

Political Cynicism and the Democratic Way of Life
Steven Bilakovics

My project offers an explanation of the remarkable divergence between the status of democratic principles and the status of democratic political practices - of the paradoxical simultaneity of the enormous faith we place in the ideal of democracy and our near-total loss of faith in the actual political practice of democracy. On one hand we hear that democracy is triumphant, the recipient of near-universal acclaim and the sole remaining source of political legitimacy. This triumph is hardly surprising once we recognize that democracy is linked to most everything good in the world: peace, prosperity, human rights, freedom, equality, justice, deliberative reason, even ethical self-development. On the other hand our attitudes and beliefs regarding everyday democratic politics are characterized by a deeply ingrained - almost reflexive - cynicism. Three decades of the General Social Survey, for instance, attests to an utter loss of confidence and trust in the elected representatives and political institutions of liberal democracy. The same is true of our view of ourselves as participants in democratic politics; the only thing we have less confidence in than our politicians is ourselves as citizens. It seems an almost *a priori* contempt for all things political - an anti-political prejudice - has taken hold. Indeed, beyond the concept of corruption, politics is increasingly experienced as quite literally a theater of the absurd: a play full of trite, repetitive, clichéd, nonsensical jargon that obstructs authentic expression and meaningful communication. Today, we are reduced to “playing politics” in the electoral “silly season.”

We are left with the contradictory sense that democracy (or maybe better, democratization) is as inevitable as the political practice of democracy is impossible. We expect ever more from, but ever less of, democracy. A gap between principle and practice hardly requires explanation, but how can we account for this opposite movement - this simultaneous waxing of democratic ideals and waning of democratic political practices? How is it that democracy has taken on the characteristics of a utopia?

I argue that this schism of principle and practice is in fact constitutive of the modern democratic regime, of what Tocqueville calls our democratic “social state.” The democratic revolution, Tocqueville explains, destroys the extreme disparities of aristocratic society: the commanding heights of nobility and the depths of servitude dissolve into one vast middle-class. Hierarchy collapses into equality. Building upon Tocqueville, I argue that this very collapse of hierarchy into equality produces new - and indeed equally extreme - polar oppositions around which democratic society takes shape. With leveling equality comes, for instance, a stultifying sense of insignificance, of being lost and adrift in the great grey sea of mass mediocrity. But with the presence of equality comes the absence of hierarchy and hierarchical absolutes, and with the absence of hierarchy comes the freedom of limitless revolutionary possibility - of what we might term “democratic openness.” In one stroke, the democratic revolution stultifies and liberates. We imagine ourselves as free as we are powerless. As Tocqueville puts it, equality “drives men forward and at the same time holds them back, spurs them on to entertain vast hopes yet keeps them tethered to the earth.” We fear ending up a “flock of

timid and industrious animals” “entranced by a contemptible love of present pleasures,” even as an “ideal and always fleeting perfection presents itself to the mind.”

In this sense, the democratic revolution produce what I formulate as a dialectic of idealism and cynicism. Tocqueville touches upon this when he writes of the new extremes of elevation and degradation characteristic of democratic modernity. With the absence of examples of aristocratic greatness and grandeur, and with the loss of pride, passion, and purpose of bourgeois materialism and individualism, the inhabitants of democracy fear “sinking below the level of humanity.” At the same time, democratic peoples aspire to no less than “rise above the level of humanity.” In his individualism the “common man” will demand an independence and even self-sufficiency of himself that is entirely uncommon - indeed, historically unprecedented. And in his “heroic” materialism he will recklessly gamble all and abandon material well-being for the love of risk and hope of indefinite future gain. With the dissolution of hierarchy, the idealizing imagination is seized by the prospect of being without limits, of indefinite perfectibility and revolutionary, re-creative possibility. The aristocrat commands, the democratic creates; the aristocrat stands atop, the democrat rises above.

This same dialectic of idealism and cynicism shapes modern norms of freedom and human association. Freedom is imagined as potentially without limits, as mastery (limitless independence and autocratic control) and as escape (liberation from all limits and even a this-worldly transcendence of material power and necessity). All that falls short of these ideals is experienced as domestication. Human association is imagined as potentially unfettered, in terms of the sweet informality and utter intimacy of the modern family (contracted to the “soul-mate” couple, or extended to community, tribe, global village, etc.). All that falls short of these ideals is experienced as pure power-relations driven by competitive self-interest and strategic calculation / manipulation (the “sex-object” opposite of the “soul-mate” norm). The family and the market become the models of human association in times of democratic openness.

I argue that Tocqueville’s famous prediction that the democratic passion for equality might trump the democratic desire for freedom, and so that democratic peoples might succumb to the “tutelary despotism” of socialism, is not warranted by his own analysis. Democratic equality and freedom are two sides of the same coin, born into the world at the same revolutionary moment. The polar opposition of stultifying equality and liberating freedom is constitutive of democratic society. Along these lines, I argue that Tocqueville’s other great prediction - that great revolutions will become rare in democratic times - is valid but for the wrong reasons. Great revolutions are rare not because the passion for revolutionary freedom fades but because politics is no longer seen as an adequate vehicle for our transformative aspirations. The passion for revolution isn’t lost but is sublimated into restlessness - into a love affair with technological innovation and the dynamic qualities of capitalism, a passion for the historical “event,” the advertising of every new product as something that forever alters the way we see and do things, and so forth. In democracy, every day becomes the day everything changed, a revolutionary new beginning or departure to new worlds.

I go on to argue that ours is rendered more fully intelligible as a “democratic society” rather than as a “market society.” Far from being indoctrinated into an unquestioned capitalist consciousness wherein we understand and evaluate ourselves primarily as producers and consumers, far from embracing the market as *natural* and even as a quasi-religious *normative* order, the costs of capitalism are constantly questioned and regretted. Every word of praise for the efficiency and prosperity of the unplanned and unregulated open-market is accompanied by scorn for a culture of fast-food homogenization, hierarchical corporatism (Big Oil, Big Tobacco), the pervasive influence of money, ubiquitous advertising, shallowness, selling-out, greed, inauthenticity, and so forth.

If we are materialistic consumers, we are self-loathing materialistic consumers. And the standard of judgment by which we critique materialism is that of democratic openness. While the free-market and consumer capitalism are at times affirmed as natural and normative, they are so-affirmed only insofar as they can be represented as aspects of democratic openness. Looking at the content of advertising, beyond the fact of its pervasiveness, it is apparent that consumerism is itself “branded” and sold in terms of the freedom of democratic openness. And if many have more faith in the market, or in the Malthusian economics of Darwinian biology, than in democratic institutions and practices, it is because these notions seem more in accord with the idea of an open world and an open society. Along these lines, the full picture of our love/hate relationship with capitalism (and globalization) becomes intelligible.

Where once laissez-faire competition was massively affirmed as both a natural fact of the world in which we live and as the normative principle of a free and rightly-ordered society, today democratic openness stands as both that which we cannot deny and that which we willingly affirm. Openness is taken as at once natural: as we experience it in time, the world is intrinsically contingent, uncertain and unpredictable, in-flux and free-flowing, mysterious and open-ended; and as normative: society ought also be free of settled absolutes and barriers (whether natural or man-made), pluralistic and inclusive, subject to question and change, with unfettered communication and expression, and encountered with an open mind and an open heart. Whether of the world, society, or self, openness becomes an all-purpose metaphor for all things good.

Principled upon openness, democratic society is itself massively affirmed as good, true, and beautiful. And it is this very overwhelming legitimacy of the principle of democratic openness that subverts the legitimacy and vitality of the actual practice of democratic politics. As Tocqueville argues, as our idealizing imagination expands more rapidly than our progress toward that ideal, progress is experienced as regression; the practice of democracy cannot fail to disappoint - cannot live up to the dream. Moreover, by its very nature the idea of openness cannot be put into conventional form. Any attempt to represent, establish, or institute openness is experienced with a sort of buyer’s remorse of spent potential. Just as the purity of religious faith is thought to be maintained by means of transcending conventional forms, materiality, particularity, and the partisan striving for power, democracy maintains its near-universal acclaim and unquestioned legitimacy by remaining above the political fray. Our faith in democracy is premised upon its

indefinite, impossible perfection. “Spiritual but not religious” has its cognate, we might say, in “democratic but not political.”

In this context, recall Aristotle’s famous claim that “the man who is isolated, who is unable to share in the benefits of political association, or has no need to share because he is already self-sufficient, is no part of the city, and must therefore be either a beast or a god.” Today, I conclude, we consider ourselves both unable to participate in *and* in need of nothing from politics. Within the dialectic of idealism and cynicism of democratic society the thought takes shape that we are at once incapable of and better off without the democratic practice of politics. Democratic man does not consider himself a political animal - as a citizen capable and in need of argument and deliberation, of persuading and being persuaded in turn. After the democratic revolution we believe ourselves to live in a world determined purely by the economics of power, and so wherein the distinction between persuasion and force collapses. Here, arguments are taken as just so much powerless talk, or as force by means of deception and manipulation. At the same time, we believe ourselves to potentially live in a world wholly undetermined and unfettered and free. This is a world of “democratic openness,” defined by a sense of limitless, revolutionary possibility. Here, the need for politics is taken to signify only the sad distance between us and our aspirations. Insofar as politics conforms to the model of market - the self-interested competition for power - it will be experienced as “realistic,” regrettably necessary, and inevitably corrupt. Insofar as politics aspires to the model of the family - with its norms of intimacy and informality - it will be conceived of as utterly good and meaningful while rendering the everyday practice of politics absurd by comparison.

It is in this sense that I argue that democratic society, principled upon openness, subverts the political practice of democracy. The ideal of openness enables both an unprecedented monopolization of legitimacy by democratic principles and a widespread cynicism toward democratic political practices of association, argument, and action.

