

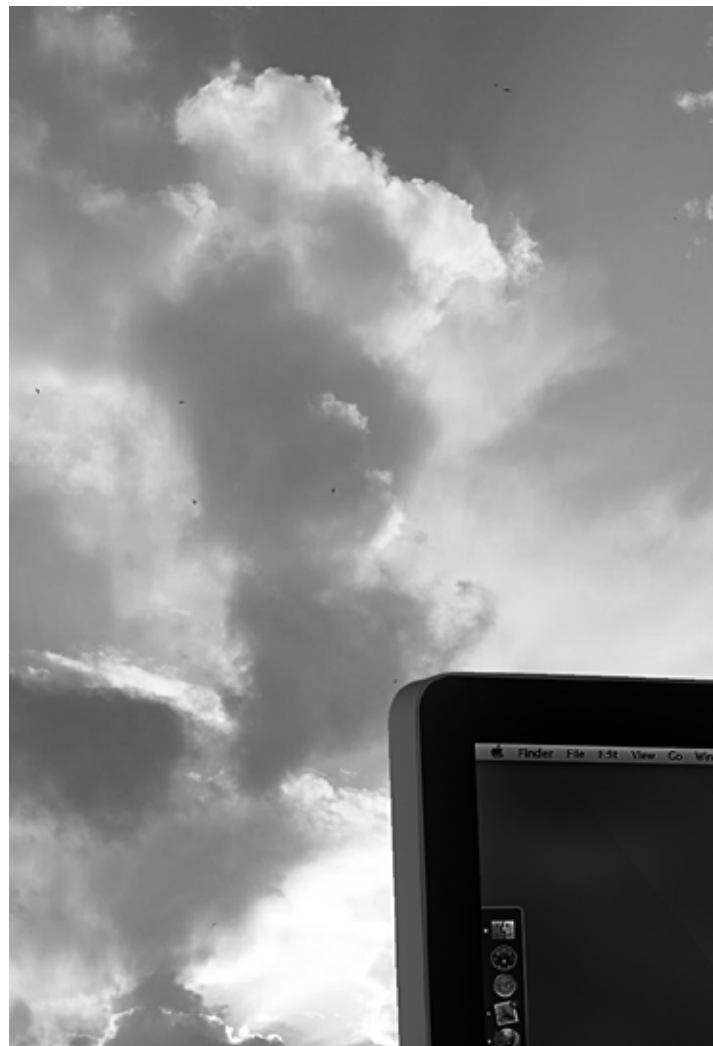
# The Tocquevillian Moment . . . and Ours

*The great 19th-century observer of America's democratic revolution has much to teach the tumultuous new century.*

BY WILFRED M. McCLAY

TO SAY THAT WE ARE LIVING THROUGH A TIME OF momentous change, and now stand on the threshold of a future we could barely have imagined a quarter-century ago, may seem merely to restate the blazingly obvious. But it is no less true, and no less worrisome, for being so. Uncertainties about the fiscal soundness of sovereign governments and the stability of basic political, economic, and financial institutions, not to mention the fundamental solvency of countless American families, are rippling through all facets of the nation's life. Those of us in the field of higher education find these new circumstances particularly unsettling. Our once-buffered corner of the world seems to have lost control of its boundaries and lost sight of its proper ends, and stands accused of having become at once unaffordable and irrelevant except as a credential mill for the many and a certification of social rank for the few. And despite all the wonderful possibilities that beckon from the sunlit uplands of technological progress, the digital revolution that is upon us threatens not only to disrupt the economic model of higher education but to undermine the very qualities of mind that are the university's reason for being. There is a sense that events

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and processes are careening out of control, and that the great bubble that has so far contained us is now in the process of bursting.

By harping on the unprecedented character of the challenges we face, however, we may allow ourselves to become unduly overwhelmed and intimidated by them. Although history never repeats itself, it rarely, if ever, presents us with situations that have absolutely no precedent, and no echoes. We have, in some respects, already been here before. “In times of change and danger when there is a quicksand of fear under men’s reasoning,” wrote the novelist John Dos Passos in the tense year of 1941, “a sense of continuity with generations gone before can stretch like a lifeline across the scary present.”

So let me propose, as a lifeline for our own era, that we consult a figure who has served Americans well in the past: the French writer Alexis de Tocqueville (1805–59), one of the most eminent European social and political thinkers of the 19th century, and still an incomparable analyst of the virtues and pitfalls of modern democratic societies. The first part of my title not only refers to the man and his unique biographical context, but also uses his name to label something more general: a particular kind of pivotal moment in human history, something that he both described well and experienced fully—a moment of profound social transition in which an entire way of life is in the process of being inexorably transformed, but in which the precise shape of this transformation is yet to be fully determined.

Tocqueville was the child of an aristocratic French family, many of whose members had suffered death or devastation at the hands of the French Revolution. As a consequence, he was haunted all his life by the specter of revolutionary anarchy, and of the tyranny such a sweeping social revolution would inevitably bring in its wake. But such fears never led him to advocate the wholesale restoration of the pre-revolutionary French social order. He was an aristocrat at heart, but not a reactionary. Instead, his apprehensions led him to examine intently the change that was coming, in the hope of directing it to a more felicitous end.

A concern with the characteristics of modern democracy is the guiding preoccupation of his *Democracy in America*



(1835–40), the work for which he is best known among American readers. Tocqueville was only 26 years old when, accompanied by his friend and sidekick Gustave de Beaumont, he came to the United States in 1831. He was ostensibly traveling on official business for the French government, to study the American prison system. In reality, he was intent upon “examining, in details and as scientifically as possible, all the mechanisms of the vast American society which everyone talks of and no one knows.” Tocqueville intended to write a large and path-breaking book about America, which he hoped would make his intellectual reputation and launch him on a successful political career in France.

The resulting book, published in two successive volumes, turned out to be perhaps the richest and most enduring study of American society and culture

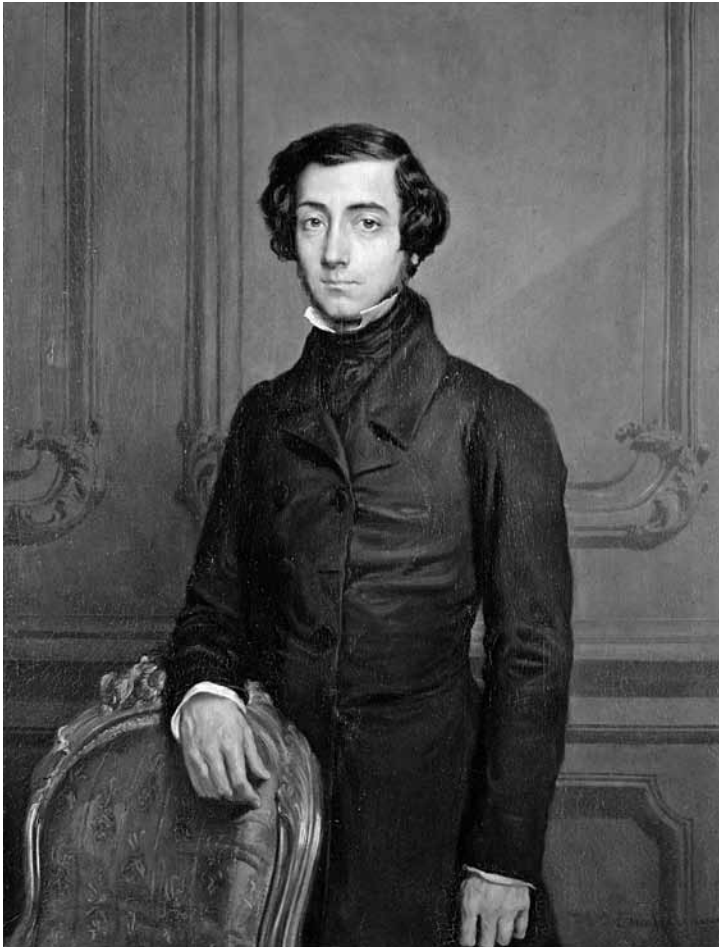
ever written. *Democracy in America* envisioned the United States as the vanguard of history, a young and vigorous country endowed with an extraordinary degree of social equality among its inhabitants. In America, one could gaze upon “the image of democracy itself, of its penchants, its character, its prejudices, its passions”—and having so gazed, could perhaps take away lessons that would allow leaders to deal more intelligently and effectively with the democratic changes coming to Europe.

Tocqueville was firmly convinced that the movement toward greater social equality—which is what he meant by “democracy”—represented an inescapable feature of the modern age, a hard fact to which all future social or political analysis must accommodate itself. Indeed, one could say that the great

recurrent motif in Tocqueville’s writing was this huge, sprawling historical spectacle, the gradual but inexorable leveling of human society on a universal scale. “To wish to stop democracy,” he warned, would be “to struggle against God himself.”

A leveling democratic regime would have sweeping effects in every facet of human life: not merely in politics and institutions, but also in family life, in literature, in philosophy, in manners, in mores, in male-female relations, in ambition, in friendship, and in attitudes toward war and peace. Tocqueville was interested not only in the outward forms of democracy but in its *innermost* effects, the ways in which a society’s political arrangements, far from being matters that merely skate on the surface of life, have influences that reach deep into the very souls of its members.

He accomplished this analysis, mostly in the book’s second volume, by contrasting the form that each of these facets of life take on, first in aristocratic societies, then in democracies. The result was a coherent and memorable



Alexis de Tocqueville later explained that he had hoped in writing *Democracy in America* “to teach democracy to know itself, and thereby to direct itself and contain itself.”

image of a strikingly middle-class society: feverishly commercial and acquisitive, obsessively practical-minded, jealously egalitarian, and restlessly mobile. Tocqueville saw many things to admire in this energetic, bumptious democracy—but also much to fear.

Chief among the dangers was its pronounced tendency toward individualism. The various bonds and structures of authority that had knit together an aristocratic order were absent from a democracy. Consequently, Tocqueville saw in America the peril that citizens might elect to withdraw from involvement in the larger public life, and regard themselves as autonomous and isolated actors, with no higher goal than the pursuit of their own material well-being.

In aristocratic societies, powerful structures of authority—ecclesiastical, cultural, political, economic—had been closely woven into the social order. Families remained in place for centuries; men and women remembered their ancestors and anticipated their descendants, and strove to do their duty to both. Citizens occupied a fixed position in the social pecking order, with tight bonds to those in their same social niche. So enmeshed was the individual person in this comprehensive order that it was nonsensical to imagine him or her apart from it—as implausible as swimming in the air, or breathing beneath the waves.

In democratic societies, however, where the principle of equality dictated a more fluid sense of connection, such duties and fixities were lost. Tocqueville described the new condition thus:

In democratic peoples, new families constantly issue from nothing, others constantly fall into it, and all those who stay on change face; the fabric of time is torn at every moment and the trace of generations is effaced. You easily forget those who have preceded you, and you have no idea of those who will follow you. . . . As conditions are equalized, one finds a great number of individuals who . . . owe nothing to anyone, they expect so to speak nothing from anyone; they are in the habit of always considering themselves in isolation, and they willingly fancy that their whole destiny is in their hands.

Furthermore, there was a danger that this atomized condition, in which families, neighborhoods, communities, and other intermediate forms of human association were rendered weak and listless, would lead to democratic despotism, an all-embracing “soft” tyranny that relied upon the dissolution of the bonds among its members, and their consequent inability to act together as citizens, as means

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of smoothing the way toward a massive bureaucratic state that would rule over every feature of their lives. Unchecked individualism could lead to something very nearly its opposite.

**H**ow does a democratic society in which all the formerly reliable defenses against anarchy and anomie have been lost still find a way to order itself, and produce the kind of virtuous behavior and commitment to the common good that is required for it to be cohesive, successful, and free? Can a society in the grip of massive change still find ways to import into the new order some of those things that were most estimable in the old?

These are the questions at the heart of “the Tocquevillean moment.” It is the moment when an old order becomes conscious of the imperative need to give way to a new one—and becomes conscious, also, of the particular dilemma that this change presents to thoughtful individuals, such as Tocqueville, whom history seemed to have destined to ride the crest of such a monumental transformation, carrying a full awareness of both sides.

Many of Tocqueville’s contemporary readers failed to understand this balancing act at work in his writing, and he was stung by their incomprehension. A letter Tocqueville wrote to an unfavorable French reviewer is worth quoting at length. We do not know for certain

whether this letter was ever received, or even sent. But it is as clear a statement as Tocqueville ever provided of precisely what he was up to:

I had become aware that, in our time, the new social state that had produced and is still producing very great benefits was, however, giving birth to a number of quite dangerous tendencies. These seeds, if left to grow unchecked, would produce, it seemed to me, a steady flowering of the intellectual level of society with no conceivable limit, and this would bring in its train the mores of materialism and, finally, universal slavery. . . . It was essential, I thought, for all men of goodwill to join in exerting the strongest possible pressure in the opposite direction. To my knowledge, few of the friends of the Revolution of 1789 dared point out these very frightening tendencies. . . . Those who saw them and were not afraid to speak of them, being the sort of men who condemned in one fell swoop the entire democratic social state and all its elements, were more likely to irritate people than guide them. The intellectual world was thus divided into blind friends and furious detractors of democracy.

My aim in writing [my] book was to point out these dreadful downward paths opening under the feet of our contemporaries, not to prove that they must be thrown back into an aristocratic state of society . . . but to make these tendencies feared by painting them in vivid colors, and thus to secure the effort of mind and will which alone can combat them—to *teach democracy to know itself, and thereby to direct itself and contain itself.* (emphasis added)

It would be hard to imagine a better expression of the Tocquevillian moment, when social change arrives at a crossroads, and awaits further direction. As Tocqueville expressed it at the conclusion of *Democracy in America*, “Providence has not created mankind entirely independent or perfectly slave. It traces, it is true, a fatal circle around each man that he cannot leave; but within its vast limits man is powerful and free; so too with peoples.”

The Tocquevillian moment involves the ways in which we come to terms, not only as individuals but also as citizens and societies, with whatever fatal circle our times and conditions have drawn around us.

**H**ow did Tocqueville believe that the Americans of his day managed to counter the dangerous aspects of democracy and create a free and vibrant society? He located a number of factors. He credited the pervasive influence of religion in Ameri-

can life, noting to his astonishment the ways in which religion served to support democratic values and free institutions. He applauded Americans for their talent in forming voluntary associations, and for their decentralized federal institutions, both of which tended to disperse power and encourage the involvement of citizens in the activity of governing themselves.

But most of all Tocqueville praised Americans for embracing the concept of self-interest rightly understood—and in so doing, he underscored the crucial importance of education in the conduct of a successful democracy. It was a foregone conclusion, in his view, that self-interest had replaced virtue as the chief force driving human action. To tell an American to do virtuous things for virtue’s sake, or at the authoritative direction of priests, prelates, or princes, was futile. But the same request would readily be granted if real benefits could be shown to flow from it. The challenge of moral philosophy in such an environment was to demonstrate how “private interest and public interest meet and amalgamate,” and how one’s devotion to the general good could also promote one’s personal advantage. Belief in that conjunction—that one could do well by doing good—was exactly what was meant by the “right understanding” of self-interest.

Hence, it was imperative to *educate* democratic citizens in this understanding, to teach them how to reason their own way to acceptance of the greater good. The American example made Tocqueville hopeful that the modern principle of self-interest could be so channeled, hedged about, habituated, and clothed as to produce public order and public good, even in the absence of “aristocratic” sources of authority. But it would not happen of its own accord.

“Enlighten them, therefore, at any price.” Or, as another translation expresses it, “Educate them, then.” Whatever else we may believe about the applicability of Tocqueville’s ideas to the present day, we can be in no doubt that he was right in his emphasis upon education. But not just any kind of education. He was talking about what we call *liberal education*, in the strictest sense of the term, an education that makes men and women capable of the exercise of liberty, and equips them for the task of rational self-governance. And the future of that ideal of education is today very much in doubt.



Which brings us back to the anxious and unstable time American colleges and universities are living through. Worries about ever-escalating costs and diminishing prospects for postgraduate employment have made many Americans question ingrained assumptions about the heretofore unquestionable value of a college education. Their concerns are entirely legitimate and must be answered.

Understandably, some academic leaders look to the new information technologies for a quick fix, hoping the vast economies of scale they offer will lower costs and improve access, while breaking down some

same spectacle, the gradual but pervasive process of democratic leveling that Tocqueville described, now taking the form of a radical democratization of access to information. Like it or not, such a development is challenging the standing of nearly all traditional institutions of formal education and those who work in them, not to mention other institutions, such as the great newspapers, magazines, libraries, publishing houses, networks, studios, and other intellectual and cultural institutions, all of which have lost much of their authority along with their monopolies.

Much of this change is inevitable, and much of

**THE INFORMATION REVOLUTION is best understood as a continuation of the gradual process of democratic leveling that Tocqueville witnessed.**

the fruit of the digital revolution is unquestionably good. But there is also much to be said for being more cautious than we have been in substituting the digital and the virtual for older educational practices. This revolution may, if embraced uncritically,

render impossible the things we have always sought to achieve through the process of formal education. The Internet is a tool of unparalleled utility. But the facility it offers may already be eroding our capacity for thinking in the focused and undistracted ways the older forms of literacy fostered and demanded. There is mounting evidence, related in studies such as Nicholas Carr's 2010 book *The Shallows*, though already anticipated in Sven Birkerts's remarkably prescient *Gutenberg Elegies* (1994), that the Internet's steady and exclusive use tends to habituate its users—meaning all of us—to think in increasingly undisciplined and fragmentary ways, that it tends to dull our capacity for sustained and penetrating attentiveness and inhibit our ability to detect larger patterns of meaning. The “linear mind” fostered by the literary culture of books, Carr argues, is being “pushed aside by a new kind of mind that wants and needs to take in and dole out information in short, disjointed, often overlapping bursts—the faster, the better.” If we are not careful, this “new kind of mind” will change for the worse the way we read, the way we write, and the way we think.

Such changes are of a piece with the ways in which the Internet has disrupted the well-established channels through which movies, television, recorded music, and news content are published and distributed. The near-irresistible tide moving in the direction of universal information dissemination and access through digitized media is itself a great and sprawling historical spectacle, as productive of awe and uncertainty as the one Tocqueville witnessed. Indeed, it is perhaps best understood as a *continuation* of the very

of the insularity and impracticality of academic life. In his 2011 book *Change.edu*, Andrew Rosen, chairman and CEO of the for-profit education firm Kaplan Inc., offers an argument that is winning a sympathetic hearing in many quarters: The model of a four-year residential college is doomed, and the salvation of higher education lies in radical institutional innovation, along with much greater use of technology. Online learning, skills-based training outside of traditional undergraduate degree programs, and tech-enabled community outreach through local colleges and community colleges—these and other more cost-effective expedients will eventually create a new model for higher education.

So we must be Tocquevillean. That means we should not be too quick to discard an older model of

what higher education is about, a model that the conventional four-year residential liberal-arts college, whatever its failures and its exorbitant costs, has been preeminent in championing. And that is the model of a physical community built around a great shared enterprise: the serious and careful reading and discussion of classic literary, philosophical, historical, and scientific texts.

What we may need, however, is to be more rigorous in thinking through what we want from such a model of education, and what we can readily dispense with. Perhaps we do not need college to be what it all too often has become: an extended *Wanderjahre* of post-adolescent entertainment and experimentation, played out in the soft, protected environment of idyllic, leafy campuses, less a *rite du passage* than a retreat to a very expensive place where one can defer the responsibilities of adult life.

At the very least, such an education ought to help us resist the uncritical embrace of technological innovation, and equip us to challenge it constructively and thoughtfully—and selectively. There is, for example, no product of formal education more important than the cultivation of reflection, of solitary concentration, and of sustained, patient, and disciplined attention—habits that an overwired and hyperconnected way of life is making more and more difficult to put into practice. If we find it increasingly difficult to compose our fragmented and disjointed browsings into coherent accounts, let alone larger and deeper structures of meaning, that fact represents a colossal failure of our educations to give us the tools we need to make sense of our lives. Colleges and universities should be the last institutions to succumb to this tendency. They should resist it with all their might, because that is precisely what they are there for.

It should be obvious that the consequences of failure would not be confined to the world of the campus. As former secretary of state Henry Kissinger made



**An endangered breed? Reading books requires us to form coherent structures of meaning out of information fragments, to understand relationships, and ultimately to know ourselves.**

clear recently, these consequences would be far reaching and practical: “Reading books requires you to form concepts, to train your mind to relationships. You have to come to grips with who you are. A leader needs these qualities. But now we learn from fragments of facts. . . . Now there is no need to internalize because each fact can be instantly called up on the computer. There is no context, no motive. . . . This new thinking erases all context. It disaggregates everything. All this makes strategic thinking about the world order impossible to achieve.”

An education that still revolves around the encounter with serious and substantial books is therefore to be commended on very practical, Tocquevillean grounds. To borrow the words Tocqueville used in his letter to his French critic, such an education seeks *to teach democracy to know itself, and thereby to direct itself and contain itself*. It equips us to negotiate the multitude of Tocquevillean dilemmas presented to us by the fatal circle of our times—such as the tsunami of digitization that is, precisely like Tocqueville’s own revolution of democratization, too powerful to be reversed, but too full of potential for both good and ill to be treated fatalistically.

The careful reading of serious books, particularly older books, equips us with something subtle, resis-

tant to easy description, whose utility is impossible to distill into a sound bite or sentence. When, for example, we accord Plato's *Republic* our respect as a great text deserving of a lifetime of study, this does not mean we are expressing approval of the many defects of the Athenian society in which it was produced. We study the *Republic* because it formulates powerful criticisms of democracy that remain enduringly valid and troubling, criticisms that we would not have had the wit to formulate on our own—and because in reading it and wrestling with it, we are teaching our democracy to know itself better, and thereby contributing, not to the undermining of our democracy, but to its deepening, its resiliency, its ennoblement. To find and retain those things from the past that remain estimable and enduringly valuable is what it means to cultivate a civilization.

**T**ocqueville was prone to melancholy, and he worried that the task of democracy's ennoblement would prove too difficult, too exacting, too exhausting. There is always in his work a sense of an uphill challenge, with the issue very much in doubt. And it does not take a great deal of imagination to find, in his description to his French critic of the "downward paths opening under the feet of our contemporaries," a description of much in the state of our own democracy today.

What remains consistent, both in Tocqueville and in the present day, is the imperative of freedom. Remember his words at the end of *Democracy in America*: "[Providence] traces, it is true, a fatal circle around each man that he cannot leave; but within its vast limits man is powerful and free; so too with peoples." It is hard at any given time to know where our containing circle is drawn. But Tocqueville clearly thought that we have far more power to shape our lives and our destinies than we allow ourselves to believe. That is why the Tocquevillean moment is, at bottom, an occasion for the exercise of the profoundest human freedom.

It is not an unlimited freedom, of course. What

could such a thing mean anyway? What, after all, is a radically unconditioned state, other than a state of utter randomness and inconsequentiality? A completely unconstrained freedom would be, as the philosopher George Santayana quipped, "like the liberty to sign checks without possessing a bank account." You are free to write them for any amount that you please, but, Santayana added, "it is only when a precise deposit limits your liberty that you may write them to any purpose." We are not like the gods of the *Iliad*, those cosmic jet setters whose freedom was nearly absolute, but who paid for that privilege by appearing trivial and small when set beside the poignant dignity of limited, vulnerable, mortal men and women. In other words, the exercise of freedom is most meaningful when it is the art of the possible, and involves us in assessing the tradeoffs and relative merits of actions whose range is inescapably finite, due to conditioning factors that are beyond our control.

No, the difficult and complex freedom of the Tocquevillean moment is exactly the sort of freedom for

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which we humans were made, and it provides an opportunity for our finest qualities to flourish. The fatal circle is also the ground of our freedom, the horizon that gives focus and purposefulness to our efforts. History may delimit our choices, but it does not dictate what we ought do with what is set before us. For that task, we will need a great deal of technical information. But more than that, in order to grasp the ends toward which that information should be directed, we will need to furnish our hearts and imaginations with the counsel of books, especially old ones. And perhaps especially a book, now nearly two centuries old, called *Democracy in America*, in whose pages many shocks of recognition and much wise guidance await the patient reader. ■