

Dissociety and Its Contents

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Tocqueville and the Nature of Democracy

Pierre Manent, translated by
John Waggoner
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The sure indications that an author is "in" are that he is quoted by all sides in political debates; that nice observations he might have made, but never quite did make, are attributed to him; and that his book is cited, but not read. This is the lot of Alexis de Tocqueville and his *Democracy in America* in the United States today.

In France, where intellectual fashions, like hemlines, are taken more seriously, the long-unfashionable Tocqueville is now being studied as he has not been for a century and a half. The best of these new students is Pierre Manent. His *Tocqueville and the Nature of Democracy*, first published in France in 1982, republished in 1993, and now published in English, shows us why Tocqueville should still be studied.

Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* is a long book, rich in detailed observations on American politics, society, and culture; and it is these details that American partisans like to quote at one another. Manent's elegant, austere explication treats none of these systematically, for his only question is Tocqueville's deepest question: What is the nature of democracy, in the light of which one might understand and appraise its details?

Manent proceeds by bringing to light paradoxes and seeming contradictions in the classic book. He resolves them only by revealing a still greater difficulty in need of resolution.

The nature of modern democracy, according to Manent's Tocqueville, is essentially that of a dogma, a compelling assertion about the nature of man and the nature of nature. All previous political regimes, categorized by

Tocqueville as aristocratic, relied on what were in truth unjust conventions that nonetheless lent support to mankind's natural, if rare, potential for excellence and greatness.

What is different about the democratic dogma, Manent acutely observes, is not so much its content as its contentlessness. The dogma of democracy posits an equality and independence of individuals much like that found in the state of nature, a concept formulated by early modern political theorists. Strictly speaking, this dogma defines a relation among human beings, not the character or nature of those beings. But the formal rule tends to become a substantive goal, indeed the only goal of democratic life.

Thus it is the origin of the ever more passionate egalitarianism we see around us. Individuals may long to be, but are in fact not, perfectly equal and independent, and they could be made so only if the nature that gives rise to human distinctions could be completely—and therefore repeatedly—nullified.

So democratic individuals must relate to one another as equal and independent through a mild, but despotic entity that each believes himself to authorize to represent all of them. This is what Manent means in calling modern democracy "dissociety" and its principle apolitical or antipolitical. The nature that modern democracy claims to express is realized only with the complete triumph of democracy's dogma over it.

Tocqueville counts religion as the most important of American democracy's mores, even our first political institution. But by his own analysis the content of religion, no less than that of nature, is endangered by democracy. What remains of Christianity in common opinion—Manent again argues impressively—remains not to limit social power from the outside, as Tocqueville may appear to say, but rather to extend and effectuate it.

Piety is "the sigh of the democratic citizen oppressed by an excess of freedom," his conscious or unconscious

self-moderation in the face of democracy's otherwise destructive, dehumanizing dogma.

What reason is there to hope that democratic citizens might moderate themselves for the sake of maintaining their political liberty, much less to be confident that they would be right in doing so?

Both democracy and aristocracy fail to comprehend the deepest truth that finally allows Tocqueville to evaluate and compare the two great political alternatives: Nature gives to human beings a taste for political liberty. This is, incidentally, an unequal gift. The political art, informed by this appreciation, preserves and promotes whatever mores and institutions, aristocratic or democratic as appropriate, best display this truth.

In the conclusion to his book, first published in 1982, Manent scolded unnamed European enemies of democracy: the few remaining reactionaries and the many more Marxists of various stripes. These are not the same enemies American democracy faces today. But Manent's analysis of modern democracy through Tocqueville's lenses should enable the partisans who claim to admire Tocqueville to spot the enemies of democracy, not only in one another's camps, but also in their own.

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