny of the majority and civil society; or they focus on such topics as why it is that modern democracies are vulnerable to 'commercial panics' and why they simultaneously value equality, reduce the threat of revolution and grow complacent. Some readers of the text treat its author as a '[classical liberal](#)' who loved parliamentary government and loathed the extremes of democracy. More often, the text is treated as a brilliant grand commentary on the decisive historical significance for old Europe of the rise of the new American republic, which was soon to become a world empire. Some observers, very often American, push this interpretation to the limit. They think of *Democracy in America* in almost nationalist terms: for them, it is a '[lavish hymn](#)' to the United States, a celebration of its emerging authority in the world, an ode to its 19th-century greatness and future 20th-century global dominance.

How should we make sense of these conflicting interpretations? Each arguably suffers serious flaws, but at the outset it's important to recognize that the act of reading past texts is always an exercise in selection. There are no 'true' and 'faithful' readings of what others have written. Readers like to say that they have 'really grasped' the intended meanings of dead authors, whose texts belong to a context, but 'full disclosure' of that kind is forbidden to the living. Hemmed in by language and horizons of time and space, reading is always a stylizing of past reality. Just as walking is a pale imitation of dancing, and dancing an exaggerated form of walking, so interpretations frame past realities. They are acts of narration. Acts of reading past texts are always time- and space-bound interpretations and, as one of my teachers [Hans-Georg Gadamer](#) liked to remark, all such interpretations of past texts turn out to be misinterpretations. That is why differences of interpretation are not only to be expected but, in order to prevent any one of them becoming dominant, to be welcomed, especially when they push beyond familiar horizons, towards 'wild' perspectives that force us to rethink things that we have so far taken for granted.

### *Democratic Literature*

It is the spirit of 'wild reading' that infuses the following notes on Tocqueville's 'classic' work. When approached one hundred and seventy years after its first publication as a four-volume set, *Democracy in America* teaches us more than a few things about the subject of democracy. But what exactly can we learn from it? It may seem far-fetched, but the first striking thing about the text is not just that it is the first-ever lengthy analytic treatment in any language of the subject of democracy but a treatment whose narrative form both mirrors and amplifies ('mimics') the dynamic openness of its subject matter: a way of life and a method of handling power Tocqueville repeatedly calls democracy. *Democracy in America* is a democratic text. Striking is its openness, its willingness to entertain paradoxes and juggle opposites, its powerful sense of adventure constructed from extensive field notes gathered by means of a grand adventure.



Map of Tocqueville's adventure through the United States, May 1831 - February 1832.

It may not seem obvious, but this sense of adventure has everything to do with the spirit of 'democracy'. *Democracy in America* brilliantly captures and mimics in literary form the growth of an open, experimental society, a dynamic political order deeply aware of its own originality. Its grasp of these qualities of democracy was undoubtedly nurtured by Tocqueville's peripatetic through the young American republic. It opened his eyes, widened his horizons, and changed his mind about democracy. In 1831, for nine short but action-filled months, the 26-year-old young French aristocrat (1805-1859) travelled through the United States. Accompanied by his colleague and friend [Gustave de Beaumont](#), he ventured almost everywhere. Like a well-briefed tourist, he rode on steamboats (one of which sunk), found himself trapped by blizzards, sampled the local cuisine, and slept rough in log cabins. He found time for research and for rest, and for conversation, despite his imperfect English, with useful or prominent Americans, among them John Quincy Adams, Andrew Jackson and Daniel Webster.



Setting out from New York, he travelled upstate to Buffalo, then through the frontier, as it was then called, to Michigan and Wisconsin. He sojourned two weeks in Canada, from where he descended to Boston and Philadelphia and Baltimore. Next he went west, to Pittsburgh and Cincinnati; then south to Nashville, Memphis, and New Orleans; then north through the south-eastern states to the capital, Washington; and at last back to New York, where he returned by packet to Le Havre, France. At the beginning of his journey, in New York, where he sojourned from May 11th for some six weeks, Tocqueville was openly hesitant about this bustling market society whose system of democratic government was still in its infancy. 'Everything I see fails to excite my enthusiasm,' he wrote in his journal, 'because I attribute more to the nature of things than to human will.'

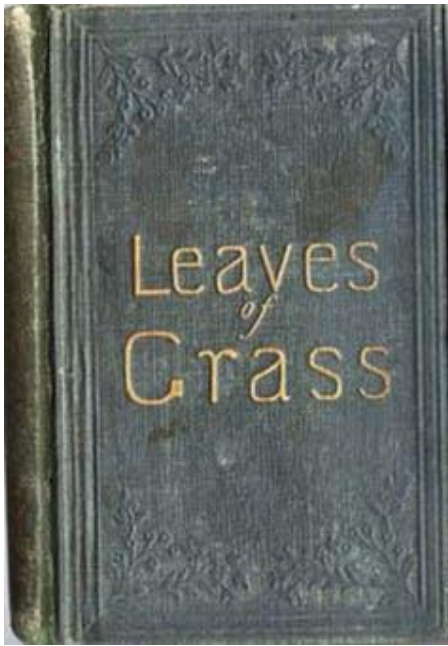


Château Tocqueville.

Talk of the God-given nature of things appears from time to time between the lines of *Democracy in America*. Seemingly still under the influence of the political false starts of his native France, the 'nature of things' principle stands in some tension with its sense of adventure, with its feeling for the novelty of democracy as a transformative experience. But Tocqueville, the slightly built son of a count from Normandy - the [Château Tocqueville](#) still stands, within sight of the harbor of Cherbourg - was soon to change his mind about democracy. Sometime during his stay in Boston (7 September - 3 October, 1831), Tocqueville became a convert of the American way of life. He began to talk of 'a great democratic revolution' now sweeping the world from its American heartlands. He was persuaded that 'the advent of democracy as a governing power in the world's affairs, universal and irresistible, was at hand'. He became convinced that 'the time was coming' when democracy would triumph in Europe, as it was doing in America. The future was America. It was therefore imperative to understand its strengths and weaknesses, he thought. And so, on January 12th 1832, just before boarding his packet for France, he sketched plans to bring to the French public a work about democracy in America. 'If royalists could see the internal functioning of this well-ordered republic,' he wrote, 'the deep respect its people profess for their acquired rights, the power of those rights over crowds, the religion of law, the real and effective liberty people enjoy, the true rule of the majority, the easy and natural way things proceed, they would realize that they apply a single name to diverse forms of government

which have nothing in common. Our republicans would feel that what we have called the Republic was never more than an unclassifiable monster...covered in blood and mud, clothed in the rages of antiquity's quarrels.'

Tocqueville's epiphany produced a string of extraordinary insights, as well as paradoxes. Consider his claim in *Democracy in America* that the political form known as democracy, all things considered, extinguishes the aesthetic dimension of life. It produces no lasting works of art, no poetry, no fine literature. Lacking a leisure class, he reasoned, the young American democracy cultivated people with practical minds. 'The language, the dress, and the daily actions of men in democracies are repugnant to conceptions of the ideal', he wrote. The whole 'philosophical method' of democracy is pragmatic, centered on the effort of individuals to make sense of their world by harnessing their own individual understanding of things. Even in matters of religion, 'everyone shuts himself up tightly within himself and insists upon judging the world from there'.



The often-beautiful narrative prose, self-conscious reflection and fragmented 'open text' structure of *Democracy in America* contradicts this thesis. *Democracy in America* is arguably a great work of modern democratic literature, a highly engaging and thought-provoking text that markedly stands at right angles to the dull-witted science of politics that is today dominant in the American academy, and elsewhere.

The point can be put in a different way: Tocqueville positively contradicted himself. He failed to foresee the many ways in which the young American democracy, with its palpable ethos of equality with liberty manifested in simple body language, tobacco-chewing customs and easy manners, would give rise to self-consciously democratic art and literature.

Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* (1855), a celebration of the potential boundlessness of the American experiment with democracy and of the power of the poet to rupture conventional language springs to mind. So also does the greatest of all nineteenth-century American novels, Hermann Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851), a tale that warned against the hubris and self-destruction that awaits all those who act as if the world contained no boundaries, rules or moral limits. Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* stands tall among these 'classics'. It is in fact their progenitor.

## Contingency

But there's more to say about *Democracy in America*: much more, in fact. *Democracy in America* is a genuine breakthrough in the understanding of democracy as a unique political form, as a whole way of life that is fundamentally transformative of people's sense of being in the world. Standing behind Tocqueville's fascination with democracy is his awareness of its profound role in shaping modern times by stirring up people's sense of the contingency of things. The four-volume work is still regarded, justifiably, as one of the great books about the subject, in no small measure because at a crucial moment in the democratic experiment in America Tocqueville managed to put his finger on several sources of its dynamic energy. For Tocqueville, it is not just capitalism and the law-enforcing territorial state that define modern times. The 'great democratic revolution' marks off modernity from the prior world structured by what he repeatedly calls 'aristocracy'. Democracy is a *sui generis* but seemingly irreversible feature of the modern age.

It is true there are more than a few hints that Tocqueville, backed by the belief that God stands in favor of democracy, is tempted by evolutionary thinking, of the kind (in much more secular form) that later gripped Fukuyama's grand generalization of the 1776 revolution as the beginning of the end of history. Yet in contrast to Fukuyama and others, Tocqueville insisted there is no certain progress at the level of 'general evolution'. Tocqueville emphasizes to his readers that democracy challenges settled ways of thinking and speaking and acting. It reveals that humans are capable of transcending themselves. Really striking is Tocqueville's grasp of the way democracy breaks down life's certainties and spreads a lived sense of the mutability of the power relations through which people live their lives. For him, democracy is the twin of contingency.

The point is not often noted by readers of Tocqueville, but it is of fundamental importance when trying to come to terms with the 'spirit' of democracy. What we learn from *Democracy in America* is that democracy nudges and broadens people's horizons. It tutors their sense of pluralism. It prods them into taking greater responsibility for how, when and why they act as they do. Democracies encourage people's suspicions of power deemed 'natural'. Citizens come to learn that 'perpetual mutability' is their lot, and that they must keep an eye on power and its representatives because prevailing power relationships are not 'natural', but up for grabs. In other words, democracy promotes something of a Gestalt switch in the perception of power. The metaphysical idea of an objective, out-there-at-a-distance 'reality' is weakened; so, too, is the presumption that 'reality' is stubborn and somehow superior to power. The fabled distinction between what people can see with their eyes and what they are told about the emperor's clothes breaks down. 'Reality', including the 'reality' promoted by the powerful, comes to be understood as always 'produced reality', a matter of interpretation - and the power to seduce others into conformity by forcing particular interpretations of the world down others' throats.

### *The Spirit of Equality*

What are the wellsprings of this shared sense of contingency? Why does democracy tend to interrupt certainties, impeach them, enable people to see that things could be other than they presently are? Tocqueville might have been expected to say that because periodic elections stir things up they are the prime cause of the shared sense of the contingency of power relations. Not so. Tocqueville actually thought that elections trigger herd instincts among citizens. He worried that 'faith in public opinion' might well become 'a species of religion, and the majority its ministering prophet'. Though frequent elections 'keep society in a feverish excitement and give a continual instability to public affairs', periodic elections are not seen by Tocqueville to be the core dynamic of democracy. The proximate cause of the 'spirit' of restlessness of democracy lies elsewhere: it is above all traceable to the way democracy unleashes struggles by groups and individuals for greater equality.

Tocqueville reminds us in *Democracy in America* that the core principle of democracy is the public commitment to equality among its citizens. The reminder seems lost these days on most politicians, political parties and governments. It's true that Tocqueville showed little interest in the finery of contested understandings of the meaning of equality. He was no doubt aware of Aristotle's famous distinction between 'numerical equality' and 'proportional equality', a form of equal treatment of others who are considered as equals in some or other important respect, but not others. Yet Tocqueville openly sided with Aristotle's view that democrats 'think that as they are equal they ought to be equal in all things'. Equality is for him not the equal right of citizens to be different. Equality is sameness (*semblable*). Proof of its allure was the way the new American democracy unleashed constant struggles against the various inequalities inherited from old Europe, thus proving that they were neither necessary nor desirable. Democracy, argued Tocqueville, spreads passion for the equalization of power, property and status among people. They come to feel that current inequalities are purely contingent, and so potentially alterable by human action itself.



Tocqueville was fascinated by this trend towards equalization. In the realm of law and government, he noted, everything tends to dispute and uncertainty. The grip of sentimental tradition, absolute morality and religious faith in the power of the divine weakens. Growing numbers of Americans consequently harbor 'instinctive incredulity of the supernatural'. They also look upon the power of politicians and governments with a jealous eye. Government structured by the good blood of monarchs is anathema. They are prone to suspect or curse those who wield power, and thereby they are impatient with arbitrary rule. In the field of what Tocqueville calls 'political society', government and its laws gradually lose their divinity and charm. They come to be regarded as simply expedient for this or that purpose, and as properly based on the voluntary consent of citizens endowed with equal civil and political rights. The spell of absolute monarchy is forever broken. Political rights are extended gradually from the lucky privileged few to those who once suffered discrimination; and government policies and laws are subject constantly to public grumbling, legal challenges and alteration.

Thanks to democracy, something similar happens in the field of social life, or so Tocqueville proposed. The American democracy is subject to a permanent 'social revolution'. Himself a self-confessed sentimental believer in the old patriarchal principle that 'the sources of a married woman's happiness are in the home of her husband', Tocqueville nevertheless pointed to a profound change in the relationship between the sexes in American society. Democracy gradually destroys or modifies 'that great inequality of man and woman, which has appeared hitherto to be rooted eternally in nature'. The more general point he wanted to make is this: under democratic conditions, people's definitions of social life as 'natural' or 'taken for granted' are gradually replaced by self-consciously chosen arrangements that favor equality as sameness.

Democracy speeds up the 'de-naturing' of social life. It becomes subject to something like a permanent democratization. This is how: if certain social groups defend their privileges, of property or income, for instance, then pressure grows for extending those privileges to other social groups. 'And why not?', the protagonists of equality ask, adding in the same breath: 'Why should the privileged be treated as if they were different, or better?' After each new practical concession to the principle of equality, new demands from those who are socially excluded force yet further concessions from the privileged. Eventually the point is reached where the social privileges enjoyed by a few are re-distributed, in the form of universal social entitlements.

That at least was the theory. On the basis of his travels and observations, Tocqueville predicted that American democracy would in future have to confront a fundamental dilemma. Put at its simplest, it was this: if privileged Americans try, in the name of such-and-such a principle, to restrict social and political privileges to a few, then their opponents will be tempted to organize themselves, for the purpose of pointing out that such-and-such privileges are by no means 'natural', or God-given, and are therefore an open embarrassment to democracy. Democratic mechanisms, said Tocqueville, stimulate a passion for social and political equality that they cannot easily satisfy. He thought there was much truth in the view of Jean-Jacques Rousseau that democratic perfection is reserved for the deities. The earthly struggle for equalization is never fully attainable. It is always unfinished. Democracy lives forever in the future. There is no such thing as a pure democracy and there never will be a pure democracy. Democracy (as [Jacques Derrida](#) later put things) is always to come. 'This complete equality', wrote Tocqueville, 'slips from the hands of the people at the very moment when they think they have grasped it and flies, as Pascal says, an eternal flight'.

The less powerful ranks of society, including those without the vote, are especially caught in the grip of this levelling dynamic, or so Tocqueville thought. Irritated by the fact of their subordination, agitated by the possibility of overcoming their condition, they rather easily grow frustrated by the uncertainty of achieving equality. Their initial enthusiasm and hope give way to disappointment, but

at some point the frustration they experience renews their commitment to the struggle for equality. This ‘perpetual movement of society’ fills the world of American democracy with the questioning of absolutes, with radical skepticism about inequality, and with an impatient love of experimentation, with new ways of doing things, for the sake of equality. America found itself caught up in a democratic maelstrom. Nothing is certain or inviolable, except the passionate, dizzying struggle for social and political equality. ‘No sooner do you set foot upon American soil then you are stunned by a type of tumult’, reported Tocqueville, stung by the same excitement. ‘A confused clamor is heard everywhere, and a thousand voices simultaneously demand the satisfaction of their social needs. Everything is in motion around you’, he continued. ‘Here the people of one town district are meeting to decide upon the building of a church; there the election of a representative is taking place; a little farther on, the delegates of a district are hastening to town in order to consult about some local improvements; elsewhere, the laborers of a village quit their ploughs to deliberate upon a road or public school project.’ He concluded: ‘Citizens call meetings for the sole purpose of declaring their disapprobation of the conduct of government; while in other assemblies citizens salute the authorities of the day as the fathers of their country, or form societies which regard drunkenness as the principal cause of the evils of the state, and solemnly pledge themselves to the principle of temperance.’

### *Civil Society*

Tocqueville was certainly impressed by ‘civil society’ (*société civile*). He was not the first to use the term in its modern sense (see my earliest works [\*Democracy and Civil Society\*](#) and [\*Civil Society and the State\*](#)), but he did find the new American republic brimming with many different forms of civil association, and he therefore pondered their importance for consolidating democracy. Tocqueville was the first political writer to bring together the newly-invented modern understanding of civil society with the old Greek category of democracy; and he was the first to say that a healthy democracy makes room for civil associations that function as schools of public spirit, permanently open to all, within which citizens become acquainted with others, learn their rights and duties as equals, and press home their concerns, sometimes in opposition to government, so preventing the tyranny of minorities by herd-like majorities through the ballot box. He noted that these civil associations were small-scale affairs, and yet, within their confines, he emphasized how individual citizens regularly ‘socialize’ themselves by raising their concerns beyond their selfish, tetchy, narrowly private goals. Through their participation in civil associations, they come to feel themselves to be citizens. They draw the conclusion that in order to obtain others’ support, they must often lend them their co-operation, as equals.

Tocqueville’s account of democracy in America shows, at a poignant moment in the nineteenth century, just how popular thinking had become self-conscious of the novelty of civil society under democratic conditions. Tocqueville called upon his readers to understand democracy as a brand new type of self-government defined not just by elections, parties and government by representatives, but also by the extensive use of civil society institutions that prevent political despotism by placing a limit, in the name of equality, upon the scope and power of government itself. Tocqueville also pointed out that these civil associations had radical social implications. The ‘great democratic revolution’ that was underway in America showed that it was the enemy of taken-for-granted privileges in all spheres of life. Under democratic conditions, civil society never stands still. It is a sphere of restlessness, civic agitation, refusals to cooperate, struggles for improved conditions, the incubator of visions of a more equal society.

### *Pathologies of Democracy*

Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America* is worth reading for yet one more reason: it is the first-ever analysis of democracy to dissect democracy’s pathologies, and to do so in a manner that remained



basically loyal to the spirit and substance of democracy as a normative ideal. Readers of *Democracy in America* often brush aside this point. While they admit that Tocqueville was well aware that democracy is prone to self-contradiction and self-destruction, they note that he tended to exaggerate the momentum and geographic extent of the busy levelling process that was underway in America. According to this view, Tocqueville, who was blessed with a remarkable sixth sense of probing the difference between appearances and realities, sometimes, when looking at life in the United States, swallowed whole its own best self-image.

He wasn't the only nineteenth-century visitor to be charmed by the new democracy. Consider the [Italian fashion](#) of visiting the new democratic republic, to see what it was like. 'Hurrah to you, oh great Country!', wrote one traveler, shortly after Tocqueville had published his great work. 'The United States is a free land, essentially because its sons drink together the milk of respect for each other's opinions...this is what makes them beautiful, and their air more easily breathable for us who are thirsty for freedom from old Europe, where the liberties we have gained with so much blood and pain have for the most part been suffocated by our mutual intolerance.' Another Italian traveler expressed similar excitement. 'Ah, this is the democracy that I love, that I dream of and yearn for', he wrote, contrasting it with the 'presumption and snobbishness' guarded back home by the 'people of high rank'. The same visitor was struck by the way American citizens casually wore caps and hats, how they spurned moustaches, chewed tobacco, and liked to chew the fat, hands in pockets. 'Simple people, simple furniture, simple greetings', he wrote, adding that Americans 'extend you their hand, ask you what you need, and quickly respond.' Still another visitor brimmed with exuberance. 'There is no lying by officials. Truth, always truth. No prejudices, no red tape. From every street corner come the cries of a people intoxicated with hope and immortal charity: "Forward! Forward!"' He added an immodest prediction: 'Just as Rome impressed the seal of its laws and its cosmopolitan culture on the old world of the Mediterranean, and Romanized Christianity, so the federated democracy of the United States will prove to be the guiding model for the next political phase of humanity'.



Alamy/2013

## Slavery

Tocqueville was much less sanguine about the fledgling American democracy. Many of his observations were both astute and prescient, for instance concerning the grave political problem of slavery. Tocqueville was perhaps the first writer to show at length why modern representative democracy could not live with slavery, as classical assembly-based democracy had managed to do, admittedly with some discomfort. He highlighted how the 'calamity' of slavery had resulted in a terrible sub-division of social and political life. Black people in America were neither in nor of civil society. They were objects of gross incivility. Legal and informal penalties against racial intermarriage were severe. In those states where slavery had been abolished, black people who dared to vote, or to serve on juries, were threatened with murder. There was segregation and deep inequality in education. 'In the theatres gold cannot procure a seat for the servile race beside their former masters; in the hospitals they lie apart; and although they are allowed to invoke the same God as the whites, it must be at a different altar and in their own churches, with their own clergy.' Prejudice even haunted the dead. 'When the Negro dies, his bones are cast aside, and the distinction of condition prevails even in the equality of death.'

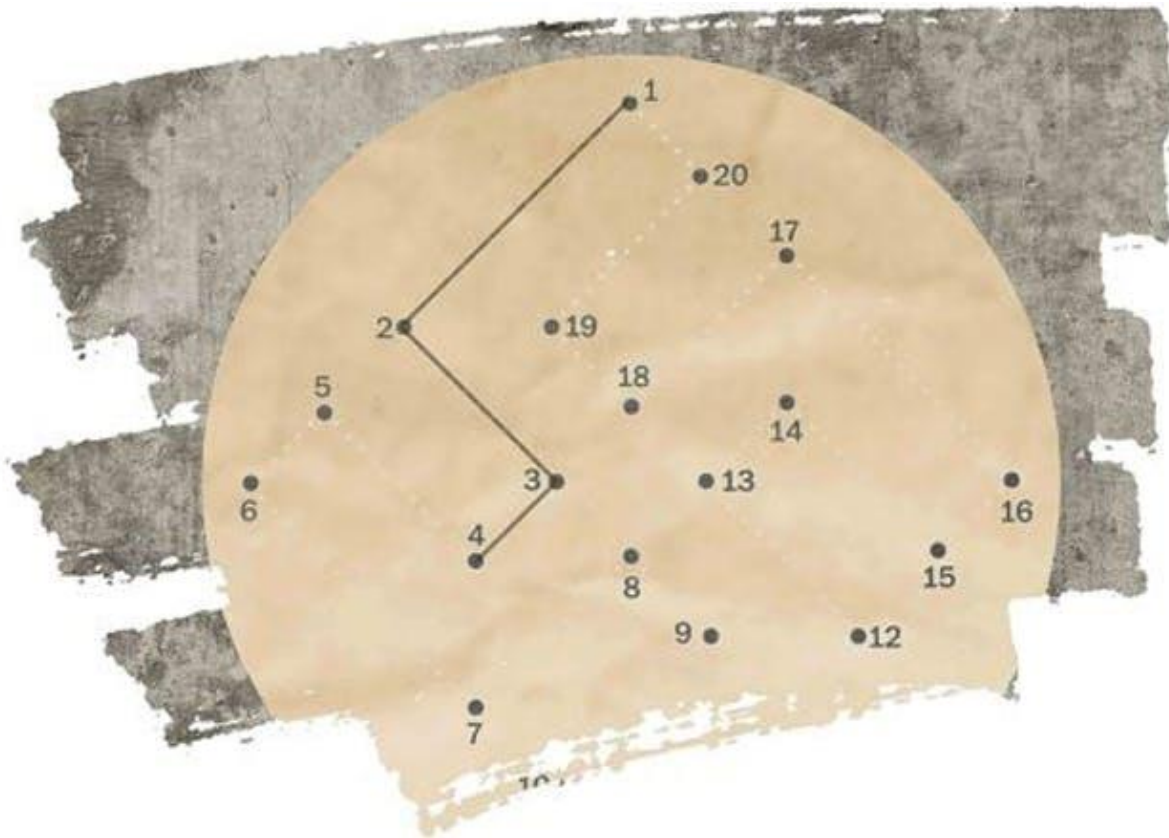
Lurking within these racist customs was a disturbing paradox, Tocqueville observed. The prejudice directed at black people, he noted, increases in proportion to their formal emancipation. Slavery in America was in this sense much worse than in ancient Greece, where the emancipation of slaves for military purposes was encouraged by the fact that their skin color was often the same as that of their masters. Both within and outside the institutions of American slavery, by contrast, blacks were made to suffer terrible bigotry, 'the prejudice of the master, the prejudice of the race, and the prejudice of color', a prejudice that drew strength from false talk of the 'natural' superiority of whites. Such bigotry cast a long shadow over the future of American democracy, to the point where it now seemed to be faced not only with the equally unpalatable options of retaining slavery or organized bigotry, but also with the outbreak of 'the most horrible of civil wars'. Tocqueville's political forecast was understandably gloomy: 'Attacked by Christianity as unjust and by political economy as prejudicial, and now contrasted with democratic liberty and the intelligence of our age, slavery cannot survive. By the act of the master, or by the will of the slave, it will cease; and in either case great calamities may be expected to ensue. If liberty be refused to the Negroes of the South, they will in the end forcibly seize it for themselves; if it be given, they will long abuse it.'

Tocqueville's white-skinned suspicion of black people should be noted, as should his accurate spotting of the poisonous contradiction between slavery and the spirit of modern representative democracy. He was right as well to be anxious about the magnitude of the problem. By 1820, at least ten million African slaves had arrived in the New World. Some 400,000 had settled in North America, but their numbers had multiplied rapidly, to the point where all the states south of the Mason-Dixon line were slave societies, in the full sense of the term. Even in New England, where there were comparatively few slaves, the economy was rooted in the slave trade with the West Indies. As David Brion Davis has pointed out (in *Challenging the Boundaries of Slavery*), Afro-Americans did the hard and dirty work of the democratic republic. They cleared forests, turned the soil, planted and tendered and harvested the exportable crops that brought great prosperity to the slave-owning classes. So successful was the system of slavery that after 1819 Southern politicians and landowners and their supporters within the federal government agitated for its universal adoption. As a mode of production, and as a whole way of life, slavery went on the warpath, as Abraham Lincoln made clear in his not inaccurate claim that Slave Power was hell-bent on taking over the whole country, North as well as South.

The aggressiveness of Slave Power during the 1820s and 1830s disturbed the dreams of some Americans; it forced them to conclude that the American polity required a re-founding. Reasoning with their democratic hearts, they spotted that slavery was incompatible with the ideals of free and

equal citizenship. These same opponents of slavery were to some degree aware of a contradiction that lurked within the contradiction. The problem, simply put, was whether or not the abolition of slavery could be done democratically, that is, by peaceful means such as petitioning and decisions by Congress, or whether military force would be needed to defeat slavery's defenders.

In the end, as we know, armed force decided, bringing with it four years of terrible misery. An ugly struggle between two huge armies that locked horns 10,000 times, the Civil War was the first recorded war between two aspiring representative democracies, whose political elites were prone to think of themselves as defenders of two incompatible definitions of democracy. The conflict was in a way a clash between two different historical eras. The military crushing of the Southern fantasy of Greek democracy, in the name of a God-given vision of representative democracy, proved costly. Death, disability and destitution ruined hundreds of thousands of households, on both sides. There were an estimated 970,000 casualties, 3 per cent of the total population of the United States. Some 620,000 soldiers died, two-thirds from neglect and disease.



Connecting the Dots to Despotism. Greg Groesch/The Washington Times

## *Despotism*

Perhaps the most profound intuition of *Democracy in America* has to do with the long-term problem of [despotism in the age of democracy](#). The complex story it tells arguably remains highly relevant for our times.

Tocqueville was acutely aware of the dangers posed by the rise, from within the heart of the new civil society, of capitalist manufacturing industry and a new social power group (an 'aristocracy', he called them) of industrial manufacturers, whose power of control over capital threatens the freedom and pluralism and equality so essential for democracy. (In *Democracy in America* Tocqueville does not



consider workers as a separate social class but rather as a menial fragment of *la class industrielle*. Here Tocqueville stood against Marx and sided with such contemporaries as [Saint-Simon](#), for whom workers and entrepreneurs comprised a single social class: *les industriels*. This partly explains why Tocqueville later reacted in contradictory ways to the events of 1848; as [François Furet](#) and others have pointed out, he interpreted these events both as a continuation of the democratic revolution and, rather spitefully, as a ‘most terrible civil war’ threatening the very basis of ‘property, family and civilization’.) This new ‘aristocracy’ applied the division of labor principle to manufacturing, he noted. This dramatically increased the efficiency and volume of production, but at a high social cost. The modern system of industrial manufacturing, he claimed, creates a manufacturing class, comprising a stratum of workers, who are crowded into towns and cities, where they are reduced to mind-numbing poverty, and a stratum of middle class owners, who love money and have no taste for the virtues of citizenship.

Tocqueville was among the first political writers to spot that a middle class gripped by selfish individualism and live-for-today materialism was prone to political promiscuity. A class of so-called citizens ‘constantly circling for petty pleasures’ could easily be persuaded to sacrifice their freedoms by embracing an ‘immense protective power’ that treats its subjects as ‘perpetual children’, as a ‘flock of timid animals’ in need of a shepherd. Against Aristotle (‘a government which is composed of the middle class more nearly approximates to democracy than to oligarchy, and is the safest of the imperfect forms of government’), Tocqueville argued that in fact the middle class have no automatic affinity with power-sharing democracy. [Francis Fukuyama](#) has said recently that ‘the existence of a broad middle class’ is ‘extremely helpful’ in sustaining ‘liberal democracy’. But what Tocqueville long ago pointed out is that under democratic conditions, especially when the poor grow uppity, the middle class might well display symptoms of what might be called political neurasthenia: lassitude, aching fatigue and general irritability about social and political disorder. Guided by fear and greed and professional and family honor and respectability, they would be happy to be co-opted or kidnapped by state rulers, willing to be bought off with lavish services and cash payments and invisible benefits that brought them stable comforts.

With good reason, looking into the future, Tocqueville worried not only about the decline of public spirit within this middle class. Yes, he was particularly exercised by its tendency to pursue wealth for the sake of wealth. That is why he worried his head about such bad ‘habits of the heart’ as cupidity and selfishness, possessive individualism and narrow-minded cunning. But his worries ran deeper than this. Unlike Marx, Tocqueville predicted that both fractions of the new manufacturing class would press for government support of their interests, for instance through large-scale infrastructure projects, such as the provision of roads, railways, harbors and canals. They would regard such projects necessary for the accumulation of wealth, the nurturing of equality and the maintenance of social order. When done in the name of the sovereign people, as Tocqueville expected it would, government intervention and meddling in the affairs of civil society would choke the spirit of civil association. It might well lead, Tocqueville argued, to a new form of state servitude, the likes of which the world had never before seen.

The point is sketched in the fourth volume of *Democracy in America*, in ‘What Type of Despotism Democratic Nations Have to Fear?’ ‘I think the type of oppression threatening democratic peoples is unlike anything ever known’, he wrote. Unlike past despotisms, which employed the coarse instruments of fetters and executioners, this new ‘democratic’ despotism would nurture administrative power that is ‘absolute, differentiated, regular, provident and mild’. Peacefully, bit by bit, by means of democratically formulated laws, government would morph into a new form of tutelary power dedicated to securing the welfare of its citizens - at the high price of clogging the arteries of civil society, thus robbing citizens of their collective power to act.



Tocqueville was sure that the fundamental problem of modern democracy was not the frantic and feverish mob, as critics of democracy from the time of Plato had previously supposed. Modern despotism posed an entirely new and unfamiliar challenge. Feeding upon the fetish of private material consumption and the public apathy of citizens no longer much interested in politics, despotism is *a new type of popular domination*: a form of impersonal centralized power that masters the arts of voluntary servitude, a new type of state that is at once benevolent, mild and all-embracing, a disciplinary power that treats its citizens as subjects, wins their support and robs them of their wish to participate in government, or to pay attention to the common good.

The thesis was certainly bold, and original. Tocqueville was the first modern political writer to see and to say that a new form of despotism born of the dysfunctions of modern representative democracy might well be our fate. He taught us that in the age of democracy forms of total power can only win legitimacy and govern effectively when they harness the trimmings and trappings of democracy – when they mirror and mimic actually-existing democracies, in order better to go beyond them. When we look back at the long crisis that gripped democracies a century after Tocqueville wrote, wasn't the totalitarianism of Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia and Pol's Cambodia marked by more than a few democratic features in this sense? And when we look today at the [new despotisms of the Eurasian region](#), Russia and China for instance, shouldn't we ask whether these regimes are simulacra of Western democracies now bogged down in various dysfunctions and pathologies? Don't they make us wonder where our own so-called democracies are heading? Might they be signals of the emerging fact, unless something gives, that despotism is once again fated to play center stage of our political lives in the coming years of the 21st century? Do we not have to thank Alexis de Tocqueville for warning us that they may well be the future of democracy?



Lithograph portrait of Alexis de Tocqueville.  
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