Democracy in America

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ALEXIS DE TOQUEVILLE

Tocqueville was born to a family of Catholic aristocrats that owned an ancient chateau in Normandy, and that included several members who had been sent to the guillotine for their support of the royal family during the French Revolution. He was educated in Metz, France before becoming a lawyer and judge. While working in Versailles, he met a prosecutor named Gustave de Beaumont. During the uncertain last months of the Bourbon Restoration, the two—who would become close friends—decided to propose a journey to the United States in order to study its unique penitentiary system, which many in France hoped to emulate. They travelled to America for a nine-month stay in 1831. While Tocqueville increasingly left the prison project to his friend (though the two would publish their findings about American prisons in 1833), he devoted the next eight years to working on *Democracy in America*, which would be published in two volumes in 1835 and 1840. In 1841, Tocqueville was elected to the French Chambre des Députés: he served in this capacity until the Revolutions of 1848, after which he left politics for good. Tocqueville published his final work, entitled *The Old Regime and the Revolution*, in 1856. Three years later, in 1859, he died of tuberculosis.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

While Tocqueville refers to early American history stretching back to the sixteenth century, and especially highlights the establishment of the Puritan Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1630, his work also assumes a general familiarity with the events of the American Revolution against England, of which it had long been a colony. The Revolution officially began in April 1775, with a skirmish in Lexington, Massachusetts—the cause of Paul Revere's famous Midnight Ride. After thirteen colonial delegations met in Philadelphia in June and July 1776, they (as the new Congress) officially endorsed Thomas Jefferson's Declaration of Independence, proclaiming the new nation of the United States of America. (Fighting would continue until the British surrendered at Yorktown in 1781). In 1777, though, Congress adopted the first version of a national constitution, called the Articles of Confederation, which gave a great deal of freedom to the states. After—as Tocqueville mentions—such a radical program proved unworkable, a constitutional convention held in Philadelphia in 1787 led to the formation of an entirely new form of federalist government, including the separation of powers that Tocqueville would so admire. Much of the political tumult of the early years of the United States would continue to be characterized by debates between Federalists, who insisted on the need for more centralized power, and Republicans, who preferred greater freedom to be given to the states. Meanwhile, when Tocqueville embarked on his voyage to America in 1831, it was in large part in response to a volatile political situation back home in France. Indeed, the prior 40 years had seen radical changes in his own home country, including the French Revolution, which had (beginning in 1789—not long after the establishment of the American constitution) had overthrown the aristocratic *ancien régime*. Napoleon Bonaparte was elected and then seized power as an emperor, before 1818 saw the "Restoration" brought the French royal family back into power, and throughout the 1820s the government attempted to systematically reinstate the privileges and restrictions of an earlier time. Tocqueville opposed this attempt to return France to an aristocracy, but he also opposed the violent pro-democratic uprisings that ensued in 1830. The "July Revolution" ended with the crowning of Louis-Philippe, the "bourgeois king"—though Tocqueville looked with suspicion upon this new government as well. Tocqueville, then, saw certain parallels between America and France, in that they had both undergone a democratic revolution at the turn of the 19th century, and both nations were home to many people fighting to extend rights and equal conditions to more people. However, France was in a more obvious state of tumult and political uncertainty than America in the 1830s.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Tocqueville was influenced and inspired by the *Federalist Papers*, a collection of articles written by James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, and John Jay in 1787-1788, which dealt with major issues concerning the American constitution and political life in their young country. Their attempts to respond to and help to construct early American politics would prove highly useful to Tocqueville's own project. In the French context, Tocqueville's readers would have found his work reminiscent of the Baron de Montesquieu's 1721 *Persian Letters*, which described the imaginary travels of two Persian men through France in order to satirize and critique contemporary French society. Though *Democracy in America* strikes a different tone from *Persian Letters*, the books share a belief that a foreigner may have a valuable perspective on the strengths, weaknesses, and contradictions of a country and its culture.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Democracy in America*
- **When Written:** 1831-1840
- **Where Written:** France

- **When Published:** 1835 (Part I); 1840 (Part II)
- **Genre:** Political writing
- **Setting:** Though writing from his native country of France, Tocqueville's text primarily draws on his experiences traveling through the United States.
- **Point of View:** The book is a work of political argumentation, but Tocqueville often explicitly invokes a first-person perspective, citing his own personal experiences in America.

EXTRA CREDIT

In Real Time Between 1997 and 1998, the television network C-SPAN created 65 hours of live programming by traveling along Tocqueville's route in America, timing the trip to coincide exactly with the days of his trip and the places he saw along the way.

Teenage Angst Although Tocqueville praises religion in America for its ability to keep order and authority, he himself lost his Catholic faith as a teenager as a result of reading the many books of the French Enlightenment that he came across in his father's library.

PLOT SUMMARY

Alexis de Tocqueville begins *Democracy in America* by discussing present-day conditions in his own nation, France. Although France—and Europe in general—have long been home to aristocratic monarchies (where a king and queen rule but an aristocratic class also retains power and privileges based on birth), equality of condition (a leveling out of social class hierarchies) is increasingly coming to replace such customs. Tocqueville describes a number of broad historical reasons for these changes, and then admits that he himself is terrified of this democratizing process. However, given that it's impossible to halt the forces of democratization, he suggests that it would be useful to consider the example of American democracy, where equality of condition has developed further than anywhere else.

Tocqueville first describes the basis of American society by giving a historical account of the Pilgrims who first arrived from England, and the ways in which sovereignty of the people was established quite early on, most notably through the dissemination of power into various **townships**. He maintains that this helps to mitigate the dangers of highly centralized administration, which can numb or "enervate" nations. Tocqueville elaborates a number of features of America's federalist system, which divides power between the national capital, the states, and local townships, stressing the ways this system both maintains individual freedom and encourages people to play an active role in their nation's political affairs. Democratic juries are a key example of active political life in America.

After discussing some of the advantages and disadvantages of great size, Tocqueville discusses the ways America has avoided the dangers of large kingdoms. He returns to a discussion of early American history and the arguments about how to divide power, resulting in the current division of political parties. Tocqueville also draws attention to the power of the press in America, which he praises as a civic institution that promotes liberty and disseminates political knowledge. Political associations are another means by which Americans maintain individual political rights. Indeed, Tocqueville insists on political rights and education as essential to promoting freedom, and he argues that Americans have by and large succeeded in promoting such rights—even if he also draws attention to certain excesses of Americans' intense political involvement.

Tocqueville subsequently turns to what he considers a crucial aspect of American society: the sovereignty of the majority, which, he warns, can become just as tyrannical as an individual despot. He worries that it's the very strength of democratic institutions in America that may one day lead to the country's downfall—arguing against a number of his contemporaries who fear that democracy's *weakness* might lead to anarchy and disorder. However, Tocqueville also argues that America has found a number of ways to mitigate tyranny of the majority, especially through law and the jury system, political associations, and the historical effects of Puritanism in early America. He concludes Part One by acknowledging that he doesn't think France or other countries should copy the American system; still, he argues, American democracy has proved remarkably versatile and powerful.

In Part Two, Tocqueville pays far more attention to non- or extra-political aspects of American culture, expressing more reservations about American democracy and its effect on social life than he had in Part One. He insists that Americans have little concern for philosophy or abstract ideas, preferring simplicity and directness. This is in part why religion can be so useful in a democracy, since it is a clear (though limited) source of authority that also mitigates some of the materialism and selfishness that Tocqueville finds prevalent in democratic societies.

Tocqueville argues that America hasn't made much progress in science, poetry, or the arts, and he attempts to find political reasons for this weakness. Democratic equality has the unfortunate consequence of making people pursue material desires and economic improvement above all else, he thinks, leaving them little time or interest for more abstract, intellectual affairs. Still, the ability of more and more people to leave desperate poverty behind will only increase the *number* of those involved in scientific pursuits, even if the quality of such pursuits is lower than in an aristocracy. Tocqueville continues to insist on Americans' preference for the concrete over the abstract, the practical over the theoretical, and the useful over

the beautiful. As a result, America and other democracies will tend to produce more and cheaper commodities rather than fewer, more well-wrought objects. Tocqueville uses similar reasoning to explain what he argues is America's lack of its own literature. Americans' lives are unpoetic, he thinks. But he also tries to imagine what poetry will look like in the future, hypothesizing that democratic poetry will increasingly study human nature and try to account for all of human existence.

Tocqueville subsequently returns to his earlier argument that freedom and equality do not necessarily go together—and that, indeed, democracies will always privilege the latter over the former. America's individualism both results from equality and works to maintain it, he thinks, even while causing bonds between people to erode and threatening the ability of society to function well. This lack of fellow-feeling is what makes democracies particularly prone to despotism, he thinks, even as the political and civic associations that are so prevalent in America have worked against such a threat. Indeed, Tocqueville turns his attention to the various civic institutions, such as town halls and temperance societies, which bind citizens together and work against individualism and materialism.

Tocqueville turns to another aspect of American culture, the intense physical vigor that seems to characterize Americans; he argues that this stems from their embrace of constant activity and striving to improve their material conditions. This is also why industry and commerce are prized above all in America, he thinks, because Americans are eager to become wealthy (and enjoy far more upward mobility than in an aristocracy); however, he warns that the consolidation of wealth among a manufacturing class threatens to erode such social mobility. Tocqueville also discusses Americans' casual manners and disdain for etiquette, which he contrasts to European attitudes, while also depicting Americans as vain and proud.

Tocqueville then spends some time discussing the institution of the family in America, where the relationship between fathers and sons is characterized by a greater ease than in Europe—there, a sense of patriarchal authority leads to stiff, artificial family relations. Tocqueville also praises the place of women in America, who are given far more independence and respect than they are in Europe. He admires their relatively higher level of education and argues that education should be extended to women as part of extending political rights to everyone. He finds that women play a central role in the success of American democracy—even though he also argues that this participation is predicated on their confinement to the domestic sphere. Indeed, Tocqueville thinks that America has accepted the "natural" differences between men and women and, therefore, that there is actually greater equality between the sexes in the United States.

Tocqueville goes on to describe other characteristics of American manners, from homogeneity of behavior to Americans' vanity to the monotony of daily life that exists when people's conditions are more and more the same—Tocqueville fears the "enervating" effects of such homogeneous behaviors, attitudes, and ways of life. He characterizes Americans as ambitious, even as their ambitions have an upper limit: Americans prefer stability and peace above all else, making them unlikely to want to seize power or go to war. Europe is far more revolutionary than America precisely because democracy has not yet secured a place for itself there. Indeed, Tocqueville insists on the relationship between democracy and peace, even as he acknowledges some of the peculiarities of democratic armies, whose soldiers are unique in democratic societies because they are eager for war.

Tocqueville returns to his concern that democracies will continue to prefer increasingly centralized power, in part because of their preference for peace and stability. America has managed to avoid such dangers thus far because its citizens have had a long time to accustom themselves both to individual liberties and to participation in politics on a number of levels. Still, the centralization of power remains a major danger in a democracy. At the same time, though, perhaps the greatest threat to a democracy is the despotism of the majority. Tocqueville depicts a number of hypothetical scenarios of future democratic societies where everyone thinks and acts the same way, where tyranny is diffused in a subtle, insidious, but no less powerful way. As he concludes, he acknowledges that it's difficult, if not impossible, to predict the future; he is saddened by the homogenization and increased uniformity of ways of life that he sees, even as he admits that this may be an unavoidable consequence of extending greater equality to all. In any case, he argues that it's impossible and undesirable to turn back the clock—even as he ends by insisting that people have the power to change their historical conditions, working within the vast processes of democratization in order to maintain and extend individual liberties.

CHARACTERS

Alexis de Tocqueville – The narrator of *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville is not quite the protagonist of the book, which is argument-driven rather than plot-driven. Although Tocqueville freely makes use of the first person, and although the book's genesis can be traced to his time spent traveling in the United States, the text's emphasis is on his thoughts about American democracy rather than on him or his personal experiences. Certain aspects of Tocqueville's character do emerge from his analysis: he is conservative and an aristocrat at heart, as is evident from his sometimes elitist critiques of American culture for the ways in which it values equality and pragmatism over "refined manners" or extensive schooling. He is skeptical that democracy is necessarily a preferable alternative to aristocratic rule, but acknowledges that the tides of democratization in Europe are strong enough that change is inevitable. Despite his

conservatism, in many ways he remains open-minded about the need to look forward rather than backward and embrace new forms of political life.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

LIBERTY, EQUALITY, AND TYRANNY

During and after his voyage to the United States, Alexis de Tocqueville paid close attention to what he saw as a worldwide trend of democratization—a trend that he considered positive in some ways, distressing in others, but in either case inevitable. Tocqueville thus studied the American example to help understand what France should seek to replicate and what to avoid in its own democratization process. Of particular interest to him was the question of whether or not liberty (which Tocqueville cherished, but worried that Americans might not love enough) could coexist with what he saw as the American "equality of condition"—that is, the lack of social hierarchies and barriers which gave people a relatively level playing field both politically and economically. Although Tocqueville identifies positive aspects of equality of condition, *Democracy in America* raises the possibility that equality might not strengthen liberty, but rather lead to a new type of tyranny of the majority over the minority.

Tocqueville does identify some positive aspects of striving for equality. He shows that sovereignty of the people—a characteristic of a society in which every person has equal share in power through the right to vote—can generate patriotism. Furthermore, he argues that valuing equality keeps peace and prevents revolution, since the possibility of social mobility (which necessarily accompanies the democratic ideal of equality) encourages people to strive for gradual improvement of their individual lives instead of fighting to overthrow the government. Tocqueville, a French aristocrat, sees this as positive, as he is eager to see an end to the revolutionary spirit of working class Frenchmen. With remarkable prescience (writing thirty years before the American Civil War), Tocqueville also notes that the one inequality that is most embedded in American society—that between white citizens and black slaves—is the most obvious potential source of violence. The implication here is that American democracy would be more stable if it were more equal in all respects.

However, to Tocqueville, equality does not necessarily make democracy fairer or freer. When rigid class hierarchies are erased and there is no intellectual or social distinction between people, there is no obvious answer to the question of whom one should listen to or agree with, Tocqueville argues. Instead, all opinions and ideas have equal weight, and as a result, the opinions that prevail are those held by the most people rather than those held by the wealthiest, most powerful, or most intelligent—and Tocqueville tends to equate these categories with each other. Tocqueville fears that this will cause people to stop thinking for themselves, preventing true moral and intellectual greatness from arising. In other words, he's worried about what people today call "groupthink."

In America, as in all democracies, the majority rules. Therefore, anyone in the minority may find his or her voice drowned out and will have nowhere to turn when they are wronged. Even worse, the opinions and laws of the majority will become so pervasive as to seem like common sense, preventing people from thinking for themselves. This kind of "tyranny of the majority" is almost worse than the despotism of a king or tyrant, Tocqueville argues, because of its insidious ability to masquerade under the cloak of the very value of liberty that Tocqueville so prizes.

CHECKS AND BALANCES

While Tocqueville was ambivalent about the "equality of condition" that he observed in America, he found that certain aspects of American democracy *did* work to defend and maintain liberty, and thus could be models for the development of French democracy. Although he believed that the legislative and executive branches in America could be unduly influenced by what he dubbed the "tyranny of the majority," Tocqueville felt that other institutional facets of American political life—particularly an independent judiciary and decentralized administration—helped keep the power of the majority in check and ensure the maintenance of individual rights and liberties.

In examining the workings of American judges, lawyers, and juries, Tocqueville is careful to weigh both the advantages and disadvantages of the American legal system. He acknowledges, for instance, that democratic juries, composed of a cross-section of people from American society, function by majority vote and are thus subject to the same dangers that democratic election poses—i.e., the danger of "groupthink." But Tocqueville also argues that juries have powerful pedagogical and political potential, since they teach people to judge others as they would want be judged themselves, and to feel themselves implicated in the everyday workings of their own democracy. If Tocqueville is slightly suspicious of one result of this pervasive use of juries, it is that legal language has seeped into many other areas of society, from business to schools and even to personal relationships, but he thinks this is a relatively low price to pay for the robust involvement of Americans in their political life.

In contrast to the highly centralized government in France,

Tocqueville admires America's federalism—a political system in which power is distributed between one central and various regional governments. Although giving the central government more power might seem to make the whole country more powerful, Tocqueville argues that such a practice actually weakens democracy by alienating citizens from the workings of those in power. By contrast, when power is spread among many different levels—from the national capital to states and **townships**—through federalism or what Tocqueville calls "decentralized administration," the interests of the country are kept in view everywhere. As usual, Tocqueville acknowledges some of the risks of decentralization, including legislative inefficiency and the danger that antagonism between conflicting interests will spread. However, he prizes America's balance between centralized and decentralized power, even as he predicts that democracies like America, in seeking to maintain peace, may eventually (though to their detriment) prefer an increasing concentration of power in the capital.

CIVIC AND RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS

One of Tocqueville's major conclusions about American life is that Americans are particularly fond of grouping themselves into all kinds of associations based on different opinions and beliefs, from small temperance societies to religious communities and large political parties. Like the checks and balances within the political system, Tocqueville sees these institutions (which lie outside the official workings of the American government) as a possible means of mitigating the tyranny of the majority and the dangers of individualism. However, Tocqueville also maintains a somewhat ambivalent view about a number of these institutions, given what he sees as the very real possibility that they might gain too much power for themselves.

Tocqueville's discussions of political parties and other associations that lobby for political change is one example of his ambivalence. The two major American parties of the time were the Federalists (who preferred more centralized power) and Republicans (who preferred less intrusion by government). Tocqueville warns that the increasing hegemony of the Republican political perspective could cause public interest to be diverted elsewhere—since, if most people agreed on important questions, they might grow occupied with arguments about insignificant features of society while failing to question the majority consensus. Still, he admires the tendency to take advantage of any excuse to gather an assembly together, whether it's building a new school, painting a new sign, or protesting a law—though he considers this a peculiarly American characteristic rather than one that could be easily replicated in France.

Tocqueville also praises the ways in which religious institutions have remained separate from political ones in America, thus allowing religion to claim a moral authority unsullied by political involvement (unlike, he notes, in many European countries). In a democracy that has embraced freedom for all, religion can fill a void for people who feel unmoored by the proliferation of possible ways to live in the modern world and who seek instruction and guidance. Religion can also mitigate individualism and materialism (which Tocqueville sees as the two major dangers facing American democracy) by teaching citizens to care for each other and to seek higher goals than wealth. He characterizes the Puritan legacy of New England as particularly influential in joining the spirit of religion to that of liberty, given the Puritans' emphasis on both spiritual *and* political well-being, and the ways the two mutually benefit each other.

Tocqueville reserves perhaps his greatest praise for the civic institution of the press, which he argues plays a political role just as significant as that of a political party. In fact, while he acknowledges that political parties and other groups may at times grow so powerful that they need to be limited by the government, he argues that there should be no such limit on the liberty of the press. Newspapers perform a similar function to local government, spreading the interests and ideals of American life to every corner of the country. While people might be swayed by one newspaper's claim of objective truth, there are so many newspapers, pamphlets, and journals in the United States that no one paper claims the allegiance of all. The pervasiveness and power of the press in general thus, paradoxically, makes individual media outlets less powerful, as so many voices counter each other and balance each other out. This means, for Tocqueville, that the press is not in danger of becoming tyrannical.

The proliferation of newspapers is another element of American democracy that Tocqueville contrasts to French society, whose Paris-centric journalistic practices are, he thinks, not nearly as powerful or beneficial as the American example. This mirrors Tocqueville's more general belief that French centralization of government precludes the possibility of robust civic institutions. To Tocqueville, a democracy in which many different voices are in conversation and in which power is diffused across broad groups of people and places is more stable and free.

INDIVIDUALISM AND MATERIALISM

For the purposes of discussing Tocqueville, individualism could be briefly defined as a focus on individual aims and beliefs over those of the collective. Today, Americans often think of individualism as working in tandem with liberty, but Tocqueville not only saw these two ideals as diametrically opposed, he also believed that individualism was one of the most negative and dangerous aspects of American democracy. Whereas Americans believed that individuals having the ability to strive for their own betterment was democratic and egalitarian, Tocqueville saw a

world in which everyone was competing against each other for their own benefit, rather than for the benefit of society as a whole. By eroding social and political bonds between people, Tocqueville argues, individualism leads to a materialistic society of single-minded people striving toward wealth rather than the common good.

Contrasting individualistic American society with traditional, French aristocratic culture, Tocqueville notes that, in aristocratic societies, landowners are reliant on each other, on the king, and on those who labor for them. But in the democratic, egalitarian society of the United States, many people have become just stable enough to be able to rely on themselves alone. Today, as in Tocqueville's time, Americans tend to view self-reliance as a virtue. But Tocqueville claims that the true virtue lies in needing to rely on other people, since doing so creates ethical bonds between citizens that can potentially expand outward, such that people can consider all their fellow countrymen—even those they haven't personally relied on—as being connected to themselves. These social connections may be abstract, Tocqueville concedes, but for him that doesn't mean they are artificial or inconsequential. Indeed, he criticizes what he characterizes as Americans' tendency to privilege "natural" ties of the family over social ties of citizenship. And while "egoism" or selfishness has always existed, Tocqueville argues that it's only when democracy creates the conditions for people to live self-sufficient lives that individualism might become a threat to the fabric of society.

Tocqueville also argues that individualism is directly tied to materialism, or the privileging of wealth and accumulation above all else. In some ways, Tocqueville does admire what he sees as Americans' constant activity: their incessant desire to start new commercial enterprises and make more and more money for themselves. This is, after all, part of what has made America such a uniquely stable democracy. But Tocqueville is also suspicious of Americans' dogged pursuit of wealth, seeing materialism as a moral and spiritual failing, but also a natural result of equality of condition. Even if everyone is given the same chances, he points out, American society still privileges those who work hardest and accumulate the most wealth (rather than those who are born with impressive titles). If materialism is therefore an inevitable result of democracy—and thus an inevitable aspect of France's own future—Tocqueville believes this is an inherently troubling aspect to an otherwise positive system of governance.

POLITICS, CUSTOMS, AND CULTURE

Tocqueville's discussions of American cultural life, customs, and manners rest on his assumption that democratic egalitarianism creates, or at least strongly shapes, American culture and character. While he admires certain aspects of the national character and makes valid criticisms of others, Tocqueville also reveals his own aristocratic prejudices, as well as the limits of his self-proclaimed role of ethnographer, in his sometimes condescending attitude toward American ways of life.

Tocqueville's more credible and illuminating observations about American culture tend to be narrow in their scope rather than general. He admires, for example, what he calls Americans' frank and natural manner, even if he expresses impatience with their pride and patriotism. In addition, Tocqueville makes certain cultural observations that seem, in hindsight, prescient and morally sophisticated. For example, Tocqueville praises the ways in which democratic egalitarianism has proved beneficial for women, and he makes a case that women's education—which will eventually make women the equal of men—should be embraced in France, as well.

However, many of Tocqueville's discussions of American culture draw overreaching or overbroad conclusions from observations that are, themselves, often suspect. For example, he describes Americans as peculiarly self-absorbed and vain, and he links these qualities to the low levels of social differentiation in the country. With little to distinguish themselves from each other, Tocqueville argues, Americans overemphasize minor distinctions in speech and dress. Of course, it is unlikely that Americans in 1830 were any more or less vain than the average Frenchman, and such specious observations undercut Tocqueville's credibility as an ethnographer. Furthermore, he claims that, due to the flattening effects of the "tyranny of the majority," he's never seen so few ignorant people, nor so few learned. This leads him to extrapolate that American tastes tend toward the middlebrow (neither overly unsophisticated nor overly refined). In general, Tocqueville's desire to view all aspects of American culture through the lens of the "leveling" effect of equality sometimes causes him to make off-base generalizations about what was, historically, a diverse and eclectic culture. His sweeping statements at times say more about his own aristocratic biases than about nineteenth-century American culture.

In his discussion of cultural life in America, Tocqueville is also concerned with the effects of an egalitarian society on poetry and the arts. Relying on the same overarching frame of equality's leveling effect, he determines that individual genius is far rarer in America than in an aristocracy, though he grants Americans that artistic production is so abundant in the Untied States that some successful works are bound to emerge. Virtually never citing specific examples, Tocqueville characterizes American artistic works as bold, stylized, and passionate; speed is emphasized over perfection, and quantity over quality. In history and philosophy, Tocqueville also prefers sweeping generalizations to analyzing specific examples, emphasizing the preference for general causes and theories over the influence of specific individuals, and on pragmatic and useful (rather than theoretical and abstract) knowledge.

Tocqueville's treatment of American pragmatism tends to be most convincing when he identifies specific, narrow historical causes and traces the development of certain assumptions; often, though, he prefers broad strokes to careful accuracy. His sweeping generalizations about American culture reveal the difficulty in arguing for a tidy correspondence between politics and culture. Although his entire book takes for granted the idea that all aspects of American life can be traced back to its democratic egalitarianism—and although he manages to make some convincing arguments for these connections—his most overreaching conclusions about American culture fail to account for the country's complexity and diversity, thereby calling into question the extent to which politics alone can explain culture.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE TOWNSHIP

Established for the first time around 1650, the American township was a regional subdivision of space and government that would come to be characterized by—as Tocqueville saw it—a peculiarly American embrace of local power, interests, and political participation. At the time he was writing, townships were responsible for much of the day-to-day activities of government, from collecting taxes to organizing meetings about political issues and questions that may not be relevant to a larger community. Tocqueville sometimes personifies the township, imagining it as a kind of political person itself: just as people have both political rights and duties, the township has political rights—the ability to collect taxes and build schools, for instance—but also must fulfill certain duties to the central State, such as allowing a road to be established within its purview. Such comparisons allow Tocqueville to express his admiration at the complex interrelation of individual people and politics in America. He admires the township as both a model of government and as a representation of American politics as a whole, one in which local initiative and the ability of citizens to feel invested in political affairs is embraced and encouraged. American liberty is enabled by the ability of townships to thrive, he argues—but townships also embody American liberty at its best.

LOG CABINS

As Tocqueville travelled around America, he encountered not only citizens and civic organizations, but also structures that he found unique to American culture and political life. Log cabins are, for him, an ideal example of Americans' desire for constant movement, their embrace of change and adventure, and their individualist tendencies. Such homes are simple and able to be built relatively quickly based on available natural resources of timber—indeed, Tocqueville emphasizes the lush natural resources of which many Americans have been able to take advantage in order to promote their own material success. Log cabins can be built in the middle of the wilderness, without the requirement of neighbors or towns, and they can be abandoned once their inhabitants decide to move again and pursue other options. Encountering such abandoned cabins leads Tocqueville to marvel at just how far Americans will go in pursuit of their individual dreams, as well as at how this tendency means that for such a young country (here he is thinking of European, not Native American, occupation) America already has ruins. The connections Tocqueville makes between log cabins and the American personality would prove prescient, as the fact that future president Abraham Lincoln was born in a one-room log cabin would become an unforgettable and much-recounted aspect of American history.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Signet Classic edition of *Democracy in America* published in 2001.

Author's Introduction Quotes

❝ If ever America undergoes great revolutions, they will be brought about by the presence of the black race on the soil of the United States; that is to say, they will owe their origin, not to the equality, but to the inequality of condition.

Related Characters: Alexis de Tocqueville (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 313

Explanation and Analysis

In *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville positions himself against a number of contemporary French politicians and intellectuals, who were concerned that the rise of democracy would destabilize society and lead to revolutions, or at the very least disorder. Although Tocqueville acknowledged the tumultuous recent past of his own country, he cautioned against explaining the French Revolution as a consequence of an increase in democratic equality. Rather, he insisted that equality of condition would only lead to more stable and secure conditions—with America as the most obvious example.

Here, however, Tocqueville admits that the equality of

condition that he's been exploring as a constitutive aspect of American society is not total, since it leaves out millions of black slaves. Tocqueville never questions whether this exclusion challenges the very principle of equality that Americans believe their country embodies—instead, he's content to think about slavery as an exception to the general rule. However, several decades before the Civil War would indeed split the United States in two as a result of slavery, Tocqueville presciently identified this entrenched, permanent inequality as a glaring root of potential disorder.

Chapter 3 Quotes

❝ The people reign in the American political world as the Deity does in the universe. They are the cause and the aim of all things; everything comes from them, and everything is absorbed in them.

Related Characters: Alexis de Tocqueville (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 59

Explanation and Analysis

Tocqueville has been exploring the deep American commitment to uphold the sovereignty of the people—a political ideal which means that political power is vested in the people as opposed to in a king, emperor, or other single ruler. In many ways, Tocqueville admires popular sovereignty insofar as it entails the extension of political rights to an ever-greater number of citizens. Indeed, for Tocqueville these political rights are what truly make a nation free.

Nonetheless, it's possible to see a read a certain amount of ambivalence in Tocqueville's words about the status of the people in America. Tocqueville's comparison of the American people to God can be understood as a way of underlining just how pervasive the sovereignty of the people has become, but it is also an almost absurdly presumptuous comparison, and Tocqueville (a believer in religion as a means of social order if not theological truth) would have been aware of the potential shock such a comparison would bring to devout Christians. He seems, then, to suggest that there's something ominous about the near-omnipotence of the people in America. Indeed, for much of the rest of the book, he'll go on to explore the dangers of giving the people too much power.

Chapter 5 Quotes

❝ The only nations which deny the utility of provincial liberties are those which have fewest of them; in other words, those only censure the institution who do not know it.

Related Characters: Alexis de Tocqueville (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 77

Explanation and Analysis

For Tocqueville, local government plays an essential role in maintaining freedom in a democratic nation, since spreading power between the capital and other places gives a democracy the checks and balances it needs to guard against the kind of despotism to which it is, in Tocqueville's eyes, so vulnerable. Here, though, he explicitly addresses possible detractors in France who might disagree with his characterization of provincial liberties.

Before the French Revolution, the provinces in France did retain a good deal of freedom from authority in Paris; it was Napoleon who did the most to centralize politics in the country around his own individual power as emperor. Writing in the context of a post-Napoleonic return to monarchy, Tocqueville inserted himself in contemporary debates about whether Napoleon's work of centralization should be maintained or the provinces should gain some measure of independence, even if this would mean a move away from aristocratic control. By suggesting that only those who do not know provincial liberties are suspicious of them, Tocqueville implies that his attempt to acquaint the French with the American model might reveal just how beneficial such provincial independence could be in France.

Chapter 11 Quotes

❝ The great political agitation of American legislative bodies, which is the only one that attracts the attention of foreigners, is a mere episode, or a sort of continuation, of that universal movement which originates in the lowest classes of the people, and extends successively to all the ranks of society. It is impossible to spend more effort in the pursuit of happiness.

Related Characters: Alexis de Tocqueville (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 120

Explanation and Analysis

Tocqueville's portrait of American political affairs—often admiring and sincere—here takes a slightly ironic tone. Tocqueville describes the constant activity of legislative bodies in America not as a unique aspect of American politics, but as one example of a feature that is general to the country—that is, that everyone is in a constant flurry of activity in their attempts to improve their own condition and climb to a higher rung of the social and economic ladder. While there is much that Tocqueville praises about the American political system, he is most suspicious of the over-extension of power within the legislative branch, and is somewhat condescending about what he considers to be the unsophisticated attempts at lawmaking in America. Here, he links the eagerness to make and change laws to the American "pursuit of happiness." Quoting the famous phrase in the Declaration of Independence that ensures Americans' right to do just that, Tocqueville has a tongue-in-cheek attitude about what this pursuit looks like in practice, suggesting that Americans may be more excited about pursuing their own happiness than about actually developing complex, refined laws.

❝ But if the time be past at which such a choice was possible, and if some power superior to that of man already hurries us, without consulting our wishes, towards one or the other of these two governments, let us endeavor to make the best of that which is allotted to us, and, by finding out both its good and its evil tendencies, be able to foster the former and repress the latter to the utmost.

Related Characters: Alexis de Tocqueville (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 124

Explanation and Analysis

In this chapter, Tocqueville has been exploring the kind of society that results from democratic versus aristocratic conditions. He argues that while aristocracy promotes heroism, genius, and brilliance, democracy embraces contentment and the avoidance of misery for the greatest number of people. But here he concludes that it's unrealistic to think that anyone might find themselves at a crossroads having to choose between these two systems of political organization. The implication is that such changes come about as a product of forces of history, not individual agency.

Indeed, Tocqueville stresses throughout the book that democratization is inevitable. While it might be possible to read his argument as a kind of determinism, Tocqueville's point is actually that it's necessary to accept current conditions as they are in order to have any hope of changing them. While he characterizes his aristocratic contemporaries as stuck in the past, eager to turn back the clock to an earlier age, Tocqueville thinks one should courageously face the present and respond to the reality of one's conditions instead of wishing for different ones. Given an era of increasing equality of condition, he suggests that one should work within these conditions in order to guide and direct democratic changes in a way that proves most beneficial.

Chapter 12 Quotes

❝ In my opinion, the main evil of the present democratic institutions of the Untied States does not arise, as is often asserted in Europe, from their weakness, but from their irresistible strength.

Related Characters: Alexis de Tocqueville (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 128

Explanation and Analysis

Here Tocqueville responds to another fear of many of his more conservative contemporaries in France and Europe, who witnessed the same trends of democratization and increasing equality of condition, and who feared that anarchy and disorder would be the inevitable result. Tocqueville disagrees with that view. Indeed, he spends a great deal of his book arguing that American democracy is peculiarly inclined to peace rather than war, stability rather than disorder. However, precisely because the institutions of democracy are so stable, he has another concern: that equality of condition will lead to a tyranny of the majority, ultimately preventing any kind of dissent or independent thought. Tyranny of the majority stems not from democracy's fragility but from its "irresistible" ability to convert all citizens to its own logic. This danger is greater than disorder, Tocqueville implies, because it comes from within—it's more insidious and thus more difficult to identify and combat than any external enemy or a tyrant.

Chapter 13 Quotes

The jury teaches every man not to recoil before the responsibility of his own actions, and impresses him with that manly confidence without which no political virtue can exist. It invests each citizen with a kind of magistracy; it makes them all feel the duties which they are bound to discharge towards society, and the part which they take in its government. By obliging men to turn their attention to other affairs than their own, it rubs off that private selfishness which is the rust of society.

Related Characters: Alexis de Tocqueville (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 143

Explanation and Analysis

Tocqueville is in the middle of discussing several aspects of the American legislative system that he finds particularly praiseworthy and conducive to maintaining liberty in a democracy. Although he tends to find that the legislative branch has too much power in America, for Tocqueville the jury mitigates that power by extending and disseminating it to all citizens. Because anyone (that is, anyone who can vote, which at this time in America is limited to white men) can be called upon to serve as a juror, he feels implicated in the workings of his government, and this holds true even in daily life, outside the specific periods devoted to jury duty.

For Tocqueville, it is by extending political rights such as those of participating in the jury system that people come to love their country and want to defend it, rather than feeling alienated from those who are in charge of national affairs. Furthermore, Tocqueville reflects that juries can work against the worst aspects of individualism. While he characterizes most Americans as having a predilection for focusing on themselves and their own lives and desires, he defends the jury as a space where people are forced to imagine other circumstances and work together to achieve a just verdict.

Chapter 14 Quotes

Those who hope to revive the monarchy of Henry IV or of Louis XIV appear to me to be afflicted with mental blindness; and when I consider the present condition of several European nations,—a condition to which all the others tend,—I am led to believe that they will soon be left with no other alternative than democratic liberty or the tyranny of the Caesars.

Related Characters: Alexis de Tocqueville (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 154

Explanation and Analysis

As he does at multiple points throughout the narrative, here Tocqueville signals what he feels to be the futility of reinstating an earlier age of monarchies and aristocratic privileges. Signaling that he is addressing his own countrymen by invoking French kings of the 16th and 18th centuries, he argues that it is impossible to bring back a lost age—even if, at times, he too expresses regret and nostalgia for some of the more comfortable aspects of France's Old Regime. However, neither does he feel that Europe is necessarily moving in the right political direction. According to Tocqueville, Europe currently finds itself at a fork in the road: either it continues to move toward a society of greater and greater freedom, or it is faced with the rise of tyranny. Although Tocqueville sees increasing equality of condition in Europe as in some ways impossible to halt, he doesn't think people are powerless in the face of this historical process. Instead, by closely examining the American example, he proposes that his contemporaries might be able to learn how to direct historical change in the way that's most likely to preserve and promote liberty rather than tyranny.

But I am very far from thinking that we ought to follow the example of the American democracy, and copy the means which it has employed to attain this end; for I am well aware of the influence which the nature of a country and its political antecedents exercise upon its political constitutions; and I should regard it as a great misfortune for mankind if liberty were to exist all over the world under the same features.

Related Characters: Alexis de Tocqueville (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 155

Explanation and Analysis

At the beginning of his book, Tocqueville argues for the usefulness of studying America as a model for democracy in France. But for Tocqueville, there's a difference between studying a country for certain ideas or lessons it might offer, and attempting to import an entire way of life from one context to another.

Indeed, even as Tocqueville will continue to note certain examples of American politics that he admires and wishes could be adapted to France, he acknowledges that cultures are different—not necessarily because of any essential ethnic or national nature, but rather because of different histories, social conditions, geographies, and other factors. Indeed, Tocqueville finds this diversity to be powerful and desirable. The more examples of liberty he can find and study, the better all nations might be able to determine what kinds of political conditions work in their particular context in promoting the greatest liberty for their citizens.

Chapter 16 Quotes

For myself, when I feel the hand of power lie heavy on my brow, I care but little to know who oppresses me; and I am not the more disposed to pass beneath the yoke because it is held out to me by the arms of a million of men.

Related Characters: Alexis de Tocqueville (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 171

Explanation and Analysis

As Tocqueville continues to elaborate his analysis about the dangers to liberty that are peculiar to a democracy, here his narrative takes a more explicitly personal note. The tyranny of the majority, to which Tocqueville refers here, can be explained by the idea that when important decisions, elected officials, and laws are decided upon based on how *many* people vote for them, it's hardly guaranteed that those choices are the best, most intelligent, or most far-sighted ones. More troublingly, when the majority is assumed to know best, people in the minority can be swept along in their wake—either mindlessly accepting the view of the many or feeling enormous social pressure not to contradict such widespread assumptions.

Here, by personifying power itself, Tocqueville evocatively signals how oppression can be *felt* as a hand or a yoke. Making an equivalence between power vested in a despot and power vested in the majority, Tocqueville questions the idea that a democracy must be more free simply because more people are involved in governing—and thus implies that liberty must be based on something other than democratic election.

Chapter 20 Quotes

In the ages in which active life is the condition of almost every one, men are therefore generally led to attach an excessive value to the rapid bursts and superficial conceptions of the intellect; and, on the other hand, to depreciate unduly its slower and deeper labors.

Related Characters: Alexis de Tocqueville (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 189

Explanation and Analysis

In Part II, Tocqueville turns to descriptions of American cultural and social life on a broader basis than politics itself. However, he continues to consider democratic equality as the defining feature of American society, and examines how it affects every other aspect of American culture. Here he draws on his earlier characterization of Americans as being in constant movement to describe how that incessant activity affects their intellectual life. It's in describing the life of the mind in America that Tocqueville expresses the greatest amount of prejudice, and makes some of his more questionable conclusions. For instance, he makes a relatively unquestioned jump from "rapid bursts" of commercial activity to "rapid bursts" of mental energy, two quite different spheres. Throughout these sections, Tocqueville will emphasize Americans' difficulty in thinking slowly, abstractly, and theoretically as a "natural" result of their economic equality and materialist desires—a very broad generalization to make about an entire country of people.

Chapter 23 Quotes

Nothing conceivable is so petty, so insipid, so crowded with paltry interests, in one word, so anti-poetic, as the life of a man in the United States.

Related Characters: Alexis de Tocqueville (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 209

Explanation and Analysis

Even as Tocqueville attempts to create an objective account of intellectual and and literary conditions in America, this passage, with its highly normative and opinionated language, continues to reflect his own biases against what

he understands to be American culture. Tocqueville's belief that material desires and the pursuit of wealth necessarily win out above all else in America. As an aristocrat who never had to worry about money, Tocqueville is suspicious of these desires and finds them vulgar, or "petty" and "insipid." In turn, he finds that there's a disconnect between poetry—which should be idealized, in his estimation—and the "paltry interests" that characterize American lives. Tocqueville will go on to argue that there is a place for "poetic ideas" in America, but that those ideas will have to develop against the anti-poetic nature of democratic life.

Chapter 26 Quotes

I think that democratic communities have a natural taste for freedom: left to themselves, they will seek it, cherish it, and view any privation of it with regret. But for equality, their passion is ardent, insatiable, incessant, invincible: they call for equality in freedom; and if they cannot obtain that, they still call for equality in slavery.

Related Characters: Alexis de Tocqueville (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 223

Explanation and Analysis

Throughout *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville has attempted to show how and why democratic equality is not the same thing as liberty—and, indeed, that the two can often work against each other. Here he further elaborates his argument that democracies prefer equality above all else, even while qualifying that preference by acknowledging that such societies also prefer to be free.

The difference between equality and liberty emerges in this passage as a question of feeling, of emotional attachment on various levels to what one might otherwise think of as a rather intellectual political category. But Tocqueville argues that equality has a more emotionally powerful draw on people, describing it in terms of a passionate love affair. Like an amorous passion, he implies, the love of equality too can lead people astray, causing them to agitate for conditions that, if they were thinking rationally, they would never embrace.

Chapter 29 Quotes

Nothing, in my opinion, is more deserving of our attention than the intellectual and moral associations of America. [...] If men are to remain civilized, or to become so, the art of associating together must grow and improve in the same ratio in which the equality of conditions is increased.

Related Characters: Alexis de Tocqueville (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 234

Explanation and Analysis

Throughout this section of the book, Tocqueville balances an analysis of the more dangerous aspects of democracy in general with an acknowledgment of how American democracy in particular has managed to avoid or mitigate those dangers. Key to America's success in this realm has been its embrace of "associations." Tocqueville divides such "associations" into two general categories: political institutions like parties, juries, and local governmental organizations, on the one hand, and civic institutions like temperance groups, debating societies, and religious organizations, on the other.

Here, Tocqueville insists on the importance of the latter category of associations in particular. But he also takes the opportunity to develop another argument for why these are so beneficial. He points out that associations not only help to mitigate the democratic tyranny that might stem from equality of condition, they also work against what he finds to be the relatively "uncivilized" nature of democratic societies. Individualism and materialism, for him, are both dangerous to freedom and also signs of a lower order of civilization. There's thus a kind of civilizing effect that accompanies the preponderance of associations—at least in Tocqueville's account of them.

Chapter 34 Quotes

I am of opinion, upon the whole, that the manufacturing aristocracy which is growing up under our eyes is one of the harshest which ever existed in the world; but, at the same time, it is one of the most confined and least dangerous. Nevertheless, the friends of democracy should keep their eyes anxiously fixed in this direction; for if ever a permanent inequality of conditions and aristocracy again penetrates into the world, it may be predicted that this is the gate by which they will enter.

Related Characters: Alexis de Tocqueville (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 256

Explanation and Analysis

Although Tocqueville stresses throughout his book that the aristocratic regimes of the past are no more, he also suggests that some of the worst aspects of aristocracy may well rise again in new and different forms. In this chapter, he has explored the possibility that America's increasing commercial and manufacturing power may well contribute to a new aristocracy. By that he mainly means not a society in which wealth is tied to birth, property, and rank, but rather a world in which the owners of companies and factories exert undue influence on their employees, who in turn increasingly lose the social mobility that is one of the main advantages of a democratic society.

Tocqueville has explored a number of other factors that limit the power of the manufacturing class in America, which is why he argues that the danger is not as great as one might fear. Tocqueville hardly a wholehearted supporter of equality of condition in general, but he fears the opposite—that is, the re-institution of permanent *inequality*, a society in which ordinary people have no hope of improving their condition. Tocqueville's fears will prove remarkably prescient as America continues to develop as an economic force—but also as a society increasingly defined by wealth inequalities that don't look too different from those of earlier aristocracies.

Chapter 38 Quotes

Democracy loosens social ties, but tightens natural ones; it brings kindred more closely together, whilst it throws citizens apart.

Related Characters: Alexis de Tocqueville (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 271-272

Explanation and Analysis

This passage initially seems to contradict some of Tocqueville's earlier arguments about the ways in which American society has been able to develop strong connections among its citizens, primarily through its many associations and through its citizens' active involvement in political affairs. Here, though, Tocqueville is describing what he finds to be a natural tendency of democracies, noting that part of what makes America so remarkable is the fact that it has been able to avoid some of these natural weaknesses.

Still, in Tocqueville's account, America too suffers from its pervasive individualism—its privileging of individual desires and objectives over the good of the collective. In a society with relative equality of condition, Tocqueville has argued, everyone theoretically is able to improve his or her social and economic status, and at times strives to do so at the expense of other people. Such desires make it more likely that people cling to and defend their closest relatives, Tocqueville argues, preferring clan mentality to a greater bond with their fellow citizens. He will go on to argue that in some ways strong family bonds can be positive, but he is also concerned about the privileging of "natural" over "artificial" bonds when it's a question of working together for the betterment of an entire society.

Chapter 45 Quotes

Variety is disappearing from the human race; the same ways of acting, thinking, and feeling are to be met with all over the world. This is not only because nations work more upon each other, and copy each other more faithfully; but as the men of each country relinquish more and more the peculiar opinions and feelings of a caste, a profession, or a family, they simultaneously arrive at something nearer to the constitution of man, which is everywhere the same.

Related Characters: Alexis de Tocqueville (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 298

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Tocqueville's ominous description of one major consequence of equality of condition comes to sound a lot like an early critique of globalization. Although that term is usually used to describe historical changes beginning more than a century after the time of Tocqueville's writing, his characterization of the disappearance of "variety" and cultural difference seems to foretell the even greater forces of homogenization the world would experience in the 20th and 21st centuries. Importantly, this passage suggests that the loss of diverse ways of life is not just a result of people's and nations' active desires to be more like each other. Instead, this is a much broader, near-inevitable process by which people's affiliations and social categories of belonging are reshuffled and rearranged. Tocqueville also relies here

on an understanding of human nature itself as singular, as "everywhere the same"—a view that many others, past and present, have espoused, but also one that has been open to many forms of critique.

Chapter 54 Quotes

❝ I am of opinion, that, in the democratic ages which are opening upon us, individual independence and local liberties will ever be the products of art; that centralization will be the natural government.

Related Characters: Alexis de Tocqueville (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 347

Explanation and Analysis

While Tocqueville names a certain number of advantages to a highly centralized political system, he's mostly wary of intense centralization, warning that even a *democratic* centralized government can prove a threat to individual freedom. Here he emphasizes just how easy, if not inevitable, the process of handing power over to the central government can be in an age of democratic equality. Tocqueville doesn't believe that democracies are necessarily fated to redistribute power to a centralized authority—indeed, he notes that America has been able to maintain "local liberties" in large part through its federalist political system and its love of political associations. Instead, part of Tocqueville's purpose in writing is to signal some of these dangers inherent in a democracy precisely so that other nations undergoing the process of democratization might acknowledge them and find a way to combat them.

Chapter 56 Quotes

❝ The will of man is not shattered, but softened, bent, and guided; men are seldom forced by it to act, but they are constantly restrained from acting: such a power does not destroy, but it prevents existence; it does not tyrannize, but it compressed, enervates, extinguishes, and stupefies a people, till each nation is reduced to be nothing better than a flock of timid and industrious animals, of which the government is the shepherd.

Related Characters: Alexis de Tocqueville (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 356-357

Explanation and Analysis

In one of the most chilling passages of *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville warns of one potential path democratic equality might take if the tyranny of the majority cannot be mitigated. The passage evocatively juxtaposes the language of violent physical force with that of delicate pressure to suggest that just because force is subtle and gradual does not mean that it's any less powerful or even despotic.

Indeed, the reason this image of the future sounds so ominous is that there seems to be no one obvious enemy to challenge or fight against. Instead, Tocqueville suggests, people will increasingly come to check and scrutinize their own actions and words, performing the work of surveillance themselves. This kind of totalitarianism will end up affecting the very character of a country's citizens, Tocqueville warns. Although this passage is written in the present tense, it remains a hypothetical scenario. By delivering such a stark portrait of a possible future, Tocqueville hopes to incite his readers to assert their political rights and fight for their individual liberties.

Chapter 57 Quotes

❝ I perceive mighty dangers which it is possible to ward off,—mighty evils which may be avoided or alleviated; and I cling with a firm hold to the belief that, for democratic nations to be virtuous and prosperous, they require but to will it.

Related Characters: Alexis de Tocqueville (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 372

Explanation and Analysis

Although a number of Tocqueville's warnings sound like prophecies of an inevitable future, here he returns to a central claim of his book: that while the worldwide process of democratization seems unstoppable, people are not powerless in the face of such changes. Instead, they can work within these vast historical processes and strive to shape the future themselves. The "mighty evils" that Tocqueville signals include, first and foremost, the kind of despotism that he fears from a democracy. But by writing a book that has chronicled both the major dangers of democracy as well as a number of the ways American society has found to mitigate or avoid such dangers, Tocqueville hopes that his compatriots will no longer be able

to claim ignorance about the possible paths their own country might take. Instead, he hopes, they'll be inspired to strive after virtue and prosperity with a confidence in their own ability to change the course of history.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

AUTHOR'S INTRODUCTION

Tocqueville begins by highlighting his most significant discovery from his travels in the United States: the "equality of condition" that he found there—and that, he argues, structures not just politics but all of American society. He's realized that France seems to be approaching a similar condition: this was the germ of his idea for the book.

Tocqueville suggests in his opening that he is not aiming to write an introduction to American society that will merely be of scholarly interest, but instead thinks that France has lessons to learn by looking at the United States. He immediately establishes equality as one of the book's core themes and highest-held values.

Tocqueville traces the history of democratization in France, which was long controlled by a small number of families holding property and ruling over the inhabitants who worked there. As society developed, the clergy's power increased and relationships between people grew increasingly complicated in commerce, in royal affairs, and in private noble wars. As education increased and, with it, general intelligence, the importance of being of noble birth gave way to that of natural ability. This was how the idea of equality was introduced into government.

In order to further explain why the American example is useful to France, Tocqueville begins with a brief summary of the political history of his own country—a history that he thinks is emblematic for Euro-American civilizations, all of which have witnessed what seems to be an inexorable march toward democracy and the greater equality of conditions that accompanies it.

Tocqueville notes that kings became more likely to give political influence to common people, if only to counter the influence of the aristocracy. With the rise of personal property and the erosion of serfdom, people could increasingly work for themselves, contributing to a general "levelling" in society. In turn, poetry and the arts and sciences came to be accessible to the people and not just to rulers.

If democracies are characterized by an equality of resources, power, and intelligence among people, Tocqueville shows how, perhaps counterintuitively, monarchies could sometimes actually speed the process of democratization.

Tocqueville pinpoints a few major events that have led to "equality of condition," from the Crusades, which devastated the nobles' wealth, to the art of printing, which disseminated knowledge among many, and Protestantism, which proclaimed the ability of all to reach heaven on their own merits. The same "revolution" is taking place throughout the Christian world, and democracy is gaining the advantage.

The vast swath of reasons offered by Tocqueville to explain the rise of democracy suggests just how over-determined he considers the process of democratization to be across the Western world, with roots in politics, technology, and religion, among other fields.

Tocqueville notes that this vast process can hardly be stopped. While he has a "religious terror" of this revolution, he believes that it's necessary to face it directly rather than pretend it's not happening. While he and others might not be able to stop equality from spreading, they might be able to guide it in a certain direction, educating people, directing their morals, and developing a new political science. As it is, since the aristocrats have turned a blind eye, democracy is growing at a wild pace, its worst tendencies free to develop unchecked and its best possibilities left unfulfilled.

For the first time, Tocqueville shows his cards. An aristocrat himself, who believes that there are natural differences between people that should be upheld, he is suspicious of the idea that equality is a virtue. At the same time, Tocqueville is a pragmatist who finds it unrealistic and undesirable to remain stuck in the past. Instead, intelligent, aristocratic people like him can have a hand in nudging democracies toward improvement.

Tocqueville fondly recalls the peace and stability of the past, when monarchs achieved respect from nobles and the people alike, when serfs were content and didn't yearn for a position above their own and nobles felt secure in their privileges. Now all distinctions of rank are being eroded, property is being divided among many, and the abilities of all, no matter their class, are being cultivated equally. Potentially, Tocqueville thinks, such a process could lead to a society in which all people would love and respect the laws that they forge themselves, and would be satisfied with certain limits to their pursuits because they'd understand that these would be in the service of their country. But as it is, people seem to despise *all* authority, and have destroyed the powers able to check tyranny.

Tocqueville's evocative descriptions in this passage only heighten the stark contrast that he sets up between a nostalgic view of the past as stable and pleasant, and a view of the present and future as overwhelming, chaotic, and muddled (a view that is largely a product of his own vantage point as a member of a class that used to have far more advantages than it does now). At the same time, Tocqueville reflects thoughtfully on the potential benefits of this new system, even if the dangers are, to him, much clearer.

Tocqueville argues that the poor still hate the rich, but now yearn to join their ranks. Peace is only maintained because of fear, not mutual interest. The former advantages of aristocracy have been abandoned, but without the potential advantages of democracy replacing them. A "strange confusion" reigns in France, where bonds between people have been broken, and everyone rages against each other. While certain true Christians remain, many others have used religion to bolster their idea of democracy, leading to chaos. Truly religious people have become the enemies of liberty, while those who love liberty attack religion. The noblest minds advocate for slavery and the most servile advocate for liberty. Tocqueville bemoans the topsy-turvy nature of contemporary life.

Tocqueville continues his rather ominous characterization of his own country in the throes of a wave of democratization and increased equality, a process that he worries is breeding disorder and immorality. Religion, which in Tocqueville's mind can potentially work in the interest of liberty, is instead used against it. In general, his description of contemporary society as chaotic, disordered, and upside-down serves to justify his own work, which will offer alternative options and several paths forward.

In order to get out of this conundrum, Tocqueville suggests looking at one country that has nearly reached the natural limits of equality—the United States. France is slowly approaching that limit, though Tocqueville doesn't think it will ever reach the extent of equality existing in America. Still, he suggests that it might be instructive to look at America for lessons that France might be able to follow—or avoid.

Here Tocqueville shifts from a wary discussion of the contemporary situation in his own country to the object lesson of the United States, with which the bulk of his book will be concerned. America is both a possible beacon and a warning for France's own future.

Tocqueville describes the structure of his book: the first part will explain how, based on his observations and travels, democracy has structured American laws, while the second will discuss its society more generally. In all, he will be careful to examine both advantages and disadvantages of the American way of life. He recognizes that some might object to his refusal to be partisan (his refusal to choose one side over the other), but he has been nonpartisan on purpose.

Although Tocqueville will certainly take sides at a number of points in his book, he never comes down one way or another on the issue of whether American democracy as a whole is positive or negative. Instead, he'll break it down into many parts, evaluating each aspect of democratic life on its own merits.

CHAPTER 1. ORIGIN OF THE ANGLO-AMERICANS

Tocqueville uses the metaphor of a human life to argue that in order to understand a nation's development, we must look to its origin (just as one studies an infant). In examining the birth of America, we might discover the cause of its prejudices, habits, and national character. While most states are too old to do this, America is far younger. This chapter, then, is the key to everything that follows.

Tocqueville's point is that while the origins of French politics are far too distant for him to study (first-hand, that is, rather than as a historian might), America's origins are still close enough in recent history that Tocqueville can gain an authoritative perspective on them just by visiting and observing.

While Tocqueville acknowledges that people emigrated to the New World with different aims, many had certain features in common. Those from England shared a language and an acquaintance with political strife, as well as a natural notion of rights and freedoms. Even those who came from other European countries, once they settled in the colonies, were relatively equal in their shared sense of precariousness and poverty (which usually drove people to emigrate). In addition, American soil was best cultivated in small portions rather than vast tracts, thus discouraging the rise of a land-based aristocracy.

Here Tocqueville raises a number of points to which he will return and further elaborate later in the book, including the English acquaintance with individual rights and the American way of dividing land. While Tocqueville is eager to formulate a sense of Americans' "national character," rather than make racially- or ethnically-based generalizations, he chooses to probe history for answers.

Tocqueville describes the inhabitants of the first English colony in Virginia (founded in 1607) as seekers of gold, adventurers without a well-developed spiritual or intellectual sense. Slavery was established early on here. Tocqueville argues that slavery dishonors labor, promotes idleness, and generally helps to explain what he sees as the sorry manners of American Southerners. In the north, meanwhile, the independence, intelligence, and morality of the Pilgrims (who hadn't been forced to leave for reasons of poverty) has given New England an entirely different character from the South. New England has been like a "beacon lit upon a hill" for America, Tocqueville says.

Tocqueville is quick to characterize whole groups according to certain moral and personality traits. By the time he was writing, both France and Britain had abolished slavery, while the practice would continue in America until the Civil War. Tocqueville sees slavery not just as a horrific institution but as a sign of a particularly depraved character on the part of slave-owners, a character that stands in stark contrast with that of their fellow countrymen to the north.

Tocqueville explains that the Pilgrims had been independent in England already, and they had also been committed to their ideals. Their Puritanism, which Tocqueville claims was a political as much as religious doctrine, forced them to leave to escape persecution. Every year more Puritans followed as a result of the 17th-century religious and political unrest in England. Almost all emigrants came from the middle classes, creating a basically homogeneous society.

Again, Tocqueville traces certain qualities of this group of American immigrants to a particular set of historical circumstances—specifically, the religious rather than economic reasons for emigration, which Tocqueville praises as contributing to the creation of a stable middle-class society in the New World.

England mostly left these emigrants alone, such that New England's liberty was greater than anywhere else in the New World. The king sometimes appointed a governor or granted certain tracts of land to individuals, but only in New England did he allow emigrants to form political assemblies and govern themselves independently through charters. People in New England thus came to learn the meaning of sovereignty of the people by enacting laws, naming their own magistrates, and so on. These laws were severe in their moral strictures, prohibiting adultery, promiscuity, idleness, and drunkenness. Sometimes even religious toleration was lost in the zeal to punish all who strayed from the right path. Tocqueville characterizes this as an unfortunate side effect of newfound freedom.

Here Tocqueville turns to the northern regions of America in an effort to identify the origins of American democracy as he sees it, two centuries after the Pilgrims established themselves in New England. A particular confluence of political and historical circumstances, he argues, allowed New Englanders to essentially teach themselves the rules of politics through experimentation. This freedom paradoxically could lead to greater strictness—a theme Tocqueville will return to.

New England was the germ for a number of characteristics of modern democracies, from "free voting of taxes" and trial by jury to the independence of the **township**, a model of American liberty today. Townships, which were the center of local interests, rights, and duties, were established beginning around 1650, and Tocqueville finds them to have productively promoted political activity among all. He is impressed at the advanced theories and sciences of legislation he finds in these early records, including concern for the condition of the poor and the arbitration of civil records.

In discussing what he finds to be the advantages of American democracy, Tocqueville is led again to emphasize the North over the South, with a preference for the North. Although Tocqueville has already argued that America is so young that he can basically study its origins as if he had been there to experience them for himself, he does acknowledge the need to examine archives and documents, many of which allow him to better observe the roots of contemporary society.

For Tocqueville, the mandates regarding public education are particularly remarkable, showing an eagerness to establish schools and oblige everyone to support them—an eagerness prompted, he thinks, by a connection New Englanders saw between education and proper religious spirit.

For New Englanders, Tocqueville argues, there was no contradiction between worldly learning and spiritual devoutness. Instead, their sense of religious duty compelled them to treat both realms with equal seriousness.

Tocqueville remarks upon the contrast to 17th-century Europe, where absolute monarchy ruled and individual rights were limited—whereas a new, humble community in the New World was the site of greatest innovation. This was the result of two distinct elements in American culture, he thinks: the spirit of religion and that of liberty. A concern for well-being on earth is matched with a concern for salvation in heaven. Even as Americans had broken down old laws, institutions, and hierarchies, and launched into a new and equal society, they nevertheless maintained a reverence for religious authority. The contrast between political uncertainty and religious authority allowed for the mutual advancement of both liberty and religion: religion acknowledged the nobleness of political affairs, and reigned supreme in its own sphere, while liberty regarded religion as the safeguard of morality, which is the best protection of freedom.

Tocqueville continues to insist on how surprising it is that it was in America—a place with (he thinks) barely any culture, history, or acquaintance with politics—that entrenched European dilemmas about individual rights and freedoms began to be resolved. At the same time, he argues, that was precisely the advantage of the clean slate offered by the American colonies. Writing from a nation where religion had long been a source of conflict and political turmoil, Tocqueville also admires the ways in which Americans, unlike the French (whose situation he portrayed starkly earlier in the chapter), find liberty and religion mutually beneficial.

CHAPTER 2. DEMOCRATIC SOCIAL CONDITION OF THE ANGLO-AMERICANS

Tocqueville argues that one must study social conditions in order to understand the laws and ideas that regulate a nation. He describes Americas' social condition as, in a word, democratic. Equality reigned from the start in New England, although to the South some English proprietors had imported aristocratic principles of inheritance, buttressed by slavery. Without privileges of birth, a true aristocracy couldn't arise, but these proprietors still were a "superior class" and became some of the greatest leaders of the American Revolution.

Tocqueville has mentioned the peculiarly American "equality of condition" before, but now he returns in earnest to this discussion, all while contrasting the northern status quo to the southern. Although Tocqueville has registered his disapproval of slavery, he does sense an affinity between himself and the southern landowners insofar as they were the closest approximation to an aristocracy.

Tocqueville signals the importance of laws of inheritance in social and political affairs. They can affect the future as well as the present, collecting property and power into a few hands and aiding in the construction of an aristocracy (or, if the laws prohibit privileges of inheritance, dissolving it). In America, the laws of "partible inheritance," which allow property to be divided up upon the owners' death, and the ban on primogeniture (in which the eldest son would inherit all the land), lead to the smaller and smaller division of land to and to the destruction of large fortunes and properties. Properties no longer represent families, and the chance is higher that sons will prefer to sell land—putting more property into circulation—rather than maintaining it. Individual selfishness rather than family pride comes to characterize such actions. Tocqueville notes that the law of partition is causing increasing impacts in France, too—but old traditions and recollections of the past linger far more in France than in the United States.

Inheritance laws were, in France and elsewhere, crucial means of transmitting wealth and maintaining an aristocracy over time. Such laws supported practices like primogeniture, in which only the eldest son would receive the fortune and property, as well as the prevention of partitioning an estate, which—as Tocqueville notes here—would eventually cause the most powerful families' fortunes to erode. Although Tocqueville is struck by the success of the United States in dismantling the system, his tone here shifts from the merely expository to the nostalgic or even dismayed, as he traces the loss of families and estates like his in America, and as he acknowledges that his own family won't be exempt from such changes back in France.

In America, the families of old, landed proprietors are now merchants, lawyers, or doctors, and any small hereditary distinctions have been lost. While the love of money is pervasive in the country, wealth circulates quickly and is easily lost. In addition, the spread of people west of the Mississippi has made neighbors ignorant of each other's history and family traditions, wiping out the influence of great names and wealth but also the "natural aristocracy" of knowledge and virtue.

Tocqueville describes the transition from an aristocratic society to one that is not just democratic but capitalistic. No longer is society divided into landowners, royalty, and peasants, but rather into a much larger "middle class" made up of people who aren't poor but still have to work for a living.

Tocqueville characterizes America as full of people neither learned nor ignorant. Everyone has access to primary education, but few to higher education. Nearly everyone has to work in America, so they begin their apprenticeship at fifteen rather than going on to study more. Most rich Americans were once poor, so now that they have leisure time they have no desire to study. Consequently there is no intellectual tradition handed down from one generation to the next, and instead the desire for knowledge is fixed at a "middling standard." Tocqueville is struck by this unique equality both of fortune and intellect.

A general way that Tocqueville characterizes Americans is as a "middling sort," neither great nor puny in their intelligence, estates, tastes, and other features. In some ways, Tocqueville simply applies an economic characteristic (i.e., the relative sameness of class in America) to many other aspects of American life, even as he tries to maintain neutrality by acknowledging that the alternative is an aristocratic society of great economic inequality.

Tocqueville argues that such equality must necessarily spread into the political world, meaning that either everyone must be granted equal rights, or rights will be granted to no one. He praises the passion for equality that would encourage the humble to rise to the great, but warns that the weak may want to lower the powerful to their own level. In places like America, even if democrats instinctively love liberty, they'll always prefer equality—and in a place where everyone is equal, it's difficult to remain free against aggressions of power, since a union of many is required to be strong enough to resist. So far, Americans have resisted this danger thanks to their circumstances, origin, and morals.

As Tocqueville concludes his introduction, he establishes one of his major themes in the book: Americans' preference for equality over liberty. Here, he suggests that a desire for equality may come to endanger individual freedoms. Tocqueville doesn't linger over what he will later call the "tyranny of the majority," but the aggressions of power to which he refers here will resurface in his discussions about the danger in giving all power to the people.

CHAPTER 3. THE SOVEREIGNTY OF THE PEOPLE IN AMERICA

Tocqueville identifies the sovereignty of the people as the main characteristic of American liberty, explicitly recognized and defended in law. Early on in American history, this sovereignty was kept in check by the necessity of obeying Britain. In addition, intelligence in New England and wealth in the South continued to exert an aristocratic influence, keeping power in the hands of the few. The right to vote was limited until the American Revolution, when people fought for national sovereignty. Martial victory was also victory for sovereignty of the people, and the more powerful found that the only way to secure the good-will of the people was to vote, often against their own interest, in favor of the most democratic laws, including universal suffrage.

"Sovereignty" means autonomy, and sovereignty of the people would have been a familiar term even to European audiences of the time, since it was a principle to which people could appeal in their struggle against the authority of the monarch or State. Early on, Tocqueville argues, Americans also had to negotiate with other authorities to secure their own sovereignty, but the difference now is that sovereignty of the people triumphed in an entirely unprecedented way in America.

Tocqueville contrasts the explicit sovereignty of the people in America to the weaker manifestations of the principle in other countries. But in the United States, the entire nation is involved in making its laws by choosing its legislators and officials. The people reign in American politics like God does in the universe, Tocqueville argues.

Tocqueville again insists on the uniqueness of the American example, arguing that America has carried sovereignty of the people as a principle to its logical conclusion, thus making it a notable model of what might happen in Europe in the future.

CHAPTER 4. LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Tocqueville states that the rest of his book will show how the principle of sovereignty of the people—that is, democratic equality—functions. He asks why, if individuals have equal shares in power, they obey the government at all. He answers that it's not because they feel inferior to legislators, but because they've acknowledged the usefulness of government. Americans assume that society has no right to control their actions unless they hurt the common good, or unless the common good needs their support.

From here on, Tocqueville will mostly use, instead of the term "sovereignty of the people," the notion of equality—in large part because, he argues, the extension of power to the people both requires and promotes a sense in which everyone is equal under the law. Tocqueville also notes Americans' libertarian streak—their preference to be left alone in matters of politics.

Tocqueville characterizes the **township** as a kind of individual in the way that it is granted independence. Townships have to fulfill certain social duties, such as paying taxes to the State or allowing a road to be paved through its territory, but in practice the township levies and collects taxes, builds and manages schools, and so on—whereas in France the State manages all these functions. Independent and authoritative, townships are also places of great local and public spirit. In Europe those in positions of power fear such local spirit as a potential threat, but in America such spirit aids the functioning of local government.

If, as Tocqueville argues, individuals are considered to be unencumbered free agents in the United States, then so too are townships thought of as independent entities. It's difficult to stress just how different the system of local independence that Tocqueville observes is from the highly centralized, highly bureaucratic administrative system in France.

In American **townships**, Tocqueville thinks, the power is so spread out and divided that almost everyone is somehow invested in local government. People take part in nearly everything that happens officially in the township, practicing the art of government in a small but valuable way and learning to exercise their rights.

Local independence and self-government are one of the aspects of American political life that Tocqueville admires the most. As a defender of individual political rights, he sees these practices as important educational tools.

CHAPTER 5. DECENTRALIZATION IN AMERICA—ITS EFFECTS

Tocqueville notes how strange it is for a European to observe the absence of "Administration" in America. While Europeans maintain authority by limiting rights, Americans distribute authority among many different hands—disseminating rather than destroying it (since indeed, a love of order and law does characterize the American people). The idea is that the community will be at once regulated and free: the power exists, even while its representative cannot be pinpointed.

Again, Tocqueville comes from a context in which it makes sense to speak of Administration with a capital A—a complex and highly centralized bureaucracy that defined the France of his time. Tocqueville seems to prefer the American ideal because it doesn't deny the need for authority—it just doesn't find it necessary to maintain it by denying individual rights.

Tocqueville distinguishes between centralized government, which concentrates common interests like foreign relations or general laws, and centralized administration, which concentrates local interests into one place. Together, they have enormous power, but they need not both be present: English centralized government, for instance, is powerful, but its administration has never been centralized. Tocqueville argues that centralized government is necessary for a nation to prosper, but that centralized administration only sucks away local spirit and "enervates" nations.

Tocqueville's distinction between centralized government and centralized administration is not always quite clear, but it's useful to think of it in the way he characterizes it here: he doesn't have a problem with a national government directing issues that concern everyone in the country, but he finds that once the central government starts meddling in issues of purely local interest, problems can arise.

The United States thus benefits from its decentralized administration. There is a single legislature in each state and concentration of national affairs in the capital, but power in local affairs is divided. Sometimes this works slowly and inefficiently. In New England, for instance, the town assessor decides on tax rates, the town collector receives them, and the town treasurer sends the amount to the public treasury.

Tocqueville argues that the United States seems to have found a relatively stable balance between centralization and decentralization, even as he also pays attention to the drawbacks of decentralization—particularly in the way they prevent the efficient running of government.

While Tocqueville is confident that such inefficiency can be reformed without a new system, he argues that the *total* decentralization of administration goes too far in America. Still, he also insists that centralized administration is not the answer, since no one central power can be adept enough to embrace all the details of a great nation's life. Sometimes Tocqueville has observed weaknesses in the lack of uniform regulations that control everyone's conduct in France, such as in certain examples of social neglect, but he also has witnessed the participation of many in the "common weal" (or commonwealth), for instance, building schools and churches or repairing roads on their own.

As usual, Tocqueville strives to maintain a balanced perspective regarding both the advantages and disadvantages of American democracy. Here he isolates one example, "social neglect," by which he seems to mean that maintenance of infrastructure and public services can sometimes slip through the cracks in America, leaving people without access to basic services like decent roads. Still, he argues that Americans themselves counteract such disadvantages out of their own goodwill.

Tocqueville also argues that an absolute authority over people's lives prevents them from feeling a stake in the affairs of their country or even town. If the country ever needs them, they will hardly be eager to rise up to defend it. He uses the example of the Turks, who only rose up to defend their nation as a defense of Islam. Now that their faith is weakening, there's only despotism, not true spirit, that remains. Laws are thus necessary to reawaken the patriotic impulse. Indeed, Tocqueville most admires the political rather than the administrative effects of decentralization in America—the ability of citizens to keep their country's interests in view everywhere.

Sometimes, Tocqueville makes recourse to cultures other than those of the United States, England, and France in order to prove a point. Here he refers to the Ottoman Empire, which by the middle of the nineteenth century had lost much of the power and influence it had held over the previous few centuries. His work of comparing and contrasting societies is meant to underline that the American model might prove useful as a lesson (either positively or negatively) elsewhere.

Americans obey not other men but justice and law. They also are eager to embark on private undertakings, which might fail more than government initiatives, but the sum total of all personal undertakings exceeds anything the government could do on its own. Tocqueville takes one example of the success of decentralized administration: while there is no criminal police on the same level as in France, no passports, and no long examinations, America is notable for its ability to punish almost every crime—because the people rise up together in the interest of finding and judging the criminal, who is considered an actual enemy of the people.

Tocqueville continues to balance his characterization of American democracy by including both advantages and disadvantages: here, America comes out favorably in contrast to France, where (perhaps paradoxically) the massive administrative apparatus actually makes prosecuting crimes more difficult. Tocqueville instead points to Americans' own initiative as the cornerstone of their justice system.

Provincial institutions are particularly necessary in a democracy, Tocqueville argues, since without them there is no security against the excesses of central power. Nonetheless, democracies are also most in danger of yielding to central power, in part because centralized government tends to want to spread into central administration as well (as happened during the French Revolution, which was against both the king and provincial institutions, and thus democratized and centralized at the same time—leading to a new kind of tyranny). Those countries that deny the utility of provincial institutions are those where they least exist.

This is a point that Tocqueville will return to again and again in his book: given that the "excesses of central power" are some of the greatest dangers posed by a democracy, he uses America as both an example of how this danger presents itself, but also as a key model for how to avoid such excesses. The existence and powers of "provincial institutions" are some of the most significant aspects of American life.

CHAPTER 6. JUDICIAL POWER IN THE UNITED STATES, AND ITS INFLUENCE ON POLITICAL SOCIETY

Tocqueville makes a case for the uniqueness of judicial power in the United States. As in other nations, American judges cannot overstep authority and create laws on their own; they can only judge on individual, not general cases, and can only act when a case has been brought to court. But the power of the judiciary is much greater in America than elsewhere—because, Tocqueville says, they base their decisions not on laws but on the Constitution, and thus can even pronounce laws as unconstitutional.

Tocqueville often begins a chapter by signaling his main argument, then taking a step back and making several general points about his object of inquiry: judicial power in different types of government. Tocqueville's argument about the power of the American Constitution still holds true today, and is one of the major unique elements of the American legal system.

While the French constitution is supposed to be immutable, and the British one can change all the time, the American constitution is neither: it's a document representing the will of the people, and as such can be altered by changes in this will. Judges have the power to invoke a law as unconstitutional and refuse to apply it: they thus have enormous political power, but this power is mitigated by the impossibility of attacking laws outside the courts.

Tocqueville distinguishes the American constitution from both the French and the British in order to argue that its intermediary position, as neither absolutely immutable nor easily modifiable, is part of what makes it more powerful than either European system.

Tocqueville thinks this practice contributes both to freedom and to order. Since the spaces where judges can act are limited, the power of changing laws is also limited, but the power of pronouncing a law as unconstitutional is a powerful barrier against the possible tyranny of political assemblies. The possibility of indicting public officials makes politicians far less likely to exceed their sphere of authority, but the difficulty of bringing someone to trial means that this possibility isn't abused.

Tocqueville's argument here is complex, relying on an examination of the limits and powers of changing laws. For Tocqueville, the key element here is the fact that while it's important that public officials can be prosecuted—since it makes them less likely to become tyrants—these checks and balances also prevent citizens from gaining too much power themselves.

CHAPTER 7. ASPECTS OF THE FEDERAL CONSTITUTION

Turning his attention to the 13 American colonies before the revolution, Tocqueville identifies two opposite tendencies: a tendency toward unity and a tendency toward independence. Each colony proclaimed its own sovereignty, such that there was no security against common dangers, or ability to pay the debt owed as a result of war. America had owed much of its war victory to its geographical position alone, but now it was forced to look inward and revise its first constitution in a convention led by the first President, George Washington.

In turning back to the early days of American independence, Tocqueville traces the country's fits and starts, first by looking at the initial document, the Articles of Confederation, which proved too weak. Tocqueville is eager to show how democracies can work in a number of different ways, as evidenced by the historical trajectory of even a single democratic nation.

In 1789, the new Federal government began and the American revolution officially ended (the same year as the revolution in France began). The difficult question of how to balance sovereignty and unity still had to be resolved: the Convention gave some powers to the federal government and left all else to the states, establishing a Federal court to maintain this balance. The careful division of powers led to both a system of federalism and, simultaneously, a highly centralized government. Yet while the powers of the president are great, given the isolation of the country, he has little chance to enact such powers.

Tocqueville continues to relate a general historical account of the establishment of the American constitution and separation of powers—an account that Tocqueville will draw on throughout the rest of his book to explain everything from manners to poetry in America. Tocqueville returns to the point about central power to argue both that America exhibits the dangers of centralization but also manages to mitigate them.

Tocqueville argues that the limited powers given to people in America also work to limit their desires—Americans being generally more content and tranquil than others. In a small country, he says, tyranny is more frightening because a tyrant's power spreads throughout the country, but Tocqueville also notes that small places are more likely to be free, if only because tyrannical individuals are less likely to be tempted by the prospect of ruling over an unimpressively-sized land.

Throughout this chapter, Tocqueville avoids sweeping generalizations, moving back and forth between point and counter-point in reflecting on the various ways that freedom and tyranny can play out depending on the size of a country. Here he takes a step back from the specifically American case in order to discuss the influence of a country's size on its style of government.

In turn, many small nations lose their freedom once they grow. Not a single *great* nation has maintained republican government for a long period of time. As states grow, ambitions grow as well, though unaccompanied by an increase in patriotism. Together with extreme inequality, large capital cities, and antagonism of interests, these dangers stem from great size in a democracy (while in monarchies, large numbers only increase their power). Vast empires, Tocqueville concludes, only work against freedom and well-being.

While Tocqueville's explicit object of study is America, he relies on a great deal of historical and political knowledge about forms of government stretching back to the Roman Empire. Indeed, Rome is a touchstone throughout the book, here becoming an example of the dangers of vast size to the maintenance of democratic rights.

Still, Tocqueville also acknowledges the advantages of size: individual greatness becomes more likely when there is greater glory to strive for, leading to more knowledge, ideas, and aptitude in war. Even if the world would be better off if only small nations existed, given the unavoidable existence of large nations, it's better to be large, if only so nations can defend themselves against other strong countries. Small nations always end up being yoked to large empires, whether by force or will.

Again, Tocqueville embraces complexity and nuance over sweeping generalization. Without contradicting himself, he carefully weighs the many different benefits and disadvantages (morally, physically, and politically) of large versus small size. Here he reveals his pragmatic emphasis, moving from an idealized view of the world to an acceptance of political affairs as they are.

Tocqueville returns to the advantage of America's federalist system, by which Congress regulates the national government and provincial legislatures manage local details of administration. Each small community has different needs, so the spirit of improvement is kept alive—unlike in South America, where large republics have prevented such improvement.

South America is used several times as a counter-example in Democracy in America. *As a landmass of similar size to North America, the political differences between South America and the United States encourage Tocqueville to find other sources of explanation than the geographical alone.*

Tocqueville notes that the national public spirit in America is really only an aggregate of patriotism applied to each province. Americans defend their nation because they want to defend their own state or county's prosperity. Still, while America is a great nation in size, its administration is more like that of a small nation, in which desires for fame and power are limited, and there are no massive capital cities or great inequalities of wealth. At the same time, objects and ideas circulate freely throughout the land.

Tocqueville returns to the power of provincial institutions and provincial spirit in America as he discusses the ways that the country has managed to secure a number of the advantages of a small nation while also retaining the benefits deriving from vastness of size.

Tocqueville characterizes war as the most important testing ground for a nation's power and spirit. Given that there is no centralized administration in America, and only an imperfectly organized central government with a tendency toward weakness, he asks why America is not harmed by a great war—and responds that its physical isolation means it has no wars to fear from Europe, while Canada and Mexico are not real threats.

Even as Tocqueville seeks to explain certain aspects of American power and stability as stemming from Americans' own qualities, he also pays careful attention to the workings of chance in matters such as geographic isolation—thereby acknowledging that America's success may not always be replicable by other nations.

In sum, Tocqueville admires the federalist system, but he doesn't imagine that it can be easily replicated anywhere other than in the US—European nations would become weak and susceptible to threats by highly centralized nations, while America luckily escapes such a menace.

Tocqueville concludes by insisting on the uniqueness of the American model: even as he wants to adopt certain lessons from its example, he recognizes that this is not entirely possible.

CHAPTER 8. POLITICAL PARTIES

Tocqueville explains that Americans elect their representatives directly every year: the people thus are constantly influencing daily affairs. Surrounding them, though, are political parties attempting to gain their support. In some large countries, factions arise composed of contradictory interests, in perpetual opposition. In America, though, there are no factions but parties—that is, groups of citizens who have different opinions regarding the same interest, which is how the country should be run.

Tocqueville has complicated, even ambivalent feelings about elections. He often praises the ways in which they invite people's direct involvement in a nation's affairs, but he has also shown himself to be wary of the capacity of ordinary people to have undue influence in government.


Early on, America did have two great parties: the Federalists, who wanted to limit the power of the people, and Republicans, who wanted to extend it infinitely. Republicans always held the majority, but most of America's great founders were Federalists—until Thomas Jefferson, a Republican, was elected President in 1802. From then on, the Republican party has come to attain near-absolute supremacy. Tocqueville thinks that the now-lost triumph of the Federalists was one of the greatest things to happen to early America, for it gave the young nation the stability to test out its doctrines in its early years.

Tocqueville once again gives readers a slice of American history in order to explain contemporary affairs. Here, he is explicitly partisan in this historical account. The Federalists are the party that is most similar to an aristocracy, which helps to explain why Tocqueville prefers them to the Republicans (even as he also is quick to note that it wouldn't be right or realistic to return Federalists to power against the will of the people).

Now, though, Tocqueville finds that America has no great parties: instead, since almost everyone is Republican and there is no religious animosity or hierarchical division, public opinion is divided into many shades of minute difference. Still, since people will persist in making parties anyway, new parties do rise up—parties whose controversies initially seem trifling and incomprehensible to a foreigner. Still, after some study, it becomes clear that all divisions turn on whether to extend or limit the authority of the people.

The erosion of significant differences and their replacement with "minute" distinctions of opinion will become one of the key motifs that Tocqueville explores in American society. Here he suggests that small differences don't destroy the existence of parties but rather affect the nature and extent of the arguments that people engage in.


When the Republicans (which Tocqueville also calls the "democratic party") gained supremacy, they siphoned power away from the wealthy classes, making wealth actually unhelpful in attaining power. The wealthy have submitted to this state of affairs and can even be heard praising republicanism—but it's clear that they still fear and hate the people.

It's important to remember that the Republicans and Federalists don't map neatly onto our modern-day political parties, even if the question of the extent of government authority continues to be a point of contention in politics.


CHAPTER 9. LIBERTY OF THE PRESS IN THE UNITED STATES

According to Tocqueville, political parties attempt to gain influence through newspapers and through public associations. The liberty of the press is one of the most significant aspects of American culture, and while Tocqueville isn't an unqualified fan of the freedom of the press, he approves of it because of the evils it prevents. Besides, there is no intermediary position between liberty and censorship: any attempt to establish one either leads either to complete servitude or complete independence.

Throughout his book, Tocqueville will continue to link civil and political associations to newspapers, even if it seems like these are separate categories. But his point is that both associations and the liberty of the press contribute to mitigating some of the dangers of equality of condition that Tocqueville explores in America.

Tocqueville notes that each newspaper exacts a small influence, in large part because Americans have so long been accustomed to liberty of the press. While the French prize newspapers as a space of debate, most of the space in American journals is devoted to advertisements. In addition, while the French press is highly centralized, making its influence potentially unlimited, American newspapers are many and local. Nearly anyone can start a paper, and almost every small town has one, each attacking or defending the government in a thousand different ways, which diffuses their oppositional force. While the position of journalist is a noble one in France, there are so many such positions in the US that the bar is much lower.

In distinguishing between American and French newspapers, Tocqueville exhibits a certain prejudice against the former. Even as he wants to praise (in a moderate way) the liberty of the press, he looks with some condescension at the advertisements in American newspapers and at what he considers to be the anti-intellectual thrust of journalism as a profession. While it's easy to consider his views as those of a snob, Tocqueville's intention is to nuance such characterizations.

Still, Tocqueville notes that the influence of the press as a *whole* is huge in America. It allows political life to disseminate throughout the whole country, it brings people together who would otherwise never speak, and in the few cases when many journals adopt the same opinion, their influence is immense.

Tocqueville distinguishes between the small influence of each individual newspaper and the large influence of the press in general—something he will argue is the case for citizens in a democracy as well.

CHAPTER 10. POLITICAL ASSOCIATIONS IN THE UNITED STATES

Tocqueville turns to political associations, an institution that Americans have embraced more than any other people has. The instinctive American suspicion of authority leads citizens to spontaneously join together in groups of any size to defend and promote ideas of public safety, morality, industry, and religion. While Tocqueville compares the right of association to the liberty of the press, he argues that the press has far more authority, since its members express opinions explicitly and exactly, united into one front. In addition, the power of meeting in person leads to the maintenance of bonds and opinions. Finally, such groups may finally decide to unite as a political party—becoming a kind of government within the government.

Having discussed both the limits and the powers of the liberty of the press, Tocqueville turns to the other element in the pair that he's already signaled. He thinks of political associations as joining people face-to-face in the way that newspapers unite those who share the same opinions and consider the same topics important. He also distinguishes between political associations and political parties, while still showing how one leads to another.

Tocqueville considers the liberty of the press as absolutely necessary in a democracy, but unlimited liberty of association is more dangerous, since it threatens the functioning of the government. That the existence of such a liberty has thus far not damaged America is due to Americans' longstanding familiarity with the principle, and the way in which it has actually come to work *against* the tyranny of the majority—since as soon as a party becomes dominant, it pervades all of society, and the opposite party's only recourse is to establish itself outside this dominance.

Tocqueville will not be altogether consistent on this point throughout Democracy in America. *While this is the most suspicion he'll express about unlimited liberty of association, already he wants to show how this potential threat is mitigated by the specific qualities of American political life precisely because of the other danger— that is, the danger of a tyranny of the majority.*

In an aristocracy, Tocqueville argues, the nobles and wealthy are natural associations that check power, while in a democracy it is necessary to construct such associations. People have a natural right to act in common with each other based on their beliefs; nonetheless, Tocqueville argues that in some nations, such a liberty can be taken to excess. Most Europeans, indeed, think of the right of association as a weapon of conflict. In America, however, it's thought of as a more benign means of peaceful debate and competition. This is because certain European parties are so different from the majority that they can never hope for majority support, but are strong enough to fight it nevertheless, while in America those whose opinions are opposed to the majority are powerless against it. Since differences in opinion are so small, this is not too dangerous in America. In Europe, meanwhile, the freedom of association can lead to a desire to attack the government.

Throughout the book, Tocqueville will continue to insist that even if he finds aristocratic societies to be superior to democratic ones in a number of ways, it's not realistic to return to the old aristocratic norm. Instead, one ideal aim would be to find artificial constructions that replicate aristocratic ways of acting and doing but in a new, democratic framework. Here, the example he gives is that of associations, which become a constructed equivalent of the "natural" associations present in an aristocracy. He also spends time lingering over the specific ways that the American system avoids the dangers of unchecked liberty of association, dangers that Europe must work to avoid.

Finally, America's right of universal suffrage means that the minority can never appeal to imaginary support, whereas in Europe, minorities often claim that they have more support than is apparent, since their support base may consist of all the people without a right to vote. Since European associations desire to fight rather than convince, they're often military in style, exerting tyrannical control over their members—quite unlike the case in America.

If everyone can vote, Tocqueville argues, those in power have a much clearer sense of their actual basis of support—whereas this basis of support remains a question mark in many European countries that limit suffrage. Again, Tocqueville points out certain elements of American democracy that are not replicable elsewhere.

CHAPTER 11. ADVANTAGES OF DEMOCRACY IN THE UNITED STATES

If democracies have an obvious defect, incomplete or imperfect laws, Tocqueville argues that it takes more time and care to study democracies' advantages. Democratic legislation tends to promote the welfare of the many, rather than the few—but that's the extent of its advantages. Aristocracies are much better at the science of making laws, while democracies are often inept. While Aristocracies have well-trained, clever officers, Democracies often struggle to place admirable people in power. Still, the lack of class interest in the U.S. often means that public officers are working for the benefit of all, not their friends.

Although Tocqueville still wants to carefully weigh the advantages and disadvantages of democracy, here he does tend toward the sweeping generalization. He also betrays his own class prejudice as an aristocrat who assumes that those of greater birth, wealth, and education are more intelligent than those who haven't been given such advantages.

Tocqueville identifies two forms of patriotism. One is the instinctive love for one's birthplace and ancient traditions tied to the land and property of one's ancestors, which can lead to pride and defense in times of need, but which dwindles in times of peace. Another more rational if less ardent form of patriotism comes from knowledge and attachment to laws, and grows through the gradual attainment and use of civil rights. While this process is still taking place, a period of crisis might shake such patriotism to the core, threatening to erode any kind of spirit and love for one's country. In order to prevent such a possibility, Tocqueville thinks, it's necessary to make people feel implicated in the governing process and to extend political rights so that, should a crisis arise, citizens are willing to defend their country. America's extension of political rights to nearly all has enacted such spirit and involvement. The eager patriotism of Americans is irritating, he acknowledges, but also admirable.

The first category of patriotism is, for Tocqueville, the kind of patriotism that an aristocracy develops. He thinks that democratic patriotism, the second category, is worthy of admiration and defense. However, his concern here is for the moments of democratic transition (a period that, he believes, Europe is undergoing as he writes), when nations find themselves between two forms of government and thus between two forms of attachment and patriotism. It's during these moments of transition that governments are the most vulnerable, leading Tocqueville to suggest the extension of political rights to all people as a way to counter such a danger (with America serving as the model).

Tocqueville praises the principle of rights, which he describes as the extension of virtue into the realm of politics. Democracy extends political rights to all citizens, and while it isn't always easy to teach people how to exercise them, it's worthwhile and important. Today, when religious belief and the divine notion of right is shaken, when morality is challenged, it's even more urgent to connect the idea of rights to private interests if nations have any chance of ruling without fear and tyranny. The early period of universal rights is the most dangerous, when people don't know how to use them. Learning liberty is difficult, unlike despotism.

It can be difficult to characterize Tocqueville as a political thinker based on the categories familiar to modern readers. It's important to remember that, while he remained skeptical about many aspects of democracy (above all its equality of condition), he was a firm believer in and supporter of what many today tend to consider the key aspect of a democracy—the extension of political rights to all, even if that extension is fraught with danger.

Tocqueville argues that the authority of the law is always strengthened when the law is formed in consultation with the people, as in America, where only slaves, servants, and "paupers" (those supported by **township** charity) don't have the right to vote. Americans thus don't fear the law as an enemy, as many Europeans do, although the wealthy have a greater anxiety with respect to it, just like the poor do in Europe.

Though Tocqueville characterizes America as unique in its universal suffrage, this passage reveals an important qualification of the right to vote. Indeed, the categories Tocqueville names are rather vast, and he doesn't even mention women. That said, American suffrage was far greater than that of many other nations at the time.

Tocqueville expresses amazement at the cacophony of political affairs that he's witnessed in the United States. On a single day there might be a meeting to decide on the building of a church, deliberation on a public road project, an assembly to debate a recent law, and so on. No people spends more time in the pursuit of happiness, he says. Even women often attend public meetings. Debating clubs take the place of theatrical shows, and sometimes Americans in private conversation grow enthusiastic and proclaim "Gentlemen" to their interlocutor, as if at a debate. Tocqueville isn't unreservedly enthusiastic about these tendencies—they often lead to inefficiency and disorder—but they involve ordinary people in governing to an admirable extent. Rather than giving people a skillful government, democracies thrive through their activity, energy, and force.

Tocqueville's remarks here are full of admiration mixed with skepticism and amusement. The comment about Americans' incessant pursuit of happiness, for instance, is tongue-in-cheek while also seeking to characterize a quality he sees as being common to many Americans. Even as he humorously recounts some of the excesses of Americans' involvement in political associations, he is quick to point out that such involvement seems like a key solution to the problem he posed earlier about the dangers of a transition to democracy in a place where people are not *so directly involved in government.*

If what one wants from society is the elevation of the mind, strong convictions, refined manners and arts, and honor, then a democracy is not the best option, Tocqueville argues. But for the promotion of well-being, clear understanding over genius, peace, and prosperity over brilliance, democracy *does* win out. Either way, since such a choice is no longer possible, he suggests we make the best of the circumstances.

Tocqueville concludes by pointing to a contrast between aristocratic and democratic tendencies in the sphere of lawmaking. This contrast will be returned to again and again throughout the book, as Tocqueville weighs the benefits of aristocratic "genius" against the greater well-being afforded to the many under democracy.

CHAPTER 12. UNLIMITED POWER OF THE MAJORITY IN THE UNITED STATES AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

Tocqueville defines democracies by having sovereignty of the majority, which in America happens through directly-elected, briefly-held legislative offices that counterbalance executive power. Custom has bolstered this through the assumption that a large number of men are more intelligent and wiser than a single individual (or prizing quantity over quality). The French under monarchy believed the king could do no wrong, while Americans think the same about the majority.

Tocqueville returns to the question of sovereignty, but here in order to linger over the specific consequences that ensue when people make decisions based on a numerical majority. While one might think that such sovereignty is what distinguishes a democracy for the better, Tocqueville characterizes it here as merely a new form of blind trust in a ruler.

While in an aristocracy, there is always a small minority with its own privileges and opinions, in America all small parties and interests hope to one day be in a majority—so the general principle and authority of the majority is never challenged. This is harmful, and dangerous, Tocqueville thinks. A collective majority is only a kind of individual whose opinions are opposed to that of another individual, the minority. Thinking about things this way makes it easier to see that the majority should not abuse its power against the minority, which it often does.

Tocqueville continues to elaborate his comparison of the majority to an individual ruler. If everyone in a democracy thinks that they may one day enjoy the rights and privileges of the majority, then they won't despise those who happen to occupy the majority position at that moment—whereas those who don't have power in an aristocracy despise those who do, since they can never hope to take their place.

Tocqueville argues that unlimited power is always dangerous for humans, whether it be in a king, an aristocracy, or the "people." Only God is omnipotent. Tyranny is possible in any form of government, but in America, the evil of democratic institutions arises from their strength, not their weakness. If a member of the minority is wronged in America, there's no one to whom he can appeal for help. Public opinion is bound to the majority in the executive, legislative, and judicial spheres. If only, he thinks, the branches could represent the majority without being enslaved to its desires. As it is, there is no sure guard against tyranny.

Although Tocqueville spends a great deal of time warning against majority rule—a key aspect of a democracy—his point here is that his concern is actually in the interest *of liberty, not against it. Tyranny is tyranny regardless of whether it happens through the rule of one or the rule of many, he argues. The stronger a democracy becomes, the more powerful the majority becomes as well—and thus the more it approximates the force of a despot.*

Tocqueville distinguishes between tyranny, which may well be enacted within the law, and arbitrary power, which may be enacted for the public good and thus not be tyrannical. The power of the majority in the US favors both tyranny *and* the arbitrary power of the lawmaker. Magistrates' privileges are rarely defined. They are more independent than in France, and as a result, America remains potentially susceptible to challenges to its liberties.

Even though lawmakers are democratically elected, Tocqueville warns that that's not enough if they're given nearly unlimited power once in office. If tyranny is facilitated by majority-based election in America, arbitrary power is facilitated by the lack of checks and balances in the legislative branch.

The tyranny of the majority is potentially more insidious than that of a despot, Tocqueville thinks, since it is based on thought, not force. As soon as the majority decides on something, discussion ceases: while a king may have physical power, the majority also exerts moral will. He characterizes America as a country with less independence of mind and freedom of discussion than anywhere else. The majority raises barriers around liberty of opinion. If someone oversteps these bounds, he won't be executed, but his career will be over, his life a continual misery. In a democracy, the body is left untouched, but the soul is "enslaved." He who thinks differently is condemned as a stranger, shunned, an object of scorn.

In a powerful series of arguments, Tocqueville drives home his point about the danger of majority rule. Physical force and violent submission are not the only means of denying people's natural rights and freedom, since creating a society in which everyone is pressured and incentivized to think the same way also destroys these rights. The vision that Tocqueville is painting here sounds like a modern-day dystopia, and eerily foreshadows the rise of 20th-century totalitarian regimes.

American writers are continually applauding and praising each other, never to learn the truth about their vices or follies. The lack of freedom of opinion is why America has had no great writers or great politicians, Tocqueville thinks (at least after the Revolution, when crisis prompted the rise of the great Founding Fathers). Now, only rarely has he met someone who deplores the defects of American customs and laws, but that person speaks to an empty room.

Although Tocqueville's blanket statement about the lack of any good writers or politicians in America betrays the narrowness of his perspective, the principle behind his argument is that placing prohibitions on people's opinions is destructive of a healthy public discourse.

Tocqueville argues that governments fall because of impotence or tyranny: people usually think that democracies are susceptible to the former, but he claims that the latter is a greater danger in America. The omnipotence of the majority may one day destroy the free institutions of the country—but because of despotism, not weakness. Tocqueville quotes James Madison's writings on the need for society to protect justice by protecting the minority, and Jefferson's statement on the need to counter the tyranny of the legislature.

Tocqueville continues to stress his viewpoint that, if there's a threat to American democracy, it's not that its institutions are too weak but rather that its democratic methods are too strong. James Madison, one of the Federalists that Tocqueville so admired, serves as a forceful piece of concluding evidence on behalf of protecting the minority as a truer form of liberty.

CHAPTER 13. CAUSES WHICH MITIGATE THE TYRANNY OF THE MAJORITY IN THE UNITED STATES

Tocqueville addresses the ways tyranny of the majority is mitigated in America, first through the federalist model. Even as the predominant party insists on its own opinion, it can't carry that opinion through to action throughout the country, since it comes up against the local powers of **townships** and municipal bodies. If this were not the case, Tocqueville is certain the result would be despotism.

Although he concluded his last chapter with an ominous depiction of the potential for tyranny in America, Tocqueville now turns to the ways America has found to lessen such a possibility. The threat isn't destroyed, but there are ways, Tocqueville thinks, to combat it.

Tocqueville argues that the power of the legal profession also counteracts the potential for tyranny. Lawyers have become a kind of superior intellectual class, arbitrating among citizens, checking the power of the majority, and often embodying an appreciation for order—in a way, they are the democratic version of an aristocratic class. If lawyers are aristocratic in habit and taste, they find affinities in the people through birth and interests.

Tocqueville seems to admire any group of people or institution that reminds him of the aristocracies that are being dismantled, in Europe and in America. His fondness for order, balance, and hierarchies of intellect becomes evident here in his admiring portrayal of American lawyers.

Tocqueville identifies the courts as the organs by which the legal profession mitigates excesses of democracy. But the legal spirit extends beyond the courts, as lawyers fill legislative assemblies and administrative posts. Almost every political question eventually becomes a question of law in the United States, so the customs and even language of the legal profession extend into society, including into the lowest classes, which adopt legal logic in their own thinking.

Tocqueville's tone here is not always clear. In a way, he seems to admire the way in which legal logic spreads into all aspects of American society, but he also always remains slightly suspicious of any viewpoint that becomes so pervasive, something that he thinks is a natural quality of a democracy.

Tocqueville turns to the jury as a political institution, not just a legal one. While juries may be composed of an aristocratic class, they are also republican in that they place society's direction in the hands of its citizens. The existence of juries gives the people a sense of respect for legal judgment and individual rights but also responsibilities. As a result, all citizens feel implicated in the workings of society, including in the affairs of others, which works against selfishness. A jury is a kind of public school that gives people a political education. While it might seem to check the power of the judge, it actually strengthens the power of the judiciary institution as a whole, and instructs people on how to rule properly.

By distinguishing the political from the "merely" legal, Tocqueville clarifies how important he considers the many institutions outside the official executive, legislative, and judicial structures to be in constructing a political life among citizens. Here, then, he separates the role of the jury as a legal institution from the ways in which the existence of the institution comes to influence citizens' engagement with their community.

CHAPTER 14. CAUSES WHICH TEND TO MAINTAIN DEMOCRACY

Although Tocqueville has described the institutions that maintain freedom in America, he also suggests that the democracy is successfully maintained by chance features, such as geographical isolation, the lack of financial crises, and the lack of a great capital city that would extend its influence everywhere. Subjecting the provinces to the rule of a capital city would mean placing the nation's fate in the hands of an independent group with no regard for the welfare of the rest of the country. This is how ancient republics fell.

Tocqueville balances his arguments about the historical aspects of America that have given rise to its current-day characteristics with an acknowledgment of the role chance has played in America's development—his point is that while some aspects of America are replicable (or to be avoided), it would be impossible to entirely transplant it into Europe.

Tocqueville reflects that the first Puritan emigrants left their stamp on the American national character for the better, in their embrace of equality and freedom. The vast geography of the nation has also proved beneficial to prosperity and thus to stability. The lush natural habitat of the continent has enabled regular waves of settlers to set out alone for the center of the country and, eventually, create a life and fortune for themselves there. Tocqueville recalls seeing the vestiges of log-houses in the American wilderness while traveling, signs of Americans' constant movement. Once he was traveling in the woods of New York State when he encountered a small island in a lake, with a column of smoke the only sign of human presence. After investigating, he found the ruins of a **log cabin**, which nature was already re-conquering, and he noted that America already had ruins.

Here Tocqueville raises a number of possible reasons for the peculiarly American embrace of democracy, for its equality of condition, and for the energy and activity that he observes there. As usual, he acknowledges the unique natural and geographical conditions of America, but also is eager to insist against geographical determinism (that is, the idea that geography equals fate). Instead he wants to show how Americans have historically dealt with their physical circumstances. Tocqueville's comment about ruins creates a striking comparison to Europe, which is full of ruins, but which has a longer history of white people building structures on its land.

While restlessness and desire for wealth are considered dangerous in Europe, Tocqueville notes that these qualities have ensured peace and prosperity in America. Still, he maintains that laws are more important than physical circumstances, and manners more important than either, in the development of the American national character. Comparing North American geography to South American geography, Tocqueville remarks on the difficulty of implementing democratic institutions in South America. It's thus necessary to study what the Americans have chosen to do with their given circumstances in order to understand what Europe might learn from democratization.

Again, Tocqueville shows both the influence of climate and geography on history, but also the ways in which people respond to the circumstances that they've been dealt. As a writer who framed his book not just as a historical study but as a document he hoped would propel people to look toward the future and engage with political challenges, it's important for him to emphasize they ways in which Americans have been able to steer the fate of their own country.

Tocqueville notes that Europe is lost if democracy is only possible in vast, uncultivated geographical spaces. It's useless to will a non-democratic system back into being in Europe because democratization is an inexorable force. The loss of religious authority and of the moral guidance of kings, as well as a series of long revolutions, have all eaten away at Europeans' tolerance for monarchies. The only possible paths are democracy or total despotism—including the despotism that comes from the tyranny of the majority. Involving people in the functioning of their own government will be difficult, but it's the only true way forward. If complete equality is inevitable, he argues that it's better to be levelled by democratic institutions than by a tyrant.

Even as Tocqueville studies certain aspects of American democracy that he thinks Europe can adopt or modify for its own use (or else avoid entirely), he is also eager to point out that different nations must navigate their own physical, geographical, and historical circumstances in attempting to transition from aristocracy to democracy, and in attempting to maintain or promote freedom along the way. America, for Europe, is not a clear-cut model to follow or avoid but rather a valuable case study that should be examined as a productive point of comparison with Europe's own future.

Tocqueville states that it hasn't been his purpose to propose that all democratic communities adopt the laws and customs of the Americans. Instead, he has hoped to show that laws and manners allow a democratic people to retain their freedom. Still, the country is so unique that there's no point in attempting to replicate its features wholesale. Still, unless democratic institutions are gradually introduced into France, he fears that the country will soon fall under the unlimited authority of a despot.

Tocqueville continues to insist on the subtleties of his argument and his objectives in writing Democracy in America. *He is promoting neither complete replication of American norms nor dismissal of the American example, but instead wants his readers to consider America as a case study of a nation that has carried democratic conditions farther than any other.*

CHAPTER 15. FUTURE PROSPECTS OF THE UNITED STATES

As Tocqueville concludes Part One, he compares himself to a traveler who, having left a vast city, climbs a hill in order to be able to see the whole (even if he can no longer make out the details). While America now occupies one twentieth of the inhabitable globe, he thinks it may well expand further. At one time, France had the chance to counterbalance English influence in the New World, but that possibility no longer exists. Instead the Spaniards are the only race that can potentially challenge the Anglo-Americans—but Anglophones continue to spread everywhere on the continent.

Such literary imagery reflects Tocqueville's shift in focus at the end of Part I of his book. Tocqueville has been thinking of himself as a scientist, studying specific specimens in order to make an argument about a particular "species," and here he draws back from close analysis in order to make a number of broader examples about the place of America on a more global scale.

Tocqueville can't imagine that the impulse of this "race" to extend over all reaches of the American continent can be stopped: nothing can stand in the way of the twin loves of prosperity and enterprise that characterize Americans. At some point, the population will be comparable to that of Europe, and will still be tied together by custom, law, and character. Today, intellectual communication has increased such that there is less difference between Europeans and Americans than there was between towns in the Middle Ages separated only by a river. Still, Tocqueville struggles to grasp the notion of a country filled with millions of people all sharing the same family, language, habits, and opinions.

Although Tocqueville will continue to insist on the importance of human agency in directing vast historical affairs, he also is pragmatic and realistic about what cannot be changed. His unwillingness to turn back the clock and try to recreate an aristocratic society is what distinguishes him from a number of his contemporaries who might share similar views. As an amateur historian and political scientist, he now finds it difficult to turn his focus from the past to what it might mean for the future.

Tocqueville characterizes Russia and America as the world's two great nations, which seem to have arisen almost unnoticed by everyone else. While Russians struggle against other men, Americans struggle against nature; their weapons are, respectively, the sword and ploughshare. The countries have started from quite different origins, yet will undoubtedly each influence half the globe.

Tocqueville's mention of Russia here is eerily prescient, in many ways foretelling the Cold War between the Soviet Union and the United States that would influence political, economic, and social affairs worldwide for much of the twentieth century.

CHAPTER 16. PHILOSOPHICAL METHOD OF THE AMERICANS

Tocqueville claims that Americans pay less attention to philosophy than any other members of the civilized world. However, they have an instinctual philosophy, that is, "to evade the bondage of system and habit, of family maxims, class opinions, and, in some degree, of national prejudices," preferring innovation to tradition, privileging the individual self as a source of information and meaning, and to prefer ends to means. Americans don't read Descartes, but they apply him better than anyone, because their social condition naturally disposes them to, in the sense that their system of equality has made individual authority triumph.

In Part Two, Tocqueville will focus less on the specific characteristics of American politics and more on the influence political conditions have on American manners and customs. Descartes' famous philosophical model (a man sitting alone in his room, narrowing all possibilities of truth back to "I think, therefore I am") is described as a type of individualism peculiarly suited to Americans.

American independence and self-sufficiency has led to a confidence that everything in the world can be explained. Americans have a distaste for the supernatural or miraculous, and a preference for pragmatism. Still, religion gave birth to American society, and Christianity has maintained a hold on its intellectual life—but this means that theological questions are mostly accepted without question or challenge. In addition, Americans have enjoyed democracy since their arrival to the New World, rather than experiencing a democratic revolution—the consequences of which tend to include uncertainty, doubts, and envy and mistrust among citizens.

These passages can be read as a kind of laundry list of American characteristics, but they are united by what Tocqueville sees as the impact of independence on philosophy, religion, and interpersonal interaction. Tocqueville will later return more closely to what seems here like a significant paradox: the fact that Americans disdain the supernatural and yet have embraced religion and strict morals more than many Europeans.

For society to exist at all, citizens need to join together under certain dominant ideas—and for this it's necessary to consent to certain pre-conceived beliefs. Dogmatic beliefs are thus necessary, to a certain extent, for society to function at all, since many people will have to put their trust in some facts and opinions that they haven't had time to examine for themselves. Some principle of authority, therefore, is always necessary—even in a democracy—and the question thus becomes where, in a democracy, such authority resides.

Tocqueville often takes a circuitous route, floating a number of philosophical hypotheses about society in general in order to end up back at his specific analysis of American affairs. The pragmatism that, according to Tocqueville, characterizes Americans could well be applied to his own frank acknowledgement of the need for dogmatic beliefs in a society.

Tocqueville states that republicans seek the sources of truth either in themselves or in people like themselves. Unlike in aristocracies, republicans are reluctant to place trust in a superior person or class of people. At the same time, they are overly ready to embrace the opinion of the majority. In the United States, the majority is what supplies many ready-made opinions, allowing individuals relief from forming them themselves. Religion itself is one of these received truths—and indeed, public opinion, too, is a kind of religion in America.

Rather than arguing that democracies do away with the dogmatism of aristocracies, Tocqueville argues that dogmatic opinions simply take a different form, located not in a class that's considered superior but in another kind of class, the numerical majority, which relieves people of the need for independent thought.

Tocqueville predicts that the principle of equality leads in two directions: to new, independent thoughts, but also to the lack of any thought at all. Tocqueville warns that a society in which the majority holds dominion over each individual is no less tyrannical than one in which one person dominates over all.

Tocqueville returns to the arguments about tyranny of the majority that he lingered over throughout Part I, insisting that democracies are not exempt from despotism but may even give it a more frightening form.

CHAPTER 17. INFLUENCE OF DEMOCRACY ON RELIGION

Tocqueville considers religion to be one of the few spheres in which dogma is to be preferred. The first principles of God, the soul, and duties to one's fellow men need to be fixed before any other kind of action is possible. Unfortunately, this is also the realm where it's most difficult for each person to settle his or her opinions alone. Philosophers themselves, of course, have long struggled in this realm, even as fixed ideas notions about God and human nature are essential for ordinary people in daily life. The only resolution Tocqueville sees is to locate authority elsewhere. Any religion that is clear, precise, and intelligible to most people is useful in restraining selfishness and leading to personal happiness, especially in free countries, where so much else is in doubt. Tocqueville doubts whether total religious independence can ever coexist with total political freedom.

Just as Tocqueville had acknowledged the need for some kind of dogma in regulating social affairs and relationships among people, here he argues that without a certain level of dogma in religion people are left unmoored and confused. Tocqueville isn't too concerned with whether Christianity or other religions are true—only with the effects that religious belief has on the workings of society. His embrace of religion as a popular authority is thus far more politically than theologically motivated.

Tocqueville adds that the usefulness of religion is especially apparent in nations with equality of condition. Equality can be dangerous in its tendency to isolate people from each other by promoting selfishness and materialism. Religion counteracts this, encouraging desire for spiritual rather than material goods and promoting a sense of duty to one's fellow man. But the human mind is reluctant to accept dogmatic ideas, and religion should therefore confine itself to its own sphere rather than stretch toward the sphere of politics.

Tocqueville will later return to the idea that equality leads people to behave selfishly or materialistically. Here, he once again emphasizes the importance of religion—not necessarily for the sake of morality or a person's salvation, but rather because it helps to create a more stable society.

Tocqueville acknowledges that, since religions claim universal and eternal truths, they cannot simply adapt themselves to each time and place, but he notes that religions can change their rituals and the ways they perform faith without changing their creed. For instance, today religions may well seek to regulate and restrain the excessive desire for material well-being, but they shouldn't try to stamp it out entirely, which would be futile.

Tocqueville's insistence on the importance of religious authority is joined to a belief that religion should limit itself to its own sphere, rather than seeking to extend into the political and social realms—in nations like France, of course, Christianity had long played a central role in political affairs.

Tocqueville describes American religion as a separate sphere, where the priest is content to remain. Christianity in America is simple and unadorned; priests acknowledge the importance of earthly affairs even while considering them secondary to spiritual affairs. American clergymen respect the supremacy of the majority: while they don't participate in party politics, they adopt the opinions of the majority. They attempt to check people's excesses without countering them with hostility. As a result, religion in America manages to avoid a conflict with the American spirit of independence.

After detailing what he finds to be the ideal characteristics of religion in a democratic or democratizing nation, Tocqueville turns to the American example, which embodies the suggestions he's laid out. The partial, modest, and humble influence that American priests attempt to assert over their congregations is, Tocqueville thinks, exactly the kind of check on democratic excesses that's needed.

Indeed, Roman Catholicism is spreading quicker in America than anywhere else. Tocqueville explains this through another aspect of equality, the desire for unity and simplicity in power. Americans, though not very inclined to dogmatic belief, would rather—once they've adopted a religion—launch into it wholeheartedly. They admire the discipline and unity of the Roman Catholic church when compared to Protestantism. He predicts that the future will see many people lapsing from all faith, but many others joining the ranks of Catholics.

While there are many Protestant denominations, Roman Catholicism is far more unitary as a church, which for Tocqueville is explained by another aspect of the American personality—the preference fro simplicity over complexity in intellectual as well as political affairs. These various characteristics are what allow Tocqueville to predict what might otherwise seem a paradoxical future trend.

CHAPTER 18. EQUALITY SUGGESTS TO THE AMERICANS THE IDEA OF THE INDEFINITE PERFECTIBILITY OF MAN

Tocqueville discusses another consequence of equality, the belief in human perfectibility. When classes and opportunities are fixed by rank and birth, people remain content with the limits given to them; but when all are considered as equal, the possibility of improvement of each person toward greatness becomes nearly unlimited. Though some rise and some fall in an unending process, each individual never stops yearning toward un-reached goals. Tocqueville cites an American sailor who, responding to his question about why ships are built to last such a short time, says that the art of navigation is progressing so rapidly that new technologies will quickly render the ships useless anyway. Tocqueville concludes that while aristocracies narrow perfectibility too much, democracies tend to extend it too far.

While the American ideal is one of perfectibility of all people (that everyone can, in theory, achieve their dream), Tocqueville is quick to point out that in reality, people are constantly rising and falling in terms of material status. His anecdote about the sailor underlines his measured admiration (which is yoked to skepticism) about what this ideal means in practice. Perhaps the constant striving causes Americans to neglect the present reality of what they're doing.

CHAPTER 19. THE EXAMPLE OF THE AMERICANS DOES NOT PROVE THAT A DEMOCRATIC PEOPLE CAN HAVE NO APTITUDE AND NO TASTE FOR SCIENCE, LITERATURE, OR ART

Tocqueville claims that the United States has made little progress in sciences, poetry, or the arts. While some Europeans have concluded that this is the natural result of equality, Tocqueville wants to isolate the particular reasons for this weakness. Puritanism, first of all, has always looked down on the fine arts and literature. In addition, the possibilities for devoting one's time and energies to making a fortune, rather than focusing on the imagination and the intellect, are immense. Nearly everyone in America is involved in industry and commerce, he claims.

Tocqueville may question the specific reasons given for the weakness of the arts in America, but he leaves unchallenged the notion that Americans have indeed been less successful in the arts. In the moment in which Tocqueville was writing, there were absolutely successful and innovative American artists, though, historically speaking, the country is younger than those in Europe, so the sum total of American artists would naturally be smaller. Tocqueville, however, prefers to find a source of his arguments in the American character.

Tocqueville argues that, if one considers America as an offshoot of England, Americans are that portion of Englishmen destined to explore the woods and wilderness, while back home people devote time to thought and imagination. All these causes have dovetailed to make Americans uniquely focused on practical objects—something that will not necessarily be the case in other democracies.

Although early Americans traced their origins to a number of countries, Tocqueville focuses on England as the most significant place of ancestry. However, his point is also to stress that places like France need not fear that democratization will suppress the arts there.

Tocqueville imagines a democratic society without classes or ranks that would also lack knowledge and freedom (if a despot, for instance, were to keep his subjects equally ignorant): such a people would probably never develop a taste for science, literature, or art, though they wouldn't develop fortunes either. Equality would soon be established, but it would be an equality of ignorance and servitude. Tocqueville is appalled at such an idea—but he notes that there is another possibility, that an already enlightened people can subsequently work toward freedom and equality.

Tocqueville continues to distinguish freedom from equality, and in this thought experiment he imagines a world in which everyone is equal, but precisely because of that, no one is free to think for himself or to cultivate intellectual affairs. The solution, he thinks, is to make sure that the arts are cultivated first, so that the benefits of democracy only accrue afterward.

Tocqueville notes that all democratic societies will always contain wealthy people, even if that group isn't a coherent class as they are in aristocracies. Those groups will have the leisure and curiosity to devote themselves to spiritual and intellectual affairs. Once hereditary wealth and rank have been dissolved, disparity of wealth will result from differences in intellectual capacity, so people will realize that it is worthwhile to develop one's intellect.

Although Tocqueville has just warned of the dangers of equality on a literary and intellectual plane, here he proposes another thought experiment, suggesting that once intelligence is the key to wealth, more people might want to prize intelligence and education (if only to grow wealthy themselves).

In democracies, Tocqueville notes, classes communicate and mingle with each other: the humblest classes look with interest at the more intellectual communities and may well strive to emulate them. Those who cultivate science and the arts will then expand. Tocqueville thus argues that democratic societies are not necessarily indifferent to intellectual affairs; it's just that they cultivate them in their own way.

Although Tocqueville acknowledges that disparities in wealth will always exist, he argues that democracies are more permeable, their different ranks less distinct—such that the lower classes can learn from and strive to become the upper classes. He continues to insist that the relationship between democracy and the arts depends on circumstance.

CHAPTER 20. WHY THE AMERICANS ARE MORE ADDICTED TO PRACTICAL THAN TO THEORETICAL SCIENCE

In a democratic society, Tocqueville argues, the general attitude of suspicion towards authority leads to a lack of trust in scientific doctrines or lofty ideas. In America, theoretical and abstract knowledge is almost entirely ignored. For that kind of thinking, meditation is necessary—a practice antithetical to a democracy. Everyone in a democracy is in constant activity, constant striving: there's no space for calm, detached contemplation. The fact that the French made advances in the sciences just around the time that they were destroying the old feudal order is not attributable to democracy, but rather to the productivity that accompanies a revolution, he says: it's a special case.

Tocqueville continues to isolate another aspect of the American personality: pragmatism, or preference for practical knowledge with concrete, identifiable results over abstract pursuits that one might call "useless." Ironically, pragmatism would also become the name for a powerful and quite complex philosophical movement in America at the end of the nineteenth century; for Tocqueville, though, pragmatism is only comprehensible as a lack of philosophy.

Tocqueville characterizes democratic societies as having little patience for abstract thought: they are prone to fleeting passions and the accidents of the moment. There is certainly a kind of mercantile, pragmatic interest in intellectual life, but only for the material benefits that may ensue from it. Tocqueville claims that such mercenary interests would never have led to the genius of a Pascal, for instance. Indeed, aristocracies tend to embrace lofty ideals and encourage the general elevation of intellectual life. Sometimes this preference for theory even leads to the contempt of practice—the opposite mode of the democratic pursuit of physical gratification as quickly and easily as possible.

Tocqueville displays his prejudices here in favor of both his own aristocratic-intellectual class and the French literary and intellectual tradition (as emblematized by Pascal). Unable to find an American thinker similar to Pascal, Tocqueville concludes that there is no "lofty" thinking happening at all in the country, and then he seeks to explain that lack through certain aspects of American history and politics.

Tocqueville uses as an example the fact that Americans have never discovered general laws of mechanics and yet have invented a world-changing steam engine. Thus, admirable discoveries won't necessarily be absent from democracies—indeed, while people may not be encouraged to study science for its own sake, more and more people will devote themselves to scientific pursuit in service of practical goals. Therefore, industrial science will only be improved by democratization, even if theoretical concerns will fall by the wayside.

Throughout his analysis, Tocqueville often elaborates this idea—that Americans make up for deficiency in quality through superiority in quantity. In order to explain how Americans have, indeed, come to excel in innovation and invention, he has to argue that it's only inventions with a direct material benefit that are privileged in America.

CHAPTER 21. IN WHAT SPIRIT THE AMERICANS CULTIVATE THE ARTS

In a democracy, Tocqueville claims, the useful will always be preferred to the beautiful. When the cultivation of arts is a restricted privilege, an artisan's skill and high quality is prized; but when everyone can enter any profession, every artisan simply strives to make the most money at the least cost and the consumer doesn't care that objects are well-made and long-lasting. Democracies always include many people whose desires grow larger than their present fortunes, and who are therefore willing to settle for shoddier commodities.

As he applies his overriding argument about American pragmatism to the industrial arts, Tocqueville attempts to explain the nature of both production and consumption. That is, he believes that the American tendency to prize utility over beauty helps to explain why artisans are less skilled in a democracy, but also why consumers are eager to buy up those commodities anyway.

Tocqueville acknowledges that even in democracies, some will pay for the time and trouble of well-wrought objects; but inferior quality is the rule rather than the exception. The human vanity so characteristic of a democracy leads artisans to feign luxury, manufacturing fake diamonds so well that they can't be told apart from real ones, for instance.

This is one of the first instances in which Tocqueville mentions vanity as a natural characteristic of a democratic society, though he will later return to this notion. Tocqueville's aristocratic sensitivity to vulgarity is especially evident here.

The same is true, according to Tocqueville, of the fine arts: in a democracy, there are numerically more artists, but the merit of each work shrinks. While aristocracies produce a few great paintings, democracies produce a huge number of mediocre ones. He recalls having seen small white marble palaces along the East River in New York, but upon inspecting them more closely, he found that they were actually made of whitewashed brick and painted wood.

The anecdote about the "marble" palaces comes to be emblematic of how Tocqueville understands the arts in a democracy—things may look beautiful on the outside, but that's only a façade. Throughout these chapters, he moves between general characterization of democracies and his specific observations in America.

American artists prefer the Real to the Ideal, Tocqueville notes: they are accurate, but don't yearn for anything beyond "mere" accuracy, detail, and imitation, as the greatest Renaissance artists did.

Contrasting American to Renaissance artists, Tocqueville indulges in the nostalgia for a lost time that he warns against elsewhere.

CHAPTER 22. LITERARY CHARACTERISTICS OF DEMOCRATIC TIMES

An American bookstore, Tocqueville begins, is packed with basic textbooks written in Europe, religious works and charitable reports, and finally political pamphlets, which are often preferred to books. He argues that there are a small number of admirable American authors that Europeans should pay attention to. In addition, most important English books are printed in the United States, and Tocqueville recalls having first read Shakespeare's *Henry V* in a log-house in the American woods. American writers tend to transport the literary trends and ideas from England into their own writing, rather than representing their land as it actually is (and are therefore not very popular in America).

Tocqueville continues his analysis of the arts in America by discussing its literature. He seems to want to judge literary trends as fairly as possible—hence his acknowledgment that there are indeed a few admirable authors in America—though he makes a slightly different argument than before. Unlike his observations about art, he does not argue that American literature is destined to be mediocre, but rather that its authors prefer to reproduce and imitate European (especially English) trends rather than forging their own style and content.

Tocqueville concludes that America does not yet have its own literature: the only "American" authors, he argues, are journalists. This is the result of something more specific than democracy, he thinks. He characterizes the literature in an aristocracy as delicate and refined because it comes from the few men who write simply out of a love for art and tradition. In an aristocracy, style is as important as ideas, writers develop a dignified tone and polished language, and they increasingly withdraw from the outside world, writing for their small circle alone. The danger of literature in an aristocracy is thus its total irrelevance and impotence.

As he does elsewhere, Tocqueville strives to distinguish what is a necessary feature of a democracy from what is a characteristic specific to American democracy. In order to do so, he takes a step back, here, and tries to understand the nature of aristocratic literature as a contrast. Tocqueville attempts to be fair and balanced by showing the disadvantages of literary culture in an aristocracy.

In a democracy of mingled ranks and divided power, those who want to write come from may different backgrounds and educations, leaving them bereft of a common tradition. Rules of convention are thus absent, while familiarity with literary history is lower than in an aristocracy. Democracies will prefer books that are cheap, quickly read, and easy to understand—strong emotions and excitingly painted scenes. Style becomes bold but loose, wit will be preferred to reflection, and short works to lengthy. There may be some exceptions to this rule, but they will be rare.

Now, Tocqueville returns to analyzing literature in a democracy: even though he has claimed that American literary culture is not shaped by democracy alone, here he examines all the intermediary consequences of equality of condition in terms of the kinds of books people will prefer to read and the literary style most amenable to this kind of culture.

Tocqueville notes that at some moments, like France in the 18th century, aristocratic and democratic literary tendencies vie for success—such eras are brief but always brilliant. He doesn't want to argue that literature can always be *explained* by society and politics: there are many kinds of relationships between a society's condition and its authors' genius.

Rather than privileging either aristocratic or democratic literary style and culture, Tocqueville concludes by arguing that a mixture is to be preferred, even if it's near-impossible to create.

CHAPTER 23. OF SOME SOURCES OF POETRY AMONGST DEMOCRATIC NATIONS

If poetry, as Tocqueville argues, searches after the "ideal" rather than the truth, then democracies—which prefer the real to the ideal—must lack the gift and taste for poetry that characterizes aristocracies. While aristocracies encourage people to contemplate the past, democracy prefers the present; while aristocracies allow great characters to rise above the crowd as proper subjects of poetry, democratic equality levels all subjects to mediocrity.

Tocqueville has already characterized American philosophy as preferring the real over the ideal, and here he extends that characterization to poetry. Toqueville believes that the leveling effect that he has identified in democracies necessarily influences the poetry (or lack thereof) that such societies will develop.


Tocqueville nonetheless identifies a new subject for poetry in an age of democratization: inanimate nature, that is, descriptive poetry. This, he thinks, is not a characteristic of a democratic age, but rather of an age in transition to democracy: eventually, democracies will inevitably turn back toward writing about man, since democratic peoples are only really concerned with describing and observing themselves. While poets in a democracy can't distinguish any one exceptional person for a subject, they will come to write about all people with the same imagery—this will become their ideal.

Tocqueville's analysis of the influence of democracy on literary and artistic affairs is particularly striking, even eccentric: he goes so far as to say that politics affects not just poetry in general but even the specific sub-genre of poetry that is preferred. The argumentation may seem questionable at times, and it leads him to surprising—if confusing—conclusions.


Tocqueville thinks that America has no poets, but does have poetic ideas. Americans don't pay close attention to the wonders of the nature around them, but they admire their own march across the wilderness and their ability to subdue nature as they conquer the continent. The life of an American is unpoetic, but the common striving of all Americans toward improvement lends them a kind of epic force: they come to consider their own striving as a poetic ideal. Aristocratic poets may succeed in portraying incidents in a nation's history, but democratic ones embrace the destiny of all humankind. Democratic poets shouldn't try to write about gods on earth, but instead should connect their nation's great events with Providence and God's will. Because their language, dress, and daily life is not poetic, poets must search beneath these qualities and study the hidden depths of human nature, finding poetry within. Since the world has started to democratize, Tocqueville notes, authors like Goethe and Chateaubriand who sought to record the actions of a great individual have begun to disappear in favor of writers who throw light on qualities of the human heart: this is poetry's future.

Although Tocqueville has identified descriptive poetry as the proper sphere for societies transitioning to democracy, he considers America to be a society that has reached a greater level of democratization than any other. As a result, he argues, Americans have turned away from the description of nature towards the depiction of themselves as a common, magnificent, force of history (even if their daily life is "unpoetic"). It's sometimes difficult to grasp the nuances of Tocqueville's argument in these passages because he almost never gives examples of American poets; it's not always even clear if he's talking about specific poets or if he's focusing instead on what is "poetic" about American society—and thus what will come to be poetic about a newly democratic world.

CHAPTER 24. WHY AMERICAN WRITERS AND ORATORS OFTEN USE AN INFLATED STYLE

Tocqueville asks why Americans, who so prefer plain language, sometimes use pompous, inflated diction on occasion. He answers that while democratic citizens are usually concerned with a small, puny object (themselves), if they try to gaze upon society at large their ideas grow vague and confused. Authors tend to inflate their imaginations without being concerned for accuracy or proportion. He fears that poetry in democracies will continue to lose itself in the clouds and get bogged down with incoherent images and descriptions.

This chapter is essentially an extension of the previous one; Tocqueville's arguments about democratic poets' tendency to embrace the destiny of all humankind are directly related to his characterization of democratic language as pompous and inflated. Again, without specific examples it's not always clear how to independently judge Tocqueville's considerations.

CHAPTER 25. SOME CHARACTERISTICS OF HISTORIANS IN DEMOCRATIC TIMES

Tocqueville contrasts historians in aristocratic ages, who tend to explain all events by the actions and characters of great individuals, to historians in democratic age, who explain every small event by vast general causes. In the former case, this is because aristocracies do contain a few prominent actors who exert an undue influence; whereas this is not the case in a democracy. Of course, the reality is somewhere in the middle, Tocqueville notes: it's just that the proportion of each cause varies depending on whether an age is democratic or aristocratic.

Turning from literature to history, Tocqueville is similarly creative in his arguments linking political conditions to ways of viewing history (even as, here and elsewhere, he continues to insist that there is no necessary and one-to-one relationship between politics and culture). As usual, he attempts to be balanced and fair in weighing aristocracy and democracy against each other.

If ancient historians were unable to perceive general theories of history, today there's a greater danger: democratic historians fail to identify the influence of certain great individuals, leading people to assume that change is involuntary and irresistible, and thus that they're powerless to change anything themselves. This sense of historical necessity, or determinism, prevents any sense of individual responsibility for historical affairs—a great danger in an age when, Tocqueville argues, it's important to empower the people, rather than presuming that they're impotent.

Tocqueville makes a fascinating argument here about the ways in which a specific theory of history can actually affect the way people understand their own agency, responsibility, and place within history. Tocqueville's own political aims—his general wish for improvement and political education—are particularly evident here.

CHAPTER 26. WHY DEMOCRATIC NATIONS SHOW A MORE ARDENT AND ENDURING LOVE OF EQUALITY THAN OF LIBERTY

Tocqueville returns to the idea of equality, which he argues is gaining ground rapidly in France. Ideally, everyone will eventually take part in governing and, because they accept the equal rights of all, will be free as well as equal. But the coexistence of freedom and equality isn't inevitable: there may be equality in civil society—equality in pursuing pleasures, professions, and so on—without it existing in politics. While absolute equality can't exist without absolute freedom, there are all kinds of possible combinations of partially fulfilled freedom and equality.

Once again, Tocqueville seeks to distinguish equality from freedom as he suggests that there are any number of ways by which the two can interact. As usual, Tocqueville prefers freedom to equality: here he cautions that equality can simply mean the equal opportunity to grow rich, to choose one's profession, or to engage in different forms of leisure—none of which he thinks is important enough to take the place of freedom.

Tocqueville argues that freedom can arise (and has arisen) in non-democratic contexts: equality of condition, not freedom, is what characterizes democracy. Equality is far more difficult to abolish than political liberty is; therefore people cling to it not only because they prize it, but also because they assume it will last forever. While the advantages of freedom are only apparent in time, its dangers and difficulties are immediately apparent—the opposite is true of equality. The passion for equality can even at times grow violent: people "pounce" on it as a kind of precious treasure.

Tocqueville is clarifying that freedom is not specific to democracy—freedom has existed in many different times and places. What is specific to democracy is equality, which Americans tend to cherish more, he argues, because it's what sets their society apart and makes it seem valuable. Tocqueville adds to his analysis about the threats to liberty by showing how much more fragile liberty is than equality.

Tocqueville turns to the specific case of France, where absolute monarchies actually did create equality among their subjects, far before a taste for freedom began to develop. Of course, then, the French prefer equality—together with its customs, opinions, and laws—to the novelty of freedom. While he does think that democracies have a natural taste for freedom, their love of equality is a more ardent, constant passion: if they can't obtain equality in freedom, they'll prefer equality in slavery—they'll choose poverty and servitude before aristocracy.

Although Tocqueville seems to contradict what he just said about equality being fixed to the historical conditions of democracy (since, here, he argues that equality was present in French monarchy too), perhaps he's simply acknowledging that equality too has a history, one that makes it both more anchored in and more dangerous for societies today.

CHAPTER 27. OF INDIVIDUALISM IN DEMOCRATIC COUNTRIES

Tocqueville characterizes democratic societies as defined by "individualism," which he calls a novel expression. "Égoïsme" (or selfishness, the exaggerated love of self) is ancient, but individualism, a sentiment that causes each person in a community to separate himself off from his fellow men, is not a question of depraved morals but rather of mistaken intellectual judgment. Still, individualism threatens to destroy all other virtues and eventually end as pure selfishness.

Although Tocqueville didn't coin the term "individualism," it was far rarer at the time he was writing than it is today. He distinguishes the eternal, human quality of selfishness from what he considers to be the historically contingent, culturally specific quality of individualism—even if one can yield to the other.

Aristocracies, according to Tocqueville, encourage people to band together with their fellow citizens and impose duties on themselves as a result of their fixed position in society and in their family. But in democracies, new connections and divisions are constantly arising, which leads people to become strangers to each other. As more people gain greater wealth, they no longer have to rely on other people; they expect nothing from anyone else and imagine that their destiny lies in their actions alone.

Even as Tocqueville has explored how democracies invite people to join together into a powerful mass (the majority), he doesn't think that this majority is one of true moral or even social communion. Indeed, aristocracies, for him, are much better at creating real bonds between people, while democratic communities are simply individuals added together.

CHAPTER 28. THAT THE AMERICANS COMBAT THE EFFECTS OF INDIVIDUALISM BY FREE INSTITUTIONS

Tocqueville argues that despotism and equality actually promote similar vices: equality puts people side by side while eroding bonds between them, while despotism similarly applauds a lack of fellow-feeling by raising barriers between people. Democracies are thus peculiarly susceptible to despotism. This is what makes it even more essential for people in a democracy to participate actively and constantly in their own political affairs. When they are involved in governing themselves, they gain a sense of the social bonds necessary for peace and prosperity and accept that they can't do without their fellow citizens. Election fraud and malicious political intrigue aside, in the long run political participation ends up counteracting the dangers of individualism.

Earlier, Tocqueville has described despotism as one potential consequence of equality; here he considers despotism and equality side by side in order to repeat how one can lead to another. Once again, Tocqueville begins with what he considers to be an advantage of aristocracy—its cultivation of social bonds—and asks how a democracy might replicate this. Even while acknowledging a few drawbacks to intense involvement in political affairs, Tocqueville finds such involvement to be crucial in a democracy.

Tocqueville argues that Americans' free institutions have worked against individualism. It's difficult to draw people out of their small circles to make them care about a larger destiny, but by implicating them in local affairs, such as the building of a road, it becomes easier to see that there is a connection between private affairs and public life. Tocqueville thinks it would be unfair to characterize American patriotism as insincere or only a result of private interest: he's witnessed real sacrifices made for public good. Political freedom, he concludes, is the greatest remedy for the potential evils of equality.

Even as Tocqueville isolates certain disadvantages inherent to democracy in general, part of what makes America such a useful model for him is that it seems to have found ways to combat and mitigate the most pernicious aspects of democratic equality. Here, Tocqueville returns to his earlier analysis of political decentralization in order to draw out the relationship between politics and aspects of the American personality.

CHAPTER 29. OF THE USE WHICH THE AMERICANS MAKE OF PUBLIC ASSOCIATIONS IN CIVIL

LIFE

Tocqueville notes that he's already discussed political associations, but will now turn to civic associations that aren't pure political. Americans love to create any kind of association—religious, moral, commercial, and so on. Any opinion or undertaking that arises will inevitably have its own society attached to it. Tocqueville admires this skill in promoting voluntary associations for the smallest purpose. He asks whether there may be a necessary connection between the principle of association and that of equality.

While Tocqueville tends to repeat himself—he has already mentioned the distinction to be made between political and civil associations, and Americans' embrace of both—such repetition only serves to underline Tocqueville's argument about the way American political conditions pervade and influence all aspects of society.

Tocqueville notes that aristocracies always include a small number of powerful people who are able to undertake significant pursuits alone—and who don't need to join with others in order to do so. But in democracies, individual citizens are weak when acting alone: they need to join together in pursuit of a common aim to have any hope of succeeding. The difficulty is that their number needs to be great in order to have any power at all. While other Frenchmen might respond that the government should just be more active, Tocqueville argues that this is impracticable outside of purely political affairs.

Tocqueville has already devoted a number of chapters to describing the power of American individualism; here, though, his emphasis is on the fact that individuals in a democracy are actually weak in the sense of their incapacity to exert significant influence in society. As usual, Tocqueville distinguishes himself from a number of his contemporaries in terms of his preference for decentralization.

Tocqueville recalls hearing that 100,000 Americans had banded together to abstain from drinking alcohol—he thought it was a joke at first, and didn't see why they felt the need to make a society out of this private choice. But he argues that the French need to attend to these moral and intellectual associations precisely because they seem so foreign—American progress is largely due to their prevalence.

Ultimately, the association that Tocqueville initially considered to be a joke would grow so powerful that alcohol would in fact be banned in the United States, though not until 1920 (the era of Prohibition). Such associations are a model that, he thinks, France should consider replicating.

CHAPTER 30. OF THE RELATION BETWEEN PUBLIC ASSOCIATIONS AND THE NEWSPAPERS

Tocqueville makes an explicit connection between political associations and newspapers, which join people together even when they may be far away. As individualism and equality increase, newspapers become more and more necessary for maintaining civilization, since they suggest a common purpose and narrative to many people in different places. They unite people's interests and desires in a way that supplements smaller assemblies. Associations and newspapers thus mutually benefit and advance each other.

In Part I, Tocqueville had already explicitly signaled this link between newspapers and associations. While much of this section is a re-articulation of such an argument, the emphasis is different: if in the first part of his book he was concerned with newspapers and associations as political organs, here he will take a broader view, examining their impact on civil life and society as a whole.

Tocqueville adds that as power grows increasingly decentralized, the number of newspapers will increase. This is due to the fact that when people exercise local powers, they become a kind of association themselves and require a newspaper to instruct them on the state of their local affairs. American laws, which require all citizens to actively contribute to daily life in each **township**, similarly require newspapers so that people can act in an informed way. In turn, since newspapers can only stay afloat when they publish principles or ideas shared among many people, they represent a kind of association already—they come to address and influence their readers as a whole. Newspapers' power will therefore increase as equality increases.

Earlier, Tocqueville had characterized newspapers and associations as extensions of the legislative branch of politics. Here, he compares them to each other: associations allow people to join together and share opinions like newspapers do, while newspapers are a kind of imaginative, abstract association. The fact that Tocqueville repeats this point at a number of points and in a number of different ways throughout the book only highlights the importance he places in these civic elements.

CHAPTER 31. RELATION OF CIVIL TO POLITICAL ASSOCIATIONS

Tocqueville hypothesizes that there's a link in democratic countries between the preponderance of political associations and civil associations: he suggests that this is because when people have a commercial or moral interest in common and join together for a common aim, they learn how to direct complex affairs in a way that's replicable in political life (and vice versa). Political associations may seem less risky than, for instance, a manufacturing association, which requires people to invest their own money; but political groups teach people to surrender their will to that of others. In turn, to destroy the right of political association, such that people may only meet for certain purposes, makes it less likely that people will be eager to meet at all. He argues that a nation that prohibits political associations will always have only few and weak civil associations.

Because Tocqueville is rarely eager to give specific, concrete examples, it's not always obvious what exactly distinguishes political associations from civil associations, especially because he describes newspapers, for instance, as both. Still, while he characterizes civil associations as having an aim other than that of participating in parties and elections, he also emphasizes that there is more continuity than difference between the political and civil spheres, in that both contribute to something he prizes—the involvement of citizens in their society.

Tocqueville reiterates his claim, in the first part of his book, that unrestrained liberty of political association is dangerous: here he qualifies that by saying that complete political freedom should be the goal, but until people learn how to manage such freedom, political associations may well be limited, even if this comes at a price.

Although Tocqueville identifies himself as a partisan of liberty (often over and above equality), he also continues to warn that freedom is difficult and even dangerous, and therefore needs to be learned or given out gradually.

CHAPTER 32. OF THE TASTE FOR PHYSICAL WELL-BEING IN AMERICA

Tocqueville observes Americans' embrace of physical well-being, which he contrasts with aristocratic societies. There, the rich take the comforts of life for granted and thus can turn to loftier, more intellectual concerns, while the poor are just as accustomed to their lack of comforts. But in a democracy, without ranks or privileges, enough people gain sufficient fortune to have a taste for physical pleasures, but without being able to satisfy them completely. They are thus always striving to pursue physical pleasures.

As usual, Tocqueville uses the status quo in an aristocracy as a jumping-off point in order to examine what is unique about the influence of politics on society in a democracy. In doing so, Tocqueville sometimes risks painting aristocratic society as overly static, as a world in which the poor, for instance, were content to remain as they were.

Tocqueville relates that he's never met a poor person who did not look with hope and envy on the pleasures enjoyed by the rich. But the wealthy in America lack that contempt of physical gratification that he characterizes as aristocratic in nature—probably because most wealthy Americans were once poor and remember deprivation all too well.

Tocqueville thinks the poor are only upwardly striving in a democracy: he assumes they lacked such desires in aristocratic society (though this assumption has much to do with the reality that the poor were less likely to escape their condition in an aristocracy).

While Tocqueville warns that aristocrats may, in ages of decadence and opulence, be tempted away from important affairs and become corrupted by physical pleasures, the taste for physical pleasure isn't so dangerous in a democracy. Its range is confined, and it doesn't challenge public order or regular morals. It's not corruption that is to be feared by the pursuit of pleasure in the age of democracy, but rather "enervation" of the soul.

Even as Tocqueville describes the exaggerated striving after physical pleasures that he finds characteristic of a democracy—a quality similar to democratic agitation and activity in a number of spheres—he concludes by arguing why these tastes are ultimately not as dangerous as one might think.

CHAPTER 33. WHAT CAUSES ALMOST ALL AMERICANS TO FOLLOW INDUSTRIAL CALLINGS

Tocqueville asks why so many Americans prefer industrial and commercial professions to agricultural ones. The cultivation of the land leads only slowly to wealth, he notes; ambitious men in democracies prefer risky but lucrative opportunities. Rich men, unable to secure vast power in political affairs, embark on commercial enterprises in order to spread their influence there. And in general, rich and poor are encouraged both by profit and through the excitement natural to a democracy.

Tocqueville lists a number of the factors he thinks might influence Americans' preference for industry and commerce over agriculture. That he proposes many different reasons reminds us that Tocqueville's arguments are often structured as a set of hypotheses rather than self-evident facts.

Tocqueville remarks that only half a century after freeing itself from colonial dependence, America has made more rapid progress in trade and manufacturing than anywhere else. Still, he's most astonished not by the massive undertakings, but by the vast quantity of small enterprises. People even make agriculture itself a kind of trade, arriving en masse in the South each year to cultivate cotton and sugar, only to return a few years later, enriched. As a result, unfortunately, commercial panics and shocks grow increasingly likely—an inevitable by-product of democracy.

Although Tocqueville has argued that agriculture is not as prevalent as other ways of making a living in America, he accounts for its significance in the South by arguing that American cultivation of the land is more commercial than agricultural. But his warning about the possibility of shocks and depressions would prove prescient, as many would ensue over the course of the century.

CHAPTER 34. HOW AN ARISTOCRACY MAY BE CREATED BY MANUFACTURES

Tocqueville suggests that manufacturing may actually, in turn, end up bringing people back to aristocracy. As a workman applies himself exclusively to a single task, such as making heads for pins, he becomes ever more skilled at that task but ever less industrious or intelligent in anything else. His place in society is fixed and he becomes more dependent and narrow-minded; but at the same time, his employer grows wealthy off his limited expertise and better able to survey the whole, rather than the detail. The differences between worker and master continue to increase: each grows accustomed to either obeying or commanding—a commercial form of aristocracy.

Tocqueville's analysis and predictions are complex; they are some of his most prescient and astute observations. Just as he has been warning of the tyranny that might result not from a single despot but from majority power, here he suggests that the extension of manufacturing, which one might think preferable to a feudal regime, may end up only increasing the gap between rich and poor and re-creating aristocratic lack of freedom.

Tocqueville adds that as equality of condition increases, the demand for manufactured commodities rises too; as masses grow more democratic, then, the manufacturing class in particular grows more aristocratic. However, this aristocracy will be new and unique. It will be an exception to the general state of democracy; while the class of the poor is fixed, the rich either lose their fortunes or abandon business once they've made a fortune—so the wealthy never create a definite class. There's also no bond between them and the poor, since their position is relative rather than caste- or territory-based (as in the past). The manufacturing aristocracy arising now, Tocqueville warns, is one of the harshest that's ever existed: while it's confined and thus less dangerous, the "friends of democracy" should keep their eyes on it as a potential threat.

Continuing his analysis, Tocqueville turns from production to consumption, arguing that the increasing demand for cheap commodities—and the increased purchasing power of the members of the rising middle class—will feed the power and wealth of the manufacturing class even more. Even as he identifies the ways this class resembles an earlier aristocracy, he's also quick to point out the peculiar nature this new class will take on in a democracy. Tocqueville's warning about the power of wealthy businessmen would also prove strikingly prescient for our own times.

CHAPTER 35. HOW DEMOCRACY RENDERS THE HABITUAL INTERCOURSE OF THE AMERICANS SIMPLE AND EASY

Tocqueville seeks to explain why Americans have such easy, casual manners with each other. In an aristocracy of birth, he notes, all know their social position to an exact degree: if people of different positions happen to meet, they can speak unconstrainedly, each knowing where they stand. But in a "moneyed" aristocracy, each person fears losing his privileges, leading to envy, hostility, and defensiveness—this accounts for why Englishmen of different ranks, if they meet abroad, treat each other with suspicion. In America, in turn, with no aristocracy of either birth or wealth, people converse freely with no concern about threats to their position. When they meet abroad, the simple fact of being American makes them friendly—while for Englishmen they need to be of the same rank.

In order to identify why Americans seem casual in their manners, Tocqueville characterizes societies based on three different types: an aristocracy of birth like France before the French Revolution, an aristocracy in which privileges can be bought, like England, and a democracy like America. The last category, he thinks, avoids both the clear-cut distinctions between ranks of the first (meaning that people of different ranks simply never interact) and the insecurity of people in the second category, that of the moneyed aristocracy.

CHAPTER 36. WHY THE AMERICANS SHOW SO LITTLE SENSITIVENESS IN THEIR OWN COUNTRY, AND ARE SO SENSITIVE IN EUROPE

Tocqueville contrasts aristocratic etiquette, which creates rules of politeness to which everyone must assent, to democratic communities, where constant intermingling means that no one can agree on the rules of good manners. Therefore, Americans pay little attention to proper forms of etiquette, and are not as sensitive as, say, the French, who are quick to perceive any possible insult stemming from difference in rank. Tocqueville recounts how difficult it was for him in America to make someone see that he didn't want to spend any more time with him: the only way to get rid of someone is to make a real enemy of him.

Here Tocqueville returns to a bipartite distinction between aristocracy and democracy, using France as an example of the former (even though part of his point is that his own country is moving in the direction of American customs and manners). Tocqueville's anecdote takes its place among a number of the humorous observations he makes at the expense of Americans, whom he sometimes disparages even while also admiring them.

Tocqueville asks why Americans immediately become so sensitive when they travel to Europe. He notes that democracies lead to an inherent sense of pride in one's country and oneself. Upon arriving in Europe, Americans are hurt and annoyed to see that Europeans are not as obsessed by America, that wealth and birth still matter there, and that it's difficult to know how to act in such a different society. They grow afraid of not attaining proper respect: they scrutinize Europeans' actions and behavior toward themselves.

Even though Tocqueville has just characterized Americans as being far less sensitive and prone to insults than Europeans, he has to make an exception for the circumstances in which Americans are transplanted into a new society, one in which the rules, manners, and customs still retain the imprint of aristocratic norms.

At the same time, despite Americans' pride in their equality of condition, Tocqueville says that there's barely a single American who doesn't vaunt his kinship to the original Pilgrims or to England's noble families. They flaunt their wealth and servants, a characteristic that can be explained by their insecurity when encountering European aristocracies.

Tocqueville makes fun of Americans' pride and vanity as he observes them, no longer in their "natural habitat," but in a context of Tocqueville's own country of birth, where Europeans can feel less of a threat from Americans.

CHAPTER 37. INFLUENCE OF DEMOCRACY ON WAGES

Tocqueville notes that as democracies continue to shrink social differences, workers can increasingly imagine themselves into the place of their employers, and they are increasingly successful in agitating for higher wages as a result. Wages and equality of social conditions rise as a result of one another, he argues. However, he finds an unfortunate exception in the manufacturing aristocracy that's beginning to spring up, which is increasingly succeeding in keeping wages artificially low by keeping workers uneducated and limited to their single task, and by limiting competition. Manufacturing is thus the one industry where wages are ceasing to rise, creating a horrifying state of dependence—an exception to the general rule.

Turning to wages, Tocqueville seems to be in support of higher wages for workers, which will help shrink the gap between rich and poor so inherent in an aristocratic society. He returns to his discussion of wealth in manufacturing in order to examine another ominous and undesirable aspect of this new "democratic aristocracy": the ways in which it keeps the poor firmly in their class and unable to enjoy the upward mobility that's supposed to be one of the great advantages of democracy.

CHAPTER 38. INFLUENCE OF DEMOCRACY ON THE FAMILY

Tocqueville turns to the institution of the family, where, he argues, traditional parental authority and filial obedience have been eroded. Independence, an assumed right in America, comes to affect the relationship between father and son, as well. Aristocratic nations only recognize the father in a family: he retains a political as well as moral right and becomes a kind of ruler. But a father in a democracy is only one more member of a community, neither superior nor inferior to another.

Initially, as he describes how family structures have changed between aristocratic and democratic societies, Tocqueville seems suspicious or at least wary of the dismantling of parental authority, especially given his preference for certain other forms of aristocratic society that are now being lost.

Tocqueville adds that the division of land prompted by democracy is also significant: when a father only owns a small property, he occupies the same space as his son, sharing the same occupations, habits, and necessities, and leading to a kind of familiar intimacy that erodes authority and respect.

Again, the language of loss and erosion seems to suggest that Tocqueville looks with some wariness on the conditions of family life in a democracy.

Tocqueville argues that at least individually, men gain by the erosion of parental authority: family relations become more intimate and affectionate, and the father becomes a confidant and advisor rather than master. Fathers and sons address each other familiarly and warmly rather than with ceremonious stiffness as in Europe.

Surprisingly, given the tone that's preceded these sections, Tocqueville now proposes that the new arrangements and norms of family life in a democracy are actually to be preferred to their equivalents in Europe.

In turn, the eldest son—rather than looking down on his brothers as in Europe, since he will inherit all the property and wealth—looks out for his brothers, who seek to support him in turn. Democracy may divide a father's inheritance, but it unites the sons together by free sympathy. Such charms are readily apparent to aristocrats, even, Tocqueville says, and yet social conditions and such manners are indissolubly linked. Democracy loosens social ties but productively tightens natural ones, he concludes.

Tocqueville makes sure, as he concludes this chapter, to emphasize that while Europeans might look at America as a productive model for their own processes of democratization, they can't merely cherry-pick the aspects of American society that they like the best if they're not willing to engage with other aspects of democracy.

CHAPTER 39. YOUNG WOMEN IN A DEMOCRACY

Tocqueville argues for the political importance of the condition of women, given that their realm is that of morals, which are essential to a free community. Protestantism promotes women's freedom far more than Catholicism, he says, and in America these doctrines, mixed with political liberty, promote women's freedom and independence.

Here and throughout the chapter, Tocqueville's arguments about the place of women are both remarkably ahead of his time, and still quite foreign to our own world: for instance, he never questions that the woman's role is a "moral" one.

Tocqueville observes that American girls speak, act, and think for themselves from a young age. They encounter the world's vices and dangers frankly and openly, but are able to face them with confidence in her own strength. They aren't childishly timid or innocent like European young women. Tocqueville was surprised and almost frightened by the confident, bold demeanor of young women in America: they are mistresses of their own actions and pleasures.

Throughout this chapter, Tocqueville will argue that the very nature of women in America is different than in Europe; implicit in this distinction is an argument that it's education and environment, rather than inherent qualities of birth, that affect how women act.

Tocqueville contrasts the French model—limiting the education and experiences of girls until the moment when they are abandoned to society as adults—to the American model, which assumes that it's better to teach women the art of checking the passions of the heart that are so ubiquitous in a democracy (rather than pretending they don't exist). Americans instruct women in the exercise of reason, revealing the world's corruptions so that she can defend herself.

Again, Tocqueville emphasizes the importance of education in shaping both the place of women and their very nature in America as opposed to in France. As a proponent of democracy and political education for all, Tocqueville admires the extension of such advanced pedagogical practices to women.

Tocqueville acknowledges the dangers of such an education—its capacity to create cold, virtuous women rather than affectionate, agreeable wives—but he thinks a democratic education is worth the dangers.

Even as Tocqueville nods to the sexist expectations of his contemporaries, he continues to embrace women's education and independence.

Tocqueville adds, though, that the Puritanical streak and commercial spirit of America require a women's sacrifice of pleasure in favor of duty far more than in Europe, keeping women circumscribed within domestic affairs. Their education and instruction, however, encourage them to accept their duties without a struggle. The American woman freely enters into the bonds of marriage, which happens relatively later in America, once her understanding is mature. The same education has taught women to accept their husbands' risks and vagaries of fortune with grace and energy. They often accompany their husbands in their treks to the West, and remain unbroken by the harshness of life there.

Even as Tocqueville points to women's relative independence in America, he also argues that precisely because they have been educated and encouraged to think for themselves from a young age, they can better embrace the submission to a husband that—and Tocqueville never questions this *standard—constitutes a natural division of roles and duties in a marriage. Still, the freedom to choose one's own husband, which Tocqueville praises, was far from a given in Europe at the time.*


CHAPTER 40. HOW EQUALITY OF CONDITION CONTRIBUTES TO MAINTAIN GOOD MORALS IN AMERICA

Tocqueville argues that the condition of society is far more significant than climate in the development of morals and manners. American morals are far stricter than in Europe, he notes, which can be directly traced to equality of condition. Aristocracies distinguish men and women so much that they can never be united with each other: as a result, people carry on relationships covertly. But in America, no girl thinks she can't marry the man she loves because of rank, making infidelity and secrecy much less common.

Even though Tocqueville has, at a number of points, raised the idea that America's geography and climate have influenced its way of life, he wants to insist on the primacy of social rather than physical factors. By doing so, he can argue for the utility of studying America in order to learn lessons and models in Europe.


Because women are free to marry whomever they choose, and have been educated to choose well, public opinion is strict regarding their faults or mistakes. Aristocracies use marriage to unite property rather than individuals, often when the husband and wife are barely out of childhood. But when men choose a wife freely, it's far easier to stay faithful, and far less likely that dramatic elopements or affairs will occur.

Here Tocqueville studies "morals" in a specific sense, that is, sexual fidelity versus infidelity in a marriage. He explains that the relatively independent status of women in America, as well as the lack of aristocratic requirements of birth and property, only aid the development of proper morals.

Tocqueville notes that in democracies, almost all men are engaged in public life, while women are confined to the home and domestic economy: the separation of spheres thus prevents men and women from mingling in dangerous ways in society. The tumultuous state of activity in a democracy distracts men from pursuing passions of love; the embrace of manufacturing and commercial assumptions make men more practical, less inclined to romantic reverie.

Although Tocqueville's promotion of women's independence is notably open-minded for his time, some of his arguments remain anchored in the common sense of the nineteenth century. He assumes, for instance, that there should be "separate spheres" dividing women and men.

Tocqueville notes that such trends are not yet present in Europe, where it seems like democratization has actually been accompanied by laxer morality. But we shouldn't be surprised: it takes some time for equality of condition to affect morality and virtue, and indeed nothing is more corrupt than an aristocracy that still has wealth, though no power (as in France). Gradually, though, what is true in America will, he thinks, become applicable to Europe as well.

While the separation of spheres seems to a modern reader a way to deprive women of involvement in public life, Tocqueville hails it as an improvement both for women's condition in society and for morals in general. His argument is based on an assumption that men and women's "natural" differences should be maintained.

CHAPTER 41. HOW THE AMERICANS UNDERSTAND THE EQUALITY OF THE SEXES

Tocqueville argues that democracies will eventually make women and men (like master and servant or father and son) equals of each other. Some Europeans, he notes, imagine equality between the sexes as a society in which each sex has the same functions, duties, and rights—but Tocqueville thinks this would degrade both sexes through disorder and confusion.

Tocqueville proposes a society in which women and men are "separate but equal," to use a term from the later Jim Crow era of racial segregation in the United States; it never seems to occur to him that separation itself is unequal.

In America, Tocqueville counters, people have accepted the natural differences between men and women, and instead have chosen to encourage each sex to engage in its respective tasks with as much freedom as possible. Indeed, American equality has consisted in stricter separation of spheres than elsewhere. Women never manage a business or engage in politics, but are also never forced to labor in the fields. They are confined to domestic economy, but never have to go beyond it. Though women are independent and knowledgeable, they retain delicate appearance and manners. Americans have also accepted the need for the husband to direct his wife, just as political democracy seeks to regulate, not subvert, power. American women are proud of this voluntary surrender of their own will, he notes.

Even as Tocqueville points to what he sees as the greater independence and freedom of women in America—a condition that he praises and admires—he sees such a situation as resting on what we, today, would probably think of as profound inequality, that is, the separation of men and women into different spheres. To what extent, then, were women in nineteenth-century America really as free and independent as Tocqueville claims they were? Or was such separation of spheres less pervasive than he argues?

Tocqueville contrasts America to the situation in Europe, where men often fall under the tyranny of women, who are in turn considered seductive but depraved. Virtuous women, then, take pride in being the opposite: feeble and timid. In America, men simply treat women with respect and assume they are virtuous—even allowing young unmarried women to travel alone, for instance. Rape is one of the only capital offenses in America, where a woman's honor is prized above all else—whereas the French difficulty of convicting rapists stems from the contempt of decency and of women, he thinks.

Precisely because the stereotype of a typical woman in Europe involves her being overly forward, Tocqueville argues, virtuous women don't have the same freedom as American women to be independent and speak their mind. For him, the strict punishment of rape in America is not just positive because it shows women are listened to, but also because it reflects Americans' championing of their "honor."

Tocqueville concludes that while Americans keep the duties and rights of men and women separate, they show equal respect for both sexes. Though women in America are confined to domestic dependence, he's never seen women occupying a loftier position, and he thinks that American prosperity and strength is largely due to its women.

Repeating himself on the existence of separate spheres for the sexes in America, Tocqueville concludes what seems from a contemporary perspective a paradoxical emphasis both on women's dependence and their freedom.

CHAPTER 42. HOW THE PRINCIPLE OF EQUALITY NATURALLY DIVIDES THE AMERICANS INTO A MULTITUDE OF SMALL PRIVATE CIRCLES

Tocqueville claims it would be a mistake to think that democracies end up compelling everyone to live in the same way: differences in education, fortune, and taste will always escape the power of equality of condition. Indeed, Americans prefer to divide up into many small, separate circles, whereas in aristocratic nations the different classes are vast, though they never mingle. Democracies will always thus include many small, private associations, none of which can be compared to the aristocratic "class."

Tocqueville's main point here is that America's equality of condition actually ends up promoting the creation of many small, minor groups and associations. It's in an aristocracy that people are more likely to experience a similar way of life with many other people (that is, the members of one's class).


CHAPTER 43. SOME REFLECTIONS ON AMERICAN MANNERS

Tocqueville characterizes manners as simultaneously natural and acquired, based on character but also convention. True dignity in manners, he thinks, is available to anyone regardless of class, because it simply consists in accepting one's proper station—but in a democracy, where all ranks are in flux, manners are often undignified and uncertain.

Tocqueville's definition of manners might seem idiosyncratic to a modern reader: while he's talking about agreed-upon customs regarding social behavior, he also assumes a link between manners and satisfaction with the status quo.

Still, once equality of condition is long established, manners will differ only in small degrees, due to homogeneous social conditions. Only at close quarters can one differentiate the manners of Americans from each other. Tocqueville acknowledges that bad manners are among what's worst in a democracy. The only advantage is that manners never reach the exaggerated refinement of aristocracies, while also avoiding the lower classes' coarse, crude manners. Even as other aspects of aristocratic conditions persist after a democratic revolution, manners are quickly forgotten: thus democratic societies soon are unable to even comprehend aristocratic manners. This is to be regretted, given that while manners are not the same thing as virtue, they often increase and embellish virtue.

Tocqueville tends to characterize democracies as "middling" or "leveling" in a number of different domains: here, the mediocrity of Americans' manners is both a consequence of their equality of condition to be lamented (he thinks) and something that nonetheless allows them to avoid the pitfalls of both high and low society. At the same time, Tocqueville has a greater affinity with and sympathy toward aristocratic manners, even if he acknowledges that behaving in a proper way is not the same thing as behaving ethically.

CHAPTER 44. WHY THE NATIONAL VANITY OF THE AMERICANS IS MORE RESTLESS AND CAPTIOUS THAN THAT OF THE ENGLISH

Vanity is, Tocqueville argues, remarkably pervasive among Americans, who are eager to insist that their country is the greatest in the world. Englishmen, in contrast, enjoy their countries' advantages with calm, untroubled by either praise or critique of foreigners, whereas Americans are always in search of praise. Aristocratic countries also have a natural, untroubled pride and sense of superiority.

Tocqueville has already discussed Americans' vanity in other respects, particularly regarding their attitude and behavior while abroad, but here he specifies the difference between what he sees as insecure, over-the-top democratic vanity and serene aristocratic pride.

In America, where there are only slight differences in social conditions, small differentiations take on great importance; and given the ease with which wealth is gained and lost, people take great pleasure in vaunting wealth while they have it. Equality and precariousness thus together feed America's great vanity. The only comparable affair in an aristocracy is the situation at a court, where people jealously seek the king's praise.

The comparison that Tocqueville makes to life at court is another instance of his attempt to find point of comparison or similarity between democracies and aristocracies, even as he distinguishes between even the kind of pride prevalent in each society.

CHAPTER 45. HOW THE ASPECT OF SOCIETY IN THE UNITED STATES IS AT ONCE EXCITED AND MONOTONOUS

Tocqueville argues that although democracies are in a ceaseless state of fluctuation, the spectacle of such change eventually becomes monotonous and tiresome. In aristocracies, in turn, social conditions are static, but people's passions, habits, and tastes are quite different. In democracies, people's passions are mostly limited to or based on their love of wealth, and the means by which they seek wealth have a kind of family likeness as well.

Paradoxically, Tocqueville argues that change and flux themselves can become boring and changeless, especially because the motivations for upward mobility are limited. As in other instances, Tocqueville tends to overstate his sense of Americans' love of wealth above all else.


In fact, Tocqueville argues, the entire world is gradually becoming characterized by the same ways of acting and thinking. As people lose the opinions and feelings of a class or local tradition, they become more alike, even if they don't actively imitate each other. Tocqueville compares this process to travelers scattered throughout a forest, all converging on a single point.

Despite his sweeping generalizations, here Tocqueville makes what sounds like an argument for globalization, over a century before people would begin to talk about the "flattening" of the world as a result of political and economic conditions.

CHAPTER 46. WHY SO MANY AMBITIOUS MEN AND SO LITTLE LOFTY AMBITION ARE TO BE FOUND IN THE UNITED STATES

Tocqueville points out that while everyone in America is seeking to improve his condition, there is usually an upper limit to such ambition. No one contemplates aims much higher than property, power, and reputation. Tocqueville doesn't think this can be traced to equality of condition, because increasing equality of condition has led to unbounded ambition in France. But he reflects that people who have recently overthrown an aristocracy are still affected by its spirit and tendencies (including that of lofty ambitions), which persist long after the revolution

Here Tocqueville elaborates on his earlier point that, while everyone in American is constantly striving, there's not much creativity in the kinds of goals they strive for. Glancing back at France, Tocqueville seems to fear the unbounded ambitions of his fellow countrymen—however, he manages to explain these in a way that keeps alive the possibility of learning from the American example.

America, though, has arrived at a much later period in equality and democracy. As wealth and knowledge are diffused and disseminated, the desire for advancement also increases. But this same process prevents any one person from having far greater resources than another, thus limiting both ambition and desire. Democratic men strive and strain for small goals; even those who have attained great wealth also remain prudent and restrained, while their sons recognize that their parents were humble and thus avoid unbounded ambition too.

Here Tocqueville makes a political and historical argument for why Americans seem both eager to strive after economic and social improvement, but also are content to stop after achieving a certain measure of wealth (even after several generations). The ease with which wealth is lost and gained in America helps to explain their caution.

As equality increases, the means of advancement are slowed, since it's difficult to distinguish people from each other: professions often require a number of petty small exams and exercises, checking the development of great desire and ambitions. China, for instance, long characterized by equality of condition, selects its public officers through competitive trials at every stage of their career.

At times, Tocqueville goes further afield than Europe and America: here he brings up China, to him an example of a radically democratic society, and thus one that has to deal with the same questions of limited ambition and restrained desire.

Democracies thus open up limitless fields of action, but also make the movement across these fields slow and gradual, such that people's ambition is discouraged by their own desire, not by laws. Nevertheless, if anyone does, against all odds, come to have boundless ambition, there are no limits to it—making it even more dangerous than elsewhere. Tocqueville advises that it's necessary to regulate and purify ambition, though it would be wrong to repress it. Indeed, he suspects that the pettiness of daily life in a democracy is of more danger than bold ambitions are: leaders shouldn't seek to lull their people into contentment, but rather to provoke them into ambition from time to time. Pride may be dangerous in morality, but may be useful in encouraging people to yearn toward greatness.

Tocqueville continues to explore the paradox that the opening of ambition to everyone in a democracy actually results in more limited, constrained desires. At the same time, Tocqueville engages in the kind of thought experiment that he seems generally to enjoy, asking what would happen if one exception to the general rule slipped through. Still, he's quick to discount that danger as he weighs the advantages and disadvantages of ambition and pride—here, less on the plane of individual morality than on that of social improvement and a society's level of greatness.

CHAPTER 47. THE TRADE OF PLACE-HUNTING IN CERTAIN DEMOCRATIC COUNTRIES

Tocqueville observes that when an American obtains education and funds, he buys land, becomes a pioneer, and only asks the state not to disturb him; Europeans, meanwhile, prefer to seek out public employment. This is because they despair of improving their lot alone, and find solace in a paid office—a system that Tocqueville criticizes as destructive of the spirit of independence and as leading to servility and unproductiveness.

Tocqueville's preference—at least as explained here—is for a "laissez-faire" system (ironically, the term comes from the French) in which the economy and social structure are left to their own devices rather than being directed by the government; he also tries to determine the reasons for Europe's opposite preference.

In any official government, there are limited appointments, but the number of those who desire them is unlimited, leading to permanent opposition against the government—and perhaps even desire to overturn the constitution and change the rulers. The only solution is to teach people the art of being independent and providing for themselves.

Tocqueville examines the possible paradox that, when people come to rely on the government for employment and services, they grow to despise the government when they don't receive those services.

CHAPTER 48. WHY GREAT REVOLUTIONS WILL BECOME MORE RARE

Tocqueville argues that, in a country that has existed for centuries with classes and rank-based distinctions, democracy can only be attained through violent revolution, leaving periodic aftershocks. It seems natural that general equality will make people restless and covetous, and thus that democratic ages should continue to be times of constant transformation: yet he argues that this will not happen.

As he often does, Tocqueville offers a common-sense explanation or possibility only to dismiss it: by means of this process he makes a claim for the superiority of his own arguments over those of his contemporaries, and thus the need for people to pay attention to his work.

Inequality is always the root of revolution, Tocqueville argues. The vast majority of democratic societies are made up of the middling sort, neither rich nor poor, sufficient in property and desiring to be richer, but lacking any obvious class to fight in order to take its wealth. They are also aware that a revolution may well cause them to lose their coveted property: there's far more to lose than to gain. Finally, commerce is averse to revolution, making people independent and practical, desirous of freedom rather than radical change.

Tocqueville's suspicion of revolution is nevertheless mitigated by his acute insight that people sometimes have rational motivations for pursuing revolution—that is, intense inequality between rich and poor. But he also suggests that democratic conditions are actually averse to revolution (another advantage that Tocqueville finds in them).

In democracies, all people strive to improve their fortune, preferring that to political agitation and dismissing violent political passions in exchange for pettier concerns. There will always be some ambitious men eager to make revolution, but they will be hindered by the attitude of their contemporaries. People in democracies may always be in states of agitation, but they direct their energies toward secondary, not fundamental affairs.

Tocqueville returns to the assumption that there is a direct link between democratic equality and material desire. As he's done before, he generalizes to a great extent about Americans' single-minded pursuit of fortune, but he's also developing a complex argument about the link between peace and democracy.

Indeed, Americans tend to view revolutionary or other radical theories with far more suspicion than in Europe. While Americans have the opinions and passions of democracy, Europe still has those of revolution. The only way America could ever undergo a revolution would be as a result of its slavery, that is, its fundamental social inequality. Still, it's not that democracies are absolutely secure from revolutions, but that democracy helps ward them off.

Even as Tocqueville contrasts American tendency toward peace with European radicalism, he makes a remarkably prescient statement about the possibility of war based on slavery. This is also one of the few points at which he nods to the one glaring exception to American equality.

While Tocqueville has heard that people in democracies are constantly changing their minds, he never observed that in America, where, indeed, it was difficult to convince the majority otherwise once it had settled on an opinion. The human mind there is never at rest, but it strives after new material goals, not new principles. The intellectual anarchy he witnesses in France is not, he thinks, the natural state of democracy, but rather a result of France's current period of transition.

Contrasting received wisdom about the intellectual tumult in a democracy with his own experience, Tocqueville returns to his point about the "enervation" that can result from the triumph of the majority. At the same time, he makes a distinction between America's near-complete equality of condition and France's state of transition.

Indeed, democracies are suspicious of intellectual superiority, making intellectual revolutions unlikely as well. If Martin Luther had had to convince each independent person, rather than have a ready audience of princes and nobles, he might have struggled far more to transform Europe. It's an uphill battle to get a democratic people excited about any theory without a direct, material consequence in daily life.

Citing Martin Luther, Tocqueville refers to the massively influential Protestant Reformation that the thinker helped to spark, but he argues that its success had largely to do with the intellectual scaffolding (not to mention embrace of abstract theory) present in Europe.

Tocqueville returns to the question of the power of public opinion and the tyranny of the majority, which exerts an undue influence on each individual person's ability to reason for himself and change his own mind. Stability of opinion is the natural result. In fact, Tocqueville dares (because he's writing in the wake of a revolution himself) to say that he fears revolution in the future far less than intellectual stagnation, the tendency to be suspicious of every new theory and therefore to fail to strive toward a better society.

Examining once again his earlier arguments about tyranny of the majority, Tocqueville reiterates what he fears from a democracy—as he emphasizes the difference between his own views and what his contemporaries find dangerous in a democracy. But Tocqueville also continues to show a desire for progress, not for a return to an old system.

CHAPTER 49. WHY DEMOCRATIC NATIONS ARE NATURALLY DESIROUS OF PEACE, AND DEMOCRATIC ARMIES OF WAR

Tocqueville makes a similar case for why democratic nations are averse to war: the rise of men of property preferring peace, mild manners, the growth of personal wealth, and so on. Of course, in many cases war is unavoidable, and democracies too need standing armies. In aristocracies, armies replicate the hierarchies of society, such that private soldiers rarely strive for promotion. But in democratic armies, since any soldier might become an officer, military ambition swells—and yet during peace there is little practical chance of advancement. While democratic nations are the most desirous of peace, then, democratic armies are the most eager for war.

Turning from revolution to war, Tocqueville continues to hypothesize on the relationship between this aspect of a state and the conditions and tendencies of a democracy. Some of these ideas are familiar: Tocqueville has already written about ambition, for instance, although here he seems to argue that the checks on ambition in the military are not a result of soldiers' limited desires but rather of their circumstances.

Another great danger, Tocqueville warns, is that without military spirit, the profession of soldier is no longer considered honorable, and so the best candidates no longer seek out the profession. As a result, democratic armies are often restless and dissatisfied, their soldiers among the few who do desire revolution or war. He does think war improves people's minds and character, and may be a corrective to the excesses of democracy—but it is not a complete corrective to democracy's dangers.

In aristocracies, at least in Tocqueville's account, the same levels of hierarchy and honor that characterize society in general are also applicable to the functioning of their armies. If it's no longer an aristocratic honor to join the military profession, he thinks, soldiers will be eager to pursue war simply to prove themselves and artificially gain honor.

Indeed, Tocqueville argues that extended war can endanger freedom: it increases the powers of government and centralizes the administration, thus habituating people to the tendencies of despotism. When soldiers' over-ambition becomes cause for alarm, one source of relief may be to increase the number of officers, but that will only encourage more people to join the army and compete for such advancement.

CHAPTER 50. CAUSES WHICH RENDER DEMOCRATIC ARMIES WEAKER THAN OTHER ARMIES AT THE OUTSET OF A CAMPAIGN, AND MORE FORMIDABLE IN PROTRACTED WARFARE

Democratic armies, Tocqueville concludes, are destined to be restless and turbulent. But after a long period of peace, when people's ambitions are directed elsewhere, if a democracy goes to war all its officers will be old men, accustomed to security and ease, and hardly able to regain the vigor necessary to fight (whereas aristocratic officers can easily recall the honor of their class). Tocqueville concludes that when a democracy enters into war after a long peace, it is more likely than any other nation to be defeated.

Toqueville returns to discussing ambition in democracies, suggesting that ambition can weaken armies in peacetime since there's no possibility for advancement without military conflict. This is perhaps a drawback of treating soldiers as members of a modern, salaried profession, rather than, for instance, nobles who join the forces only when their country needs them and then return to their estates.

However, Tocqueville claims that if war continues for long enough, democratic passions can be successfully diverted from peace. Indeed, there's a natural connection between the risky, energetic military character and the democratic character.

Although at times Tocqueville seems to contradict himself, his aim is to explore all the subtleties and even tensions present in the "democratic character."

CHAPTER 51. SOME CONSIDERATIONS ON WAR IN DEMOCRATIC COMMUNITIES

Tocqueville argues that as equality of conditions spreads among many nations, as is happening in Europe, people will grow more and more alike, making international strife and war increasingly rare. The fact that commercial interests will come to implicate people from different nations with each other will similarly discourage war. However, that also means that once two nations do go to war, it will be difficult for them not to involve other countries too. Finally, once differences between nations are lessened, the only major difference will be numerical—making larger nations much more likely to triumph than in the past.

Once more, Tocqueville returns to his predictions about what today we would call "globalization," the extension of homogeneous commodities, systems, and even ways of life across the entire globe. Tocqueville's insight is that this is not solely an economic phenomenon resulting from the power of capitalist corporations, but has to do with political equality. Still, he argues that while equality might lessen the chance of war, it may also make war more unfair.

Tocqueville notes that aristocracies struggle both to conquer and be conquered: it's difficult to collect forces together but also easy to resist an enemy in small distinct ways. The reverse is true for democracies, which are only strong when forces are joined together—but that also means that if the capital (which manages this union) is conquered, the nation is lost. After the defeat of its army, members of an aristocracy will continue to fight individually rather than submit; citizens in a democracy have far too much to lose. Whereas once small battles and long sieges were more common, now decisive battles and attempts to rush upon the capital are preferred. Napoleon embraced this method, but it was changing society that made it successful.

Tocqueville's argument here rests on certain assumptions and claims that he's made earlier, such as the claim that smaller nations are always in danger of being subsumed into stronger ones. Napoleon was initially democratically elected but then seized power as an emperor. He also promoted many aspects of what Tocqueville defines as equality of condition; here, though, he argues that these conditions enabled Napoleon's success more than the other way around.

These statements, Tocqueville argues, also apply to civil wars—democracies have many structural obstacles to civil war. The power of the majority is such that it usually succeeds in tamping down resistance; those who would want a revolution can only hope to seize the government at a single fatal blow. The only way a civil war could happen, he thinks, is if the army splits into two factions, one remaining faithful to the government and one rebelling—and even so that war wouldn't be long. Civil wars, then, should also grow less frequent in a democracy.

Once again, Tocqueville's arguments seem eerily prescient. Even as he argues that civil wars will be less likely in a democracy, his claim that they will arise from an army's division into factions seems like a premonition of America's later division into Northern and Southern states, Union and Confederacy, during its Civil War.

CHAPTER 52. EQUALITY NATURALLY GIVES MEN A TASTE FOR FREE INSTITUTIONS

Tocqueville reiterates his claim that democratic independence, which makes people suspicious of authority, also encourages them to embrace free institutions. Tocqueville acknowledges that such love of independence may well elicit fears about anarchy and disorder. However, he argues that anarchy is to be feared far less than servitude, and he approves of independence to the extent that it prepares people to fight against servitude.

Tocqueville explicitly acknowledges the fear of anarchy most likely because this was something that many of his contemporaries, especially those who shared his social position, feared about democracies. He only raises the point, though, in order to replace that concern with another.

CHAPTER 53. THAT THE OPINIONS OF DEMOCRATIC NATIONS ABOUT GOVERNMENT ARE NATURALLY FAVORABLE TO THE CONCENTRATION OF POWER

Tocqueville returns to his argument that democracies tend to favor a single, central power, rather than the gradations present in a democracy. Democratic people prefer simple, general ideas, as well as uniform legislation equally applicable to all, something never enacted in aristocracies.

Here Tocqueville links his earlier arguments about Americans' suspicion of abstract philosophy and complex ideas to the kind of legal structure inherent to a democracy.

As people become more equal, they tend to privilege the value of society over the rights of individuals. Tocqueville notes that while Americans believe that power should stem from the people, once that power is constituted, they don't feel the need to check or limit it. Privileges peculiar to certain cities, families, or people are anathema to Americans, and such assumptions are permeating Europe as well. France has gone farther than other European nations, embracing the language of equality and of the need for government intervention. Even as people continue to disagree on lesser affairs, the idea of government as a sole, simple, and overwhelming power is unquestioned.

Tocqueville also returns to a paradox that he mentioned before: Americans have embraced the sovereignty of the people, but they are content to have their leaders take on enormous amounts of power—just as long as these leaders came to power in a democratic election. Tocqueville's warning is that even if rulers are elected through majority vote, that doesn't make them naturally democratic—they can become despots if their power isn't checked or limited.

CHAPTER 54. THAT THE SENTIMENTS OF DEMOCRATIC NATIONS ACCORD WITH THEIR OPINIONS IN LEADING THEM TO CONCENTRATE POLITICAL POWER

Tocqueville turns to the habits of democratic people that encourage them to concentrate power. He reminds the reader of his discussion of individualism and argues that private passions and work leave people without much time or energy for public life. At the same time, the desire for well-being leads to a dread of violent disturbance, leading people to hand over more rights to the central power in order to maintain stability. Just as people are independent, they are not required to lend support to each other, so they remain powerless, similarly leading them to desire a strong public power.

Here as elsewhere, Tocqueville makes an implicit distinction between democratic tendencies in general and the specific American example. Here, he focuses on the latter, suggesting that the desire for concentration of power (which he's identified to varying degrees in America) is at the very least something that the nation should be wary of, given the vulnerability of a democracy to this potential form of despotism.

In addition, as the hatred of any kind of privileges increases, people become more amenable to locating all privileges in the sovereign alone, since he is unquestionably above all other citizens and thus not a source of envy. A democratic man is loath to obey his neighbor, an equal, but will happily obey the leader whom his neighbor must also obey. Local independence and local liberties, therefore, will only be retained by "art," while centralization will be the natural temptation.

Tocqueville's argument—that precisely because people in democracies are less inclined to obey each other, they will happily obey a far more powerful person—is based on the acknowledgment that since some kind of power or authority must exist, democracies prefer to locate that authority in a single person and embrace equality everywhere else.

CHAPTER 55. OF CERTAIN PECULIAR AND ACCIDENTAL CAUSES, WHICH EITHER LEAD A PEOPLE TO COMPLETE THE CENTRALIZATION OF GOVERNMENT, OR WHICH DIVERT THEM FROM IT

Tocqueville qualifies his points about centralization by making certain distinctions between cultures. For instance, in Europe, where equality is increasing as freedom remains unfamiliar, power is quick to be centralized. In America, though, people had centuries to learn how to take part in public affairs and to learn to enjoy liberties of speech, press, and individual rights. There, freedom is older than equality.

Tocqueville has already made this point about the benefits of freedom preceding equality, rather than the other way around; here he applies that claim to the specific realm of centralized power, in order to explain why centralization is more of a problem in Europe than America.

Tocqueville thinks that Napoleon should be neither praised nor condemned for his massive centralization of administrative power, given that he inherited a nation where classes had just been destroyed; but no comparable process has ever needed to happen in America. The degree of centralization, then, depends on how equality has been established in a country. At the start of a democratic revolution, for instance, the people strive to centralize government in order to siphon away power from an aristocracy; at the end, it's the aristocracy who desires a strong central power, which it prefers to tyranny by the people, who continue to despise aristocrats.

Writing during France's July Monarchy, after monarchy had been restored to France but during which many people remained nostalgic (even if they had to officially hide such loyalties) for the Napoleonic age, Tocqueville navigates this thorny political terrain as he contrasts the French situation to the American. He also maps the desire for centralized power onto a historical process of democratization, in which those who desire such power shift over time.

Therefore, Tocqueville thinks, central power is always stronger in a democracy that has gone through a long, difficult struggle to reach equality, rather than having experienced it all along. This explains why central power isn't as strong in America as it could be. In addition, Tocqueville uses the example of the Pacha, the current ruler of Egypt, who discovered that people there were equally ignorant, and thus he could use European science in order to govern them through immense central power—Egypt has become the Pacha's own manufacturing plant.

Tocqueville implies that the process of democratization was much more natural and easily accomplished in America than it will be in Europe, given its long acquaintance with freedom. This is also another instance at which Tocqueville uses a non-Western example to show how central power has functioned elsewhere (even if this example betrays Tocqueville's own cultural prejudices).

Tocqueville thinks that centralized government ends up "enervating" a nation, but he acknowledges that it may be able to carry through certain, limited important undertakings more easily and successfully. Since military men prefer centralization because of its strength and efficiency, democracies often subject to war will be more centralized as well. In addition, if a democratic ruler represents the people's interests faithfully, they are willing to put nearly unlimited confidence in his power, whereas citizens will look upon kings somehow still connected with the old aristocracy with suspicion.

"Enervation" is a term that Tocqueville uses again and again: it's what he sees as one of the greatest dangers that democratic equality can have on a society, far greater than anarchy or disorder. Still, in his typical penchant for balance, he concludes that there may be certain advantages, in certain cases, to highly centralized power; while he doesn't name examples, he might be thinking of infrastructure projects or social reforms.

CHAPTER 56. WHAT SORT OF DESPOTISM DEMOCRATIC NATIONS HAVE TO FEAR

Tocqueville returns to his earlier point about the particular kind of despotism to be feared in democracy. After five years, his fears remain, but they've changed slightly. He reflects that in no aristocracy did the sovereign power ever attempt to administer a vast empire alone, making all people uniformly subject to the same laws and requirements. Roman emperors permitted a great deal of diversity and local administration; even as they did abuse their power, such abuse remained limited in range.

This passage reminds us of the five-year gap between the first and second Parts of Democracy in America, *a gap that helps to explain some of the repetitions that are to be found in the work. Here, one change seems to be Tocqueville's broader, more long-term viewpoint by which to judge democratic conditions and the fear of tyranny.*

Tocqueville argues that despotism in a democracy would be more extensive, though less violent; just as equality facilitates the spread of despotism, it limits its strength. Mild manners, solid education, pure religion, and industriousness all make the rise of violent tyrants unlikely. Instead, a kind of oppression may arise with no historical equivalent, one for which even the words "despotism" and "tyranny" are insufficient.

Here Tocqueville addresses more frankly than he has before one particular difficulty of his project, the fact that he's not just analyzing the history and development of democracy in America (and elsewhere), but also attempting to predict the consequences of this unprecedented political form into the future.

Tocqueville attempts to imagine a world in which innumerable people are all striving after petty, small pleasures, remaining a stranger to each other, both ignorant and careless of their common cause. Above them is absolute (though mild) power that seeks to keep people in constant childhood: the power provides for their security and facilitates their pleasures, preventing them from having to think or care about the troubles of life. Man's agency becomes restricted; it's not shattered but softened and bent. People aren't prevented but rather discouraged from acting; they aren't tyrannized but "enervated" and stupefied, until each nation becomes a flock of timid beasts.

In these powerful passages, Tocqueville paints a chilling portrait of the potential future that awaits democratic nations. Given his many moments of praise and admiration for American life, such a bleak prediction may seem out of place; but Tocqueville has been striving all along to grasp what is best about democracy while also remaining clear-eyed about its dangers—dangers that for him are not inevitable but rather crucial to combat while there's still time.

At the present, Tocqueville notes, people want both to be led and to remain free: but both desires are in conflict with each other. They allow themselves to be chained because it is they who have freely chosen their guards—but this surrender is troubling to Tocqueville. Of course, sovereignty of the people leaves room for individuals to intervene in more important affairs, but increasingly men will become enslaved in minor details of life, where Tocqueville thinks freedom is even more crucial.

Even as Tocqueville identifies one possible mitigating factor for the tyranny that may result from democracy—sovereignty of the people—he also argues that this isn't enough if people are content to follow the crowd in their opinions, choices, and everyday experiences. The inability to think for oneself is, to Tocqueville, dangerous in any capacity.

Tocqueville worries that people will soon lose the capacity to think and act for themselves and thus lose the very thing that makes them human. He can't imagine how people who have given up the habit of self-government can properly choose someone to govern them; governments themselves may thus lose their ability to be wise and energetic. Tocqueville concludes that despotism is easier to establish in a democratic time than at any other: he thus wants to cling to freedom all the more. Still, he argues that those who try to base freedom on aristocratic privilege today are bound to fail. Equality must be the first principle of a legislator if he hopes to succeed at all: since reinstituting an aristocracy is impossible, the question becomes how to encourage liberty in a democratic society.

Tocqueville's explicit embrace of liberty is, in the final instance, intellectual more than anything else: his defense of liberty is ultimately a defense of independence of opinion and thought. It isn't necessarily that democracies deny such independence—indeed, there are a number of aspects of a democracy that promote and encourage it. But Tocqueville also wants to linger over the ways democracy can actually work against freedom and independence, even as he acknowledges that the solution is not to turn back the clock and return to an aristocracy.

Given that democracies will inevitably have more centralized, extensive, uniform governments, and that society will be stronger and the individual weaker, private independence will never be as great in democracies as in aristocracies. Tocqueville doesn't think this is to be desired, given that in aristocracies the mass is usually sacrificed to the individual. He suggests that some administrative powers be vested not in the central government but in other public bodies composed of temporarily appointed citizens—a kind of provincial assembly that the Americans have adopted. Hereditary officers have no place in a period of equality, but officers could be elected instead, which would similarly ensure their independence with respect to the government.

Even as Tocqueville continues to exhibit a love of what he here calls "private independence," he also acknowledges that the existence of such independence in an aristocracy was always contingent on the subjugation of the many in favor of the few. In order to get out of this conundrum, he draws on the American provincial institutions that he's already studied and praised. These concluding sections, indeed, are most explicitly concerned with his own country and fellow citizens.

Similarly, whereas aristocracies have many independent wealthy people who can't easily be oppressed, something analogous might be made in a democracy by joining many private citizens together in associations. If in aristocracies people are bound up closely with their fellow citizens, rather than remaining alone as in democracies, the liberty of the press (the greatest democratic instrument of freedom) and judicial independence might play a similar role.

Rather than advocating for a return to aristocratic conditions, Tocqueville suggests that democracies find equivalents to the characteristics of an aristocracy that were most conducive to freedom and independence, and adapt them to a new set of political conditions.

Tocqueville reminds his readers of some of the most significant dangers that equality poses to freedom. In democracies people disdain "form," that is, customary manners and traditions, preferring to rush into action—a pitiable state of affairs that Tocqueville thinks should be combated. He also condemns the way that democracies undervalue the rights of private people, even while extending the rights of society as a whole. Revolutions are also more dangerous to democracies than aristocracies, because they tend to be more permanent. He doesn't claim that people in democracies should never make revolution, since they may at times be justifiably led to do so, but he argues that they should think longer and harder beforehand than those who live under other conditions need to.

Tocqueville has been somewhat ambivalent about the status of manners in a democracy, expressing various degrees of praise or censure for the particular ways Americans act with each other and in society. But here he takes a more explicitly negative stance on American manners as part of a list by which he reiterates some of his central themes: the dangers to freedom under conditions of democratic equality. But he also adds to and modifies his discussion of revolution in asking when exactly it might be justified.

Tocqueville wishes to conclude with a general idea that sums up his entire book. In aristocracies, there were small numbers of people with great power, and a weak social authority: the main political goal was to strengthen the central power and to limit individual independence and private interests. Now, however, the goal should be the opposite, as new problems call for new solutions. He proposes that rulers try harder to make great men, and that they recall that a nation can't be strong when each man is individually weak.

In embarking on what will become several concluding chapters, Tocqueville briefly reprises his historical sketch in order in underline one of his guiding arguments, that new political conditions prompt the rise of new challenges to freedom. His call for "great men" seems to invite a return to an aristocracy, even as Tocqueville looks to the future and not the past.

Tocqueville criticizes both those who only see anarchy and danger in equality (and thus abandon the goal of freedom) and those who have seen the possibility that equality leads to servitude and have accepted it as inevitable. While Tocqueville thinks the latter is certainly a danger, he has written this book because he thinks the danger is able to be mitigated. We should look to the future with productive concern, not idle terror.

Here Tocqueville addresses himself explicitly to his contemporaries, positioning his argument among the many other arguments about new political forms and how France should deal with the seemingly inevitable transition to equality of condition. Tocqueville then emphasizes once again his commitment to human agency.

CHAPTER 57. GENERAL SURVEY OF THE SUBJECT

Tocqueville finds that as he attempts to survey his entire subject, he struggles to do so. The society he's tried to describe is just coming into existence, still half weighed down by a former way of life. It's impossible to know how many of these ancient institutions will disappear entirely; changes in laws, opinions, and manners are still in a process of flux. He sees no parallel in all of history to these changes.

Tocqueville returns to a conundrum of his project: he's attempting to use history and ethnographic analysis to understand the present and look to the future, even as the ground seems to be shifting under his feet; while he's made comparisons to other cultures and historical periods, none is entirely sufficient.

Still, Tocqueville can make out certain characteristics: growing equality of condition, the leveling of wealth, the universalizing of the feeling of ambition together with the shrinking of its scope. Laws are becoming more humane even as energy of character is diminished; heroism is declining but so is cruelty; life is not brilliant, but easier and more secure. Genius becomes rarer as information is more disseminated. The arts are less exalted, but more abundant; the ties of race, rank and country are lessened but the bond of humanity grows stronger.

In this series of passages, Tocqueville returns to some of his central themes and arguments, while describing them as various aspects of a single process: the "middling" or "leveling" effect of democracy. For him this process has both its benefits and disadvantages, both sides of which he identifies in the law, in manners, in the arts, and in social bonds generally.

Tocqueville is saddened by this universal uniformity, though he regrets the world of extremes between great men and insignificant men, wealth and poverty, and learning and ignorance, which allowed him to focus on the former categories alone. But he acknowledges that this is largely because he ignored the latter half—unlike God, whose sight embraces all things. If God prefers the greater well-being of all, perhaps this increasing equality is to him more just. On earth no one can affirm absolutely that this new world is better, but it's certainly different, with different vices and virtues, different advantages and disadvantages. It wouldn't be fair to judge it based on a state of society that no longer exists, as many of his contemporaries are doing: instead they should look forward.

Even as Tocqueville expresses regret for the lost age of aristocracy, he acknowledges that he was only able to embrace the best of what aristocracy had to offer because he (as a member of the privileged class himself) could afford to pay little attention to those ignored or harmed by aristocratic society. Again, Tocqueville inserts himself into contemporary debates in France about the direction society could take, as he urges his fellow thinkers—especially those who are similarly nostalgic for a lost age—not to cling to the past.

Looking back over his own work, Tocqueville is apprehensive but also hopeful. He criticizes those who say that nations do not direct their own affairs but are determined by some inevitable power, by race or soil and climate. This is cowardly and false: instead nations should embrace their own free will, even while men are certainly limited by circumstance—but there is a large circle of fate within which people and nations are free to act, and the question is whether they will allow equality of condition to lead them to freedom or servitude.

Tocqueville makes a powerful argument against determinism (the idea that humans have little or no agency, but that instead their lives are determined by forces outside their control). While Tocqueville has traced the effects of politics on social conditions, he insists that such effects are not absolute or necessary—but instead that people might work to change their circumstances.

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