



ALEXIS DE TOCQUEVILLE

DEMOCRACY IN AMERICA

No book has ever offered as many penetrating insights into the character of American democracy and the nature of American life as Alexis de Tocqueville's two-volume classic *Democracy in America*. Tocqueville (1805–1859) was a French aristocrat who toured the United States between 1831 and 1832 seeking to discern what lessons the workings of American democracy might have for Europeans, who were at an earlier stage in the democratic revolution sweeping the Western world in the nineteenth century.

The first of these selections discusses one of the perennial problems of democratic society, that of "the tyranny of the majority." Although the American Constitution gives very broad protection to freedom of speech, the press, and religion, Tocqueville found "less independence of mind and true freedom of discussion" in America in the age of Jackson than he did in European countries still ruled by despots. Even the most absolute of monarchs, he says, cannot "hold all the forces of society in his hand," but a majority of the people, who *are* the society, can make it tempting for everyone to jump on its bandwagon or suffer ostracism.

It can be argued that much of the pressure for popular conformity that Tocqueville observed reflected the fairly primitive level of social development in the United States of the 1830s. Still, there are later examples of mass hysteria—the Red Scare that followed World War I and the McCarthyism of the 1950s, for instance—that seem to reinforce Tocqueville's conclusion.

It is in the examination of the exercise of thought in the United States, that we clearly perceive how far the power of the majority surpasses all the powers with which we are

acquainted in Europe. Thought is an invisible and subtle power, that mocks all the efforts of tyranny. At the present time, the most absolute monarchs in Europe cannot prevent certain

opinions hostile to their authority from circulating in secret through their dominions, and even in their courts. It is not so in America; as long as the majority is still undecided, discussion is carried on; but as soon as its decision is irrevocably pronounced, every one is silent, and the friends as well as the opponents of the measure unite in assenting to its propriety. The reason of this is perfectly clear: no monarch is so absolute as to combine all the powers of society in his own hands, and to conquer all opposition, as a majority is able to do, which has the right both of making and of executing the laws.

The authority of a king is physical, and controls the actions of men without subduing their will. But the majority possesses a power which is physical and moral at the same time, which acts upon the will as much as upon the actions, and represses not only all contest, but all controversy.

I know of no country in which there is so little independence of mind and real freedom of discussion as in America. In any constitutional state in Europe, every sort of religious and political theory may be freely preached and disseminated; for there is no country in Europe so subdued by any single authority, as not to protect the man who raises his voice in the cause of truth from the consequences of his hardihood. If he is unfortunate enough to live under an absolute government, the people are often upon his side; if he inhabits a free country, he can, if necessary, find a shelter behind the throne. The aristocratic part of society supports him in some countries, and the democracy in others. But in a nation where democratic institutions exist, organized like those of the United States, there is but one authority, one element of strength and success, with nothing beyond it.

In America, the majority raises formidable barriers around the liberty of opinion: within these barriers, an author may write what he pleases; but woe to him if he goes beyond them. Not that he is in danger of an *auto-da-fé*, but he is exposed to continued obloquy and persecution. His political career is closed forever, since he has offended the only authority which is able to open it. Every sort of compensation, even that of celebrity, is refused to him. Before publishing his opinions, he imagined that he held them in common with others; but no sooner has he declared them, than he is loudly censured by his opponents, whilst those who think like him, without having the courage to speak out, abandon him in silence. He yields at length, overcome by the daily effort which he has to make, and subsides into silence, as if he felt remorse for having spoken the truth.

Fetters and headsmen were the coarse instruments which tyranny formerly employed; but the civilization of our age has perfected despotism itself, though it seemed to have nothing to learn. Monarchs had, so to speak, materialized oppression: the democratic republics of the present day have rendered it as entirely an affair of the mind, as the will which it is intended to coerce. Under the absolute sway of one man, the body was attacked in order to subdue the soul; but the soul escaped the blows which were directed against it, and rose proudly superior. Such is not the course adopted by tyranny in democratic republics; there the body is left free, and the soul is enslaved. The master no longer says, "You shall think as I do, or you shall die"; but he says, "You are free to think differently from me, and to retain your life, your property, and all that you possess; but you are henceforth a stranger among your people."