

Tocqueville's key concepts, themes, and political positions are thoroughly explored in the *Dictionnaire Tocqueville*, written by Jean-Louis Benoît. This comprehensive reference work includes in-depth entries on major issues such as democracy, despotism, liberty, equality, or freedom of press, and Tocqueville's circle of contemporaries, offering both contextual and historical perspectives.

Below is an extract from his book. These texts provide valuable context for understanding Tocqueville's thought and its continued relevance today.

Democracy

(See the entry "Democracy and Democratic Social State")

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.

Liberty

For Tocqueville, the central problem of democracy lies in the natural, necessary, and inescapable tension between liberty and equality, both of which are constitutive of democracy’s very essence. The gravest danger that may threaten the existence of true democracy is the possible, probable, and perhaps inevitable sacrifice of liberty in the name of equality. This is the underlying motif that runs through Tocqueville’s entire work, as well as his political speeches to his fellow deputies and countrymen.

For Tocqueville, liberty is the highest of values, the one that endows human life and the individual with dignity and nobility. It is the absolute attachment to their freedom that, in his eyes, makes Native Americans the last living aristocrats, and it is this very attachment that condemns them to annihilation...

Yet the historical and democratic evolution of Western societies, particularly in those governed by the rule of law, has brought to the fore the **quest for equality**, which, for the vast majority of citizens, has become the primary value, both by its longevity and its perceived importance:

“In most modern nations, and particularly among all the peoples of continental Europe, the taste and idea of liberty only began to arise and develop when conditions started to become more equal, and as a consequence of that very equality. It was absolute monarchs who worked the hardest to level ranks among their subjects. In such nations, equality preceded liberty; thus, equality was an old fact when liberty was still a new idea. One had already given rise to opinions, customs, and laws suited to it, while the other emerged alone, and for the first time, into the public light. So liberty remained confined to ideas and desires, while equality had already shaped habits, seized the moral character, and given a particular cast to even the smallest acts of daily life. How can we be surprised, then, that people today prefer one over the other?”

While the advantages of equality are **immediate and visible**, the demands of liberty are **cumbersome**, even burdensome, to the point of being rejected as aristocratic relics of the old society. Tocqueville recalls the credo of certain revolutionaries:

“Let us try to be free by becoming equal, but better to forfeit liberty a hundred times than to remain or become unequal!”

For Tocqueville, individual liberty and political liberty are the primary values of modern society. They are not inherently in contradiction with democracy, but they are the most

naturally threatened by demagoguery, the pursuit of comfort, the lure of ease, and the love of mediocrity : « *aurea mediocritas* »...

“One can, however, imagine an extreme point where liberty and equality meet and merge. Suppose that all citizens take part in government and that each has an equal right to participate. No one differing from his fellows, none would be able to exercise tyrannical power; men would be perfectly free because they would be entirely equal—and entirely equal because they would be perfectly free. This is the ideal toward which democratic peoples tend. [...] The taste men have for liberty and the one they feel for equality are, indeed, two distinct things, and I do not hesitate to add that, among democratic peoples, they are two unequal things.”

As for economic liberty, its existence is, for Tocqueville, absolutely essential: any system that undermines it necessarily destroys, *ipso facto*, all other liberties (see the entries *Liberalism* and *Commerce*).

Press (Freedom of the Press)

Tocqueville paid close attention to the press and even took charge, albeit without great success, of the newspaper *Le Commerce*. He was also a staunch defender of press freedom, a liberty to be preserved without condition. This position stemmed in part from his desire to align himself ideologically with Malesherbes, who, between 1758 and 1759, wrote five *Mémoires on the Book Trade* to the king, advocating for the abolition of censorship and the establishment of freedom of the press, and who would again defend this cause in his *Memoir on the Freedom of the Press* in 1788.

By "press," one then meant everything that was printed, chiefly, books. The word "press" and the expression "freedom of the press" retained that meaning, as evidenced by the sixth edition of the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie*. However, for Tocqueville, as for his contemporaries and for us today, the term refers primarily to newspapers, a matter of great political weight, as the July Ordinances of 1830, which triggered revolution, revolved around this very issue. The question of press freedom has resurfaced regularly in French society ever since.

Tocqueville unwaveringly defends the freedom of the press, even while recognizing that it inevitably creates problems:

"I admit that I do not feel for freedom of the press that complete and instinctive love which one grants to things that are sovereignly good by nature. I value it more for the evils it prevents than for the good it does."

His argument rests on two ideas, on the one hand, the impossibility of establishing meaningful censorship, since censorship is a political tool but a democratic aberration. On the other hand, in a democratic regime, the press is a good, or a lesser evil. Freedom of the press is one of the three guarantees for maintaining democracy, along with freedom of association and, much more delicately, the existence of active citizens. He puts forward three arguments against censorship: no limitation on the freedom of the press makes sense, censorship increases the resonance of censored texts, books, newspapers, and articles, and the defenders of censorship always claim to speak in the name of true liberty, of a higher freedom, yet they end up, *volens nolens*, in despotism:

"If someone were to show me, between the complete independence and total enslavement of thought, an intermediate position where I could hope to stand, I might settle there, but who will discover this intermediate position? You begin with the license of the press and proceed in an orderly fashion, what do you do? You first subject writers to juries, but the juries acquit, and what was merely the opinion of an isolated man becomes the opinion of the country. You have therefore done too much and too little, you must go further. You then hand authors over to permanent magistrates, but judges are obliged to listen before they condemn, what one might have feared to confess in a book is proclaimed with impunity in a courtroom plea, what would have been said obscurely in a narrative is thus repeated in a thousand other places. Expression is the outward form and, if I may say so, the body of thought, but it is not thought itself. Your courts seize the body, but the soul escapes them and subtly slips through their fingers. You have therefore done too much and too little, you must continue onward. You finally surrender writers to censors, very well, we are getting close. But is not the political platform still free? Then you have done nothing yet, I am mistaken, you have increased the harm."

Censorship inevitably calls democracy into question and inevitably leads to abuses of authority, limiting the freedom of the press naturally and necessarily leads to despotism. Between total freedom and despotism, there is no middle ground, therefore, the freedom of the press cannot be limited from the outside:

“In matters of the press, there is therefore truly no middle ground between servitude and license. To reap the inestimable benefits that freedom of the press ensures, one must be prepared to endure the inevitable evils it brings about. To wish to obtain the former while escaping the latter is to indulge in one of those illusions that typically deceive sick nations when, weary of struggles and exhausted by effort, they seek to make hostile opinions and opposing principles coexist on the same soil.”

Freedom of the press is particularly necessary for peoples living in democracy, democratic freedoms are intrinsically linked to freedom of the press, which is a necessary but not sufficient condition for them.

The sovereignty of the people and freedom of the press are therefore entirely correlated, censorship and universal suffrage, by contrast, are things that contradict each other and cannot long coexist within the political institutions of the same people. Among the twelve million men who live on the territory of the United States, not one has yet dared to propose restricting the freedom of the press:

“In America, as in France, freedom of the press is that extraordinary power, so strangely mixed with good and evil, that without it liberty cannot survive, and with it order can barely be maintained.”

It therefore constitutes a major safeguard of democracy against abuses of all kinds:

“In certain nations that claim to be free, each agent of power can violate the law with impunity without the country’s constitution granting the oppressed the right to seek justice. In such nations, the independence of the press must no longer be considered one of the safeguards, but the only remaining safeguard of liberty and the security of citizens. If the men who govern such nations were to speak of taking away the independence of the press, the entire people could answer them, let us prosecute your crimes before the ordinary courts, and perhaps then we would agree not to appeal to the tribunal of public opinion.”

It thus constitutes, on its own, a counter-power and, in a certain sense, an intermediate body:

“Equality isolates and weakens individuals, but the press places beside each of them a very powerful weapon that the weakest and most isolated may use. Equality takes from each individual the support of those close to him, but the press allows him to call upon all his fellow citizens and all his peers for help. The printing press hastened the progress of equality, and it is one of its best correctives. I think that men who live under aristocracies may, in a pinch, do without freedom of the press, but those who dwell in democratic lands cannot. To guarantee the personal independence of the latter, I do not rely on great political assemblies, on parliamentary prerogatives, or on the proclamation of the sovereignty of the people. All these things can be reconciled, to a certain extent, with individual servitude, but that servitude cannot be complete if the press is free. The press is, above all, the democratic instrument of liberty.”

It is what can ensure the defense of the individual against the power of the State, of public opinion, or any form of oppression, yet it is at the same time ambivalent, it can itself serve a public opinion that is hostile to freedom:

There is therefore no solution, the press is not an absolute good, it can be a relative good, or a lesser evil. It may itself become a vehicle, an agent of oppression:

“A newspaper can only survive if it reproduces a doctrine or sentiment common to a large number of people. A newspaper therefore always represents an association of which its regular readers are the members. This association may be more or less defined, more or less narrow, more or less numerous, but it exists, at least in germ form, in people's minds, by the very fact that the newspaper does not die.”

So how can we guard against the possible abuses of the press?

There exists, and can exist, no guarantee, the problem is the same as for censorship, who would impose a line of conduct on the press, and what line, in the name of what or of whom? Here again Tocqueville is Pascalian and emphasizes the uncertainty and relativity of things: “Truth on this side of the Pyrenees, error on the other...”

There should indeed be a press ethics (Tocqueville does not use the term), but it could under no circumstances come from the outside.

Could it come from the press itself? That is another problem...

Associations

In *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville devotes, in both the 1835 and 1840 volumes, extensive analysis to the nature and significance of associations in the United States. He was initially struck by the sheer number and variety of associations, both in purpose and size:

“Americans of all ages, all conditions, and all dispositions constantly unite. Not only do they have commercial and industrial associations in which all take part, but they also have a thousand other kinds, religious, moral, serious, futile, general and particular, immense and very small. Americans form associations to give fêtes, found seminaries, build inns, raise churches, distribute books, and send missionaries to the antipodes. In this way, they establish hospitals, prisons, and schools. If a truth is to be made known or a sentiment to be developed with the help of an example, they form an association. Wherever, in France, you would see the government at the head of a new initiative, or, in England, a great nobleman, rest assured that in the United States you will find an association.”

Associations in the United States span all domains; in his reflections on them, Tocqueville conceives of association as a global modality of social life, a societal unit that transcends its internal diversity: civic and political, economic and industrial associations alike. Americans create associations for every purpose, to address immediate needs or pursue lasting objectives, dissolving once those ends are achieved or persisting over time.

Thus, the association becomes a specific model through which democratic societies engage with reality. When a societal issue arises, Americans form associations; in contrast, in France, people instinctively appeal to the State for everything, at all times:

“The first time I heard in the United States that a hundred thousand men had pledged publicly to abstain from strong liquor, I found the notion more amusing than serious, and I did not understand why these temperate citizens could not simply drink water in the privacy of their own homes. I came to understand that these Americans, alarmed by the spread of drunkenness around them, wanted to publicly lend their moral authority to sobriety. They acted precisely as a great nobleman might dress simply to inspire in others disdain for ostentation. One may presume that, had those hundred thousand men lived in France, each of them would have petitioned the government individually to supervise all the taverns of the kingdom.”

For Tocqueville, the existence of associations is essential in democratic regimes, as they safeguard individual freedoms and rights against the potential or actual despotism of the all-powerful State. Associations also serve as antidotes to the withdrawal into oneself that is the natural counterpart of democratic individualism.

In aristocratic regimes, the great possess sufficient individual power to shield themselves from oppression:

“Aristocratic societies always contain, within a multitude of powerless individuals, a small number of citizens who are very powerful and very wealthy; each of these may, by his own means alone, undertake great endeavors. Each forms, as it were, the head of a permanent and forced association composed of all those whom he holds in his dependence, and whom he makes contribute to the execution of his plans.”

By contrast, in democratic societies, associations are both the best remedy against the isolating tendency of democratic individualism, which is the surest accomplice of the State’s natural despotism, and the most viable expression of the active citizen, who remains the true guarantor of individual liberty. Moreover, the proliferation of associations creates a network of decentralized entities that counteracts the centralizing tendency of democratic power. Associations are therefore a key component in the balance of powers, providing a counterforce to the State. They constitute one of the first and most vital guarantees of democratic liberty. By uniting divergent energies around a common goal, associations generate a powerful synergy. They prevent citizens from falling prey to factional domination or despotism.

To function, however, associations must make themselves known, must clarify their objectives before public opinion. In this, their purpose partially overlaps with that of the press. Thus, freedom of the press and freedom of association are complementary. Yet unlimited freedom of association, especially in political matters, is not to be conflated with freedom of the press. While the press indeed expresses public opinion, it enters into a dialectical relationship with it and becomes, in this sense, a power. Associations, on the other hand, rely only on themselves.

In a democracy, power must neither fear nor limit the scope and role of associations, for they are the very guarantee of democratic life. Though their presence may seem uncomfortable to rulers in the short term, Tocqueville notes:

“In countries where associations are free, secret societies are unknown. In America, there are factions, but no conspirators.”

Associations, along with the press, are among the only bulwarks against democracy's internal excesses; they are one of the necessary, but not sufficient, conditions of its proper functioning and of the liberties they embody.

Nevertheless, for historical and cultural reasons, Tocqueville knows that in France, the State will always regard unfettered associational freedom with suspicion. That is why he formulates this imperative, which reads like a categorical injunction:

“In democratic countries, the science of association is the mother science; the progress of all the others depends upon the progress of that one.”

And he adds:

“Among the laws that govern human societies, one seems clearer and more precise than all the rest. In order for men to remain civilized, or to become so, the art of association must develop and perfect itself in direct proportion to the growth of equality of conditions.”

Centralisation / Decentralisation

Tocqueville's discovery of American democracy—its institutions and modes of functioning—led him to reflect, in light of the decentralisation at work in the United States, on the nature, role, and operation of centralisation in France and in Europe more broadly. To this end, he wrote to his father on 7 October 1831, asking him to draft a short memorandum on centralisation.

Drawing on both his American experience and the insights from his father's memorandum, Tocqueville developed two major ideas on the subject. First, as he explains in the first volume of *Democracy in America*, it is absolutely necessary to distinguish between two types of centralisation: governmental and administrative. Second, as he later demonstrates in *The Old Regime and the Revolution*, centralisation as a whole is primarily an inheritance from the Ancien Régime, rather than the exclusive result of the Revolution or the Empire. He describes how everything was “directed from Paris”: “The volume of paperwork was already enormous, and the slowness of administrative procedure so great that it would take no less than a year for a parish to obtain authorisation to repair its steeple or its presbytery.”

The Revolution, and even more so the Empire, merely reinforced this trajectory, which Tocqueville identifies as the natural slope down which democracies are inclined to slide.

In *Democracy in America*, he devotes an entire subchapter to the effects of administrative decentralisation in the United States, and to the crucial distinction between governmental and administrative centralisation. While governmental centralisation is useful for providing coherence and efficacy to the exercise of power, administrative centralisation, by its tendency to occupy the entire political space, hampers the development of individual or collective initiative. In Tocqueville's view, democracy can only thrive if citizens are active; the natural and almost inevitable expansion of administrative centralisation inhibits such activity, depriving individuals not only of their capacity to act, but eventually even of their desire to do so. “It excels, in short, at preventing, not at doing.”

Tocqueville nevertheless acknowledges that a natural link exists between the two types of centralisation. He notes that a political regime may enjoy strong governmental centralisation without succumbing to administrative centralisation (as in England), or that, conversely, an empire lacking governmental centralisation is condemned to impotence (as in the historical case of Germany):

“Centralisation is a word repeated endlessly in our time, and which few people take the trouble to define. There are, however, two very distinct kinds of centralisation, and it is important to know them well. Certain interests are common to all parts of the nation, such as the creation of general laws and the conduct of foreign affairs. Others are specific to certain localities, such as communal undertakings. To concentrate the direction of the former in a single place or a single hand is what I call governmental centralisation. To concentrate the direction of the latter in the same way is what I call administrative centralisation. (...)

One can see that governmental centralisation acquires immense strength when joined with administrative centralisation. It then habituates men to the complete and continual abstraction of their own will; to obedience—not once and in a single matter, but always and in everything. Not only does it subjugate them by force, but it also seizes them through their habits; it isolates them and captures them one by one in the common mass.”

These two types of centralisation thus support and reinforce each other, yet Tocqueville insists they are not inseparable:

“In our time, we see a powerful nation, England, in which governmental centralisation is carried to a very high degree: the State seems to act as a single man. (...) For my part, I cannot conceive how a nation could live, let alone prosper, without strong governmental centralisation. But I believe that administrative centralisation serves only to enervate the peoples who submit to it, because it continually seeks to extinguish civic spirit. (...) It may well contribute to the fleeting greatness of one man, but never to the lasting prosperity of a people.”

The confusion is common: when one says that a State cannot act because it lacks centralisation, one is almost always, without knowing it, referring to governmental centralisation. Germany, Tocqueville writes, never succeeded in harnessing its full national strength, not because of administrative failings, but because of its lack of unified governmental authority.

He further adds:

“I am convinced, moreover, that there are no nations more exposed to the yoke of administrative centralisation than those whose social state is democratic. (...)”

Administrative centralisation thus appears as a latent and natural danger for European democratic societies, a danger from which the United States has been spared by virtue of its unique historical trajectory as a democracy from the outset. Tocqueville admired the effects of American decentralisation, especially its ability to unleash individual initiative and entrepreneurial spirit, an expression of enlightened self-interest which, because it serves the common good, takes on a properly political dimension:

“What I admire most in America is not the administrative effects of decentralisation, but its political effects. In the United States, the homeland is felt everywhere. It is an object of concern from the village to the entire Union. The citizen attaches himself to every interest of his country as if it were his own. He glories in the nation's triumphs; in its successes, he sees his own efforts recognised and rises with them; he rejoices in its prosperity, from which he benefits. He feels for his country something akin to what one feels for one's family, and it is again a kind of egoism that binds him to the State.”

It is important to note, however, that although Tocqueville praised the advantages of decentralisation as he observed it in America, he never translated this into a concrete political programme for France. He criticises the excesses of French centralisation, yet ultimately accepts that the State must pursue territorial development policies, for example by financing railways or defining the legal framework for social assistance.

In 1848, among the eighteen members tasked with drafting the new Constitution, only Lamennais, Beaumont, Tocqueville, and to some extent Odilon Barrot supported decentralisation. Lamennais posed the question from the very first session, demanding that the Commission begin by establishing the status of local government. When his request was rejected, he resigned. Though sent by his peers to persuade Lamennais to return, Tocqueville, knowing the cause was lost, did not press the issue further.

Democratic Despotism

In reflecting on the future of the rule of law in Western Europe, Tocqueville clearly explains that the choice is now simple, at least initially, and boils down to the alternative: democracy or despotism. However, the new political science that he helped to formulate, drawing from the model of American democracy, a heuristic rather than paradigmatic model, reveals that the initial choice can unfold in several ways. Democracy can remain a complex yet virtuous and balanced political regime, whether in the form of a republic or a constitutional monarchy, but it can also drift and give rise to monstrous political forms.

Democracy is a difficult regime that requires active citizens calling upon virtue—understood here as the democratic *virtù* comparable to that which Montesquieu deemed necessary for a republic. Citizens may lack this courage and virtue and grow weary of this "democratic condition," demanding instead a strong power, like the frogs in the fable who call upon Jupiter to send them a king that will move. The entire twentieth century was marked by harsh despotisms that all came to power with, if not total, at least majority consensus, leading to the catastrophic aberrations of fascist, Nazi, or Stalinist regimes, or others cut from the same cloth, all presenting themselves as embodiments of the popular will. Since the Terror, every tyrant has repeated: "I am the people!"

But the form of despotism toward which democracy tends almost naturally is of endogenous nature: a democracy pushed to its own extreme, which corrodes the individual, the social body, and society itself to the point of turning them into grotesque caricatures—this, for Tocqueville, is the major risk. Democracy becomes despotic by sacrificing liberty to equality, by multiplying laws through a legislative power reinforced by stifling centralism, enclosing the individual from cradle to grave. It carries within itself the seed of despotism:

"I had noticed during my stay in the United States that a democratic social state similar to that of the Americans could offer singular opportunities for the establishment of despotism. (...)

It seems that if despotism were to be established among the democratic nations of our day (...), it would be more widespread and more mild, and it would degrade men without tormenting them.

I do not doubt that in centuries of enlightenment and equality like ours, sovereigns would find it easier to concentrate all public powers into their own hands, and to penetrate more routinely and more deeply into the realm of private interests (...). But this same equality that facilitates despotism also tempers it; we have seen how, as men become more alike and more equal, public manners become gentler and more humane. When no citizen holds great power or great wealth, tyranny, in a sense, lacks opportunity and a stage. (...)

Democratic governments may become violent and even cruel at certain times of great turmoil and danger, but such crises will be rare and fleeting. When I reflect on the small passions of men today, the softness of their morals, the breadth of their knowledge, the purity of their religion, the gentleness of their morals, their industrious and orderly habits, the restraint they maintain in vice as well as in virtue, I do not fear they will find tyrants in their leaders, but rather guardians.

I thus believe that the kind of oppression that threatens democratic peoples will not resemble anything that has come before in the world. (...)

The phenomenon is new, so we must attempt to define it, since I cannot name it.

I want to imagine under what new features despotism could appear in the world: I see an innumerable crowd of alike and equal men who revolve on themselves without rest in order to obtain petty and vulgar pleasures with which they fill their souls. Each of them, withdrawn into himself, is like a stranger to the fate of all the others; his children and his close friends constitute for him the whole of humanity; as for the rest of his fellow citizens, he is beside them but does not see them; he touches them but does not feel them; he exists only in himself and for himself, and if he still has a family, at least he no longer has a homeland.

Above these stands an immense and tutelary power, which alone takes it upon itself to secure their enjoyment and watch over their fate. It is absolute, detailed, regular, provident, and mild. It would resemble paternal power if, like that, its purpose were to prepare men for manhood; but it seeks, on the contrary, to keep them irrevocably in childhood. It likes its citizens to enjoy themselves, provided they think only of enjoying themselves. It willingly works for their happiness, but it wants to be the sole agent and sole arbiter of that happiness; it provides for their security, foresees and supplies their needs, facilitates their pleasures, manages their principal affairs, directs their industry, regulates their inheritance, divides their estates—can it not entirely relieve them from the trouble of thinking and the burden of living?

Thus it reduces the use of free will every day, confines the action of the will within a narrower space, and gradually robs each citizen of even the use of himself. Equality has prepared men for all this: it has predisposed them to endure it and even to regard it as a benefit.

After having thus taken each individual in turn into its powerful hands, and molded him as it pleases, the sovereign extends its arms over the entire society. It does not break wills, but it softens them, bends them, and guides them; it rarely forces action, but it constantly opposes any action; it does not destroy, it prevents birth; it does not tyrannize, it hinders, it restrains, it enervates, it extinguishes, it stupefies, and finally reduces each nation to nothing more than a herd of timid and industrious animals, of which the government is the shepherd. (...)

To create a national representation in a very centralized country is thus to reduce the harm that extreme centralization can produce, but not to eliminate it. I can see that, in this way, individual intervention is preserved in the most important matters; but it is no less suppressed in the small and particular ones. (...) Subjugation in small affairs appears every day and is felt indiscriminately by all citizens. It does not drive them to despair, but it continually annoys them and leads them to relinquish the use of their will. In vain you will charge these same citizens, whom you have made so dependent on central power, to choose from time to time the representatives of that power; this use, so important, but so brief and so rare, of their free will will not prevent them from gradually losing the capacity to think, feel, and act for themselves, and thus falling gradually below the level of humanity.

I would add that they will soon become incapable of exercising the great and only privilege that remains to them. The democratic peoples who have introduced liberty into the political sphere, while simultaneously increasing despotism in the administrative sphere, have been led into very strange contradictions. If it is a matter of handling small affairs where mere common sense would suffice, they believe the citizens incapable; but when it comes to governing the whole State, they entrust to those same citizens immense prerogatives. (...) It is, in fact, difficult to conceive how men who have completely renounced the habit of governing themselves could succeed in making a good choice of those who should govern them;

and no one will be made to believe that a liberal, energetic, and wise government could ever arise from the votes of a people of servants.”

The Tocquevillian democratic man described here is the spiritual brother of Nietzsche’s Last Man, the one the crowd cries out for.

And Tocqueville concludes:

“A constitution that would be republican at the top and ultra-monarchical in all its other parts has always seemed to me an ephemeral monster. The vices of the rulers and the imbecility of the ruled would soon bring about its ruin; and the people, tired of its representatives and of itself, would either create freer institutions, or soon stretch itself once again at the feet of a single master.”

That master so eagerly awaited in our national tradition of Caesarism or Bonapartism.

Tyranny of the majority

For Tocqueville, the inevitable advent of democracy is accompanied by multiple threats that are inherent to it: chiefly, the centralization of power and legislative inflation, which together produce a form of omnipotence of the state at the expense of the free and responsible individual. The democratic man is often willing to relinquish part or all of his freedom in the name of equality and security. This new citizen withdraws into democratic individualism and, at the same time, adheres to a mass society driven by herd instincts, merging into the prevailing massification of public opinion.

Tocqueville devotes two full chapters to this fear of the *tyranny of the majority*, but the theme recurs frequently throughout both volumes of *Democracy in America*, like a leitmotif. Here, we retain only a few of the most telling passages from the subchapter "Tyranny of the Majority".

Let us first recall two affirmations that appear only in the Nolla edition. The first draws a direct line between the tyranny of the majority and the despotism it engenders:

“Despotism lies at both extremes of sovereignty: when one man reigns, and when the majority governs. Despotism is tied to omnipotence, whatever its bearer.”

The second intensifies the gravity of Tocqueville’s diagnosis:

“The omnipotence of the majority seems to me the greatest flaw of democratic governments and the source of their most serious dangers.”

After denouncing “this maxim that, in matters of government, the majority of a people has the right to do anything,” Tocqueville affirms the preeminence of universal values, of humanity itself, over the positive laws of any particular nation, laws which, though legal, may still be illegitimate:

“There exists a general law that has been made, or at least adopted, not only by the majority of a particular people, but by the majority of all humankind. This law is justice. Justice, then, forms

the limit of every nation's rights (...). I appeal, not from the sovereignty of the people, but to the sovereignty of the human race."

And he continues:

"I think, therefore, that there must always exist somewhere a social power superior to all others (...). Omnipotence in itself seems to me an evil and dangerous thing. Its exercise exceeds the strength of man, whoever he may be; and I see only God who may safely be all-powerful, because His wisdom and justice are always equal to His power. There is no authority on earth so respectable in itself, nor vested with such sacred rights, that I would consent to leave it unchecked and free to dominate without limits. Whenever I see the right and the means of doing everything granted to any power whatsoever—whether called people or king, democracy or aristocracy, whether exercised in a monarchy or a republic—I say: here lies the seed of tyranny, and I seek to live under other laws."

Faced with the omnipotence of the democratic All-State, the individual is left helpless. Only associations may still defend causes and individuals, giving them the means to resist, with the support of the press if it joins their cause. Yet even this dual safeguard is insufficient—especially when a citizen stands isolated, targeted by a public opinion that has already decided his downfall:

"When a man or a party suffers an injustice in the United States, to whom can he turn? To public opinion? It is the majority. To the legislature? It represents the majority and blindly obeys it. To the executive? It is appointed by the majority and acts as its passive instrument. To the police force? The police is simply the majority under arms. To the jury? The jury is the majority endowed with the right to pronounce verdicts. Even the judges themselves, in certain states, are elected by the majority. However iniquitous or irrational the measure that strikes you may be, you must submit to it."