
Conclusion

Postpolitics: Society without Argument

It is the political man that we must develop in ourselves

—Tocqueville, Letter to Beaumont, October 25, 1829

To Love Our Oppression

In his classic work of social commentary, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, Neil Postman argues that we are living in—or fast approaching—something like Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*. Postman famously juxtaposes the mode of domination characteristic of this dystopia to that of Orwell’s *1984*: “Orwell warns that we will be overcome by an externally imposed oppression. But in Huxley’s vision, no Big Brother is required to deprive people of their autonomy, maturity, and history. As [Huxley] saw it, people will come to love their oppression, to adore the technologies that undo their capacities to think.” Such oppression is less overwhelming than undermining, operating through deprivation rather than degradation, aiming not to defeat our strengths but to prey upon our weaknesses. It is based not primarily in prohibition but in permission; far from being constrained, the oppressed are immediately granted their every felt desire: “In *1984* . . . people are controlled by inflicting pain. In *Brave New World*, they are controlled by inflicting pleasure. In short, Orwell feared that what we hate will ruin us. Huxley feared that what we love will ruin us.”¹

So what do we love ruinously today? What do we adore without thinking and against our capacity for thought? In Postman’s account, what we love above all and perhaps exclusively is the narcissistic, visceral pleasure derived from a certain form of entertainment most closely associated with music and images orchestrated in an immediately accessible, intellectually predigested, ego-massaging, emotion-stirring narrative.

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1 We love television, in other words, along with any other screen-image,
 2 response-stimuli device. Television is our soul mate, perfectly and ex-
 3 clusively suited in its technological capabilities to present that which we
 4 at bottom most want, without compromise. We are oppressed, in turn,
 5 as were Pavlov's dogs by the dinner bell. Conditioning and control come
 6 to seem like freedom when freedom seems like desire fulfillment. The
 7 scale model of domination here is not the gray, walled-up city of Soviet-
 8 occupied East Germany but rather the excessively permissive, blindingly
 9 colorful dream cities out west: Las Vegas and Hollywood. "Today," Post-
 10 man writes, "we must look to the city of Las Vegas, Nevada, as a metaphor
 11 of our national character and aspiration . . . [to live] entirely devoted to
 12 the idea of entertainment."² When Las Vegas becomes our defining as-
 13 piration, when we are devoted to the orthodoxy and orthopraxy of en-
 14 tertainment "in a society that worships TV," when our existence is so
 15 flattened and we have so sunk below the level of humanity, the circle is
 16 closed and our oppression becomes self-sufficient and self-perpetuating.³
 17 Beyond futile, resistance becomes incomprehensible. That which should
 18 be highest—our sources of devotion and worship—has been consumed
 19 by that which is lowest. Modernity's democratic promise of popular self-
 20 government has given way to modernity's democratic promise of popular
 21 self-gratification.

22 It is, of course, difficult to gauge our complicity in this process of sali-
 23 vating domestication. In one sense, unwilling to perform the hard work
 24 of leaving home, of laboring to give birth to autonomy out of paternal-
 25 ism, we seem in our dumb and soft hedonism the agents of our own
 26 domination, taking the road far more traveled by, from one sort of de-
 27 pendence to another. In another sense, such oppression involves a sort
 28 of conspiracy against us so insidious and creeping, so vast and abstract,
 29 so impersonal and in a sense accidental, that we are not even aware of
 30 our domination, much less responsible for it. Where in the first formula-
 31 tion we have given in to our lower nature, in the second we are lost in a
 32 second nature. Whatever the source of our addictive indulgence, though,
 33 the outcome is the same: oppression operates unseen through seduc-
 34 tion rather than repression—indeed, in part through the taboo against
 35 repression and inhibition. Censorship is unnecessary, as no one pays
 S36 attention to or says anything worth being censored—indeed, the prohi-
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bition of censorship fits well with the Las Vegas brand of oppression. 1
 Books need not be burned, as no one cares to read—especially those 2
 books that would be unsettling enough to be burned. This notion of op- 3
 pression through distraction, amusement, and trivialization is so pernicious 4
 because it proceeds without question, protest, or even much notice. 5
 It catches us sleeping, or celebrating: “America’s consuming love-affair 6
 with television . . . appears benign, when it is not invisible altogether. . . . 7
 But it is an ideology nonetheless, for it imposes a way of life, a set of re- 8
 lations among people and ideas, about which there has been no consen- 9
 sus, no discussion, and no opposition. Only compliance.”⁴ The more 10
 television indoctrinates us to the ideology of the image, the less are we 11
 aware of its influence over us. So vast is its power that its power goes 12
 undetected. Our situation becomes quite apparently like Plato’s cave, 13
 whose inhabitants grow so habituated to their shadowy and constrained 14
 condition that they affirm it as true and good; they literally cannot con- 15
 ceive of any other way of life, and so they embrace their oppression even 16
 once it is exposed.⁵ No first-time reader of Plato’s *Republic* fails to no- 17
 tice the similarity between the architecture of the cave and that of our 18
 living rooms. 19

Postman’s powerful critique of American culture continues to reso- 20
 nate broadly and deeply today, if anything even more so with the tech- 21
 nological revolutions that have, it seems, cast all in television’s image. 22
 Cogent social commentary now sounds like chilling prophesy as the 23
 amusing image has gone viral, insinuating its way into our every wak- 24
 ing hour—all the world’s a screen, and all the men and women merely 25
 viewers. What better reflects the regrettable course of our culture back 26
 to us than the familiar images of the iPod zombie, the Internet junkie, 27
 the video game besotted, the creature with the body of a man and the 28
 head of a cell phone? Who hasn’t heard parodied those monuments to 29
 narcissism that are YouTube and Facebook? We turn our private lives 30
 into advertisements for ourselves, to accumulate “friends” with whom 31
 we never converse but who will be informed as our audience of the news 32
 of ourselves. Human relations are reduced to social networking, lived 33
 literally on-screen, with communication performed via computer im- 34
 age, all in the society of privatism, passivity, and egoism par excellence. 35
 What in popular imagination has come to demonstrate our age of show 36S
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1 business and its “descent into a vast triviality” better than (sur)reality
2 TV—from Las Vegas to the Jersey Shore?⁶ And if not in the sophisticated
3 terms of Postman’s analysis, who isn’t amused by the gallows humor of
4 the age of typography ending in Twitter—in with the Bible, out with a
5 140-character tweet?

6 When we criticize our culture, it is perhaps most often by reference to
7 these screen idols. To point out their pervasive and stultifying influence
8 is by now less an insight than a cliché. Reflexively scorning and ridicul-
9 ing the mainstream of our multimedia habitat has itself become main-
10 stream. Our public discourse—accessed almost exclusively through a
11 screen, of course—constantly decries the cocoon of amusing distrac-
12 tions that cut children off from meaningful relationships in the family
13 and the community and from meaningful experiences in the classroom
14 and the world. What could be more familiar than the satire of kids travel-
15 ing on family vacation to some foreign land but never looking up from
16 their armory of personal electronics? Americans more generally are
17 accused of being reduced to softness by the endless stream of junk we
18 consume—whether the junk food that softens our waistlines or the
19 junk-food entertainment that softens our minds and wills. While Post-
20 man, as we shall see, is primarily concerned with the intellectually debi-
21 lilitating consequences of a culture that turns public discourse from
22 argument centered to amusement centered, the primary concern today
23 seems to be this culture’s strength- and drive-sapping consequences. In
24 either case, the difficult things of life—those things that require disci-
25 pline, concentration, and fortitude—are abandoned for the entertaining
26 things of life. We have become a “nation of wusses” and a “nation of
27 whiners,” so addicted to our pleasures and comforts, so dependent upon
28 our luxuries, that we are unable to compete in the global market (the
29 concern here focuses not on our declining capacity to argue together, as
30 Postman writes, but rather on our declining math and science skills).⁷
31 We have become a nation spellbound by the silliness, superficiality, and
32 downright unreality of “celebrity culture” and its manifestations in such
33 enormously popular TV shows as *American Idol* (the concern here is not
34 that we are unwilling to do the hard work of exposition but that we are
35 unwilling simply to work hard, struggle, and sacrifice—we wish to move
S36 from rags to riches through not daily labor but rather overnight fame, by
R37 simply having the camera turned upon us).⁸ Even our most serious pub-
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lic business is represented as a game and performed as a public relations advertising campaign. Our experience of politics is as a game-show business, televised to audiences as ratings-driven “infotainment.” In Postman’s terms, we hear that the American Dream has departed Boston, New York, and Chicago, leaving behind all that those cities might have once stood for, to be buried somewhere in the desert outside Las Vegas and replaced by the American Fantasy.⁹

In all of these familiar elements of our contemporary cultural self-critique (and in many, many others), Postman’s analysis resonates, leaving us to wonder whether Huxley didn’t go far enough. A popular recent representation of our fears in this regard comes from the 2008 movie *Wall-E*. Here, the human being has been fully domesticated: being too overweight to move, lounging in a luxury-bed hovercraft at a pool under a fake sun, indulging every desire for food and drink, being catered to by robots that seem like servants but are actually masters, staring vacantly at huge television screens. But does the very fact that Postman’s critique is so widely recognized today—to the point of being the moral of a children’s movie—undermine its validity? Far from making it a best seller, translated into multiple languages and released in numerous printings, the inhabitants of the brave new world would not have been interested in or able to comprehend *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, or even *Wall-E*—barring John the Savage, of course. Postman’s argument would not have resonated in the London of 632 A.F. As we have just seen, this is not to say that Postman’s analysis doesn’t cover a great deal of the terrain of our contemporary culture. But it does suggest that “America’s consuming love-affair with television” is only part of the picture, that we need to detach his insights from the notion that our media environment functions as a sort of Platonic cave, and that we need to account for the perspective from which we condemn our age of show business, as Postman does.¹⁰ Only then would we arrive at an interpretation of the full spectrum of America’s love-hate relationship with television and its progeny.

Argument as Entertainment

Postman actually pardons the junk-food programming one finds atop the ratings on television. The existence of trivial and distracting amuse-

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1 ments isn't significant. The existence of nothing but trivial and distract-
 2 ing amusements, conversely, indicates "spiritual devastation."¹¹ When
 3 politics, journalism, religion, and education are all put through the tele-
 4 vision rendering plant, processed into the stuff of campaign commer-
 5 cials, infotainment, televangelism, and *Sesame Street*, "the machinery of
 6 thought-control" is operating at full capacity—prison culture by means
 7 of not censorship or surveillance but totalizing "burlesque."¹² When
 8 television has achieved "sovereignty over all of [society's] institutions"
 9 in such a manner, entertainment value becomes the sole standard of
 10 judgment, which is really no standard at all.¹³

11 Like the escape from nutrition in a fast-food culture, a certain "escape
 12 from meaning" that was exceedingly difficult to achieve in a word cul-
 13 ture becomes possible in an image culture.¹⁴ The "language-centered
 14 discourse" that dominated prior to the advent of television was perfectly
 15 suited to conduct "content-laden and serious" arguments, as was the
 16 printed page, upon which such a discourse was modeled. Thinking in
 17 and communicating through the printed word potentially cultivates
 18 certain habits of mind—the "typographic mind"—that involve patient
 19 reasoning, analytic thought, sustained critical reflection upon claims to
 20 rationality and validity, the capacity to logically order assertions and
 21 comprehend lengthy and complex sentences, and so forth. Thinking in
 22 and communicating through the televised image lacks this poten-
 23 tial. Put simply, the printed word involves one's intellect; the televised
 24 image, one's emotions. Television might contain propositional content
 25 but presents it in such a way as to take effect as a feast for the senses—
 26 rapid-fire images, saturated in swirling colors, dynamic and strikingly
 27 beautiful, set to music. The image, in turn, less persuades than pleases—
 28 or stupefies. It performs an argument, in a sense, but without reference
 29 to previous knowledge, context, or continuity, without perplexity, and
 30 without exposition, evidence, discussion, and refutations. Persuasion,
 31 such as it is, occurs by reflex rather than reflection, by the giving off of
 32 appearances rather than the giving of reasons. The image manipulates
 33 rather than convinces.¹⁵

34 One need only view the presidential debates that are allowed by the
 35 medium of television to see Postman's point. Argument is made to take
 S36 the form of advertisement, and so we judge the candidates by the stan-
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dards of how they emote and what “impressions” they leave.¹⁶ The spoken word is ancillary to the image, and intellectual weightiness is performed to the extent necessary to appear presidential. These show-business debates are to actual argument what the dinner bell was to actual meat, exciting but without substance and effortless to digest, leaving us with a politics of psychic secretions. On television, Postman concludes, “propositions are as scarce as unattractive people,” and for much the same reason.¹⁷

Perhaps above all, then, what the television social state—the society not of equality or uncertainty or economy but of the image—eliminates from the human world is the possibility of arguing together. All that argument represents, all the capacities and dispositions that the practice of argument fosters in and requires of people, is undermined when the screen becomes our gateway to encountering each other and the world. As beautiful as it is simplistic, the screen image seduces and stultifies; as ugly as it is complicated, argument either submits to the power of the image and abides by the standard of entertainment, or it is expelled as indigestible from the body politic. Argument, like all else in television society, becomes intelligible exclusively as a sort of game—at best a vigorous contest to score points, at worst juvenile name calling. Politics, the venue of argument and practical judgment in their most serious forms, becomes something to be played—at best a sport, at worst a petty and silly children’s game. Culture’s descent into meaninglessness is the end point of this degradation of the social conversation: “When a population becomes distracted by trivia, when a cultural life is redefined as a perpetual round of entertainments, when serious public conversation becomes a form of baby-talk, when, in short, a people becomes an audience and their public business a vaudeville act, then a nation finds itself at risk; culture-death is a clear possibility.”¹⁸ The dissolution of the place of the word in society signifies that society’s collapse into absurdity.

Image and Openness: The Dimensionality of Democratic Society

In a number of ways, then, Postman and I arrive at similar interpretations of modern American society. There seems no place for the politics of arguing together in the prevailing culture and consciousness. But we

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1 identify very different pathologies. In Postman's account, we no longer
 2 take arguments seriously because we no longer take much of anything
 3 seriously. As in *Brave New World*, there is a sort of bottomless absurdity
 4 to the society that takes shape around television technology. This is not
 5 a condition that is critiqued as absurd, mind you, but an absurd condi-
 6 tion that eliminates the possibility of its critique. The cultural crisis that
 7 follows is all the more tragic for its not being recognized as such; the real
 8 crisis is that there is no crisis. I have raised the prospect—both more and
 9 less troubling—that our condition is based not in meaninglessness but
 10 rather in that which we find meaningful. Postman writes of our con-
 11 suming love affair with television, suggesting that the life of the image
 12 reduces love to desire and then flattens desire to pleasure. We end up in
 13 the terrible state of loving our meaninglessness. We are devoted to and
 14 worship our amusements in a truly one-dimensional way of life, a flat-
 15 screen society. My analysis is less troubling in maintaining that a society
 16 of such totalizing absurdity—wherein its inhabitants do not suffer a
 17 sense of meaning's loss but instead enjoy an unsensed meaninglessness,
 18 unaware of anything having been lost—is most likely impossible and, in
 19 any case, very far from our current predicament. My analysis is perhaps
 20 more troubling, though, in diagnosing the emaciation of our politics and
 21 of the practice of argument more generally, as a symptom of precisely
 22 that which we affirm as deeply meaningful—that which we love not as
 23 entertaining but as authoritative.

24 I have argued that the democratic principle of authority is itself the
 25 source of our political discontent. This is the principle of equality, born
 26 of the revolutionary destruction of the counterprinciple of hierarchy.
 27 Not the advent of a technology or a mode of power or even a form of
 28 communication, but the principle of proper and conceivable relations
 29 between people gives shape to a society. The political, as Tocqueville and
 30 Lefort argue, is primary. We thus more fully make sense of our time as
 31 the age of democracy rather than the age of show business—as taking
 32 shape in the wake of the democratic revolution more so than in the
 33 wake of television, the photograph, the printing press, or the industrial
 34 revolution. Postman recalls the cultural changes that the automobile
 35 brought, changes that would “tell us” how we were to “conduct our so-
 S36 cial and sexual lives” and that created “new ways of expressing our per-
 R37 sonal identity and social standing.”¹⁹ I suggest that we reverse the causal
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arrow between culture and technology and consider the social-symbolic milieu in which social standing persists only feebly and narcissistically as the product of work and wealth (car ownership), a milieu in which personal identity becomes both paramount and open to question and so in *need* of expression, one in which back-seat sex-objectification becomes interesting, and above all one in which mobility comes to equal freedom. Only then can we make sense of the automobile as a significant social artifact, one which seemingly can tell us how to live. The automobile is of interest as more than a mere instrument—like a coffee table or indoor plumbing—primarily because it can be interpreted as an agent of democratic freedom, equality, and ontology (of auto-mobility) and as a threat to democratic community.

Building primarily upon Tocqueville, I have attempted to trace the multifaceted logical consequences of equality's rise and hierarchy's fall in our norms of *freedom* (mastery and escape against domestication, totalizing independence and totalizing liberation against totalizing paternalism); in our norms of *association* (informality against etiquette, both in the intimacy of communal resemblance, from the familial to the human, and in the competition of the market); in our norms of *elevation and degradation* (limitless possibility and indefinite perfectibility toward imminent transcendence, and against the collapse of the human into stultifying mediocrity and meaningless materialism); in our conception of *the human being* (a rights-declaring animal, who interprets himself as primarily self-interested and self-expressive); and in our understanding and embrace of revolution as that which situates us in *time and space* (a compulsive restlessness born of living within indeterminate and eventful history after the dissolution of settled absolutes, a leaving home on pilgrimage into the wilds of New World primitivism and future opportunity, a state of nature always before or beyond the conventionalized present). I summed up these sometimes contradictory, sometimes reinforcing elements of democratic society as its characteristic openness—the open society, the regime of revolution, the social state of nature.²⁰

In my analysis, the perceived absurdity of the politics of persuasion is relative, not absolute. For Postman, meaning deeper than amusement cannot find purchase in the image society. I argue that, in the open society, the experience of significance is not trivialized but rather in a sense radicalized. With democracy's revolutionary abstraction—what

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Lefort terms the dissolution of the markers of certainty—the authority of democratic openness coincides with that which never falls to the level of mere material power or partisan particularity, that which cannot be enclosed in representative or embodying form, that which rises above or drops below the shallow surface of the conventional world. A schism between principle and practice takes shape not contingently but essentially at the center of democratic society, across the spheres of politics, religion, economics, and so forth. Democracy is a society of separations between the sources of authority and the repositories of power—whether between church and state or economics and state, whether between faith and organized religion or democracy and organized politics.²¹ In the open society, the only permissible walls are those that ensure these separations. Authority, the precondition of any experience of meaningfulness, is not desiccated into amusement but expanded into openness; it is not lost, but it is absent—located not yet in this world or, eventually, in the next. And relative to this standard of judgment, the politics of arguing together, the politics of partisanship and small measures, the political art of the possible cannot but seem petty and absurd. Democratic politics goes the way of aristocratic dueling, and for much the same reason. Like the practice of dueling outside the context of aristocratic codes of honor and etiquette, the politics of arguing together ceases to signify.²² Democracy, ultimately, lies not in the argument but in the dreaming—in faith and imagination. In this sense, not the shallowness but the capaciousness of the democratic way of life dissolves the political element of human association. The consequence is not the boundless stupidity of the age of show business but the irreducible and irreconcilable cynicism and idealism of the age of democracy.

One benefit of this interpretation is that it enables us to account for the phenomena Postman identifies, as well as the equally prevalent critique of those phenomena. A full three-dimensional mapping of a social state, free of generalization and speculation, is of course impossible. But initiating an analysis from the presumption that a society of whatever form—even a formless form—takes shape around certain principles of human relations provides at least a two-dimensional theorization wherein the norms invoked to critique society can be understood as internal to that society. One can critique aspects of society while still speaking as part of

that society (rather than necessarily taking up the position of the Platonic guide out of the cave), and one can offer a critique that does not inevitably tend—impelled as if of its own accord—toward grossly reductive exaggeration (that we are, for instance, approaching a brave new world, or any other version of consumer society). One can account for one’s own interpretation and one’s audience, offering a critique that might plausibly begin with “we.” Focusing on the openness of democratic society allows us to make sense of the experiences, both elevating and degrading, of equality, uncertainty, economy, consumerism, the television image, and so forth. We can account for the standard of judgment by which we come to both love and hate television—TV as a pleasure, but a guilty one. Indeed, we can explain why the loss of meaning described by Postman, along with couch-potato docility, boob-tube infantilism, and seduction by advertisers into wanton materialism and neediness are some of the constitutive insecurities of democratic society.²³ The dissolution of settled absolutes and the absence of the father figure imbues the open society with the sense that something eventful is always just about to happen, and the collapse of hierarchy makes it seem as if that something will be the swallowing up of head and heart by gut and groin—consumer society. Revolutionary liberation means that autonomy has become possible but also that we might henceforth be enslaved by way of our needs and desires—from paternalism to maturity or to permissiveness. The inhabitants of democracy experience it as a society always on the verge, whether of transcendence or trivialization.

Democratic Despotism? The Politics of Personality and the Impersonal

At the outset of *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville writes that he looked to America to see “democracy itself,” in its natural state, so that he might “find out what we had to hope from it, or to fear.”²⁴ Regarding the latter, Tocqueville concludes his considerations by formulating what he calls tutelary power. This is the power that domesticates. It looms in the sense of extreme degradation inherent in democratic equality. It is a perversion of “paternal authority” in that it seeks not to “prepare men for manhood” but rather to “keep them in childhood irrevocably”: “It likes citizens to rejoice, provided they think only of rejoicing. It works will-

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1 ingly for their happiness but wants to be the sole agent and only arbiter
2 of that happiness. It provides for their security, foresees and takes care of
3 their needs, facilitates their pleasures, manages their most important af-
4 fairs, directs their industry. . . . Why not relieve them entirely of the
5 trouble of thinking and the difficulty of living?"²⁵ Whatever its me-
6 dium—the state, the market, television culture—tutelary power offers
7 the oppression that we love. As such, it becomes our most pernicious
8 fear—the fear that we will betray ourselves and lose ourselves. We in-
9 voke *1984* when we want to congratulate ourselves for our strength, and
10 *Brave New World* when we want to expose ourselves in our weakness.

11 I have argued that if something approximating democratic despotism
12 is possible today, it is by way of the depth rather than the shallowness of
13 democratic society. Our situation is not one wherein society-wide mean-
14 inglessness, decadence, laziness, cowardice, shallowness, or stupidity is
15 leading toward a modern form of paternalism—or maternalism. Rather,
16 such power is permitted with the migration of meaning from public to
17 private life, and the consequent colonization of the public by the private.
18 It advances, in other words, with what Richard Sennett cast as the "fall
19 of public man." In his 1974 work of that name—perhaps the finest of
20 works in the Tocquevillian tradition—Sennett analyzes the "tyrannies
21 of intimacy" over contemporary public life. "Intimacy," Sennett writes,
22 "is a field of vision and an expectation of human relations. It is the local-
23 izing of human experience, so that what is close to the immediate cir-
24 cumstances of life is paramount. The more this localizing rules, the
25 more people seek out or put pressure on each other to strip away the
26 barriers of custom, manners, and gesture which stand in the way of
27 frankness and mutual openness." Intimacy turns despotic when it is
28 embraced as the sole principle of human association. And it is oppressive
29 in that, in its very depth, it flattens other possible experiences of signifi-
30 cance. Communication, for instance, is reduced to self-expression, the
31 self to be expressed is reduced to a personality, and the standard of judg-
32 ment in the act of mutual personality expression is reduced to authent-
33 icity: all the world's a confessional, and all the men and women merely
34 personalities. It is forgotten, for instance, that displaying manners in
35 accordance with a formal code of etiquette—that "disguise and self-
S36 repression"—may be "morally expressive." Instead, "self-disclosure be-
R37 comes a universal measure of believability and truth," and "intimate
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feeling” becomes “an all-purpose standard of reality.”²⁶ Self-expression and intimate feeling become to the social state of nature what self-preservation and rational interest were to the state of nature; recognition becomes to intimate society what honor was to aristocratic society.

“Intimacy,” Sennett writes, “is an attempt to solve the public problem by denying that the public exists.”²⁷ Largely over the course of the nineteenth century, Sennett explains in a nuanced and wide-ranging historical and sociological account, public life came to be understood as morally deficient, meaningless, and threatening; every stranger came to represent compromise, confusion, and potential narcissistic injury. The solution to the trauma of leaving home was to reimagine public space as an extension of private life. The emotional immediacy and intimate unions once thought possible only in the small republic of family life were to be superimposed onto the “dead public space” of repressive formalities, cold competition, and the mystifying operations of the mass and the industrial machine.²⁸ Where private life had been deemed an alternative to and shield from public life, it had now become the model for public life. As a way of being together in public, familiarity was to replace formality, nature’s informality was to replace the realm of conventional settlements, authenticity was to replace civility, and the embrace was to replace the argument. The modern community—the unmediated association with those like oneself that Tocqueville described as collective individualism—becomes the building block of public life.²⁹ Beyond one’s communities, public space is passed through in the role of the tourist, as a fleeting encounter with strangeness, an encounter intended as an adjunct of self-development.

Sennett’s intimacy is thus no less destructive of public life—particularly *political* public life—than Postman’s image. Like the image, intimacy can do without mediating words.³⁰ Both thereby discredit what today can only seem a matter of “public relations” or “mere rhetoric.” But where Postman’s analysis depicts us as too shallow to argue together, Sennett interprets us as believing we are too deep for argument. The display of personality is central for both, but for Sennett it’s in terms of an expansive passion for intimacy rather than as just a source of amusement, which affords Sennett’s subjects a range of emotions and feelings beyond the simple desire for pleasure. In turn, the fall of public man, as opposed to the rise of show business, helps us understand the *felt* absur-

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1 dity, and so the reflexive cynicism, so characteristic of our political pub-
2 lic sphere. Sennett suggests that “ ‘Intimacy’ connotes warmth, trust,
3 and open expression of feeling. But precisely because we have come to
4 expect these psychological benefits through the range of our experi-
5 ences, and precisely because so much social life which does have a
6 meaning cannot yield these psychological rewards, the world outside,
7 the impersonal world, seems to fail us, seems to be stale and empty.”³¹
8 Insofar as public life conveys this sense of intimacy—insofar as the pub-
9 lic abides by the norms of the private—it will be experienced as deeply
10 meaningful. As Sennett puts it, we “care about institutions and events”
11 when we can “discern personalities at work in them.”³² Insofar as public
12 life falls short of warmth, trust, and the open expression of feeling—
13 insofar as it is formal, power laden, contentious, scripted, and unfeeling—
14 it will be experienced as contemptible and absurd, and we will
15 either cease to care or engage to reform it, that is, to make it more inti-
16 mate and personable.

17 Much is made today of the devaluation of privacy in our Internet age,
18 when it seems every detail of one’s personal life is publicly revealed or
19 displayed. But what could better demonstrate the demise of the public as
20 a distinct sphere of thought and action than its colonization by such ex-
21 hibitions of confessional intimacy? And much is made of the incessantly
22 shrill and bitter arguments that wrack our political life. But what else
23 beside the incivility of clashing authenticities would one expect when
24 communities (or cultures) come into intimate contact in the absence of
25 political mediation? This is exactly the sort of exchange conducted by
26 private individuals in public space when partisanship and persuasion
27 are no longer taken seriously, when communication cannot be both
28 open and ongoing, when natural sympathy is not supplemented by an
29 artificial politeness, when self-interested and self-expressive individuals
30 are not spontaneously mediated by, as Pierre Manent puts it, the “im-
31 mediate presence of humanity beyond all forms.”³³ This is the postpoli-
32 tics of collective individualism.

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34 It is by a paradoxical consequence of this tyranny of the personal over
35 the political that something like a tutelary power might arise in democ-
S36 ratic society. Sennett extensively chronicles the ways in which “inti-
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mate vision” involves people in the active participation in their own degradation, and the damage this causes to their public *and* private lives, leaving postpolitical man self-centered but lacking sufficient resources to generate self-respect. As in Tocqueville’s account, nothing less than human dignity is threatened by the collapse of political public life.³⁴ Even as the intimate society may well prove to be a hospitable environment for tutelary power, though, we should recognize that such a society cannot deliver its inhabitants over to a material manifestation of that power, lest the intimate society contradict its own principle. We grasp the full appeal of intimacy in democratic times when we see it as a strategy for coping with power: the soul-mate union enables democratic people to come together without compromising their ideas of equality and freedom by rendering power *unconditional* and therefore *immaterial*—a general will.³⁵ The moment this power is embodied and operationalized in material form, it abdicates its sovereignty. Precisely by so debasing the power of the word, intimacy breaks up the moment it is spoken. We cease to love our oppression the moment we see our oppressor, whether coercive or seductive, represented back to us.

But intimacy is only one aspect of democracy’s constitutive informality (thus can it be criticized from the alternate mode of informal power relations, competition, as weak and naive foolishness). The vehicle of tutelary power cannot be *personified* informality, which might well convey a certain intimacy but which is eventually exposed as ridiculous. We are all too familiar with, for instance, the politician seeking power by acting authentic: seeming down to earth with a folksy warmth and a populist heat, making a connection with overwrought sympathy and confessional emotions, speaking in anecdotes and scorning a teleprompter (the political equivalent of reality television’s unscripted appeal). Such strategies are effective (and so both troubling and dispiriting) to a point but are ultimately too conventional and recognizable—to the point of being clichés. They are too obvious, the stuff of beheading-by-parody. To honor democratic freedom and equality, to proceed under cover of that which we find meaningful, oppression would have to take shape as formless, as an *impersonal* informality.³⁶ In the company of equals, the aspiration will be to sustain (and expand) openness and intimacy not by confining power to the political sphere of society, which was once

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1 thought uniquely constituted for the purpose of managing power effectively and legitimately, but by locating power outside of society altogether. In this context, democratic despotism would have to be a stealth power, not a personable one but the perfectly selfless power of nobody—of some superhumanistic abstraction. Were paternalism to reemerge in the society founded against the paternal principle, it would have to be as the authority of the absent father.

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8 This, of course, is just how Tocqueville thought the state would be understood in democratic times. But the state is not nearly stealthy enough to approach tutelary omnicompetence and omnipresence. While citizens might want the government to do and provide everything for them, it will be, as the most obvious of repositories of power, despised at every turn, for each use and nonuse of its power. Insofar as government itself seems a postpolitical system of administration—being perfectly expert and perfectly impartial, operating like a business and a science—it approaches the possibility of practical authority. Yet, as Lefort argues, every representation (above all, every election) exposes the system's connections to particular people, special interests, and institutional machinery—shunting Wolin's postmodern power back into its modern housing. Far from achieving a closed-circuit power system, it seems the state must increasingly rely upon secrecy and ad hoc justifications for its actions, such as prerogative in times of crisis. The use of power must be declared the exception, as opposed to operating as the rule, silently and routinely, in tutelary rather than emergency mode. Along these lines, perhaps the continuous invocation of crisis today attests to (along with the democratic fascination with, and expectation of, the transformative event) the fragility rather than the hegemony of the state's authority. More so than the state, the quiet peer pressure of public opinion might accumulate into a sort of tutelary power, but only until someone speaks in its name. Religious authority cannot be made manifest in the here and now without degrading itself, nor be fused to politics without suffering the cynicism politics generates. The free market—insofar as it is perceived as a spontaneous, unplanned, and objective natural order—is a more likely vehicle of tutelary power: encouraging the fantasy of eternal youth and the discipline of nonstop play, taking care of our needs and facilitating our pleasures, managing our most important affairs. The invisible hand is the ideal informal, impersonal Leviathan.

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But again, every representation of the particular actors and institutions that populate the market exposes the dirty fingerprints of the invisible hand; “market forces” translate into Big Corporation’s profits and the rich getting richer, for instance. The distance between the authority of the market and the political power of corporations is the distance between market society and mere plutocracy. Perhaps the real threat of tutelary power today would lie not in the Platonic cave but in a Platonic guardianship of embodied virtue, were such a thing remotely believable today. Manent writes that “when *no one* governs, the desire grows to *identify* those who govern the society that no one governs.” In democratic times, the persistence of freedom *and* the anticipation of despotism issue from in this insistence on identifying “the phantasm of invisible power”—perpetually reimagining the king who is to be beheaded.³⁷

Tocqueville writes that he concluded his journey and departed America still full of hopes and fears: “I see great dangers that can be warded off and great evils that can be avoided or held in check, and I feel ever more assured in my belief that in order to be virtuous and prosperous, democratic nations have only to want to be so.”³⁸ His fears ultimately seem to converge on the fatalism of democratic times, that democratic peoples will take themselves to be “necessarily obedient to I know not what insurmountable and unthinking force born of previous events or race or soil or climate.”³⁹ The most free people in human history, who need only to want to be so, might imagine themselves the most obedient. Tocqueville’s logic of the tutelary state plays out here on a far vaster—but for that reason immaterial—scale. Perhaps to open society, to transcend our political condition, we seek out and cede power not to the state, or even to the market, but to such wholly impersonal informalities as history and nature. Fearing domestication, whether by coercion or seduction, we renounce the practice of managing power through politics and readily explain power away as belonging to these purely selfless, objective, efficient stealth authorities. We abdicate the place of argument, persuasion, practical judgment, collective decision, and collective action—and so of mediating partisan divisions, of mediating particular and general goods, of mediating principle and practice, of mediating individuals who understand themselves as primarily self-interested and self-expressive. Absent politics, the center cannot hold. Absent these

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236 **Conclusion**

mediating opportunities and obligations, with the atrophy of political life, the imagination, “that ambiguous blessing of modern democracy,” tends toward unmediated extremes, losing itself at once in utopian idealism and faux realism.⁴⁰ The open society proves to be the cynical society. In the absence of politics, we imagine ourselves equally free and powerless.

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128. Ibid., 77.
129. Ibid., 77–78. To portray an Athenian demos striving for empire—driven by an “extraordinary release of energy that was sublimated into the political”—Wolin quotes Thucydides: “ ‘The Athenians are addicted to innovation. . . . They are adventurous beyond their power, and daring beyond their judgment, and in danger they are sanguine. . . . They are never at home . . . for they hope by their absence to extend their acquisitions.’ ” Ibid., 82.
130. Wolin, “Fugitive Democracy,” 43; Wolin, *PV*, 603.
131. Wolin, “The People’s Two Bodies,” 24; Wolin, “What Revolutionary Action Means Today,” 25.
132. Wolin, “What Revolutionary Action Means Today,” 25.
133. Tocqueville, *DA*, 623.
134. Wolin, “Transgression, Equality, and Voice,” 75, 64.
135. Wolin writes that to “examine both the fugitive character of the modern demos and its form of rationality, consider how a citizenry materialized in response to the Hurricane Katrina disaster.” Wolin, *DI*, 288. But what sort of citizenry is this that is unified and energized (materialized) in response to pressing necessity? Is it one that is likely to function along legislative lines of argument and persuasion, or one unlikely to require or see the use of words?
136. Wolin, *PV*, 596, 598.
137. Wolin, “What Revolutionary Action Means Today,” 25.
138. We might read James Miller’s great historical work *Democracy Is in the Streets* as charting precisely this self-radicalizing and self-subverting course of participatory democracy in America: from the archaic radicalism that framed the 1962 Port Huron Statement to the late-1960s embrace of revolutionary transgression of middle-class conventionality as such to the disengagement and quietism of that took hold in the 1970s. Miller, *Democracy Is in the Streets: From Port Huron to the Siege of Chicago* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987).

Conclusion

1. Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), xix–xx.
2. Ibid., 3.
3. Andrew Postman, “Introduction to the Twentieth Anniversary Edition,” in *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, vii.
4. Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, 156–157.
5. In the introduction to the twentieth-anniversary edition, Andrew Postman writes of how readers of the book describe it as “one of those I-didn’t-realize-it-was-dark-until-someone-flipped-the-switch encounters with an

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- illuminating intellect.” Tellingly, he recounts how most of these readers embraced their newly illuminated condition. Postman, “Introduction,” vii.
6. Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, 6. Again with an uncanny accuracy, Postman writes, “In the Huxleyan prophecy, Big Brother does not watch us, by his choice. We watch him, by ours.” *Ibid.*, 157.
7. After a football game between the Philadelphia Eagles and the Minnesota Vikings was canceled in 2010 because of a blizzard, Pennsylvania Governor Ed Rendell made the news of the day by declaring, “We’ve become a nation of wusses. The Chinese are kicking our butt in everything. If this was in China do you think the Chinese would have called off the game? People would have been marching down to the stadium . . . and they would have been doing calculus on the way down.” Rendell, interview by Mike Missanelli, 97.5 FM radio, Philadelphia, December 27, 2010. Senator Phil Gramm, an economic advisor to Senator John McCain in the 2008 presidential election, similarly made headlines when he dubbed America a “nation of whiners,” regarding attitudes toward the Great Recession. Gramm, in “McCain Adviser Talks of ‘Mental Recession,’ ” interview by Patrice Hill, July 9, 2008, *WashingtonTimes.com*, www.washingtontimes.com.
8. We can also think of John McCain’s efforts to have the nation dismiss Barack Obama as a mere celebrity during the 2008 presidential election. McCain 2008 campaign television advertisement, released July 30, 2008.
9. For an example of just this argument, see James Cullen, *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea That Shaped a Nation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).
10. Postman writes, “An Orwellian world is much easier to recognize, and to oppose, than a Huxleyan. . . . We take arms against [an Orwellian] sea of troubles, buttressed by the spirit of Milton, Bacon, Voltaire, Goethe and Jefferson. . . . Who is prepared to take arms against a sea of amusements? . . . I fear that our philosophers have given us no guidance in this matter.” Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, 156–157. Yet this tradition in philosophy seems at least as prominent and includes Plato, Augustine, Rousseau, Kant, Mill, Marx, Nietzsche, and the social theorists of the Frankfurt School, not to mention Tocqueville, Wolin, and many others.
11. *Ibid.*, 155–156.
12. *Ibid.*, 155. *Sesame Street* was conceived of as a show that would “master the addictive qualities of television and do something good with them.” Michael Davis, *Street Gang: The Complete History of Sesame Street* (New York: Penguin Books, 2008), 8.
13. Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, 156.
14. Postman writes, “Whenever language is the principal medium of communication—especially language controlled by the rigors of print—an idea, a fact, a claim is the inevitable result. The idea may be banal, the fact irrel-

- evant, the claim false, but there is no escape from meaning when language is the instrument guiding one's thought. . . . [It] is very hard to say nothing when employing a written English sentence. What else is exposition good for? Words have very little to recommend them except as carriers of meaning." Ibid., 50.
15. Ibid., 49–51, 147–148.
16. In contrast, Postman argues that in previous centuries the spoken word took on the character of print. He recounts the "seven hours of oratory" of one of the Lincoln-Douglas debates, during which at one point: "Douglas responded to lengthy applause with a remarkable and revealing statement. 'My friends, . . . silence will be more acceptable to me in the discussion of these questions than applause. I desire to address myself to your judgment, your understanding, and your consciences, and not to your passions or your enthusiasms.'" Ibid., 45.
17. Ibid., 128.
18. Ibid., 155–156.
19. Ibid., 157.
20. The ideal of "Jeffersonian democracy" similarly captures the complex aspiration to pastoral independence and community, as well as to the fugitive moment of revolutionary transcendence, whether articulated as the return to pristine past or the leap into untouched future. Historian Joseph Ellis describes this well. Jefferson's "essential obsessions and core convictions," Ellis writes, take shape in the "the vision of each generation starting from scratch, liberated from the accumulated legacies of past debts, laws, institutionalized obligations and regulations." In his "utopian radicalism," Jefferson longed for a world where "innocence had not yet been corrupted": "This was the world of . . . the prepolitical Indian tribes, the world of the independent yeoman farmer on the edge of the frontier, the world after a rightful rebellion has cleared the air. It was a world . . . where coercion was unknown and government unnecessary. Though transient—history would begin to make its inevitable inroads almost immediately—the idyllic harmonies sustained themselves for that one brief, shining moment." Jefferson's utopia was "a society devoid of contaminating institutions and laws; an effort to routinize their removal so that the deadening hand of history was regularly slapped away in order to make room for a pristine encounter with what he believed to be the natural order." Joseph J. Ellis, *American Sphinx: The Character of Thomas Jefferson* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), 133, 136.
21. Ayn Rand captures the logic of democratic openness perfectly: "When I say 'capitalism,' I mean a full, pure, uncontrolled, unregulated laissez-faire capitalism—with a separation of state and economics, in the same way and for the same reasons as the separation of state and church." Ayn Rand, *The Virtue of Selfishness* (New York: Signet Books, 1964), 33.

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- 1 22. Discussing the America discovered, Tocqueville claims, “If . . . an American were reduced to minding only his own business, half of his life would be stolen from him. He would feel as though an immense void had hollowed out his days, and he would become incredibly unhappy.” Tocqueville, *DA*, 279.
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- 5 23. This insecurity finds one its earliest seminal modern statements in Kant’s “An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment” (1784): “Immaturity is the inability to use one’s understanding without guidance from another. . . . Laziness and cowardice are the reasons why so great a proportion of men . . . gladly remain in lifelong immaturity. . . . It is so easy to be immature. If I have a book to serve as my understanding, a pastor to serve as my conscience, a physician to determine my diet for me, and so on, I need not exert myself at all. I need not think, if only I can pay.” In the “immaturity that has all but become his nature,” man sinks to the level of “dumb” and “docile” “domestic livestock.” Two hundred years before Postman warned of the power of television to undermine the typographic mind, Kant warned of the power of the book to undermine autonomy; in both cases, the door opens to man’s domestication.
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- 17 24. Tocqueville, *DA*, 15.
- 18 25. *Ibid.*, 818.
- 19 26. Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1974), 338, 29–30, 8.
- 20 27. *Ibid.*, 27.
- 21 28. *Ibid.*, 16–24.
- 22 29. Along these lines, the civil society that Robert Putnam, for instance, advocates actually demonstrates rather than works against Sennett’s fall of public man. The bowling alley is a venue for private man in public space, where trust allows the participants to do away with mediating formalities.
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- 26 30. Marshall McLuhan (whose famous dictum “the medium is the message” is central to Postman’s analysis of television culture) perfectly states the aspiration for a social—indeed global—intimacy beyond words: “Our new electric technology that extends our senses and nerves in a global embrace has large implications for the future of language. . . . Electricity points the way to an extension of the process of consciousness itself, on a world scale, and without any verbalization whatsoever. . . . The computer, in short, promises by technology a Pentecostal condition of universal understanding and unity. . . . The condition of ‘weightlessness,’ that biologists say promises a physical immortality, may be paralleled by the condition of speechlessness that could confer a perpetuity of collective harmony and peace.” Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extension of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), 80.
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32. Ibid., 338. 1
33. Pierre Manent formulates the modern imperative of intimacy in terms of the passion for immediacy and informality: “Modern humanity is impatient with regard to all mediations. In earlier, predemocratic centuries, mutual recognition was conditioned, and therefore, limited by a multitude of forms. Politeness and ceremonies played an eminent role. . . . Democracy seeks in all domains [the] common human expression that signifies that one belongs to the same humanity as others.” As people are compelled by this sublime idea of an intimate humanity, the “desire, the demand for immediacy, tends to dominate all aspects of modern democratic life.” The democratic order in turn disbars politics as an external and oppressive hindrance to immediate and authentic experience—unnecessary for *and* inadequate for allowing diverse experiences to communicate with one another. Thus the “democratic political order itself contains something antipolitical, since it claims to reduce the place of politics as much as possible.” Manent, *A World beyond Politics?: A Defense of the Nation State*, trans. Marc LePain (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2006), 168–169. 2
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34. Tocqueville describes something like the intimate society in the passage immediately preceding his introduction of tutelary power. Each member of that society, “withdrawn into himself, is virtually a stranger to the fate of all others”: “For him, his children and personal friends comprise the entire human race. As for the remainder of his fellow citizens, he lives alongside them but does not see them. He touches them but does not feel them. He exists only in himself and for himself, and if he still has a family, he no longer has a country.” Tocqueville, *DA*, 818. 16
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35. Wolin argues that “Rousseau’s citizen looks like a political animal,” but he is “forbidden to discuss political matters outside of formal assemblies or to form ‘partial associations’”: “Rousseau’s democracy without politics was prefigured by the innovations he effected in the social contract. While retaining contractualist language, its meaning was radically transformed from a negotiation into a political sacrament, from an agreement among signatories into a rite among communicants, from the founding of a political society to transubstantiation into a *corpus mysticum*.” Wolin, *TBTW*, 178. 23
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36. Wolin describes a major element of this impersonal informality well, contrasting it to previous despotic regime-forms: “There is a sense in which democratic despotism is not a ‘form’ at all. Save for an omnipresent bureaucracy, it has little in common with the highly personalized tyrannies of the twentieth century and their charismatic leaders. Tocqueville’s despot appears as faceless and nameless, a shadowy presence, enveloping rather than domineering.” It seems “as though he might easily disappear into the system, as though despotism is the archetype of the impersonal, 31
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which overcomes even the despot." In the representations (the faces and names) of contemporary American culture, this is very nearly the oppression of *The Matrix* (or Postman's television society) rather than of early iterations like *Star Wars*. Wolin, *TBTW*, 569–570.

- 37. Manent, *A World beyond Politics*, 168–169 (emphasis in original).
- 38. Tocqueville, *DA*, 834.
- 39. Ibid. Thus, Françoise Mélonio concludes that, for Tocqueville, "denouncing the state was less important than restoring the political vocation of citizens." Mélonio, *Tocqueville and the French*, trans. Beth G. Raps (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1998), 207.
- 40. François Furet and Françoise Mélonio, "Introduction," in Tocqueville, *OR I*, 53.

