
Unprophetic Tocqueville

How Democracy in America Got the Modern World Completely Wrong

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Over the past few decades, as Karl Marx was thrown into the dustbin, Alexis de Tocqueville came surging back from the graveyard of intellectual history. Tocqueville's main claim to fame is as the author of *Democracy in America*, which was originally published in two parts, in 1835 and 1840. Owing largely to this book, he is hailed today by almost universal consensus as a thinker of virtually superhuman prescience—indeed, as the supreme oracle of the modern age. Tocqueville now enjoys “magistral status,” observes one eminent commentator (Wolin 2001, 4). “No one seriously believes,” writes another, “that an author, dead for more than century, can say anything to us about the novelties we face, that he can explain us to ourselves. This is precisely what Tocqueville accomplishes, it seems to me, when he elaborates the idea of democracy” (Manent 1996, xi). “By speculating in the large about democracy,” writes a third, Tocqueville “far transcended the confines of his time and place” (Eisenstadt 1988, 272). The introduction of a recent translation proclaims *Democracy in America* “at once the best book ever written on democracy and the best book ever written on America” (Mansfield and Winthrop 2000, xvii). *Democracy in America* is “summoned not only to interpret the past and

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The Independent Review, v. XII, n. 2, Fall 2007, ISSN 1086-1653, Copyright © 2007, pp. 165-178.

present but to augur the future. . . . Scarcely a week passes without some quotation from *Democracy in America* appearing in the popular media or in literary reviews” (Wolin 2001, 4). No less than three new English translations of *Democracy in America* have appeared within the past seven years.

One may be surprised therefore to hear that *Democracy in America*’s predictions about modern civilization’s future were wrong on nearly all essential points because Tocqueville incorporated into the definition of modern democracy the concrete social and economic features of early-nineteenth-century democratic societies, including the rudimentary degree of education, the unsophisticated technology, and the lack of extensive occupational specialization. In sum, his idea of democracy was premised on a permanent forestalling of modern industrialization and its social consequences. From this premise, he deduced practically all of the book’s major predictions, warnings, and prescriptions for modern democratic societies. In the end, the interesting question is not how this young Frenchman (who was only thirty-five years old when he finished writing *Democracy*) could have been so astonishingly prescient—he was not—but how the near-sighted predictions he set forth in *Democracy in America* came to be construed as vindicated prophecies.

In letters and articles he wrote after completing the first volume of *Democracy* in 1835, Tocqueville offered his views on industrialization in England during the 1830s. These letters throw into broad daylight his egregiously conservative estimate of the future impact of modern industrialization. Though rarely cited by modern Tocqueville commentators, they are the best starting point for understanding the logic of *Democracy in America*’s reflections on modern democracy.

Tocqueville saw the facts clearly. “Already in England,” he wrote in a letter dated May 19, 1835, “nearly two-thirds of the population have passed from agriculture to trade and manufactures” (1861, 2:7). We know, of course, that this movement of labor away from agriculture was laying the groundwork for the modern industrial economy. For thousands of years, since humans figured out how to grow crops and domesticate animals, the vast majority of worked in agriculture. Now, thanks to technological progress, a tiny fraction of the population can produce enough food for all the others, freeing up a huge mass of human talent and energy for countless other productive and creative pursuits.

Although the exodus of English workers from agriculture augured this future, Tocqueville certainly did not know it. He wrote that “its progress must lead to an unnatural and, I believe, an unmaintainable state of society” (1861, 2:7). The unemployment, job insecurity, and wealth inequality that accompanied industrialization in England would produce, he believed, “universal discontent” that ultimately would push England into revolution (1861, 2:8). It would not be a socialist or a Marxist revolution that would abolish private-property rights and socialize economic production, but a Jeffersonian-Jacksonian revolution that would reverse the progress of industrialization, roll back the division of labor, and redistribute the land, turning England into a democracy of independent smallholders—as France and America still

were at the time. “To sum up,” Tocqueville wrote, “I may say that if the taste of our people [in France] for possessing land, and our habit of cultivation on a small scale, have singularly facilitated our progress towards equality, it is probable that the excess of opposing causes will drive the English in the same direction” (1861, 2:9). In an article published a year later in the *London and Westminster Review* (edited by John Stuart Mill), he amplified this idea, writing that “there is nothing . . . more favorable to the reign of democracy than the division of land into small independent properties” (1836, 155–56).

In other words, Tocqueville thought that the future of modern democratic civilization belonged to the yeoman farmers and small independent proprietors who predominated in Jacksonian America and Orleanist France, rather than to the workers, managers, capitalists, shareholders, corporations, and efficient, mechanized, large-scale agriculture emerging in England. From his vantage point in the early nineteenth century, Tocqueville contemplated two diametrically opposed paths of modernization—the French and American path, which simply reflected agrarian society in its democratic phase, and the British path, which was setting the stage for full-scale modern urbanization and industrialization—and he chose the wrong one.

In a letter to Tocqueville in 1835, Nassau Senior, a prominent English economist, tried to show Tocqueville the sound economic logic that was driving England along its path of modernization. The wage laborer, who was more productive than a small independent farmer, was the wave of the future. The situation was a textbook case of the gains of a greater division of labor and of economies of scale. “This [greater productivity of the wage laborer] depends on the same ground,” Senior explained, “which makes it more profitable to work for a cotton manufacturer than to make stockings for his own use” (Simpson 1872, 1:3–4, Nassau Senior to Tocqueville, February 17, 1835).

Despite the argument’s cogency, Tocqueville was not convinced. He replied that the economic organization of 1830s France, dominated by yeoman farmers and small independent proprietors, would afford ample wealth and prosperity *indefinitely*. “The progress of our people in comfort and civilization has been rapid and uninterrupted,” he boasted. Even if English workers were quantitatively more productive, French farmers and proprietors enjoyed greater well-being. They were their own bosses; they were self-reliant; and they were more secure economically. The French system had “political, moral, and intellectual advantages, which are a more than sufficient, and above all, a permanent compensation for the loss [in economic productivity]” (Simpson 1872, 1:7–8, Tocqueville to Nassau Senior, February 21, 1835). Tocqueville saw no reason why France would ever want to go down England’s path of extensive industrialization. To the contrary, as we have already seen, he thought that England must sooner or later be forced to go the way of France.

Tocqueville expressed these views in 1835–36, but he did not change his mind by 1840, when *Democracy in America*’s second volume was published. In the second volume, he allowed that a few large industrial enterprises would exist in the modern

democratic world, but he placed great stress on *few*. By the 1830s, however, factory towns such as Manchester, England, and Lowell, Massachusetts, had already sprung up, presaging the massive Industrial Revolution to come. Yet Tocqueville erred once again on the side of industrial conservatism. He wrote that these large and complex forms of industrial enterprise would always be “an exception, a monstrosity” in the modern democratic economy, confined to only a few industries ([1840] 1969, 557, 2.2.20).¹ Although he conceded that the industrial logic embodied in the factory town was reintroducing aspects of aristocratic society, such as specialization, inequality, elaborate organization, and interdependence in small pockets of the modern world, the broad mass of society, he believed, would be unaffected by it. “[T]hat particular class which is engaged in industry becomes more and more aristocratic,” he wrote, but “the mass of the nation is turning toward democracy. . . . Men appear more and more like in the one context and more and more different in the other, and inequality increases within the little society in proportion as it decreases in the society at large” ([1840] 1969, 556–57, 2.2.20).

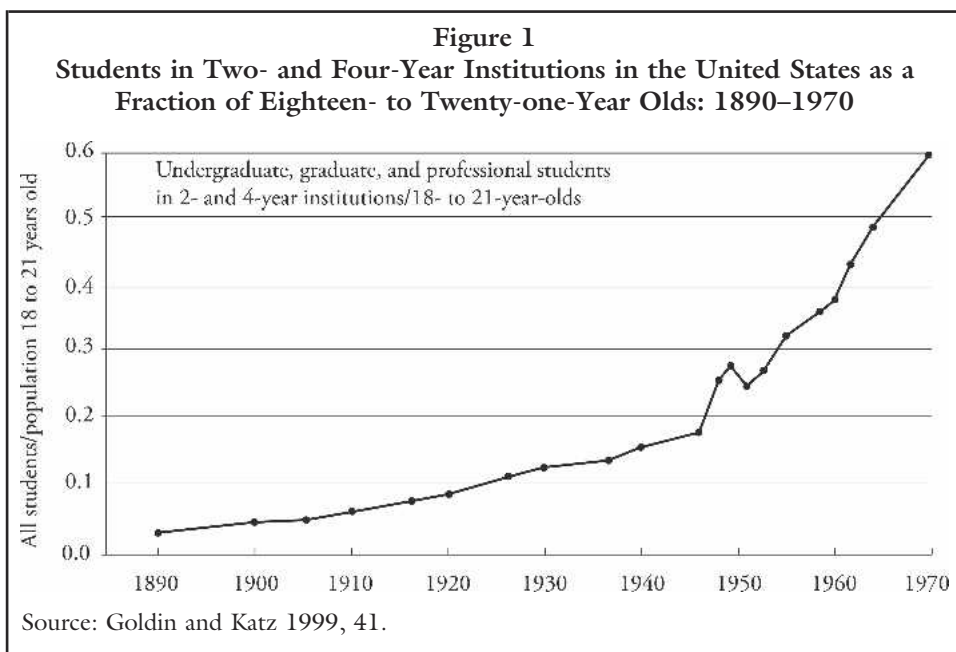
Once we understand that modern industrialization as we know it was critically absent from Tocqueville’s speculations about the future, both the meaning and the logic of the many predictions and warnings in *Democracy in America* come into clear focus.

Tocqueville feared that in the world that was emerging, the progress of science and technology might not only slow down, but even stop and *go backward*. “Confining ourselves to practice,” he wrote, we—modern mankind, that is—“may lose sight of basic principles, and when these have been entirely forgotten, we may apply the methods derived from them badly; we might be left without the capacity to invent new methods, and only able to make a clumsy and an unintelligent use of wise procedures no longer understood” ([1840] 1969, 464, 2.1.10). He pointed to the scientific, technological, and economic stagnation that befell China after the twelfth century as a cautionary tale for societies emerging in the West.

This warning is, to put it bluntly, bizarre and ridiculous, but once we accept that Tocqueville believed that the character, rate, and potential of mankind’s industrial and technological progress would undergo no revolutionary change after the early nineteenth century, we can easily work out the logical steps by which he made this deduction.

In modern, industrialized society, the investment in education and research—especially scientific research—is massive and unprecedented. It is also a very recent development (see figure 1). The modern education boom depended on industrial advances that would not come into their own until the second half of the nineteenth century, many years after the publication of *Democracy in America*. These industrial

1. The last set of numbers in the citation represents the volume, part, and chapter number. For the most part, I use George Lawrence’s 1969 translation of *Democracy in America*, but on occasion I use Mansfield and Winthrop’s 2000 translation.



advances would change the face of modern society and rapidly antiquate the type of society Tocqueville considered “modern.” He did not foresee any of them.

Tocqueville actually believed that higher education was *diminishing* with modernization. Literacy certainly spread, but he concluded that advanced education, which had been the luxury of the aristocracy and the clergy, was coming to an end with the triumph of modern democracy. He took Jacksonian America, where virtually everyone left school by the age of fifteen to take up a trade, as his paradigm of the future. This society produced “a very strange phenomenon” in which men were “nearer equality in . . . mental endowments . . . than in any other country in the world or in any other age in recorded history” ([1835] 1969, 56, 1.1.3). Tocqueville was not exaggerating: he gave a fair description of a society in which literacy was high, yet less than 5 percent of the population finished high school. (Today, approximately 80 percent graduate.) “Intellectual inequality comes directly from God,” he wrote, but in modern democratic civilization “intelligence . . . finds equal means at its disposition” ([1835] 1969, 51, 1.1.3).

Once Tocqueville had decided that no enduring economic progress would occur beyond a heavily agrarian, low-tech, industrially small-scale economy, his speculations about the future of modern democratic societies were almost a matter of simple deduction. Whatever was possible in democratic society had to be possible within the very modest economic limits of an only slightly industrialized society. Because the economy could never be very productive or technologically advanced, not much higher education and occupational specialization could exist in society: they were not only expensive, but also unnecessary. An early-nineteenth-century economy had no

obvious or pressing need for a mass of professionals, scientists, and research universities; it could not afford them; it could hardly even form a conception of a world in which they are vital.

Thus, Tocqueville concluded that professors, scientists, and scholars—intellectual specialists of any sort—were relics of the aristocratic age, doomed to extinction in modern democracies; their roles would instead be filled by amateur theorists, dabblers, and tinkerers. He called Jacksonian Americans natural Cartesians (after the French philosopher and mathematician René Descartes) because they practiced an extreme form of intellectual self-reliance, seeing no reason to defer to the conclusions of others ([1840] 1969, 429, 2.1.1). Given the actual dearth of expertise and specialization in that society, Cartesian self-reliance in all matters, high and low, was natural, even rational. Because hardly anyone went beyond an eighth-grade education, there was “an immense multitude of individuals who have nearly the same number of notions in matters of religion, of history, of science, of political economy, of legislation, of government” ([1835] 2000, 51, 1.1.3). In this kind of society, a Ph.D. degree was truly exotic, verging on extraterrestrial.

Moreover, as Tocqueville envisioned the future, it would contain not only no intellectual specialization, but no specialization *in general*. He predicted that the typical career track would be exemplified by that of the Jacksonian American jack-of-all-trades. Men would freely and frequently change occupations. “One comes across those who have been in turn lawyers, farmers, merchants, ministers of the Gospel, and doctors. Though the American may be less skilled than the European in each particular craft, there is hardly any skill to which he is a complete stranger” ([1835] 1969, 403, 1.2.10). Whereas in aristocracies “every man has but one sole aim which he constantly pursues,” in democracies a man will often “take up a profession and leave it, settling in one place and soon go off elsewhere with his changing desires” ([1840] 1969, 536, 2.2.13).

Career switching may be on the rise today (at least in rich, industrialized democracies), but it occurs now for an altogether different reason from the one Tocqueville bore in mind. Today, people demand more pleasure and meaning from their work, and this growing choosiness has led more and more of them to sacrifice substantial time and money to learn another occupation. Tocqueville, by contrast, attributed the mania for occupation switching to the sheer ease of doing it. He thought there would be low barriers of entry to virtually *every* occupation in the modern democratic world. “In such a country as America,” he wrote, “where specialists are very rare, it is impossible to insist on a long apprenticeship before a man enters into a profession. Consequently an American finds it very easy to change his trade, suiting his occupations to the needs of the moment” ([1835] 1969, 403, 1.2.10). Amateurism, not professional skill and expertise, would be the general rule. Americans “do things which they have not properly learned to do and to say things which they scarcely understand; they have to throw themselves into actual work unprepared by a long apprenticeship” ([1840] 1969, 611, 2.3.15).

It follows that in such a society inequalities between individuals in wealth-producing capacity, income, and career prospects would be negligible because everyone would be basically fungible in knowledge, training, and skills. No serious income or educational disparities would divide white-collar and blue-collar workers or those who went to college and those who did not because the very basis for such disparities would be absent. Thus, *Democracy in America* set forth the maxim that “in democratic countries, most of industry is carried on at small expense by men whose wealth and education do not raise them above the common level of those they employ” ([1840] 1969, 583, 2.3.7). This maxim is clearly false for the industrial democracies of the twenty-first century, but it is a fair description of the pre- or protoindustrial democracies of the early nineteenth century.

We come now to Tocqueville’s famous idea of “individualism,” which is one of the most widely misunderstood ideas in the study of political thought. Many scholars and commentators have assumed that when Tocqueville warned of modern society’s perpetual susceptibility to individualism, he was referring prophetically to a tendency toward psychological self-absorption, a feeling of rootlessness, a lack of civic spiritedness, a dearth of communal solidarity—all of which arguably characterize modern societies today. Tocqueville’s idea of individualism did indeed entail these outcomes, but did not have any of them at its actual core, wherein he denoted *a literal absence of collaboration between individuals*.

Tocqueville premised his idea of individualism on the economic conditions of his time, just as he did with his speculations about the future of intellectual and professional activity. With the high cost of transportation, the unsophisticated state of technology, and the generally modest needs of that stage of civilization, most human activity in the democratic societies of the early nineteenth century was performed by individuals or families. Civil society comprised few organizations of any note or import. An insignificant number of people worked or studied in universities; there were no research establishments because scientists were still by and large independent amateurs; and there were few corporations. Wherever the corporate bodies and caste-based occupational tracks of aristocracy had been dismantled, a civilization was emerging in which nearly everyone was an independent proprietor of his own farm or business concern. Thus, Tocqueville wrote that modern democratic society made men “independent of one another” and made them “contract the habit and taste of following their will alone in their particular actions” ([1840] 2000, 639, 2.4.1). These people clearly did not work in organizations as coworkers and employees, as the vast majority of people do today. They were small proprietors accustomed to enjoy an “entire independence . . . vis-à-vis their equals” ([1840] 2000, 639, 2.4.1). They were men engaged in undertakings that “they pursue apart, unencumbered by assistants” ([1840] 1969, 672 n. 1, 2.4.3).

Individualism arose when these individuals developed a “presumptuous confidence” in their self-sufficiency and stopped imagining how “they could ever need another’s help again” ([1840] 1969, 508, 2.2.3). It portended the end of all forms of

collaboration in civil society. Thus, instead of forming larger partnerships and business associations, a people plagued with individualism would settle exclusively for tiny family businesses and sole proprietorships. Instead of joining forces and pooling resources to build schools, roads, and intellectual or moral associations, they would withdraw into the petty isolation of their separate little farms. They would gradually become incapable of joining together to pursue any common interest in business, science, philanthropy, or anything else. To use Tocqueville's literally precise phrase, they would lose the "art of association" ([1840] 1969, 517, 2.2.5).

An epidemic of individualism would clearly have very grave consequences. It would kill economic prosperity, halt intellectual progress, push civilization back toward barbarism, and prepare a people for servitude. Tocqueville said as much in the second volume of his book: modern democratic societies would ever be prone to lapsing into "servitude, misery, and barbarism" ([1840] 1969, 705, 2.4.8).

To put it mildly, this scenario is inconceivable today. Everywhere we turn, we have collaborations—very sophisticated, durable, and effective ones, too: universities, professional associations, philanthropic foundations, research institutions, public-interest groups, corporations, political parties, hospitals, symphonies, sports teams, television networks, movie studios, and so on. Society today is ultracollaborative. As the late social scientist Peter Drucker observed, "Society in all developed countries has become a society of organizations in which most, if not all, social tasks are being done in and by an organization" (1993, 49). Individualism according to Tocqueville's definition would mean nothing less than the end of modern civilization as we know it. The only way such an individualistic world might be conceivable would be in the aftermath of a nuclear apocalypse or a comparable, civilization-obliterating catastrophe.

Modern progress has occurred so fast and has had such profound and pervasive effects that we forget that much we take for granted today had yet to materialize when Tocqueville wrote *Democracy in America* in the 1830s. At least twenty more years would pass before railroads had spread enough to have a significant impact on business and trade. Large, complex business associations—modern private corporations—awaited even farther in the future, as did the modern university, the modern science establishment, and modern occupational specialization, all of which took off only as the nineteenth century neared its end. The simple, homogenous Jacksonian world of small proprietors, yeoman farmers, and unspecialized nonprofessionals would then disappear. In the 1830s, however, these conditions were still the pillars of "modern civilization."

Looking back, we can see how modern progress since the mid-nineteenth century has proceeded. Its motor is a never-ending and accelerating feedback loop: technological innovation makes possible ever more sophisticated and productive forms of collaboration, which in turn fosters even more technological innovation. Thomas Friedman's recent best-seller *The World Is Flat* (2005) tries to predict where the next turn of this virtuous circle will take us.

Tocqueville, the Thomas Friedman of his day, failed to anticipate in every respect this self-reinforcing and self-intensifying process of growing technological power and collaborative sophistication. He thought that private corporations, which were small and beleaguered in the 1830s, had a bleak future. These associations—which would never be anything more than “little private societies” ([1840] 1969, 687, 2.4.5)—would always be so rare that wherever they arose, they would be eyesores that cause “astonishment and disquiet” (687, 2.4.5). Sooner or later, Tocqueville thought, the state would strip them of their rights and privileges and absorb them.

In the unlikely event that the state let corporations be, they would still not become powerful for another reason, according to Tocqueville: they would never be able to raise a significant amount of capital. He predicted that the state would absorb almost the whole stock of available investment capital in society—“the wealth of the rich by loans” and “the poor man’s mite through the savings bank” ([1840] 1969, 682, 2.4.5). Why? Because “in a democracy only the state inspires confidence in private persons, for it alone seems to them to have some force and permanence” (682, 2.4.5). Tocqueville might have fainted at the sight of today’s AMEX and NASDAQ.

The most fundamental reason Tocqueville could not foresee where modern industrialization would take the world, however, goes to the heart of his ideas of democracy and the democratic man. He could not imagine how the sort of persons who flourished in the early-nineteenth-century economy could ever be transformed into skilled specialists, who were eventually to form the basis of the modern organization.

Today, we all are bred from birth to work in organizations. First, we are pushed toward white-collar or blue-collar work according to our academic performance in high school. Then we are forced to specialize further and to develop a narrow, but well-developed set of skills and knowledge that will prove effective in a specific position in a specific type of modern organization. Take the modern university, for example: here, we have not only scholars and researchers (who are further specialized into different disciplines and subfields), but administrators, accountants, repairmen, computer technicians, and many kinds of trained specialists working in concert to perform and sustain the university’s operation. Next to technology, modern civilization’s productive power lies in its unprecedented ability to produce human beings who possess diverse, well-honed, and complementary powers.

As we have seen, however, Tocqueville thought democratic people would always be fungible and shallow in knowledge and skills. He expected that they would seldom become specialists in anything and that the modern economy would never force them to do so. He expected the vast majority of workers to be independent, self-sufficient, small-scale proprietors. People in Tocqueville’s vision of democracy were like small, identical spheres, designed not for collaboration, but for separateness and self-sufficiency. Thus, large, sophisticated private organizations such as the modern corporation and the modern university—perhaps the two most important institutions of our present civilization—were inconceivable to Tocqueville.

Of course, as we now know, economic and technological changes readily induced the Jacksonian proprietor to evolve within a century into the modern specialist and organization employee. Working in associations would become a virtual precondition of making a living.

Tocqueville, however, had no idea that things would work out this way, so he believed that the only way to preserve the art of association in modern times would be deliberately and vigilantly through constant, persevering practice and example. Because civil society could not provide anything more than puny and fragile examples of association, he turned to the township, or local government, as the last, best hope for keeping the art alive. Many commentators have misinterpreted the vital importance that Tocqueville attributed to civic involvement in the township as evidence that he was a “civic republican” or a “participatory democrat” who saw politics as the supreme human activity. The truth however is more mundane. Tocqueville valued the democratic township because there men could learn how to work together, run a sizeable operation, administer a big budget, hold meetings, split up responsibilities, and achieve substantial results, whether these results took the form of new public roads, schools, or trash collection. People today acquire these skills by working for almost any organization or even beforehand, as part of their vocational or professional training. But Tocqueville believed that the township would be practically the only school available for the individual to learn these basic skills and acquire the competences necessary for working in concert with others.

Because Tocqueville feared that modern individuals would be so incompetent and incapable of accomplishing anything requiring collaboration, he famously warned that modern democratic societies would be prone to an unprecedented degree of encroaching state control. Many commentators have regarded the specter of “democratic despotism” that he describes at the end of *Democracy in America* as an uncanny prophecy of modern totalitarian states or even of the modern liberal-democratic welfare state. But such is not the case.

Tocqueville’s idea of democratic despotism presupposed an extremely weak and undeveloped civil society plagued by individualism, lacking collaborative activity, and devoid of organizations. As the state stepped in to do things that private individuals were too incompetent and too unimaginative to do for themselves through collaboration, democratic despotism would emerge. And this intervention would proceed by way of a vicious circle: the less private individuals collaborated, the more the state would assume various tasks and responsibilities; the more the state did things for people, the less they would feel the need to collaborate to accomplish things on their own.

Thus, Tocqueville’s favorite adjectives for democratic despotism were *soft* and *enervating* ([1840] 1969, 677, 2.4.5). It would be soft because few would resist and in fact many would welcome the expansion of state control and direction. It would be enervating because it would progressively relieve people of the responsibilities and challenges of initiating and managing their own affairs. They would not found com-

panies, spread innovations, build and operate universities, establish and sustain philanthropies, or steer existing organizations toward new achievements and in new directions. They would not feel the need to do so, and they would probably be unable to imagine the possibility. Democratic despotism would “monopolize all activity and life to such an extent that all around it must languish when it languishes, sleep when it sleeps, and perish if it dies” ([1835] 1969, 93, 1.1.5). It would “administer directly according to a uniform plan all affairs and all men” ([1840] 1969, 670, 2.4.2). Even in the smallest affairs, “where common sense is enough,” democratic despotism would “hold that the citizens are not up to the job” ([1840] 1969, 694, 2.4.6). There would be no private initiative or achievement, only “a flock of timid and hardworking animals with the government as its shepherd” ([1840] 1969, 692, 2.4.6).

Democratic despotism is completely incompatible with the striving, creative, and enormously productive civil society we have today. It is certainly incorrect to classify the modern liberal-democratic welfare state as democratic despotism because it is instead parasitic on a prosperous and well-developed private sector. Neither is it correct to call modern totalitarianism a type of democratic despotism because, as Tocqueville makes clear, the latter would not arise by and certainly would not have to be maintained by state terror legitimated by ideology. Democratic despotism would be both mild and nonideological. At the end of the day, Tocqueville’s idea of democratic despotism assumed that civilization would never transcend early-nineteenth-century economic conditions.

For all these reasons, we should stop saying that Tocqueville was a great prophet of modernity. He was not prescient. He fundamentally misjudged the direction of modern industrialization, gave a wildly pessimistic prognosis of the fate of modern civil society, and urged unrelenting vigilance against a sort of despotism whose emergence is now inconceivable.

How could so many of Tocqueville’s present-day commentators and admirers have been blind to all this? I offer three possible reasons.

First, Tocqueville wrote in an epigrammatically abstract style. He loved lofty generalizations and skimmed on examples, illustrations, and statistics. Such down-to-earth elements would have made the economic premises of *Democracy in America* more obvious.

Second, many Tocqueville commentators have misunderstood *Democracy in America* because they have lacked the requisite knowledge to work out the basic logic of his vision, a logic which is economic and technological in nature. Ever since interest in Tocqueville was revived around half a century ago, owing to the scholarly and popularizing efforts of J. P. Mayer, his commentators have hailed overwhelmingly from the fields of political theory and intellectual history. However, the scholars who are really best equipped to elucidate the critical assumptions undergirding Tocqueville’s thought are historians of industry, business, science, and technology. Yet these kinds of scholars have never shown a significant interest in studying *Democracy in*

America, leaving its interpretation to scholars who not only are inexpert in economic, industrial, and technological history, but also have a vested interest in understating the importance of such things—relative to the importance of political and moral ideas, that is—for understanding the modern world. (Tocqueville himself shared this intellectual lopsidedness, which contributed to his poor understanding of modernizing forces.)

Lack of relevant expertise, however, does not wholly excuse the commentators. Tocqueville's economic assumptions might be tricky to unravel without a working knowledge of economic, business, and technological history, but they are scarcely invisible. Thus, we come to the third and perhaps the most important reason why so many commentators have mistaken Tocqueville for a prophet: that certain parts of *Democracy in America* have proved all too easy to misinterpret in ideologically congenial ways. By a miraculous coincidence, this temptation has occurred across the ideological spectrum. Anti-Marxist liberals, conservatives, and communitarians alike have regarded Tocqueville as a profound and venerable oracle who happened to say exactly what they wished to hear. Anti-Marxist liberals have been eager to set Tocqueville's vision of modern democratic society's future, devoid of class conflict and amenable to liberal values, against Marx's prophecy of class struggle and Communist revolution. Conservatives have trumpeted Tocqueville's unflattering description of the universal pettiness of democratic life. Communitarians—composed of a large swath of left-wing anticapitalists who no longer wanted to be Marxists—have rushed to call attention to Tocqueville's warm endorsement of the civic activism he saw in the townships of early-nineteenth-century New England.

In all these cases, interpretation of *Democracy in America* has become an act of ideological narcissism, thus thwarting serious, disinterested inquiry into Tocqueville's meaning. Had these various commentators pursued clarity rather than ideological vindication, the anti-Marxists among them might have seen that Tocqueville's vision of the future is classless only because the early-nineteenth-century democratic economy, which he mistook as eternal, was too simple and unproductive to generate modern economic classes; the communitarians among them would have seen that Tocqueville cared so much about townships not because they fostered civic participation per se, but simply because they were effective in teaching the generic art of collaboration; and, finally, the conservative commentators among them might have seen that the "pettiness" Tocqueville ascribed to democracy was an artifact of early-nineteenth-century economic assumptions as well. In a democratic society composed overwhelmingly of simple, highly self-sufficient farmers, merchants, and artisans, with almost no higher education, no opportunities for specialization or long apprenticeships (such as a Ph.D.), and no complex organizations, of course it would be difficult for anyone to accomplish anything more than simple, small-scale objectives that contribute nothing to either an advancement of science and enlightenment or the fund of serious art, literature, and philosophy. Thus, Tocqueville wrote that modern civilization "prevents any from enjoying resources of great extent" ([1840] 1969,

629, 2.3.19) and that, as a consequence, ambitious and talented men would have to “strain their faculties to the utmost to achieve paltry results” ([1840] 1969, 629, 2.3.19). Such simple, straightforward reasoning from an erroneous premise—not a deep, philosophical aversion to modernity (such as Tocqueville’s many conservative Catholic and Straussian admirers have supposed)—explains why he feared that the end of aristocracy spelled the end of great human achievements.

This erroneous premise also accounts for Tocqueville’s idea, applauded by conservatives, that it would be crucial to preserve religious conviction in modern times. In *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville valued religion entirely for its secular effects, especially for one effect in particular: he thought that religious belief in an imperishable soul—whether in the form of reincarnation or the afterlife, it hardly mattered—would have the psychological tendency of enlarging and elevating democratic man’s worldly aspirations. He stressed the immortality of the soul, however, in the expectation that the modern human would be prone to whittle his pursuit of happiness down to the running of a little farm or store—a truly petty and unaspiring expression of materialism. Although some of that stance might still be seen today in broad swaths of the consumerist middle class, the modern world at the beginning of the twenty-first century abounds in ability and aspiration, and materialism has become so dynamic and creative that it has become infused with spiritual, ethical, and aesthetic purposes. We have Nike commercials, magazine profiles of entrepreneurs and visionaries, and a thousand other secular sermons and examples performing the aspiration-raising function of religion, impressing on us a sense of possibility, idealism, and self-confidence every day.

What then was Tocqueville’s politics? It was liberal in the most elementary and uncontroversial sense. “My critics,” he wrote to his English translator Henry Reeve in 1837, “insist upon making me out a party-man; but I am not that. Passions are attributed to me where I have only opinions; or rather, I have but one opinion, an enthusiasm for the liberty and for the dignity of the human race. I consider all forms of government merely as so many more or less perfect means of satisfying that holy and legitimate craving” (1861, 2:31–32, March 22, 1837). He accepted, as the will of God, that rudimentary education, half-baked skills, and petty, weak, and inglorious mutual independence would be modern man’s permanent fate. The political agenda of *Democracy in America* was simply to help to prevent this petty yet dignified freedom—perfectly exemplified by the Jacksonian Americans—from degenerating into ignorance, servitude, and infantilized dependence under the tutelage of a democratic despotism. Although Tocqueville was a blinkered analyst of modern historical forces, he thought nobly and seriously on behalf of his cause, “for the liberty and for the dignity of the human race.”

Tocqueville would have been astonished, delighted, and relieved to see the modern world at the beginning of the twenty-first century. That is not to say that he would find nothing to dislike or criticize, but his principal reaction would be shock: at our abundance, our activity, our skills, our extraordinary proficiency in freely join-

ing together, pursuing, and realizing thousands of diverse and often extraordinary goals, ideals, visions, whims, and dreams. The modern world has spectacularly transcended Tocqueville's best-case scenario.

In the end, Tocqueville himself conceded that *Democracy in America* was at best a tentative speculation and that he possessed no special clairvoyance. "The past throws no light on the future," he wrote in his conclusion, "and the spirit of man walks through the night" ([1840] 1969, 703, 2.4.8). *Democracy in America* is now itself part of that antiquated past. As progress sweeps us onward toward to an unknown destiny, the human spirit still walks through the night. Gazing at the emerging modern landscape in 1835, Tocqueville declared that "a new political science is needed for a world entirely new" ([1835] 1969, 12, author's introduction). Were he alive today, he would almost certainly repeat this statement and set to work.

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Acknowledgments: I thank Professor Harvey C. Mansfield for his warm encouragement while I was writing the Ph.D. dissertation from which this article is adapted, despite the deep differences in our views. I also thank Nathan Glazer for his steady encouragement, advice, and mentoring on this project and much else.

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