Democracy

Commentators are often struck by the absence in Tocqueville's work of a clear, unified, and explicit definition of what he precisely means by the term "democracy." However, the invaluable *Nolla edition*, which includes notes, variants, and corrections to the text, allows for a relatively precise approximation of the meaning Tocqueville ascribes to the term. In the manuscript of the first *Democracy*, a marginal pencil note reads: "explain what is meant by democracy." Yet Nolla adds that Tocqueville never arrives at a fully satisfying definition of this concept, which he consistently employs in varying senses. Harold Laski, who wrote the preface to *Democracy in America* in the *Gallimard* edition of the Complete Works, identifies four meanings; Pierson retains about half a dozen; and James T. Schleifer has identified as many as eight: "inevitable development or trend, social condition, popular sovereignty, government by the people, mobility, middle classes, equality of conditions, open society."

All of this is accurate, and one must understand that for Tocqueville, "democracy" is an overarching concept encompassing all these elements, each of which he examines more specifically at different moments. It is the central concept around which the entire system is organized, and for this very reason, it is not strictly defined—for doing so would prematurely close off the inquiry. To define democracy from the outset would be to exclude from the object of study anything that does not fit within that definition. In order to remain operational, the term must therefore remain open. This illustrates the futility of the often-used phrase, "democracy in the Tocquevillian sense…"

Tocqueville further specifies that his study concerns *modern* democracy, which has nothing in common with ancient models that, in his view, were not democracies but rather aristocratic republics.

If Hegel's "owl of Minerva takes flight only at dusk," Tocqueville's modern democracy is being born. It already exists in the United States and is gradually establishing itself in Western Europe. Indeed, it is already present, in broad terms, at the time of his writing, though it has emerged through a long historical evolution. He traces the origins of this birth as far back as the eleventh century, with the development of medieval cities following the end of the Great Invasions, the rise of commerce, the convening of village assemblies, the growing power of cities with belfries, the election of aldermen and *capitouls*, and the calling of the Estates General… A long historical trajectory culminating in a new social condition marked by social mobility, the emergence and rise of the press from the seventeenth century onward, and the growing power of public opinion, which becomes, as early as the reign of Louis XV and even more so under Louis XVI, the first non-institutional power.

For Tocqueville, democracy is directly related to the "social condition"; however, to assert that democracy *is* a social condition would be a misinterpretation. Rather, one should say that democracy *has* a social condition, that it presupposes a democratic social state. This is, however, somewhat tautological; and even then, the expression remains imprecise, for the democratic social condition is, for Tocqueville, a necessary but not sufficient condition of democracy.

To equate democracy and social condition is therefore both clumsy and inaccurate, and Tocqueville is unequivocal on this point. He writes at the outset: "A brief glance at the civil and political society of the United States reveals two central facts from which all others seem to

flow. Democracy constitutes the social condition; the dogma of the sovereignty of the people, the political right." Yet he immediately adds: "These two things are not analogous. Democracy is a way of being for society. Sovereignty of the people is a form of government. They are not inseparable either, for democracy is more compatible with despotism than with liberty."

Nevertheless, these two elements are correlated. Popular sovereignty is more or less a fiction in places where democracy has not been established.

Tocqueville also adds in a marginal note: "Note that one must never confuse in this chapter the social condition with the political laws that arise from it; equality or inequality of conditions, which are facts, with democracy or aristocracy, which are laws. Re-examine from this perspective."

The democratic social state may coincide, as Kergorlay notes, with a republic, a constitutional monarchy, or even despotism. Tocqueville had previously defined the democratic social state—a term he was among the first to use, along with Benjamin Constant. (The notion of *social condition* appears in Constant and Guizot, but Tocqueville may have been the first, perhaps with the exception of Bonald in 1810, to use the phrase "democratic social state.")

If we gather what characterizes both the democratic social state and democracy in the two *Democracies,* we find: equality of conditions (which should not be confused with egalitarianism, a force that ossifies society), social, economic, and political mobility, the growing power of public opinion, becoming the first non-institutional power in a country, with its corollary: freedom of the press, as an expression of political awareness and will; popular voting, eventually leading to universal suffrage; and the existence of intermediary bodies, which are challenged only when the political democratic regime shifts from a republic or constitutional monarchy toward despotism.

Despotism or tyranny, then, constitute one possible evolution, an avatar, of the democratic social state. Tocqueville warns not only of the emergence of a "soft" despotism, characteristic of a tutelary democratic state, but also of the drift that leads citizens, weary of democratic instability, to demand strong authority, hope for a coup d'état, and ultimately give plebiscitary support to Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte, the first President of the Republic elected by universal suffrage, who would overthrow the very regime he was meant to uphold. History has since shown that the liberticidal regimes that emerged in Europe after World War I all adopted, to some extent, democratic trappings, and often enjoyed broad popular support.

James T. Schleifer rightly emphasizes that, for Tocqueville, whenever popular government expresses the will of the majority, it is, regardless of its form, "democratic." He adds: "Tocqueville was well aware that the will of the people could easily accommodate despotism. In his view, democracy tended more readily toward tyranny than toward liberty."

It thus becomes clear why Tocqueville's concept of democracy is polysemic, encompassing, and far more complex than it appears in common discourse.