CHAPTER 1

"More Than Kings Yet Less Than Men"

Tocqueville on the New Extremes of Democratic Society

> Equality drives men forward and at the same time holds them back, spurs them on yet keeps them tethered to the earth.
>
> —Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*

I. The Dualism of Democratic Society

Democracy in America Today?

Not yet two hundred years ago, Alexis de Tocqueville described the "great social revolution" of democracy as "irresistible" and "already so powerful that it cannot be stopped." Throughout the Christian world democracy had "destroyed feudalism and vanquished kings"; in America the empire of democracy held "no less sway over civil society than over government." The advance of democracy, as Tocqueville famously put it, seemed no less than a "providential fact": "It is universal, durable, and daily proves itself to be beyond the reach of man's powers."[1]

Today many argue that if anything is inevitable, it is the decline and loss of democracy. Sheldon Wolin, perhaps most notably, stands Tocqueville on his head, writing that we are currently witness to "the steady transformation of America into an anti-democratic society"—it is "evolving from a more to a less democratic polity and from a less to a more authoritarian society."[2] If there is an irresistible social revolution, it is one of dedemocratization; democracy appears already so powerless that it cannot be resuscitated. In this inversion, democracy is the new ancien régime.[3]

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In what is perhaps the mainstream of current academic and public discourse, these extreme positions are actually conjoined around a principle/practice distinction. In principle, democracy is indeed triumphant; in practice, democracy is in severe crisis, with the "warning signs of exhaustion, cynicism, opportunism, and despair."[4] "Few would seem to dispute," we hear, "that democracy is the best form of government seen from the standpoint of principle," yet "the exercise of democracy in the old-established democracies can hardly be judged as inspiring."[5] Democracy is "the sole surviving source of political legitimacy," yet "most Americans have lost faith in their democracy."[6] Even Wolin concurs that one of "the most striking facts about the political world of the third millennium is the near-universal acclaim accorded democracy," with its status as a "transhistorical and universal value."[7]

We are left with the question of why even the most basic practices of democratic political association and action have grown so scarce in a time when democracy has achieved a normative empire historically unprecedented in its global monopoly of legitimacy. A gap between our ideals and reality hardly requires explanation, but we might wonder why the political practice of democracy has waned seemingly in proportion to the waxing of democratic principles. How can we account for this opposite movement?

The mystery is compounded when we consider that even as we expect ever less *of* democracy, we apparently expect ever more *from* democracy. Most every good—freedom and equality, justice and human rights, peace and prosperity, deliberative reason and ethical self-development—is today considered in some way the product of (or simply synonymous with) democracy. Democratization seems the path to a perfected self, society, and world, a sort of secular salvation. Yet, as theorizations have moved away from "minimalist democracy" over the past half century and toward more participatory, deliberative, and radical formulations, the widespread impression is that we are not even living up to the low standards of minimalism.[8] Expectations have continued up as even voting rates have continued down. Has reality ever fallen so far from ideal? Everywhere preached but nowhere practiced, democracy has taken on the characteristics of a utopia.

In what follows, I argue that the simultaneous triumph of democratic principles and tragedy of democratic political practices is no coincidence.

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Democracy is not in crisis despite the fact that democratic principles are hegemonic but precisely because democratic principles are hegemonic. The diagnosis of this Pyrrhic quality of democracy is, I suggest, at the center of Tocqueville’s work. While Tocqueville is far from positing Wolin’s retrogressive movement toward an *antidemocratic* society, he does foresee and fear the *antipolitical* inclinations of democratic society. In his terms, as the “mores” of our “social state” become more fully democratic, our politics becomes less so. This, as we shall see, is largely because the inhabitants of democratic society are disposed to devalue the political practice of democracy and to harbor a sort of contempt for themselves in their political roles and capacities. Along these lines, we can address at least one aspect of the antidemocratic movement Wolin envisions. He asks why, despite the fact that “all of the elements for radical protest appear to be present,” there “has been no general mobilization of outrage,” only “astonishing passivity.”[9] Following Tocqueville’s analysis, we understand that the sphere of politics is no longer considered a vehicle for meaningful mobilization, and so we are left with a politically passive, immobile outrage.

My argument unfolds in four steps (the first in this chapter, the remaining three in the following chapter). First, I explore the apparently contradictory characteristics Tocqueville finds within the democratic social state.[10] Those living in democracy are at once the most materialistic and the most spiritualistic, the most practical and abstract minded, the most restless and docile, the most prideful and the neediest, and so on. I show that for Tocqueville neither extreme is more essentially characteristic of the democratic way of life. Rather, the essential character of democratic society lies in its tendency toward unmediated extremes. Most significantly, after the democratic revolution, we imagine the historically unparalleled degradation, and the equally radical elevation, of self and society. As Tocqueville puts it, democratic man fears sinking below the level of humanity even as he dreams of rising above the level of humanity. Democratic degradation takes shape in the atmosphere of stultifying middle-class mediocrity, in the inescapable awareness of one’s own insignificance and neediness, and in the loss of great passions and lofty purposes that accompanies isolation and felt powerlessness. The democratic individual ends up in the terrible position of being self-centered

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without cause for self-respect. At the core this experience looms the thought that the domestication of the human being has become a real—even immanent—possibility. Democratic elevation takes shape around the idea of freedom-as-openness, of liberation from worldly limits in the condition of indefinite perfectibility and infinite revolutionary/creative possibility. The dichotomy of base and noble that gave aristocratic society its normative dimensionality translates into the democratic dimensionality of domestication/openness. Fear of collapsing into the petty need for material comfort and pleasure, for instance, is accompanied by the grand aspiration to ensure the victory of the democratic idea in the world. The great paradox of democracy, as we shall see, is that both sides of this dualism are inscribed in the modern political/social principle of equality—in what we might divide out as the postrevolutionary *presence of equality* and *absence of hierarchy*.[11]

Along these lines I argue that modern society cannot be reduced, or degraded, to the ubiquitous contemporary formulation of "market society." In Tocqueville's terms, the social state that takes shape in the wake of the democratic revolution is part "commercial society" but also part "literary society." Inhabitants of the modern democratic regime understand and evaluate themselves as businesspeople in the world, as it were, but also as artists of the world. They exhibit their unchecked "realism" in representing their actions solely in terms of the necessities of competition and compulsive consumption, and their unconstrained "idealism" in thinking it possible to transcend materiality and rewrite themselves and the world. The promise of self-transformation accompanies the felt pervasiveness of fixed banality; the celebration of self-expression is as widespread as the explanatory invocation of self-interest.

For Tocqueville, democracy's literary aspect is largely a relic of its revolutionary birth in France. Over time the audacious passion for revolutionary rupture and re-creation is bound to give way to the timid desire for material well-being and then potentially to a society-wide collapse into the arms of a quasi-paternalistic "tutelary power." At times fatalistically, Tocqueville foresees a tragic narrative arc of democratic society, from revolutionary adolescence through bourgeois middle age to geriatric socialism. The early impulse to freedom succumbs to a fully realized and wholly base egalitarianism. I depart from this view to suggest that democratic society stands in permanent tension between the passion for

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equality and the passion for revolutionary openness—which is to say, between equality and the notion of freedom inscribed in equality. Indeed, I argue that Tocqueville's own analysis of democracy does not warrant his prediction that the potentially degrading belief in and experience of equality might eventually undermine freedom. Equality and the freedom born of the dissolution of hierarchical absolutes are coconstitutive of democratic society. If the former makes great revolutions rare, as Tocqueville famously predicts, the latter constantly spurs the idealizing imagination's embrace of revolution. I go on to argue that by depriving revolution of politics as its venue, democracy is less likely to make revolution rare than to relocate revolution to the spheres of science, art, and economics or to render revolution a private and personal matter. The passion for revolution is sublimated into the notions of innovation and reinvention, into the norms of creativity and audacious heroism, into the experience of life's transformative events and the rupture onto original nature. If we in modern democratic society need constant comfort and pleasure, so too do we demand constant drama and excitement.

In the second step of my argument, I show that two extreme notions of freedom, accompanied by an extreme notion of freedom's loss, are embedded in our democratic social state. As openness, freedom's meaning coalesces around the poles of mastery and escape. With the collapse of aristocratic command and the consequent unleashing of competition, democratic individuals feel compelled to seek the freedom afforded by power over others. At the same time, these same individuals hope for a power-free zone possible only in isolation or in uninhibited communion with others. The loss of freedom is imagined as similarly total, as domestication, wherein democratic peoples internalize and cling to their enslavement.

Third, I follow Tocqueville in arguing that the democratic principle of equality not only undermines hierarchical conventions but also, in its concomitant principle of openness, "cannot fail to destroy what is purely conventional."[12] In the spheres of the family, religion, economics, and so forth, the democratic revolution gives birth to the quest for a pre/post-conventional social state of nature. Here, the alienating artifice of conventional norms and forms have been rendered unnecessary via the liberating event of opening. As Tocqueville argues, the modes of human

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association affirmed as meaningful and legitimate within this social state of nature are those of the preconventional, primitive family (community, culture, tribe, and so on) and of postconventional, global humanity (represented as a "global village," a world market, the World Wide Web, a human rights community, and so forth). Certain ideas, I go on to suggest, take hold of the imagination in this context: spiritualism free of religious form, materialism free to run its course in the open market, expression/communication free of words.

Finally, I argue that there is an antipolitical prejudice inscribed in this democratic social state. "Spiritual but not religious" has its cognate, we might say, in "democratic but not political." After the democratic revolution, we come to believe in a world before and beyond politics—at least the politics of addressing common purposes and problems by means of arguing together. The sublime idea of an open way of life cannot find expression in democratic political action and association and can only take flight outside of the confining forms of political institutions and organizations (whether liberal or radical, representative or participatory). From a different angle: in relation to the expansive idea of freedom-as-openness, "political freedom" seems oxymoronic.

Uncovering the new extremes of elevation and degradation native to equality, Tocqueville helps us see how those who live in accordance with the democratic principle might imagine themselves to be as free as they are powerless, at once "more than kings yet less than men."[13] Recall in this context Aristotle's reasoning 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."[14] Much of what I put forward here amounts to the proposition that democratic man does not consider himself a political animal. He is foreign to Aristotle's taxonomy, and indeed unique in history, in thinking himself simultaneously incapable of participating in and above politics—both beast and god.[15]

Democracy as a Social State

In Tocqueville's notoriously expansive usage, "democracy" is more the principle of a way of life than merely a form of politics. Living in democracy, the way we understand and evaluate the world, how we think and

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feel about ourselves and others, what we believe and what we desire, all become somehow characteristically democratic. Taking up democratic education or character formation in the most capacious sense, Tocqueville explores how living within a democratic regime orients what we find meaningful—whether good, true, or beautiful.[16] It is hardly an exaggeration to say that, for Tocqueville, the democratic revolution alters the human condition: democracy becomes the ordering, animating Faith of modern man. Indeed, the revolution carries within it the new human type of "democratic man," bringing to the fore previously subordinate elements and even producing wholly new ideas and beliefs, passions, and interests.[17] As our most basic source of authority, democracy becomes our most basic source of self.

All of this is not to say, however, that the concept of democracy isn't fundamentally political for Tocqueville. Even as democracy expands beyond the sphere of politics, Tocqueville asks us to recognize that this revolution could only have begun within the political. While he often writes about the spread of civilization and enlightenment, he interprets modernity as originally and essentially democratic. The pivot of human history is a revolution in the principle of authority—in the way by which power comes to be represented as legitimate authority.[18] At the core of this transformation, the aristocratic right of command is supplanted by the right of equal individuals to consent, contract, and choose (the successive iterations—the radicalization—of equality as the principle of authority). Even in the relationships of ruler and ruled or rich and poor, we hold that, regarding what is most fundamental about the two parties, they are equal. Both equally work for wages, if not for equal wages. Inequality persists, hierarchy does not.

And it is this *political* transformation, this shift in the principle of legitimate human association, that utterly reshapes modern existence. As we shall see, perhaps the most basic conceit of Tocqueville's work is that this transformation in the norms of human relations reorients our beliefs concerning what is real and necessary, what is possible and ideal, and even our perception of time and space. The idea of a democratically integrated society colonizes and reorders every sphere of life, including the life of the mind. And within this social form are generated characteristically democratic modes of politics and economics, religion and morality, the arts and sciences, and public and private life.

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For Tocqueville, then, the democratization of authority is the interpretive key to modern existence. To perceive such an interpretive key, Tocqueville suggests, one must recognize those instances when, in effect, fact and value are taken to coincide by the inhabitants of that social state. In democratic times, for example, "men do not hold on to equality solely because it is dear to them; they also cling to it because they believe that it must always endure." And "all consider society a body in progress and mankind a changing tableau in which nothing *is* or *should be* fixed forever." The sense that change is given and inevitable reinforces and is reinforced by the affirmation of social mobility, restless activity, and novelty. The collapse of belief in a stable hierarchy in nature and society signifies a shift in self-evidence; henceforth, equality and impermanence are presupposed as natural and embraced as good. This convergence lends a powerful but unnoticed gravity to the principle of a social state, instilling a "natural inclination" in the "minds and hearts" of its people—"to arrive there it suffices that they not hold themselves back."[19]

To gain interpretive access to a social state, Tocqueville therefore seeks out the silence, conspicuous only from a comparative perspective, surrounding those points where "is" and "ought" overlap in a sort of second nature.[20] For instance: "The French were not just friends of monarchy; they could not imagine the possibility of putting anything else in its place. They accepted it as one accepts the course of the sun and the succession of the seasons. They were neither advocates nor adversaries of royal power. This is how the republic exists in America: without combat, without opposition, without proof, by a tacit accord, a sort of *consensus universalis*." One of course "meets with exceptions" to the normal state of affairs generated by the principle of a social state—with what would seem unnatural aberrations—but "not with a contrary principle."[21]

From his time to our own, Tocqueville has been criticized for attempting to interpret all aspects of life from the single starting point of democracy. Given the complexity and diversity of modern society, how well does it serve us to think about it in terms of an ideal type of "democratic society" or to theorize the democratic regime as the carrier of modernity? Does it make sense to speak of anything as Tocqueville speaks of equality, as the "dominant fact to which all other facts are related" and the "principle of action that dominates all others"?[22]

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Despite such questions, it seems today less that the passion for generalization has subsided than that the starting point has changed. In particular, the notions of “market society” and “consumer culture” are put forth in strikingly analogous terms to those of Tocqueville’s democratic social state. “Market society,” we hear, “is no longer simply a metaphor, or an analytical concept. It is a living reality. As society becomes a market the values and operative norms of the market become salient to society as well. That is why consumption, the driving force of the market, has assumed a special significance in the contemporary world. . . . It has become existential, the veritable badge of identity. As we consume so we are. Our economic identity as consumers is increasingly overriding our civic and even our human identity.”[23] Here, the idea of a society ordered, integrated, and animated by market principles colonizes every sphere of life, carrying with it the new human type of consumer.

Wolin again provides a perfect contrast to Tocqueville, arguing that we live not in a democratic social state but in an “economic polity.”[24] Wolin’s claim is not merely that power resides with wealth today, although plutocracy is surely one element of the economic polity. Rather, taken as the “ontological principle . . . underlying reality” and “the ‘real’ constitution of society,” economy, not democracy, functions as the “first principle of a comprehensive scheme of social hermeneutics” and “an interpretive category of virtually universal application.” Wolin continues, “It is used to understand personal life and public life, to make judgments about them, and to define the nature of their problems. It supplies categories of analysis and decision by which public policies are formulated, and it is applied to cultural domains such as education, the arts, and scientific research.”[25] In our economic polity, “market forces” supplant the equality of conditions as the dominant fact/principle of action. Consequently, we are not just friends of the market; we accept its movements as one accepts the succession of the seasons and we cannot imagine the possibility of putting anything else in its place.

As we shall see, Tocqueville shares many of these characterizations and critiques of modern society as market society—the society of bourgeois consciousness wherein, for instance, the self and its “interests” are habitually represented in economic terms. But he is not so reductive in his analysis; market society is just one aspect of modern society. Insofar as we can generalize about such things, modern society is rendered more

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fully intelligible as originally and essentially democratic, founded in the collapse of hierarchy and in the equalization of conditions. Insofar as we can issue abstractions about existential badges of identity and ontological principles underlying reality, we get further by beginning with the democratic political principle of human association.

With this reorientation and broadening of our interpretative view, we are able to see that notions like free-market competition and consumption are affirmed, often silently, but only to the extent that they conform to and express democratic norms.[26] Our belief in competition, even with its consequent inequalities of winner and loser, is warranted and conditioned by our belief in equality. At least insofar as it is meaningful, competition can only be an interaction between equals. Indeed, society-wide competition is inconceivable outside the context of society-wide equality; competition makes sense only between equals, absent the right of command and heritable status. And while consumerism is surely one part of the democratic whole, an equally significant part is the contempt for commodification and the petty bourgeois preoccupation with material comfort and pleasure. In this sense, the critique of totalizing market capitalism advanced by Wolin and others is best understood as internal to, and indeed constitutive of, modern democratic society. In Tocqueville's terms, within the democratic social state we evaluate our "commercial" norms from a "literary" perspective, and our "literary" norms from a "commercial" perspective.[27]

On Sex Objects and Soul Mates

In the summer of 2004, Major League Baseball and Columbia pictures announced a $3.6 million deal to place logos for the movie *Spider-Man 2* on the bases of fifteen stadiums for a weekend. The subsequent public outcry was fierce and extensive. Ralph Nader called the deal "a greedy new low" and "beyond grotesque." U.S. Rep. George Nethercutt, a Washington Republican, sent a letter to the league, arguing that the game should "remain pure" and that "Little Leaguers deserve to see their heroes slide into bases, not ads." Former baseball commissioner Fay Vincent spoke out, saying "I guess it's inevitable, but it's sad. . . . I'm a romanticist. I think the bases should be protected from this." Apparently it wasn't inevitable, however, as one day later the league announced it

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would not run the ads, relenting to polling wherein close to 80 percent agreed that baseball was "selling out."[28]

Can we infer anything about our "culture" or "age" from this course of events? Does it signal that we live in a consumer culture where everything is for sale or in an age of outrage over everything being for sale? Does it mean that sports is a bottom-line business just like everything else or that athletic competition is understood and valued as a world apart from market competition? One need only look to the film "industry" itself, where artistic expression and bourgeois profit seeking cohabitate, to see this tension played out on a daily basis. Everyone cynically recognizes that movies like *Spider-Man 2* are made to make money, and yet the heroes of these blockbusters (and the actors who portray them) invariable scorn such philistinism. And it's the most romantic love stories that make the most money.[29]

Of course everyone knows sex sells too. While prostitution might be the oldest profession, pornography is the growth industry of the information age. By 2006, pornography generated more money than Microsoft, Apple, Google, Yahoo!, EarthLink, eBay, and Amazon.com combined, and U.S. pornography revenue exceeded the combined revenues of ABC, CBS, and NBC.[30] As with the baseball controversy, though, we should notice a contrary trend toward the opposite end of the cultural spectrum. A 2001 Gallup Poll commissioned by the National Marriage Project at Rutgers University reported, "Ninety-four percent of single men and women, ages twenty to twenty-nine agree with the statement that 'when you marry, you want your spouse to be your soul mate, first and foremost.' Eighty-eight percent believe that there is one person 'out there' who is specially destined to be their soul mate." The report speculates, "In a secular society, where sex has lost its connection to marriage and also its sense of mystery, young people may be attracted to the soul mate ideal because it endows intimate relationships with a higher spiritual—though not explicitly religious—significance." Here, as the antithesis of pornographic objectification and commodification, the "ideal of friendship in marriage . . . has been notched up to a more demanding ideal. People now expect their marriages to be a spiritualized union of souls."[31]

Taking these two trends together, it appears that our juvenile puerility is matched only by our youthful romanticism. The contrary extremes of

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sex degraded to the purely material and love elevated to the purely spiritual have simultaneously commandeered the mainstream. We seem at once utterly superficial and utterly scornful of superficiality. For all of their obvious differences, though, there are basic similarities between these "soul mate" and "sex object" types of relations. In a common enough formulation, your soul mate is "someone who completes you" and "accepts you no matter what"; soul mates "have two minds, hearts and souls that operate as one." In transcendent intimacy, just as in the total lack of intimacy between sex objects, your partner is "someone for whom you would not have to make major compromises."[32] In either case—whether in spiritual union or in the sex-object marketplace—one remains as free as if alone. And operating as one, in communion beyond the need of formal mediation, soul mates have no more need of words than do sex objects. Both modes of association are unspoken, articulated by means either above or below conversation.

I suggest in what follows that Tocqueville identifies a tendency toward just these borderline extremes in the way we think about the possible and proper modes of freedom and human relations within the democratic social state. Unlike most formulations, though (as in the discussion above, in which the soul mate ideal is merely a secondary reaction to the more fundamental sex objectification of secular society), Tocqueville theorizes transcendent spiritualism and reductive materialism as equal aspects of democratic society—as opposite expressions of the same idea of democratic openness.

II. Democratic Degradation: Equality, Mediocrity, Domestication

Mediocrity and the Loss of Passion

It seems problematic from the outset to interpret Tocqueville as positing a new dimensionality—a new polar opposition between the extremes of human elevation and degradation—as constitutive of postrevolutionary society. Tocqueville himself writes that of all the various traits of democracy he surveys, "the one that seems to [him] most general and most striking" is that nearly "all extremes are being softened and blunted": "Almost anything that stands out is being wiped out and replaced by

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something average—neither as high nor as low, neither as brilliant nor as obscure as what the world once knew." In a process Tocqueville describes as the exchange of aristocracy's beautiful nobility for the sublime justice of democratic equality, great disparities of authority, honor, wealth, and enlightenment are leveled. In democratic society, he concludes, "we should not expect to encounter the extremes of degradation and grandeur" that define aristocratic society.[33]

Yet the fear of a new sort of degradation, democratic in origin and as bottomless as any found in previous times, is a constant in Tocqueville's writings, from his earliest private letters to his notes for the unfinished second volume of *The Old Regime.* In democratic times we run no less a risk than of man "sinking gradually beneath the level of humanity."[34] I argue that, for Tocqueville, a new notion of degradation arises precisely with the softening and blunting of aristocratic extremes into democratic mediocrity. Paradoxically, a world without great disparities of authority, honor, wealth, and education itself harbors the experience of dehumanization. In aristocracy, the presence of nobility and serfdom simultaneously blurred the lines between man and God and between man and animal; in democracy, these lines are no less blurred even as nobility and serfdom dissolve into one vast middle class.

The inhabitants of democracy have long been represented as tending toward the subhuman and animalistic. Rejecting the principle of hierarchy, democratic peoples end up governed by their base bodily appetites and impulses rather than by the essentially human faculty of reason—they are literally ruled by their lower parts, by gut and groin, rather than by their heads. Tocqueville follows this characterization to some extent, particularly in *Democracy I.* Over time, though, he came to think of democratic dehumanization primarily in terms of the devitalization rather than the disorderliness of soul and city. The collapse of hierarchy degrades less through the subversion of order than through the sapping of energy, in stagnation rather than corruption. The basic danger of equality is not anarchy or licentiousness but the enervation of passions and convictions.[35] For Tocqueville, democratic equality deprives the heart more so than the head its place in human things. Thus, for instance, the bloodless passivity of the majority came to replace the chaotic tyranny of the majority as his central preoccupation. In terms of

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living in democratic times, he concludes, "I am far less afraid of audacity of desire than of mediocrity."[36]

Tocqueville offers a number of well-known connections between equality and this loss of vitality. On a purely contingent level, the ongoing violent upheavals of the democratic revolution inevitably generate *fatigue*. More significantly, a life of equality—lived without the settled hierarchical orders of aristocracy and so without the possibility of commanding or being commanded—is inevitably one of *uncertainty*, and so of potential paralysis. On a still deeper level, in the *neediness* of their materialism and the felt *insignificance* of their individualism, the new men of democracy will tend to imagine themselves as both soft and small, as subject to all kinds of powerful necessities and as powerless to cope.

There is another equally important connection between equality and docility, though, which is often overlooked. With the collapse of the principle of fixed hierarchy, Tocqueville reasons, the idea of striving enters the imagination and becomes widespread even as people lose sight of any manifest model toward which to strive. In the great gray mass of democracy, people are mobile but directionless because they are without example of greatness. The aristocracy had acquired during their "long, uncontested experience of greatness, a certain pride of heart, a natural confidence in its strength, a habit of being respected," Tocqueville writes, and the show of noble bearing "increased the virility of the other classes by its example."[37] Conspicuous inequalities of honor and authority were to the benefit of the least well off. With the fall of the closed aristocratic order comes the loss of such public displays of grandeur. People are no longer held back, but neither can they so clearly conceive of human elevation; they are no longer deprived of respect, but neither can they habitually envision being respected. A new sense of possibility and openness is born into the world with the demise of immutable hierarchy, but with the collapse of the principle of hierarchy, all that is exceptional and extraordinary—all that stirs the human heart—dissolves into banality. In one stroke the democratic revolution liberates and stultifies the modern imagination.

In a formulation he returns to time and again, Tocqueville writes that the "true nightmare of our period is in not perceiving before oneself anything either to love or to hate, but only to despise."[38] Suffocated by

mediocrity, the “spark and grandeur of ambition” fades while “human passions subside and diminish.”[39] He believes in nothing save the individual self-interest that engulfs him, and he hopes for nothing except the material gain he sees everyone pursuing.[40] Ultimately, the same egalitarian man who cannot tolerate subordination to others comes to harbor “such contempt for himself that he thinks the only pleasures he is made to savor are vulgar ones”: “He voluntarily limits himself to mediocre desires and never dares to reach for anything high.”[41] The collapse of aristocracy is internalized, and even in himself he sees nothing to love or hate, but only despise.

From Revolutionary Excess to Conservative Defect

For Tocqueville, the condition of pervasive mediocrity harbors an intrinsically democratic type of dehumanization. In a world of mediocrity, we find it difficult to conceive of the kind of goals and to experience the kind of emotions that we would respect as worthy of humanity. In this sense, middle-class equality can be as dispiriting as the deprivations of the serf were debilitating. In the absence of commanding passions, just as in the presence of entrenched barriers, Tocqueville fears that the human race might “stop progressing and narrow its horizons.”[42]

Tocqueville typically formulates his contempt for the “little democratic and bourgeois pot of soup” within which he lives as a fall from the epic heroism of those who produced the democratic revolution in France—the “men of ’89”—to the inconsequential hedonism of the revolution’s epigones.[43] Dumbly “entranced by a contemptible love of present pleasures,” endlessly “hastening after petty and vulgar pleasures with which they fill their souls,” the inhabitants of democracy have “raised themselves to sovereign power only to gratify trivial and coarse appetites more easily.”[44] Indeed, democratic peoples have apparently liberated themselves from paternal authority of every sort, not on the way to Kantian maturity, but so as to indulge a sort of perpetual childishness. Yet this juvenile quality comes with none of the enthusiasm, vigor, and bold idealism of youth. For Tocqueville, aristocratic ambitions no less than aristocratic properties seem democratically partitioned into innumerable small holdings. In equality, the grand and often unruly loves of the few divide into the countless small wants of the many.[45] Mediocre

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even in his desires, passionless even in his hedonism, democratic man conceives of pleasure seeking only as the mundane pursuit of material well-being. He is too softened and dulled even to properly debauch himself—too decent to be really decadent. Having reduced living well to living easily, he "scarcely imagines" flourishing as anything more than "meeting the body's every need and attending to life's little comforts."[46] His uninspired indulgences take the form not of wild and squandering abandon but of the securing of every little convenience of domestic life. Even the wealthy fall short of aristocratic excess: "They gratify a host of small desires and avoid unruly grand passions. Thus they lapse into limpness rather than debauchery."[47] With the "prevalence of the bourgeois classes . . . over the aristocratic classes," postrevolutionary society thus ends up "more pacific" and "less proud," "calmer and duller, more tranquil and less heroic."[48]

And in this bourgeois limpness, democratic peoples actually grow dependent upon pleasure, ease, and comfort. They love little and hate little but feel themselves to need much. Even as their desires become increasingly petty, they are experienced as increasingly pressing; these individuals want only material well-being and believe themselves unable to do without such well-being. Consequently, Tocqueville predicts that democratic peoples will be in a sense conservative and virtuous, but for all the wrong reasons and in all the wrong ways. In their "spineless passion" for material well-being, in the "need to obtain it at any price," they will cling to any order that promises security, tranquility, and prosperity.[49] They will sacrifice everything for material well-being and will not sacrifice material well-being for anything. And this timid disposition interlaces with temperate virtues just as easily as it does with trivial vices. The "love of one's family, good morals, respect for religious belief, and even the lukewarm and regular practice of the established religion" combine with bourgeois materialism to render men incapable of great good as well as great evil—promoting honesty but forbidding heroism, limiting depravity but not baseness, and leading to orderliness out of enervation.[50] "I reproach equality," Tocqueville concludes, "not for leading men into the pursuit of forbidden pleasures but for absorbing them entirely in the search for permitted ones."[51] In their needy and respectable materialism, the children of the democratic revolution end up too well behaved—moderate to excess.

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From Aristocratic Pride to Democratic Domestication

At the outset of *Democracy in America,* Tocqueville famously claimed that the work had been composed “in the grip of a kind of religious terror occasioned in the soul of the author by the sight of the irresistible revolution, which . . . continues to advance amid the ruins it has created.”[52] By the second volume of *Democracy,* however, the source of his terror ceased to be the radicalization of the revolutionary disturbance: “Standing as I do in the midst of ruins, dare I say that what I fear most for generations to come is not revolution?”[53] Rather, he came to fear a society that would be without disturbance of any sort, peaceful out of lethargy and felt infirmity.[54] He foresees future generations abdicating the democratic place of power, confining themselves “ever more narrowly within the sphere of petty domestic interests” and there becoming “all but invulnerable to those great and powerful public emotions that roil nations but also develop and renew them.”[55]

In Tocqueville’s account, what we come to lack—despite our prosperity and enlightenment and political sovereignty—is the aristocrat’s proud disposition. In one of the great ironies of history, the democratic revolution liberates people from the constraints and inequalities of the aristocratic order even as it undermines the aristocratic conception of the capacity, potency, and agency of man. After the revolution, we are free but believe ourselves powerless. We are no longer duty bound to commands from on high but respect ourselves so little as to believe that we are subject to even our basest impulses and instincts.

We might say that the tragic story of democracy Tocqueville presents runs from the “fall from the heights of limitless pride of 1789” to the equally limitless humility he saw spreading around him.[56] Pride is the virtue par excellence of aristocracy but also of the men who made the democratic revolution in France. In this sense, they were hybrids of aristocracy and democracy—quasi-aristocratic actors striving for democratic ends, uniting the disposition of nobility with the passion for liberty and a just equality. The epic event they produced was necessarily short and unnecessarily terrible, but it was also a moment of “incomparable beauty” and “admirable élan”—“of generosity, of enthusiasm, of virility, and of greatness.”[57] It is true, Tocqueville writes, that the men of ’89 displayed

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the aristocrat's erroneous excess of "confidence in the power that man exercises over himself and in that of peoples over their own destiny," but this was a "noble error."[58] The men who "made the Revolution . . . believed in themselves" and in "the power of man": "They readily became impassioned for his glory, they had faith in his virtue. They put in their own strength the prideful confidence that often leads to error but without which a people is capable of nothing but servitude."[59] Those who came after the revolutionary intersection of aristocracy and democracy tended toward the opposite extreme, which is no less an error but much less noble. "After having believed ourselves capable of transforming ourselves," Tocqueville regrets, "we believe ourselves incapable of reforming ourselves; after having had an excessive pride, we have fallen into a humility no less excessive; we believed ourselves capable of everything, today we believe ourselves capable of nothing."[60]

And it is from this crisis of confidence that democratic peoples might allow themselves to decline into a type of degradation historically unprecedented in its character and extent. In aristocratic times, Tocqueville argues, degradation was largely a matter of the physical conditions in which the lowest orders lived. One "saw inequalities and misery, but souls were not degraded," and so even within the "ignorant and coarse multitude one also found energetic passions, generous sentiments, deep beliefs, and uncultivated virtues."[61] In democratic times, the experience of degradation enters the soul. Consumed by fatigue and doubt, constantly pressed by a felt neediness and insignificance, honored by and honoring no one, even themselves, the inhabitants of democracy grow accustomed to self-contempt. The fact of oppression gives way in democratic modernity to feeling impotent, to being dispirited and devitalized, without power and so without "prideful confidence," capable of nothing but servitude.

Along these lines, the idea of man domesticated ultimately becomes the source of Tocqueville's religious terror. Democratic degradation takes the particular form of "tameness," Tocqueville explains, which is not the same as servility: "When we say servility we mean something cowardly, low, someone who has the *consciousness* of humiliation, of slavery, and submits himself with a view to the profit gained by servitude. . . . The almost universal disease of our time is different. *It does not seem shameful*

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and seems almost natural to those who are struck by it. . . . It is a kind of feeling of a domesticated animal."[62] Like the domesticated animal, uncaged but with broken spirit, democratic man assumes docility as his second nature. In a sense too civilized, democratic peoples sink below the level of humanity not as the wild beasts of anarchy but as a "flock of timid and industrious animals."[63] It is not man-as-wolf that we must guard against in democratic times but rather man-as-sheep.

Following upon the internalization of degradation, the democratic revolution might paradoxically end in what Tocqueville terms the "mild despotism" of a "tutelary power." In the completion of their domestication, democratic peoples welcome any protective power (Tocqueville focuses primarily upon the power of the centralized, bureaucratic, administrative state) that "provides for their security, foresees and takes care of their needs, facilitates their pleasures," and ultimately relieves them entirely of "the trouble of thinking and the difficulty of living."[64] They abdicate all that makes them human for the sake of an extreme sort of assisted living. Born in the epic struggle for liberty and equality, relaxing into a feeble and sleepy mediocrity, democratic peoples might thus end up actually embracing a degree of slavishness never before seen.

For Tocqueville, a simple sense of pride vaccinates us against this democratic despotism.[65] It is hardly an exaggeration to say that Tocqueville's theoretical project amounts to envisioning ways to synthesize in democratic times of mediocrity and docility some semblance of the pride that came as if naturally to the aristocratic actor. Perhaps the central moral imperatives of democratic times, he writes, is to give democratic peoples "a more ample idea of themselves and their species": "Humility is not healthy for them. What they lack most, in my opinion, is pride."[66] The difficulty, of course, lies in inspiring a noble posture in times of equality, after the collapse of the principle that made man's grandeur obvious within a social state that was a theater for acts of great passion, purpose, and potency. Democratic political action-in-association is for Tocqueville the primary vehicle for introducing a quasi-aristocratic manner of being into democratic society. It is by raising ourselves onto and acting on the political stage (whether to vote, build a school, or resist domination) that we might again honor ourselves and be honored by others.

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Domestication in America Today?

Tocqueville thus takes his place in a critique of "the onslaught of economic man" that runs at least from Rousseau's depiction of bourgeois man through Nietzsche's last man and Marcuse's one-dimensional man to Benjamin Barber's infantilized adult.[67] Whether we are slouching toward a brave new world, amusing ourselves to death, being entranced by our narcissism and consumerism, and on and on, Tocqueville's condemnation of the "universal pettiness," "universal shrinkage," and "universal weakness" of modern man continues to resonate.[68] Whether he represents this as a decline into the childish infatuation with present pleasures, the flaccidity and impotence of old age, or the feminine aversion to hardship and preoccupation with domestic concerns of security and comfort, Tocqueville's depictions seem only to have increased in persuasiveness.[69] While the explanatory reasoning might vary from that of Tocqueville's, the fear of an encroaching domestication remains the same. From worries over the decay of manly assertiveness and "core convictions" to calls for the unruly disturbance of received authority in every walk of life, the specter of tutelary domestication sapping aristocratic or revolutionary possibilities lurks. From the militaristic fascination with the "experience of the front" and the violent reality of "the street" to the provocative celebration of nonconformity and subversive play, from every commercial with an absurdly oversized truck tearing across alkali salt flats and narrated by an unnaturally rugged voice demanding we "man up" to the comic book outlaw-heroism so ubiquitous across popular culture, a sort of bourgeois loathing of bourgeois tameness cries out. Perhaps the pervasiveness of this anxiety helps to explain Tocqueville's often noted appeal to both sides of the so-called culture wars.[70]

Tocqueville argues that this extreme degradation opens up the possibility of a centralization of power into one immense, regulating, coddling state—the vehicle of "tutelary power." This state power "would resemble paternal authority if only its purpose were the same, namely, to prepare men for manhood," Tocqueville writes. "But on the contrary," he continues, "it seeks only to keep them in childhood irrevocably. It likes citizens to rejoice, provided they think only of rejoicing."[71] While the vehicle of tutelary power is often conceptualized today in terms of the market rather than the government—in terms of omnipotent corpo-

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rations rather than an omnipotent state, a slavish and base consumerism rather than bureaucratism, and a stultifying need for constant entertainment rather than for welfare—the fear that we are being seduced into and pacified by reality-free rejoicing remains largely unaltered.[72] We shall see the most extensive exploration of this new mode of tutelary power when we take up Sheldon Wolin's notions of "postmodern power" and "inverted totalitarianism."

At the same time, can we say that the undiminished force of Tocqueville's theorization of democratic degradation actually proves the limits of its current applicability? If we follow Tocqueville and say that once domesticated, we would not be ashamed or even conscious of our tameness, can we conclude that the ongoing resonance of Tocqueville's warning is itself evidence that we are at least not yet so degraded?[73] Perhaps some proof that we are not descending into either socialism or consumerism lies in the widespread and constant outcry that we are descending into socialism and consumerism. Perhaps some proof that we do not live in a "brave new world" lies in our continued recognition of that world as dystopian. In what follows I argue that Tocqueville himself (even if he is not always fully aware of it) identifies the particular stance from which we in democratic society "face the future with that salutary fear that keeps us vigilant and ready for battle."[74]

III. Democratic Grandeur: Openness and the Absence of Hierarchy

Literary Society and Commercial Society

Thus far we have traced Tocqueville's logic regarding how the experience of degradation is transformed—and pushed to a new extreme—with the disintegration of the aristocratic principle of hierarchy and the rise of democratic equality. But is there a comparable sense of democratic grandeur? Can we speak of a democratic type of nobility and of the experience of elevation within equality, or is democratic society one-dimensional—reducible to "the obsession with material well-being and the congenital flabbiness of bourgeois civilization?"[75] At one end of the spectrum, the deprivations of the serf and the servant in aristocratic times are replaced by the anxieties of the bourgeois individual: even in

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his wealth he feels himself in constant need; even in his sovereignty he believes himself powerless and insignificant; even in his enlightenment he thinks himself mediocre and small, "lost in the crowd," as Tocqueville often puts it. At the other end of the spectrum, we have this comparison: in aristocratic times, ideas of the "dignity, power, and grandeur of man are widely entertained"; in democratic times, "an ideal and always fleeting perfection presents itself to the human mind."[76] Grandeur gives way to perfectibility. Democratic man imagines sinking below the level of humanity, but he also imagines rising above the level of humanity. The "common man" of democratic times routinely demands of himself that which even the loftiest aristocrats would have found incomprehensible. He is to be a sovereign individual and self-made man.

The full picture of democratic society that Tocqueville presents starts to come into focus here. If democracy's inhabitants are "entranced by a contemptible love of present pleasures," so too are they drawn to an "ideal and always fleeting perfection." To reduce democratic society to the former—to the bourgeois characteristics of the democratic type—is to reduce it to what it is not. In the full picture, democratic peoples' sense of the possible is as limitless as their neediness. Their humility is matched by their hubris, and their fear of insignificance by their passion for individuality. They are as audaciously innovative as they are timid and as adventurous as they are domestic—feeling restless, leaving home, dreaming and striving, narrating their lives as a series of transformative events, daily declaring their independence from even the slightest influence of others.

In Tocqueville's terms, democratic society is part "literary society" even as it is also part "commercial society."[77] Commercial society takes shape around the motive of self-interest, as determined by economic calculations oriented by the bourgeois desire for material profit, pleasure, and comfort. At the heart of literary society is the passion for revolutionary openness—for vital, dynamic, creative potentiality. Tocqueville describes the sense of grandeur intrinsic to the democratic social state as bound up with this literary standpoint. In democratic society, that which we honor, that which we find meaningful and motivating, issues from the revolutionary imagining of an always fleeting or fading state of openness—with the freedom of openness.

And it is from the standpoint of literary society, I suggest, that we still

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experience certain elements of commercial society as degrading—from the neediness of the consumer to the petty self-interest of the competitor. On the other hand, when commercial society incorporates attributes of literary openness, certain elements of commercial society are affirmed as manifestations of undomesticated freedom—from restless innovation and the open market to unfettered and even savage competition. At the same time, it is from the standpoint of commercial society, with its hardheaded and practical realism, that we scorn the flights of our literary imagination as just so much lofty rhetoric and inexperienced naiveté. Given the economics of our existence, we should just grow up and set aside our utopian projects and projections. It is, in other words, between these parallel lines of literary and commercial society that the democratic social state takes shape. Democratic man is as much artist as businessman, as idealistic as he is materialistic, as much a great dreamer of humanity as a self-interested profit-seeker.

In what follows, I highlight three aspects of Tocqueville's interpretation of the dualism of democratic society. First, this dualism of literary and commercial society is characteristic not only of early French democracy but also of democracy in America. Second, the elevation to which democratic peoples aspire is as limitless as the degradation they fear. And third, there is no intermediate form between these extremes of democratic grandeur and degradation—democratic man imagines himself as either creator or creature, master or puppet, and seldom as anything in between.

Pilgrimage and Revolution: Making an Idea Triumph in the World

Tocqueville is perhaps best known for his remark that the disparate courses of American and French democracy follow from the fact that America was born in equality while France had to induce equality through revolution. But this should not obscure a basic similarity between the origins of democracy in France and America. In both countries, Tocqueville writes, democracy arose out of the attempt to ensure the victory of an idea in the world. While he fears that the democratic way of life will eventually narrow into a purely economic way of life, he argues that it issues from a sort of religious striving for transcendence.

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Democratic society might culminate in pure materialism and a base preoccupation with the body, but in France as in America, it originates with a visionary turn toward the unfettered life of the mind and the spirit.[78]

From the very first page of *Democracy I*, Tocqueville describes the advent of democracy in terms of the *disembodiment* of power. In feudal society, "power stemmed from a single source: ownership of land." The status and wealth of aristocracy is essentially "territorial," "materialized in earth," and "rooted in the soil." He continues, "It is not just privilege that establishes an aristocracy and not just birth that constitutes it; it is property in land, passed on from generation to generation." Society was opened to democratic equality with the disincorporation of the "wellsprings of power and influence"—when "works of the intelligence became sources of power and wealth," when the clergy, lawyers, writers, and financiers ("men of letters," with their ranks "open to all") took up places of power in society and government. Where the place of power was once "incorporated into the earth and represented by it," then, in democratic society it is rendered immaterial and without place—"intangible and almost invisible."[79] Society takes on wholly new qualities of abstractness and impermanence with the dissolution of power-in-land concomitant to the collapse of hierarchy. In this sense, democracy is intelligible as the social state of openness as much as of equality.

Perhaps Tocqueville's finest description of the disembodiment of power characteristic of democratic times lies in his discussion of modern despotism: "Princes made violence a physical thing, but today's democratic republics have made it as intellectual as the human will it seeks to coerce." And where "despotism tried to reach the soul by striking crudely at the body," tyranny in democratic republics "ignores the body and goes straight for the soul"; no longer represented by "chains and executioners," the violence of despotic power is itself rendered abstract and almost invisible.[80]

The shift from the physical to the intellectual and spiritual orientation of society is exemplified for Tocqueville by the point of departure of American democracy. "It was by no means necessity" that compelled the Puritan flight from their "native land": "They left behind enviable social positions and secure incomes. They did not travel to the New World in the hope of improving their situation or enhancing their wealth. They tore themselves away from the pleasures of home in obedience to a

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purely intellectual need. They braved the inevitable miseries of exile because they wished to ensure the victory of *an idea*."[81] Taken up with neither territory nor the pleasures of home, these decidedly undomesticated souls strove to establish a world apart from both aristocratic landedness and bourgeois materialism.

The French men of '89 similarly sought to ensure the victory of an idea in the world. Their means were necessarily different—revolution in the Old World versus pilgrimage to the New World—but their endeavor was in many ways the same. Puritanism, Tocqueville writes, "coincided with the most absolute democratic and republican theories."[82] As such, it "was almost as much a political theory as it was a religious doctrine."[83] The tenets of the men of '89 constituted a religious doctrine almost as much as a political theory. The Revolution, as Tocqueville put it, became "a new kind of religion."[84] Like the Protestant Reformation, the French Revolution served to erase "all the old frontiers from the map" and establish, "above all particular nationalities, a common *intellectual homeland* where men of all nations could become citizens."[85] The Revolution represented a sort of mass pilgrimage to this intellectual homeland, wherein "questions of territory gave way to questions of principle."[86] And like the Puritans, the apostles of revolution were willing to sacrifice material well-being and bodily concerns to reach this homeland. In its religiosity, the revolutionary rupture "tore them away from individual egoism, encouraged them to heroism and devotion, and often made them seem insensible to all the petty goods which we possess."[87]

Whether democracy emerged through pilgrimage or revolution, Tocqueville marvels at the grandeur of democracy's introduction into the world.[88] Whether as departure or rupture, democracy stands as a moment of sublime action to make a universal principle manifest in the world. Tragically, the revolution in France ate its young, as it were, largely because this sublime action proceeded absent any sort of practical political experience on the part its leaders. The men of '89 were heroes but not statesmen. This situation was due partly to the administrative centralization of the Old Regime, which monopolized the practice of politics, and partly to the uncompromising idealism of the men who made the revolution, which was willfully deaf to the lessons of experience. In America, conversely, the democratic revolution found its bearings because ideas were conditioned by political and even commercial

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experience; principle and practice were never entirely divorced from one another. Regardless, the original event by which democracy entered the world was a transcendent moment for all the world and all of history to behold.

As we have seen, Tocqueville's abiding fear is that modern peoples would cease to be moved by democracy's original intellectual principles and spiritual passions, even as they were endlessly agitated by the trivial pursuit of bodily well-being. Tocqueville presents this narrative of decline in microcosm, for instance, when he describes America as devoid of great politics and political parties. "The political parties that I call great are those that dedicate themselves more to principles than to their consequences; to generalities and not to particulars; to ideas and not to men," he writes. Such "parties generally have nobler features, more generous passions, more genuine convictions, and a franker, bolder manner than others." Bourgeois rather than quasi aristocratic or revolutionary, "minor parties are [in contrast] generally without *political faith*": "Because they do not feel ennobled and sustained by any great purpose, their character bears the stamp of self-interest." With the apparent alternatives of noble conflict and base calculation, Tocqueville writes that great parties "stand society on its head; minor parties agitate it": "Great parties tear society apart; minor parties corrupt it. . . . America has had great parties in the past, but today they no longer exist. This change has contributed greatly to its happiness but not to its morality."[89]

I want to suggest a different formulation, one wherein the sense of grandeur Tocqueville describes in democracy's points of departure, and which he associates with the "great parties" of early democracy, is a permanent and determinate aspect of the democratic social state. We perceive this permanence in that the feared or felt absence of principled convictions and passionate boldness in politics is represented as a narrative of decline and experienced as a loss. Even as democratic peoples are preoccupied by the pleasures of home, they continue to inhabit an intellectual homeland, established above all particularities, where the realities of territory give way to questions of principle. Whether born in revolution or in pilgrimage, the democratic project continues to be about ensuring the victory of an idea in the world.

Tocqueville himself occasionally offers this interpretation of demo-

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cratic society, even as he perhaps more often adheres to the decline-and-fall narrative. In the former, pride, passion, heroism, and the experience of being ennobled by great purpose are not lost to universal banalization and degradation but are instead attached to the possibility of rupture with or departure from the world as it is. Here, democratic man is an imagining animal. Where normative meaning in aristocratic society took shape around the dichotomy of noble and base, normative meaning in democratic society takes shape in the tension between opening ourselves and the world to the democratic idea and collapsing into the domesticating pleasures of home—between the passion for revolution and passionless materialism.

Ambitious Words: Democratic Abstraction and the Politics of the Impossible

While it is true, Tocqueville writes, "that a part of the human mind is drawn to that which is limited, material, and useful, another part is naturally drawn upward to the infinite, the immaterial, and the beautiful."[90] The human mind has simultaneously economic and religious leanings. We have seen how the idea of degradation in democratic societies attaches to the belief that an exclusive preoccupation with the economic will come to dominate thought, entirely eliminating the religious. Tocqueville himself expresses the fear that the democratic mind might cease to be fully human, abdicating the human aspiration to transcendence and permitting pragmatic thought full reign. At times, though, he offers the opposite analysis, wherein the idea of grandeur toward which the human mind is drawn is not lost but radically expanded in democratic times. The writers of democracy, for instance, "are always pumping up their imaginations until they become so unreasonably inflated that they forsake the *great* for the *gigantesque*." Combining both strands, Tocqueville writes, "In democratic societies, each citizen is usually preoccupied with something quite insignificant: himself. If he lifts up his eyes, he sees only one immense image, that of society, or the even larger figure of the human race. He has either very particular and very clear ideas or very general and very vague notions; *there is nothing in between*."[91] In this characteristic formulation, democratization does not collapse the dimensionality of the human mind, which is still drawn upward toward the infinite and immaterial—the vast idea of humanity in this case.

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Rather, both the down-turned sight and the upward vision of intellect tend toward unmediated extremes after the democratic revolution. I shall argue that this tendency of democratic thought—to eliminate everything in between the material and the ideal—as opposed to the tendency of thought to either exclusively abandon itself to economic calculations or lose itself in infinite abstractions, is at the center of Tocqueville's critique of the democratic way of life.

For Tocqueville, the democratic revolution and the works of religion mirror one another in proceeding by way of abstraction from all particulars. "Religions," Tocqueville writes, "consider man in himself, without regard for what laws, customs, and traditions of a country have added to the common base. . . . The rules of conduct which religions prescribe . . . are based on human nature itself." The more a religion maintains this "abstract and general character," the "more it spreads, despite differences of laws, climate, and men."[92] The "political gospel" of the revolution in France, with its rules of conduct prescribed by nature's truth of universal equality and the rights of man, similarly "considered the citizen in an abstract manner, outside of any particular society, . . . independently of time and place."[93]

The difference between religious and revolutionary modes of abstraction is as significant as their similarities, however. Where religion reserved its ultimate abstraction for the divide between this world and the next, between lower and higher, the revolution sought to realize its timeless and placeless aspirations in the here and now. With the revolution's goal of imminent transcendence, the "always to come" logic of the next world gave way to that of the next step—dynamic movement supplanted hierarchical order in salvational thought. The revolutionary project operated, in turn, through the near-total denial of the present world (the world of particular times and places) so as to enact a timeless archaic past/timeless utopian future of unfettered equality, liberty, and fraternity. The revolutionary rupture—whether conceptualized as toward pastoral origins or pristine newness—constituted as much a departure from the conventional world as an attempt to presently establish democratic ideas and principles. From "thick treatise to the popular song," Tocqueville writes of France, revolutionary thought went on a sort of mass pilgrimage from the city of experience to a city of imagination: "Above the real society, whose constitution was still traditional, confused, and ir-

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regular, where laws remained varied and contradictory, . . . there was slowly built an imaginary society in which everything seemed simple and coordinated, uniform, equitable, and in accord with reason. Gradually, the imagination of the crowd deserted the former to concentrate on the latter. One lost interest in what was, in order to think about what could be, and finally one lived mentally in the ideal city the writers had built.”[94] At an “almost infinite distance” from practical experience, this “literary society” was engineered upon “pure theory,” “abstract speculations,” and that which filled “dreamers’ imagination.”[95]

As the French were striving through a program of revolution to ensure the victory of the dream, Tocqueville writes that even “political life was violently driven back into literature.”[96] Where political affairs had been conducted by men of action par excellence (aristocrats and statesmen), the politics of revolutionary France was conducted by “men of letters” (writers, philosophers, lawyers, economists). In Tocqueville’s telling, these ivory-tower intellectuals’ “profound practical ignorance” was matched only by their “taste for the original [and] ingenious.” Laboring to put into action a “literary politics” full of “general expressions, abstract terms, ambitious words, and literary turns of phrase,” they were impractical as much out of a “contempt for existing facts” as out of inexperience.[97] At once beautiful and terrible, the result is what Tocqueville calls “the politics of the *impossible*”—perfectly ordered, wholly moral and just, universal in scope, purified of any departure from principle by perpetual revolution, constitutively uncompromising, and willfully unrealistic.[98]

With its ambitious words—in the audacity of its abstractions and its sense of impossible possibility—the revolution of which democracy was born founds a pride and purpose as expansive as the neediness Tocqueville saw in democracy’s future. This is the society and politics of “I have a dream.” In times of hierarchical order, pride attached to the lofty station of man, which presented itself to the eye in the pinnacle figure of the aristocrat. In times of democratic openness, with the collapse of hierarchical order, pride attaches to the (re)creative capacity of man, which presents itself to the mind in the phenomenon of revolution. The aristocrat, in his recognized superiority, judges himself to stand atop society and creation; the democrat, even in his recognized equality, imagines himself to rise above society and creation. Man as commander is

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succeeded by man as creator. Where the pride of the aristocrat followed from his capacity for action in the world, the pride of the democratic revolutionary follows from his capacity for imaginative abstraction from the world—with the thought of breaking with and remaking the world. Tocqueville calls this the "pride and absolute spirit of makers of systems."[99] Aristocratic elevation is not lost through democratization, then, but rather outstripped by the idea of transcending and overpowering fettering reality—from nobility to perfectibility in "a world astonishingly open."[100]

Thus, while democratic modernity in France might culminate in the timid flock animals of socialism, for Tocqueville, the revolutionary opening of the world to democratic principles was ushered in by no less than a "cult of blind audacity."[101] Indeed, it "became impossible to say what unheard of audacities the minds of the innovators would be led to, liberated at one stroke from all the limits that religion, custom, and law impose on the human imagination."[102] The long narrative arc of the democratic character in France ranged from the heights of the revolutionary creator to the encroaching degradations of the materialistic creature. The story of democracy in France is one of the departure from the scene of great men, great parties, great principles, great passions, great revolutions, and all those quasi-religious aspirations and abstractions of literary society. With the passing of the revolutionary moment, the sensible, practical, unprincipled mediocrity of commercial society was the best that remained. The absurdity of the revolution of 1848 and its aftermath confirmed in Tocqueville's eyes the coming of something much worse.

Tocqueville's interpretation of democracy in America and of democracy as such, however, does not exactly conform to this narrative of democracy in France. Rather, while the equality of conditions renders the *occurrence* of great revolutions rare in established democracies, it would appear that the *passion* for revolution—for the openness inscribed in democracy's revolutionary heritage—might endure. The idealizing imagination might endure. Here, the collapse of hierarchy generates a permanent belief in limitless possibility and indefinite perfectibility as much as a sense of stultifying mediocrity. Tocqueville represents these "literary" qualities as abundant in the America of his time and in the

concept of democracy, if not to the unhinged extent to which they were present in the France of his past. Extending Tocqueville's analysis, I shall suggest that democratic society has not taken shape in the arc from revolutionary audacity to bourgeois (much less socialistic) tameness but rather is constituted in permanent tension between these polar opposites. The democratic character sees himself as at once revolutionary creator and materialistic creature.

The Poetry of Democracy

The contrast Tocqueville draws between French and American democracy is well known. The former is a social state wherein democratic equality is alloyed with the alien presence of violent revolution—warped by first the act and then the memory of revolutionary conflict. The latter is a social state of untroubled equality and so of democracy relatively closer to what Tocqueville considers its natural form. France is a theater of democratic revolution, and America of democracy as such.

The contrast of French and America democracy would seem to map on to the dichotomy of literary and commercial society. As Tocqueville describes it, American life is directed not by utopian men of letters, with their quasi-religious abstractions and reckless idealism, but by pragmatic men of business—makers of things rather than of systems. The settled equality Americans take for granted levels their gaze toward the particular and material things of this world. Absent grand ambitions, Americans—and eventually "all men who live in democratic times"—acquire the "habits of the industrial and commercial classes": "Their minds take on a serious, calculating, and positive cast. They gladly turn away from the ideal and aim for some visible nearby goal."[103] Where France has economists and political philosophers (physiocrats and philosophes), America has businessmen and politicians.

A number of intertwined contrasts follow. Where revolution gave French thought an ideological and uncompromising bent foreign to the egalitarian mind, American thought is empirical and practical—it never has "so blind a faith in the correctness and absolute truth of any theory." Where the idea of revolutionary rupture moved the French to abandon the real world of facts and experience for a world of "general and eternal laws" that "encompass the entire human race," such sweeping generali-

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ties "terrify" the Americans, who are "accustomed to concrete calculations" and prefer "common sense" to "genius." In turn, where French thought is always lunging via abstraction toward universality and so toward uniformity and systemization, Americans "honor practice above theory" and are always "correcting . . . ideas through experience." Finally, where revolutionary democracy is inherently nonterritorial and expansionistic, Tocqueville describes American democracy as utterly local (only at great pains made national). And these qualities of the businessman order other spheres of life beyond the economic. For instance, scientific study in America conforms to these commercial norms, with its preoccupation with "the tangible and the real in all things." Tocqueville notes that "in America, the purely practical part of the sciences is admirably cultivated," while almost no one "devotes himself to the essentially theoretical and abstract aspects of human knowledge."[104]

Democracy is not without its own literary qualities, though. In the full picture Tocqueville presents, the dualism of literary society and commercial society is hardly less characteristic of American democracy and of democracy in general than of democracy in France. Americans are as idealistic as they are pragmatic, they are as taken with the immaterial and infinite as they are inveterately materialistic, and they are nearly as liable to lose themselves in vast abstractions as in practical details and particular facts. And Americans are not just conservative and rooted in the local; they "have always demonstrated a decided taste for the sea" and they "already reach well beyond" the limits of their "territory." Indeed, nowhere does the American "perceive the limits that nature may have imposed on man's efforts," and this renders him "ardent in his desires, enterprising, adventurous, and above all innovative." Amid the "universal movement that dominates everything else in the United States," an "American experiences all life as a game of chance, a time of revolution, a day of battle."[105] The difference between the French men of '89 and the average American seems here more of degree—or of the direction of revolutionary exertions—than of type.

We have seen how democracy's point of departure in American was the attempt to ensure the victory of an idea in the world, just as in France. To some extent, the impossibility of ensuring this victory in France except through revolutionary rupture was contingent upon French

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social and political conditions—the old world had to be erased to make way for the democratic idea.[106] American democracy took shape differently because it did not need to undergo the terrible labor of revolution; born equal into the new world, it need not be born again. At the same time, though, Tocqueville's interpretation of democracy in America demonstrates that the passion for revolutionary rupture is not merely contingent upon French circumstances. Rather, this passion is constitutive of the democratic way of life as such. The grand abstraction of universal equality permanently seats the schism of "literary" idealism and "commercial" realism at the center of democracy, just as Christianity takes shape around the schism of this world and the next.[107] The passion for revolutionary abstraction from the here and now is no less basic to democracy than the desire for material well-being in the present moment. The democratic revolution, we might say, is as temporally unbounded as it is territorially unbounded—as recurrent in time as it is expansive in space.

However much Americans—and the democratic type in general—may prefer the commercial to the literary, Tocqueville makes clear that when they do "dream . . . of what will be," their "imagination knows no bounds": "It stretches and grows beyond all measure." This becomes amply evident when surveying the poetry natural to democratic times. Poetry, on Tocqueville's account, "is the search for and depiction of the ideal."[108] As such, the poetry of democracy highlights the tendencies of the idealizing imagination in the democratic social state more generally. To study democratic society's poetry is to study its normative dimensionality.

On first take, it seems democracy is without sources of poetry. Democratic pragmatism and materialism turns thought toward "conceiving the useful and representing the real," while egalitarian homogeneity "not only discourages portrayal of the ideal but also reduces the number of objects to be portrayed." The age of feudal aristocracy, principled upon hierarchy and based in the locality of landedness, was one of constitutive diversity. This deeply ingrained particularity was reflected, for instance, in the religious practices of aristocratic peoples. What seized the imagination was not the axial resemblance of the faiths but the irreducible differences between the faiths. Consequently, religion in aristocratic times overflowed with all sorts of "supernatural beings," "secondary agents," and "intermediate powers between God and man."[109] The dis-

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tant grandeur of these various figures, along with the only slightly less distant grandeur of the aristocrat himself, offered the poets of feudal aristocracy a rich and diverse pallet. So what is left amid universal mediocrity and uniformity for the poets of equality to idealize? The very vastness—the unbounded universality—that opens up before the imagination with the democratic abstraction. The democratic sense of grandeur, as Tocqueville puts it, forsakes "the great for the gigantesque."

Initially, this awakens democratic peoples to inanimate nature: "As they lost sight of heroes and gods, they sought first to depict rivers and mountains." Ultimately, though, material nature proves insufficiently oceanic to spur the democratic imagination, which drives on to the *exclusively* immaterial and infinite. In the idea of "indefinite perfectibility," for example, democracy "opens the future" to poetry. Nobility is supplanted by perfectibility, and the heritable past by indefinite future, as outlets of imagination. Further, the very "similitude of individuals, which makes each of them an unsuitable subject of poetry, enables poets to embrace all in a single image"; thereafter the "nation as a whole" serves as a subject of the ideal. The figurehead of aristocratic command is supplanted by the powerful abstract collective—the father figure by the fraternal. Democratic abstraction does not halt with the nation or the state, however. These ideas fall short, in their remaining particularity and territoriality, of the democratic imagination's reach, which drives on to the idea of merging all nations into "one vast democracy." The democratic abstraction makes it possible for the first time in history, Tocqueville writes, to envision the human race as a single whole. The poets of aristocracy "never *dared* to embrace the destinies of all mankind," looking up only so far as to the relatively trivial actions of passing aristocrats and their particular figures of faith. The democratic imagination is not so timid: "As individuals look beyond their own country and at last begin to perceive humanity as such, God reveals ever more of himself to the human spirit in his full and entire majesty." If belief in intermediate divinities fades, democratic peoples "are nevertheless apt to form a far vaster idea of Divinity itself and to see its intervention in human affairs in a new and brighter light."[110]

Tocqueville thus concludes, "Equality does not destroy all the subjects of poetry; it reduces their number but enlarges their scope." The democratic universe depopulates the heavens and the earth of great poetical

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figures, leaving nothing in between the insignificant individual facts of reality, including the individual, and the vast timeless and placeless panoramas of oceanic nature, open future, global humanity, and the fundamental Divine. Far from collapsing the poetic into the prosaic, the egalitarian social state pushes these categories toward unprecedented extremes—the sublime and the banal. What remains to democratic thought and belief are inconsequential particulars, meaningful only in gigantesque sums, and the view from nowhere, representations of essentially unrepresentable sum and scope, a grandeur beyond grand. What seizes the idealizing imagination is a sort of *formlessness*—of being without determinate, finite, limiting territory, whether conceptually present to the mind in terms of nature, future, humanity, or God. Opposite ends of the circle, uniformity and formlessness are the promise of equality's revolution. Here again we see the movement toward disembodiment at the heart of the democratic revolution. "Democratic poets will always seem petty and cold," for instance, "if they venture to bestow *corporeal form* on gods, demons, and angels and bring them down from heaven to vie for the earth." Tocqueville continues, "But if they seek to link the great events they narrate to God's general design for the universe [as does Tocqueville himself], and to reveal the sovereign master's *thought* without showing his *hand*, they will be admired and understood, because the imagination of their contemporaries naturally follows this same route."[111]

In the end, Tocqueville writes, the confluence of these tendencies turns the idealizing imagination of democratic modernity toward its ultimate content: man—that is, democratic man, who is taken to be man as such, "apart from time and country and set before nature and God." The human being, individual man, the particular sign of democratic humanity: here is the pinnacle figure of democratic abstraction, of the revolutionary aspiration to imminent transcendence. At once universal and unique, the self supplants the aristocrat as the centerpiece of poetical imaginings. Insignificant as embodied fact of the world, wholly significant as particular sign of humanity, the individual, like God, must be explored in depth, in its oceanic and fundamental nature, before or beyond corporeal form, to rouse the poetics of democracy. The portrayal of the ideal here requires "sounding the depths of [man's] immaterial nature," delving "beneath the surface revealed by the senses to catch a

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glimpse of the soul itself."[112] Contra the bourgeois individual, the democratic individual is a world apart from materialistic or superficial—the seeker of souls and soul mates.

In representing the ideal, then, a democratic poetry of the impossible accompanies the democratic "politics of the impossible." "Finding no more material for the ideal in what is real and true, poets give up on truth and reality altogether," just as France's revolutionary men of letters did.[113] Democratic idealization is drawn away from corporeality of the present moment and toward the irreducibly immaterial and infinite. The ideal is supplanted by the utopian. We might follow Tocqueville's reasoning beyond his immediate interpretation, to surmise that the moment even the vast abstractions of democratic modernity (nature, nation, state, humanity, divinity) are given representative form—as soon as they are objectified, conventionalized, and domesticated by definitional borders and boundaries—the idealizing imagination will be left cold and turn elsewhere. Public opinion will be inviolable when voiced from nowhere by "the people" or as "common sense" but will lose its normative weight the moment it is depicted in poll form. State and market "forces" will stand above question until they are materialized in actual institutions, corporations, and persons. The divine will be sapped of its grandeur the moment it is made manifest in particular religious form.[114] In this way, the poetry of democracy drives ceaselessly onward toward the fundamentally unrealizable in its representations of the ideal; that which is realized ceases to be ideal. There is a sort of revolutionary contempt for existing facts that is intrinsic to the idealizing imagination of democracy.

Democracy, then, is far from without a poetical sense of grandeur. The world as experienced in equality, with its correlates of materialism and mediocrity, is lost to poetry. But the world as imagined with the collapse of hierarchical absolutes, with its correlate sense of openness, of being without form or limits, presents a vast canvas for democratic poetry. Indeed, forsaking the great for the gigantesque, the idealizing imagination is animated by ideas so sublime that the poetry of aristocracy seems petty and absurd by comparison. These poles of equality—of prosaic flatness and poetical openness, of uniformity and formlessness, of perceiving oneself as lost in the crowd and as standing as the particular sign

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of universal humanity—give the democratic social state its dimensionality, as with nobility and baseness in the aristocratic social state.

Tocqueville thus offers both of the following: “Equality does not destroy the imagination . . . , but it does limit it, forcing it to hew close to the earth as it flies”; and “I have no fear that the poetry of democratic peoples will prove timid or quite mundane. I worry, rather, that it will constantly be losing itself in the clouds and end up depicting worlds that exist only in the imagination.” This same bipolarity is reflected in democratic language. With their sober, scientific, commercial cast of mind, democrats favors “plain language” to “bandying about big words.” These are the single-syllable words of pragmatic communication, used free of airs and formalities and employed when even simpler signals do not suffice. At the same time, democratic peoples have “a taste and often a passion for general ideas” and “vagueness,” which “manifests itself in democratic language through the constant use of generic terms and abstract words.”[115] These are ambitious words—the meaning of which transcends their word forms—that struggle to express ideas beyond what language can convey. In these things Tocqueville does not contradict himself. Rather, he envisions the dualism of the democratic social state.

The whole image of democratic society comes into view in a minor but telling chapter from *Democracy II:* “Why Americans Build Such Insignificant and Such Great Monuments at the Same Time.” In democratic times, “man’s imagination shrinks when he thinks of himself as an individual and expands without limit when he thinks of the state.” Reflecting these poles of the imagination in their works, democratic peoples “produce a host of trifling works but also erect a small number of very great monuments. Between these two extremes . . . there is nothing.”[116]

The Specter and Prospect of Humanity

Tocqueville is less than enraptured by the literary abstractions that capture the democratic imagination. At times he seems as wary of the democratic sense of grandeur as of democratic degradation. Interpreters of Tocqueville have long emphasized his warning that individuality and diversity might be submersed in the experience of the limitlessness that is characteristic of democratic times. Forsaking the great for the gigantesque, the individual feels insignificant before the very vastness he idealizes.[117] This phenomenon manifests itself in a variety of ways—as the

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sense of being "lost in the crowd" amid the monolithic sameness of mass society, as gravitational peer-pressure conformity to public opinion, as the tendency to drain the world of its particular qualities and reduce human perception to quantification and human judgment to accountant calculation: in all things, the more the better—the greater number as the greater as such. Tocqueville fears above all that the democratic abstraction paves the way for centralization and the abdication of individual rights to the "the social power."[118] Transcending territoriality, the democratic movement arcs from the local particularities of feudalism to the uniformity and centralization of socialism.

For all of his praise of the principled audacity and selfless abandon of the revolutionary men of '89, Tocqueville argues that their beautiful abstractions and universal systems only streamlined things for further concentrations of power. Perhaps paradoxically, the passion for revolutionary transcendence fosters centralization, no less than the passionless need for material well-being does . In contrast, Tocqueville praises Americans' clear-eyed if shortsighted conduct of "public business." Close to home, experienced directly rather than muddled by all sorts of speculative representations, American politics "force each citizen to be concerned with government in a practical way, [and to] moderate the excessive taste for general theories in political matters that equality encourages."[119] Carrying the pragmatic, utilitarian, empirical caste of mind of commercial society into political life, Americans check the centralizing bent of the poetical imagination by virtue of firsthand and hard-headed experience.

It would be a mistake, however, to take Tocqueville's wariness as an outright condemnation of democracy's ambitious words and ideas. The "passion for general ideas" follows from both the "inherent virtues and defects" of the democratic mind, and the "great merit . . . as well as the great weakness" of democratic language lies in the "constant use of generic terms and abstract words."[120] Regarding its defects, democratic abstraction leads to obscurity of thought and vagueness of language.[121] More troubling, the passion for general ideas threatens the notion of human agency. In aristocratic times, the "world stage" was occupied by a small number of "leading actors"; the "influence that a single individual [could] exert" upon the human epic was obvious to all.[122] In democratic times, "when all citizens are independent of one another and each of them is weak," society "seems to proceed on its own owing to the free

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and spontaneous cooperation of all its members." Tocqueville continues, "This naturally prompts the mind to look for the general reason that could have struck so many intellects at once and simultaneously reoriented them all."[123] It becomes, in turn, tempting to believe that human action in general "is not voluntary, and that societies are unwittingly obedient to a superior force, which dominates them"; any cause "vast enough to apply to millions of people at once and strong enough to move them all in the same direction might easily seem irresistible."[124] The aristocratic world of commanding authorities gives way to a democratic world of controlling powers, against which resistance is futile. The stage exit of the aristocratic actor clears the way to explaining human action in terms of the vast, unseen, and impersonal imperatives of, for instance, "the nature of races" or "the spirit of civilization"—of the course of history, fate or chance, subconscious human instinct, choice standardized as generic rationality, the invisible hand of market forces, evolution's genetic programming, and other such general, spontaneous, and insurmountable ordering powers.[125] Sounding the depths of man's immaterial nature in search of the soul, we discover the determinate universal constant that we are in fact "98% chimp."[126] In such ways, the grand abstractions of the democratic imagination can be as degrading as the need for comfort, security, and pleasure. Democratic grandeur is not necessarily elevating. The democratic individual might submit to the thought that he "has no power over either himself or his surroundings," that his influence over events and even himself amounts to a drop in the oceanic.[127] Transcending limits and forms, overawed, he stands as free as he is powerless. Lost in the gigantesque, confined to the fatal circle of his own felt weakness, though once he dreamed of transforming the world, he here concedes that he cannot even reform himself. A "false and cowardly" principle issuing from the idealizing imagination, determinism joins socialism as the twin aspects of unwitting obedience—of democratic tameness.[128]

At the same time, though, Tocqueville maintains that the abstract thought and language of democracy captures as much as it obscures of what is true, good, and beautiful. First, general causes really do "explain more things in democratic centuries than in aristocratic ones, and particular influences explain less." Tocqueville identifies his use of the word *equality* "in an absolute sense" and "without applying it to something in

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particular" as an example of democratic abstraction. Second, for all his praise of Americans' business-minded tendency to check general theories against experience and grand principles through practical application, Tocqueville writes that if "the sources of our enlightenment were ever to die out, they would dwindle gradually," as we "limit ourselves to applications, [and] . . . lose sight of principles." While dissolving individuality and agency into the protean abstractions of democracy "would soon paralyze the new societies and reduce Christians to Turks," abandoning those abstract principles and theories in an exclusive preoccupation with practical concerns would lead to "the singularly static character of the Chinese mind."[129]

Tocqueville's full ambivalence comes into view in his discussion of that vastest of democratic generalities: humanity. In times of equality, man "sees around him only people more or less like himself"; for that reason, "he cannot think of any segment of humanity without enlarging and expanding his thought until it embraces the whole of mankind."[130] Tocqueville fears the swallowing up of individuality in this universal resemblance, with the reductive/expansive power of abstraction dissolving particular identities, leaving only the homogeneous generality of "the mass." At the same time, the recognition of human resemblance proves no less than providential, opening consciousness to generalizations like human rights and human dignity.[131] In predemocratic times, people simply could not conceive of the noble truth that a "common thread" ties "all together into the vast bosom of the human race."[132] Again associating democratic and Christian abstractions, Tocqueville writes that "it took the coming of Jesus Christ to make people understand that all members of the human race are by nature similar and equal."[133]

I suggest, then, that Tocqueville is concerned less with the abstract dimension of democratic thought and speech as such than with the tendency to expand this dimension to exclusive extremes. He never denies that the egalitarian generalization advances the highest human calling of freedom. For instance, the recognition of human equality and resemblance, and so of the universal rights of man, at long last exposed the practice of slavery as an ignoble lie—grossly unjust and based on false doctrines. But this very consciousness of similarity, when taken to extremes, threatens to annihilate the individual and his rights, cul-

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minating in the idea of humanity as herd, as one vast, undifferentiated multitude. The prospect of slavery is rehabilitated, expanded beyond all previous forms and limits, and insinuated into the soul itself as domestication, as the individual's loss of humanity. The very condition that enables us to envision totalizing freedom enables us to foresee a totalizing slavery.

Conclusion: Principle versus Practice in Democratic Society

Perhaps above all, Tocqueville views the transition to democratic modernity as a transformation in the way we imagine human degradation and grandeur. In his account, degradation in democratic times takes shape as domestication. Tocqueville associates this dissolution of human dignity with the felt powerlessness and insignificance of insurmountable mediocrity and overawing vastness, with the diminution of pride, passion, and purpose, and with the overriding need for material well-being. Compared with the proud aristocrat and the audacious revolutionary, the democratic individual is petty, timid, and soft—self-centered but without the resources for self-respect. At the opposite end of the spectrum, the democratic sense of grandeur takes shape as an idea we struggle to put into words, a sense of formlessness and limitlessness perhaps best represented as "openness." Where modern conceptions of degradation follow from the experience of equality, openness and its concomitant notions of freedom issue from the revolutionary advent of equality, when the hierarchical absolute gave way to the democratic abstraction. The democrat draws his immense pride, passion, and purpose from the aspiration to openness, which imbues the idealizing imagination with thoughts of infinite possibility, indefinite perfectibility, and imminent transcendence.

What Tocqueville shows is that both aspects of democratic society—both its characteristic degradation and grandeur—are principled upon equality, which can be divided out as the dual presence of equality and absence of hierarchy. The leveling of equality is conjoined to the openness of this absence of hierarchy, domestication to liberation. In turn, neither element of democratic society can overcome its other. That which makes indefinite perfectibility conceivable at the same time makes indefinite corruption conceivable. The correlate of the transcendent possi-

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bility we idealize is the bottomless need we fear possible. The movement toward one extreme conceptually enables a countermovement toward the other extreme. Thus is Tocqueville's fear of our finally succumbing to tutelary domestication not warranted by his own analysis. Given the normative dimensionality of the democratic regime, the specter of slavery welcomed into the soul is better understood as a *constitutive insecurity* of democracy. Being tamed by tutelary power—whether political, social, religious, economic, or otherwise—is the mode of dehumanization we believe most likely and perhaps in a way most tempting (as opposed to, for instance, evil's seductions). But as the antithesis of openness, with its promise of revolutionary liberation and sovereign independence, this unwitting docility defines our condition as our paramount anxiety rather than as present reality. Indeed, that Tocqueville's fears remain our own attests to the point that we remain not so shamelessly tamed.

Envisioned as a whole, then, the democratic way of life is ordered and animated by a permanent, fundamental tension between the fear of domestication and the aspiration to openness—between sinking below and rising above the human condition. After the democratic revolution, we foresee the collapse of society into the purely economic—into petty self-interest and competition, shallow materialism and consumerism, the meaningless pursuit of bodily pleasures, and so forth: all the world reduced to Wall Street, Hollywood, and Las Vegas. At the same time, *for the same reason* and to a *mirror extreme*, we envision a sort of quasi-religious pilgrimage of moral and spiritual transcendence, abstracting from the fetters of all thing material, bodily, and territorial: all the world democratized, freedom's reign established over global humanity. The character of democratic consciousness and society is captured not by either extreme but in the simultaneous tendency toward both extremes. Here we have the full portrayal of life in democracy: "The same equality that allows each citizen to entertain vast hopes makes all citizens individually weak. It limits their strength in every respect, even as it allows their desires to expand." The same equality "drives men forward and at the same time holds them back, spurs them on yet keeps them tethered to the earth."[134]

No less than in Tocqueville's time, this polarity shapes the faiths and works of democratic society today. Consider, for instance, that greatest of

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monuments to democratic modernity: the American Dream. Being in essence abstract and having a global constituency, the dream testifies to democracy's dualism—the vision of imminent transcendence, of movement away from home to wide-open lands of new beginnings and limitless possibilities (westward expansion across the plains, which at once signals the return to pristine nature and the drive toward the future), of pilgrimage to the all-inclusive land of an idea, the land of liberty (immigration), a vision that is always just on the verge of being lost once and for all or collapsing into the American Nightmare of unfettered materialism, petty decadence, and docile conformity (the dream of hitting the open road reduced to one of car and home ownership). As another iteration of dualism—one which is well situated to exemplify the democratic affinity for extreme and mutually exclusive notions of degradation and grandeur—consider the debate surrounding today's so-called genetics revolution. We hear that it is possible "to view genetic engineering as the ultimate expression of our resolve to see ourselves astride the world, the masters of our nature."[135] Molecular biologist Robert L. Sinsheimer plainly states the Promethean resolve of the genetics revolution: "As we enlarge man's freedom, we diminish his constraints and that which he must accept as given. . . . We can be the agent of transition to a whole new pitch of evolution. This is a cosmic event."[136] Ethicist Julian Savulescu offers an even more immoderate formulation of this revolutionary aspiration. With our newfound biotechnological powers, the "next stage of human evolution may be rational evolution, where we select children who not only have the greatest chance of surviving . . . , but who also have the greatest opportunities to have the best lives."[137] Evolution need no longer be a pitch of the die at all. The choice is ours: "the natural lottery or rational choice."[138] Savulescu notes that "our future is now in our hands, whether we like it or not"—failure to exert ourselves over nature "is to be responsible for the results of the natural lottery."[139]

Even as innovations in biotechnology allow us to entertain vast and lofty hopes, however, we apparently take ourselves to be ever more firmly tethered to the earth. Regarding statements like Savulescu's, political philosopher Michael Sandel worries that the power to rewrite our genetic constitutions will produce an overawing extension of responsibility. As we "attribute less to chance and more to choice," he argues that "humility gives way [and] responsibility expands to daunting propor-

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tions."[140] Yet, as new modes of genetic mapping and brain imaging have recently seized the imagination, the very concept of personal moral responsibility is called into question.[141] We have the power to reprogram our nature, but we are powerless to escape our material hardwiring. We slide between the images of ourselves as creature and as creator—far beyond the capacity of aristocratic commander, as the masters and originators of the reality we inhabit, and as puppets on evolutionary strings.[142] As Tocqueville theorized, we paradoxically take ourselves to be without power and without limits, in a wholly determined world where everything is becoming possible. Amid the "cosmic event" of the genetics revolution, we think ourselves always on the brink of both rising above and sinking below the level of humanity—of collapsing into dehumanization and leaping into the "posthuman." In a single stroke, the lines are blurred between man and God, and man and animal.

To return to the question with which we began: how might we understand the simultaneous waxing of democratic principles and waning of democratic political practices? Building upon Tocqueville's works, I argue that this contrary movement is inscribed in the democratic social state itself. It issues from the more general divergence of the "literary world" of ideas and speech (which takes shape as a sort of this-worldly transcendence of the here and now) and the "commercial world" of action (which is reduced to purely economic rationalities and formations). When we think and talk about democracy, we are prone to flights of poetical idealism. We dream of a world reordered exclusively in accordance with democratic principles—a world of openness and revolution, of universal freedom-in-equality, where anything we can imagine is possible. As I take up in the following two chapters, this open world seems as natural, as given and inevitable, as the hierarchical world once seemed. Any sort of authoritarian walling up of self, society, or world is presumed destined for the ash heap of history. At the same time, we are prone to cynically degrade the prosaic world within which we act—whether politically or otherwise—to the status of wholly unprincipled. Within the confines of the material world, the "real world" where power rules, we are experienced enough to know that ideas are decidedly immaterial, talk is cheap, deliberation is a naive waste of time, and arguments are just "spin" meant to manipulate. This sort of world seems

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natural too—real, factual, given, and inescapable. Taken together, the victory of democratic principles seems as inevitable as the basic practices of democracy seem impossible. The key here is that we are not just exceptionally cynical, or exceptionally idealistic, but that we are both exceptionally cynical and exceptionally idealistic, and for the same reason. Limitless idealism and bottomless cynicism are intrinsically linked, polar opposite expressions of the same faith in equality. Our cynicism becomes fully intelligible not as disappointment at failing to achieve our ideals but as the worldly articulation of an idealism principled upon openness.

With this dualism of the world we imagine and the world we experience—of thought and action, principle and practice—democratic society harbors two polar opposite characters. There is the man of business, the executive decider, the practical man of action who just gets things done. And there is the man of letters, the dreamer and artist who speaks for hope and change and the promise of future generations. What is most revealing of democratic society, though, is not the simultaneous predominance of these two types but that their synthesis or mediation appears inconceivable today. The dreamer is all principle and no practice, the businessperson is all practice and no principle, and there is nothing significant in between. In relation to the latter, the former seems uncompromising and/or impotent; in relation to the former, the latter seems calculating and corrupt.[143] The choice is between meaninglessness and powerlessness. The blending of principle and practice by the statesmen gives way to the split between the sell-out politician just “playing politics” to gain power and the moralistic and/or naive political preacher.[144]

Principled upon openness, then, democracy is essentially a politics of the impossible. A contempt for existing facts, including the facts of actual democracy, is not contingent upon conditions and events but intrinsic to democratic society. To give openness form, to embody it in our practices and conventions, is to place limits upon and so degrade openness. In a sort of politics of buyer’s remorse, any determinate representation bounds and domesticates revolutionary possibility. We can never quite realize the victory of the democratic idea in this world; by remaining a world apart, democracy’s victory is assured. Further, progress toward the idea is experienced as regression. Tocqueville famously wrote

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that the "inevitable evil that one bears patiently seems unbearable as soon as one conceives the idea of removing it."[145] In times of democratic openness, we conceive the idea of removing every evil, of indefinitely perfecting the world and ourselves. Those evils that inevitably remain—those inequalities, injustices, immoralities, and limits to our freedom—are more frustrating precisely because they seem more contingent and slight. In Tocqueville's words, "The weight, although less heavy, seems then all the more unbearable."[146] As openness is thought natural, given and inevitable, every restriction, boundary, and material necessity is thought aberrant, arbitrary, and so intolerable. The persistence of imperfectability is taken not as a meaningful aspect of the human condition but as something simply inexplicable and absurd. If there is a cure to every sickness, how do we make sense of our continuing ill health? The politics of the impossible is, in turn, also a politics of impatience. Sensitive to every limitation, flaw, and deficiency, we may see even the steady democratization of America as the steady transformation of America into a more authoritarian, antidemocratic society.

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56. The historical playing out of this logic is described by James Miller in his classic account of how the participatory democracy of the New Left evolved into the antipolitics of the counterculture. See Miller, *Democracy Is in the Streets: From Port Huron to the Siege of Chicago* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987).
57. Tocqueville, *DA,* 272.
58. Wendy Brown, "American Nightmare: Neoliberalism, Neoconservatism, and De-Democratization," *Political Theory* 34, no. 6 (2006): 692.
59. Ibid.
60. Lefort, DPT, 19.
61. In his fascinating study of the radical striving—particularly evident in the writings of Rousseau, Marx, and Lenin (and to some extent, Hegel and Arendt)—to achieve a postpolitical society free of pluralism, conflict, and the need for political mediation, Joseph M. Schwartz writes, "The radical vision's desire to transcend the messy business of democratic disagreement through the instantiation of a solidaristic society embodying true universal human interests not only is profoundly antipolitical; it also violates the very democratic impulses that inspired the radical critique of . . . authoritarian regimes." Schwartz, *The Permanence of the Political: A Democratic Critique of the Radical Impulse to Transcend Politics* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995), 10. The radicalism Schwartz analyzes is born of the principle of democratic equality, and in envisioning a world beyond politics, it reflects its genealogy.

"More Than Kings Yet Less Than Men"

1. Tocqueville, *DA,* 3–14.
2. Sheldon S. Wolin "Why democracy?" *democracy* 1, no. 1 (January 1981): 3–4. "Today it is difficult," Wolin writes, "to imagine that any political scientist or political sociologist in good repute would write a book about the irresistible tide of democracy or its incarnation in America." Wolin, PP, 78.
3. Wolin writes, "Thus democracy is poised to become for our time what aristocracy was for Tocqueville's, the archaic remains of a superseded past. Unlike Tocqueville's aristocracy, however, the passing of democracy, if that is what is happening, is not being experienced as loss, . . . but as freedom from an impossible obligation." Wolin, *TBTW,* 567.
4. Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Democracy on Trial* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), 1.
5. Axel Hadenius, "Victory and Crisis: Introduction," in *Democracy's Victory and Crisis,* ed. Axel Hadenius (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 7, 2–3.
6. Fareed Zakaria, *The Future of Freedom: Illiberal Democracy at Home and Abroad* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2003), 13, 162.

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7. Wolin, "Why democracy?" 3; Wolin, NF, 39.
8. In 1970, Carol Pateman wrote that this minimalist "theory of democracy has gained almost universal support among present-day political theorists": "By the middle of the century . . . even the ideal [of democracy] seemed to many to have been called into question." Pateman, *Participation and Democratic Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 14, 2. How far have we come from this questioning of the ideal of democracy, where today it is difficult to even imagine a legitimate alternative to democracy?
9. Wolin, "What Revolutionary Action Means Today," *democracy* 2, no. 4 (Fall 1982): 23.
10. For all that Wolin's *Tocqueville between Two Worlds* contributes to our understanding of the life and works of Tocqueville, of his theorization of political life in democracy and of democracy against political life, and of his place in modern political thought's attempts to conserve the human in a world made of, by, and for power, perhaps Wolin's greatest contribution is to our appreciation of Tocqueville's approach to the practice of theory—to his "method," if that word is not too misleading. With Wolin's help we are able to see beyond the thicket of Tocqueville's apparent contradictions. Wolin writes, "The ascent of Tocqueville's *theoros* is an escape from details in order to achieve a panoramic vision. Unlike his contemporaries whose theoretical structures were methodically built on premises and hypothesis while professing deference to facts, the structure of Tocqueville's theory was shaped to organize impressions, developing what he called 'tableaux' and 'spectacles.' The model he followed was not that of the scientist but of the painter. The theory he created might be called 'political impressionism.' . . . [It] employs and evokes images, abounds in sweeping generalizations, is richly allusive, dwells on the quality and style of political performance, and persuades by exhibiting rather than demonstrating." Such a theory will, Wolin suggests, "often seem confusing, on the verge of collapse, forced, and artificial." He continues, "It may also compensate with dazzling insights and unsuspected truths produced by a refusal to constrict a particular idea by one invariant meaning." Thus, for instance, precisely in Tocqueville's "contradictions, evasions, and ambiguities" do we see democracy in its actual "multivalent" form and "variety of expressions." Wolin, *TBTW,* 138–143, 96–97.
11. Tocqueville most explicitly highlights the latter in a definition of democracy from a draft fragment for *Democracy II:* "A democratic people, society, time do not mean a people, a society, a time when all men are equal, but a people, a society, a time when there are no more castes, fixed classes, privileges, special and exclusive rights, permanent riches, properties fixed in the hands of certain families, when all men can continuously climb and descend and mix together in all ways." Quoted in James T. Schleifer,

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The Making of Tocqueville's Democracy in America, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2000), 336. Here, Tocqueville describes a type of freedom as coconstitutive with the equality of the democratic social state.

12. Tocqueville, *DA,* 551.
13. Ibid., 821.
14. Aristotle, *The Politics,* book 1, sect. 14 (1253a), trans. Ernest Barker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962).
15. Patrick Deneen touches upon something similar: "The democratic citizen is simultaneously overconfident and overwhelmed. . . . Tocqueville, quite startlingly, sees these conditions as compatible, not contradictory, and, moreover, as extremes which democratic humanity is likely to simultaneously and perpetually manifest. . . . From the dynamics of democratic equality Tocqueville perceives a resulting democratic man who exists simultaneously at a version of both Aristotelian extremes, . . . [exhibiting] both an excess and a deficiency of felt personal significance." In his otherwise illuminating study of Tocqueville, Deneen badly underemphasizes the significance of political life for Tocqueville. We hear, for instance, that the institutions that Tocqueville envisions as moderating democracy's excesses include "the family, civic association, and, above all, religion." It is doubtful that Tocqueville would include the family in this list without qualification, and he most assuredly would include political liberty and political activity, beyond what plausibly might be lumped in with "civic association." Deneen, *Democratic Faith* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005) 223–225.
16. Claude Lefort offers a similar notion when he writes that democracy is properly understood as a regime or *politeia,* as "a 'style of existence' or 'mode of life,' " characterized by "those mores and beliefs that testify to the existence of a set of implicit norms determining notions of just and unjust, good and evil, desirable and undesirable, noble and ignoble." Lefort, *DPT,* 3.
17. As Pierre Manent describes it, democracy in Tocqueville's sense is "something that happens to us, that transforms us, that changes the depths as well as the surface of our lives, something that we do not desire because we do not take cognizance of it when it is most at work, when it has transformed us the most." Manent, *Tocqueville and the Nature of Democracy,* trans. John Waggoner (Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 1996), xii.
18. At times Tocqueville seems to suggest that the advent of Christianity was the true turning point of history and the necessary precursor of the democratic revolution, with the Protestant Reformation and the French Revolution being successive extensions of this original movement.
19. Tocqueville, *DA,* 583, 432, 796 (emphasis added).
20. Tocqueville writes, "I have no doubt that the social and political constitution of a people fosters certain beliefs and certain tastes, which then easily

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become second nature to it, while these same causes eliminate certain opinions and certain penchants without any active effort by the people in question and in a sense without their knowledge." Ibid., 634.

21. Ibid., 459–460, 92.
22. Ibid., 582, 290.
23. Claude Ake, "Dangerous Liaisons: The Interface of Globalization and Democracy," in *Democracy's Victory and Crisis,* ed. Axel Hadenius (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 287.
24. Wolin, *PP,* 41–42, 143.
25. Ibid., 155, 42, 147–148. Economy offers, Wolin notes, subverted "equivalents for democracy's values of participation (mass consumption), inclusion (work force), and mass empowerment ('consumer society,' 'shareholder democracy')." Economic production, Wolin concludes, is what political citizenship was to Aristotle. Ibid., 60.
26. Wolin himself seems to recognize this point when he writes of "the transmutation of democratic values into a democratized economy of opportunity" that is "opened to all" and defined by a sense of "unlimited possibilities." The question, it seems, is this: are we better off thinking in terms of an economic democracy (democracy's colonization by economy) or a democratic economy (economy's colonization by democracy)? Are opportunity, openness to all, and unlimited possibility originally democratic ideas, issuing from the collapse of hierarchy, or originally economic values, issuing from more-material aspirations and imperatives? Similarly, Wolin writes that for "democracy to be exploited a semblance of popular sovereignty has to be preserved" in notions like consumer sovereignty and purchasing power. Why, though, should we think of this relationship between democracy and economy as democracy being "exploited" rather than being reiterated as the legitimizing principle of another sphere of activity—a sphere that has become predominant, overshadowing by far the political, precisely because it seems the venue for a more democratic (more open) democracy? Does this signify the "sovereignty of economy," which is "where real power is to be had," or the sovereignty of democracy, where it would seem real authority is to be had? Wolin, *TBTW,* 268, 274, 570–571.
27. As Lefort describes it, the art of Tocqueville's writing lies precisely in its dimensionality—in that looking upon society, he permits the ambiguities and contradictory properties of social existence into his analysis. Insisting always upon "reversals of perspective," Tocqueville is at once the most general and least reductive of theorists: "Tocqueville lets himself be guided by the exigency of his investigation. . . . Certainly he attempts to bring the democratic experience to the pure expression of its proper meaning; . . . however, he discovers that experience has more than one meaning and works at grasping the opposite aspects of the same phenom-

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enon and at understanding how the oppositions refer from one phenomenon to the other." Our "contemporaries," Lefort continues, "often lose the sense of ambiguity. Everything that happens in their eyes happens as if society had no depth, as if they could see it in one fell swoop, as if they could be satisfied with the celebration of the market or the critique of the state-providence or the condemnation of individualism or the condemnation of mass culture or the glorification of social movements." In my own analysis of Tocqueville and of democratic society, I attempt to do justice to the capaciousness of this method. Claude Lefort, "Tocqueville: A Phenomenology of the Social," in *Liberty, Equality, Democracy,* ed. Eduardo Nolla (New York: New York University Press, 1992), 110–111.

28. Quoted in Darren Rovell, "Baseball Scales Back Movie Promotion," ESPN, May 7, 2004, http://sports.espn.go.com; quoted in Darren Rovell, "The Tangled Web of Sports and Advertising," ESPN, May 6, 2004, http://sports.espn.go.com.
29. *Titanic,* one of the top grossing movies of all time, is only the most obvious example.
30. "Pornography Statistics," Family Safe Media, accessed February 13, 2011, www.familysafemedia.com/pornography_statistics.html.
31. "While marriage is losing much of its broad public and institutional character, it is gaining popularity as a SuperRelationship, an intensely private spiritualized union," write sociologists David Popenoe and Barbara Dafoe Whitehead of Rutgers's National Marriage Project. Popenoe and Whitehead, *The State of Our Unions: The Social Health of Marriage in America* (New Brunswick, N.J.: National Marriage Project at Rutgers University, 2003), 11.
32. Scott Stanley, "Myths about Soul Mates," *Boundless Webzine,* 2005, www.boundless.org/2005/articles/a0001123.cfm.
33. Tocqueville, *DA,* 832, 673.
34. Ibid, 821. I take up Tocqueville's notion of democratic elevation and grandeur—of how we in democratic society take ourselves to rise above the level of humanity—in Part III of this chapter.
35. While Plato speaks of democracy as appearing at first sight like "a many-colored cloak decorated in all hues," Tocqueville sees only that democracy might take "the color out of the whole soul." Plato, *The Republic,* trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1968), 235; Tocqueville, *OR I*, 377.
36. Tocqueville, *DA,* 743.
37. Tocqueville, *OR I,* 173.
38. Tocqueville, *Letters,* 155. "The further away I am from youth," Tocqueville writes in an 1841 letter to Jean-Jacques Ampère, "the more regardful . . . I am of passions. I like them when they are good, and I am not even very certain of detesting them when they are bad. That is strength, and strength, everywhere it is met, appears at its best in the midst of the uni-

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versal weakness that surrounds us. . . . What we meet least in our day are passions, true and solid passions that bind up and lead life. We no longer know how to want, or love, or hate . . . as we flutter heavily around a multitude of small objects, none of which either attracts us, or strongly repels us, or holds us." Tocqueville, *Letters, 152–153.*

39. Tocqueville, *DA,* 743.
40. Tocqueville, *Letters,* 376.
41. Tocqueville, *DA,* 743.
42. Ibid., 759–760.
43. Tocqueville, *Letters,* 143.
44. Tocqueville, *DA,* 759, 881, 743. This characterization would seem to capture France's present for Tocqueville but only one possible future for America.
45. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Recollections: The French Revolution of 1848,* ed. J.P. Mayer and A.P. Kerr, trans. George Lawrence (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2005), 4.
46. Tocqueville, *DA,* 881, 617.
47. Ibid., 621.
48. Tocqueville, *Letters,* 287.
49. Tocqueville, *OR I,* 78.
50. Ibid., 178, 376.
51. Thus, in Tocqueville's view, "anarchy is not the principle evil that democratic centuries must dread, but rather the least of those evils." Tocqueville, *DA,* 622, 787.
52. Ibid., 6–7.
53. Ibid., 759.
54. Tocqueville writes that society even in his own time was "tranquil not because it [was] conscious of its strength and well-being but, on the contrary, because it believe[d] itself to be weak and infirm." Ibid., 11.
55. Ibid., 759.
56. Tocqueville, *OR I,* 451.
57. Tocqueville, *OR II,* 68. Tocqueville also noted that "everywhere it communicated the clarity, the intensity, the freshness of the emotions of youth," even as it displayed the reckless inexperience that is the "chief flaw . . . of youth." Tocqueville, *OR I,* 208, 244.
58. Tocqueville, *Letters,* 303.
59. Tocqueville, *OR I,* 208.
60. Tocqueville, *Letters,* 303. In a letter to J.S. Mill, Tocqueville offers some advice he himself does not always follow: "One cannot let a nation that is democratically constituted like ours . . . take up easily the habit of sacrificing what it believes to be its grandeur to its repose, great matters to petty ones; it is not healthy to allow such a nation to believe that its place in the

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world is smaller, that it is fallen from the level on which its ancestors put it." Ibid., 151.

61. Tocqueville, *DA,* 9.
62. Tocqueville, *OR I,* 377 (emphasis added).
63. Tocqueville, *DA,* 819.
64. Ibid., 818.
65. For an insightful analysis of the theme of pride as a bulwark against democratic despotism, particularly as it arises in his discussion of the three races in America, see Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop, "Editor's Introduction," in Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America,* trans. Mansfield and Winthrop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), lvii–lxiii.
66. Tocqueville, *DA,* 744
67. Seymour Drescher, *Tocqueville and England* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1964), 126. Still the finest analysis of Tocqueville's critique of bourgeois politics and society is Roger Boesche's *The Strange Liberalism of Alexis de Tocqueville* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1987). Perhaps the central reason Tocqueville continues to persuade, fascinate, and confuse, as Boesche explains, is the mix of conservative, Romantic, republican, and democratic elements of Tocqueville's critique of middle-class politics and society even as he remains firmly within the liberal tradition, defending liberal principles of representation and "negative" rights and liberties. See also Boesche, "The Strange Liberalism of Alexis de Tocqueville" and "Hedonism and Nihilism: The Predictions of Tocqueville and Nietzsche," in *Tocqueville's Road Map: Methodology, Liberalism, Revolution, and Despotism* (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2006).
68. Tocqueville, *Letters,* 118, 153; Tocqueville, *Recollections,* 4.
69. Over the past decade, perhaps the finest popular representation of the dread surrounding the decline into an emasculated softness and smallness (the seeking of childish pleasures, the infirmity of old age, feminine weakness and dependence) has been the television show *The Sopranos.*
70. Of course, this was no different in Tocqueville's time, when the inveterately bourgeois reign of Guizot was assaulted in similar terms by Right and Left alike.
71. Tocqueville, *DA,* 818.
72. As we shall see when we take up Lefort's critique of Tocqueville, there are elements of Tocqueville's own theory that suggest tutelary power would have to take an even more abstract and "disembodied" form than that of a centralized state (or even "public opinion," which can be represented via polling). Only something as impersonal as "market forces" would be sufficiently in accord with the outward signs of democratic freedom and equality to be embraced.

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73. When I have had occasion to teach Tocqueville, it is quite evident that his critique of democratic softness and smallness is immediately familiar and utterly compelling to most students.
74. Tocqueville, *DA,* 830.
75. François Furet and Françoise Mélonio, "Introduction," in *OR I,* 37.
76. Tocqueville, *DA,* 525, 515.
77. The following characterization of what Tocqueville here terms "commercial society" and elsewhere terms "literary society" is typical of his thought: "In the very heart of the commercial city par excellence, Hamburg, among the very people who participated in commerce, . . . intellectual activity and [the] taste for high subjects of conversation, [and the] passion for ideas reigned." Tocqueville, *OR II,* 170.
78. Many interpreters of Tocqueville emphasize the distinctions he draws between democracy in America and democracy in France, to distinguish between the two key concepts he associates with democracy: equality and revolution. Embodied in these disparate nations, it comes to seem as if Tocqueville is talking about two different social states, even as he calls both democratic. Jean-Claude Lamberti, for instance, writes that Tocqueville formulates "a revolutionary social state" between those of aristocracy and democracy, that America is the model of democratic equality and France of democratic revolution, and that the "Tocqueville's mind was always occupied by one thought [the defense of political liberty against administrative centralization] whose development we can follow through his constant need to contrast democracy with revolution, democratic culture with revolutionary culture." Lamberti, *Tocqueville and the Two Democracies,* trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), 51, 196, 232. See also Cheryl Welch, *De Tocqueville* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 106–112. My interpretation emphasizes the continuity of equality and revolution—of the absence of hierarchy and the destruction of hierarchy—in Tocqueville's thought as the original end of the democratic social state. While there are surely distinctions to be drawn, they are most often ones of degree rather than type; within the egalitarian imaginary, the revolutionary spirit takes shape as restless energy and agitation, as the revolutionary disease of chronic rebelliousness, as the totalizing assault upon regime form, and all points in between. And while the historical paths to democratization diverged for America and France—departing to the new versus confronting the old, leaving behind versus tearing down—the ideas the nations pursued were analogous. In this interpretation, we can comprehend Tocqueville's multifaceted view, wherein equality and revolution alike promise and imperil political liberty. Tocqueville envisions not two democracies but the dualism of democracy.
79. Tocqueville, *DA,* 4–5, 34, 54, 748.

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80. Ibid., 294.
81. Ibid., 37 (emphasis in original).
82. Ibid.
83. Ibid., 39.
84. Tocqueville, *OR I,* 101.
85. Ibid., 99 (emphasis added).
86. Ibid. Tocqueville describes the product of the Constitution of the United States in similar terms: "The Union is an ideal nation that exists only in the mind, as it were, and whose extent and limits can be discovered only through an effort of intelligence." Tocqueville, *DA,* 186.
87. Tocqueville, *OR I,* 208.
88. In a wonderful note, Tocqueville writes of how Plymouth Rock "has become an object of veneration in the United States": "I have seen fragments of it preserved in any number of cities of the Union. Does this not clearly prove that man's power and grandeur lie entirely within his soul? A rock touched momentarily by the feet of a few wretched individuals, and that rock becomes famous. It draws the attention of a great people. Pieces of it are venerated, and its dust distributed far and wide. What has become of the doorstep of many a palace? Does anyone care?" Tocqueville, *DA,* 38–39.
89. Ibid., 199 (emphasis added).
90. Ibid., 520.
91. Ibid., 561 (emphasis added).
92. Tocqueville, *OR II,* 162.
93. Tocqueville, *OR I,* 100.
94. Ibid., 196, 200–201. The revolutionary pilgrimage Tocqueville describes in the French context of 1789 seems to be reoccurring in the so-called Arab Spring popular uprisings of 2011, as recounted by *New York Times* op-ed columnist Roger Cohen: "J. Scott Carpenter, 46, who once held a senior Middle East job at the State Department . . . (notes that) 'In the Middle East you've had all these young people living free online and then coming to their stupid realities and seeing that the politics were not compatible with their online lives. And the two can only merge in one direction.'" Roger Cohen, "Positive Disruption," *The New York Times.com,* June 23, 2011, www.nytimes.com. Even between worlds that see themselves as in revolution there are striking continuities.
95. Tocqueville, *OR I,* 195–200; Tocqueville, *OR II,* 30.
96. Tocqueville, *OR I,* 198.
97. Ibid., 195, 201–202. Tocqueville writes of how around the time of the Revolution the "administration of Roads and Bridges was . . . taken with the geometrical attractions of the straight line . . . ; it took great care to avoid following existing roads, because they seemed a bit curved, and rather than make a slight detour, they cut across a thousand inheritances." Ibid., 231.

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98. Tocqueville, *OR II,* 213.
99. Ibid., 373.
100. Wolin writes that "ambitions were aroused because modern revolutions appeared to have transcended the received categories of political thinking about revolutions." Where once "the conception was of a closed cycle" in which "the system would return to its starting point and begin again," modern revolutions "seemed to have a greater potential for totally transforming society as well as political institutions and hence of permanently breaking the cycle" with "no predetermined end." The modern "revolution that was in the making, and that would soon spread to other domains of thought and activity," was in the "concept of revolution itself." Wolin, *TBTW,* 46–47.
101. Tocqueville, *OR II,* 213.
102. Tocqueville, *OR I,* 242.
103. Tocqueville, *DA,* 702.
104. Ibid., 495–499, 329. Tocqueville writes, "The Americans carry to excess a tendency that can, I think, be found in all democratic peoples." Ibid., 522–523.
105. Ibid., 463, 470, 466–467.
106. Moreover, administrative centralization in France proved a violent teacher, depriving the French of any chastening practical experience and habituating them to the thought of changing everything uniformly from the top down.
107. In the next chapter I argue that the schism of society and nature—or, better, of conventional society and natural society—comes to replace that of this world and the next.
108. Tocqueville, *DA,* 557, 554.
109. Ibid., 555.
110. Ibid., 556–558 (emphasis added).
111. Ibid., 558–560 (emphasis added).
112. Ibid., 559–560.
113. Ibid., 562.
114. This, of course, is one reason why Tocqueville suggests that religion not get involved in politics.
115. Tocqueville, *DA,* 702, 562, 522, 551–552.
116. Ibid., 536.
117. Tocqueville's most famous critique along these lines takes up the democratic receptiveness to pantheism: "As conditions become more equal and each man in particular becomes more similar to all others, weaker and smaller, . . . one forgets individuals and thinks only of the species. . . . In such times, the human mind . . . invariably aspires to associate a multitude of consequences with a single cause. The mind becomes obsessed with unity and looks for it everywhere. . . . Upon discovering in the world

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but one creation and one Creator, it finds even that primary division of things troubling and deliberately seeks to enlarge and simplify its thought by subsuming God and the universe in a single whole. [It] . . . holds that everything in the world, material and immaterial, visible or invisible, is merely part of one immense being." Such a system "destroys human individuality. . . . All who are still enamored of man's true greatness should join forces to combat it." Ibid., 512–513.

118. Tocqueville writes, "The idea of an unrivaled central power that leads all citizens by itself is one that [democratic peoples] conceive as it were without thinking. In politics, moreover, as in philosophy and religion, the intelligence of democratic peoples delights in simple and general ideas. It finds complicated systems repellent and likes to imagine a great nation whose citizens all conform to a single model and are directed by a single power . . . [and] uniform legislation." Thus, even while "Americans believe that the social power in each state should emanate directly from the people, . . . once that power is constituted, they do not, as it were, imagine it as having limits." Tocqueville concludes that "they are prepared to grant that it has the right to do anything" and that "the rights of the individual" amount to "nothing." Ibid., 789–790.
119. Ibid., 499–500.
120. Ibid., 552.
121. Tocqueville writes, "An abstract word is like a box with a false bottom: you can put in any ideas you please and take them out again without anyone being the wiser." Along these lines, Tocqueville explains the passion for generalization as a practical response to the disorienting flux and bustle of life in democracy, as well as to the impracticality of the Cartesian attempt to independently judge everything for oneself. Too busy to stop and think and wracked by doubt, democratic peoples corner-cut their way out of complications and confusion by use of general ideas and terms. Ibid., 497–498.
122. Ibid., 569.
123. Ibid., 569–570.
124. Ibid., 571–572.
125. Ibid., 570–571.
126. For the history of and reflection upon the implications of this finding, see Jonathan Marks, *What it Means to be 98% Chimpanzee: Apes, People, and their Genes* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002). The cultural fallout from this factoid, both decrying it and celebrating it (to the point of T-shirts and coffee mugs being made in its honor), deserves a study of its own.
127. Tocqueville, *DA,* 571–572.
128. Ibid., 834.
129. Ibid., 570–572, 528, 552.

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130. Ibid., 496.
131. Tocqueville notes that even the "most profound geniuses of Greece and Rome . . . never hit upon the very general yet at the same time very simple idea that all men are alike and that each is born with an equal right to liberty." Ibid., 496.
132. Ibid.
133. Ibid. On Tocqueville's association of the democratic and Christian abstractions, see Furet and Mélonio, "Introduction," 12–13.
134. Tocqueville, *DA*, 627, 759.
135. Michael J. Sandel, *The Case Against Perfection: Ethics in the Age of Genetic Engineering* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007), 99.
136. Quoted in Sandel, *The Case Against Perfection*, 100.
137. Julian Savulescu, "New Breeds of Humans: The Moral Obligation to Enhance," *Ethics, Law and Moral Philosophy of Reproductive Biomedicine* 1, no. 1 (2005): 37.
138. Ibid.
139. Savulescu writes that "impulse control," "shyness," "memory," "patience, empathy, a sense of humor, optimism and just having a sunny temperament can profoundly affect our lives." He continues, "All of these characteristics will have some biological and psychological basis capable of manipulation with technology." Savulescu, "New Breeds of Humans," 37–39.
140. Sandel, *The Case Against Perfection*, 87.
141. For example, in debates surrounding the moral basis of our legal constructs, the question has arisen whether, if the physical processes of the brain determine our "behavior," we can be considered responsible for our actions at all. See Michael S. Gazzaniga and Megan S. Steven, "Neuroscience and the Law," *Scientific American Mind*, April 15, 2005: 43–49.
142. This pattern has played itself out in a remarkable number of conversations I have had with my students. Many seem no less than enchanted by the concept of evolution as a catchall explanatory determinant of (and norm for) most worldly phenomena. And many of these very same students readily suggest that modern technologies (the Internet, in particular) allow them to live increasingly in a literary society of their own invention, as the artists and architects of reality.
143. For example, the extent to which Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton embodied these extreme types in the 2008 Democratic presidential primaries is striking.
144. As I shall argue regarding Sheldon Wolin's theory of "fugitive democracy," today it seems that the marriage of principle and practice can be consummated only in the necessarily fleeting moment of revolution (thus the passion—evident everywhere from our commercials to our political commentary—to exaggerate even the most trivial changes as no less than epochal innovations).

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145. Tocqueville, *OR I,* 222.
146. Tocqueville, *Letters,* 296.

Civilization without the Discontents

1. C. Fred Alford, *Rethinking Freedom: Why Freedom Has Lost Its Meaning and What Can Be Done to Save It* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 1–2, 16, 50.
2. Ibid., 7, 4, 31 (emphasis added).
3. Ibid., 19–20.
4. Ibid., 20.
5. Ibid., 4, 50, 14. Recall the emphasis on not having to compromise in definitional statements, in Chapter 1, of what it means to be soul mates.
6. Ibid., 16, 29, 12.
7. Ibid., 25, 34, 9, 27.
8. Tocqueville, *DA,* 584.
9. This is, in effect, Seymour Drescher's argument in his classic *Dilemmas of Democracy: Tocqueville and Modernization* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1968). For Drescher, industrialization rather than democratization is the defining phenomenon of modernity. In turn, Tocqueville's vision of the egalitarian eradication of socioeconomic classes is "engulfed in a sea of social differentiation" that is produced largely by the division of labor and that results in a "functional elite" and a "functional hierarchy"—"a new aristocratic system." He writes, "Under the impact of industrialization, wealth was not radically redistributed, and social positions as defined by birth, religion, or occupation seemed a more empirically significant fact than the rhetoric of equality and of social mobility." Drescher, *Dilemmas of Democracy,* 255–279. One wonders, though, what we are to make of the empirical fact that, regardless of one's birth, religion, or occupation, most everyone today proudly declares their membership in the middle class, whether upper middle, lower middle, or some variation thereof. Perhaps this does suggest a certain democratization of class differences.
10. Alford, *Rethinking Freedom,* 1.
11. Like Drescher, Mark Reinhardt conflates inequality and hierarchy in an often-heard critique of Tocqueville: "While he worried about despotism born of equality, the despotisms of the present day are fundamentally inegalitarian. We work, play, go to school, and carry out the business of living amidst complex hierarchies of prestige, privilege, and power." Reinhardt, *The Art of Being Free: Taking Liberties with Tocqueville, Marx, and Arendt* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1997), 51. Françoise Mélonio, conversely, captures Tocqueville's position well: "That in democracies there is inherited money and intelligence, Tocqueville did not doubt.

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