

Democracy in America

By

Alexis de Tocqueville

Translator – Henry Reeve

A Penn State Electronic Classics Series Publication

Democracy in America, Volumes One and Two by Alexis de Tocqueville, trans. Henry Reeve is a publication of the Pennsylvania State University. This Portable Document file is furnished free and without any charge of any kind. Any person using this document file, for any purpose, and in any way does so at his or her own risk. Neither the Pennsylvania State University nor Jim Manis, Faculty Editor, nor anyone associated with the Pennsylvania State University assumes any responsibility for the material contained within the document or for the file as an electronic transmission, in any way.

Democracy in America, Volumes One and Two by Alexis de Tocqueville, trans. Henry Reeve, the Pennsylvania State University, *Electronic Classics Series*, Jim Manis, Faculty Editor, Hazleton, PA 18201-1291 is a Portable Document File produced as part of an ongoing student publication project to bring classical works of literature, in English, to free and easy access of those wishing to make use of them.

Cover Design: Jim Manis

Copyright © 2002 The Pennsylvania State University

~~several parts of an immense Being, which alone remains un-
changed amidst the continual change and ceaseless transforma-
tion of all that constitutes it, we may readily infer that
such a system, although it destroy the individuality of man -
nay, rather because it destroys that individuality - will have
secret charms for men living in democracies. All their habits
of thought prepare them to conceive it, and predispose them
to adopt it. It naturally attracts and fixes their imagination;
it fosters the pride, whilst it soothes the indolence, of their
minds. Amongst the different systems by whose aid philoso-
phy endeavors to explain the universe, I believe pantheism
to be one of those most fitted to seduce the human mind in
democratic ages. Against it all who abide in their attachment
to the true greatness of man should struggle and combine.~~

Chapter VIII: The Principle of Equality Suggests to the Americans the Idea of the Indefinite Per- fectibility of Man

Equality suggests to the human mind several ideas which
would not have originated from any other source, and it

modifies almost all those previously entertained. I take as an
example the idea of human perfectibility, because it is one of
the principal notions that the intellect can conceive, and
because it constitutes of itself a great philosophical theory,
which is every instant to be traced by its consequences in the
practice of human affairs. Although man has many points of
resemblance with the brute creation, one characteristic is
peculiar to himself - he improves: they are incapable of im-
provement. Mankind could not fail to discover this differ-
ence from its earliest period. The idea of perfectibility is there-
fore as old as the world; equality did not give birth to it,
although it has imparted to it a novel character.

When the citizens of a community are classed according
to their rank, their profession, or their birth, and when all
men are constrained to follow the career which happens to
open before them, everyone thinks that the utmost limits of
human power are to be discerned in proximity to himself,
and none seeks any longer to resist the inevitable law of his
destiny. Not indeed that an aristocratic people absolutely con-
tests man's faculty of self- improvement, but they do not
hold it to be indefinite; amelioration they conceive, but not

change: they imagine that the future condition of society may be better, but not essentially different; and whilst they admit that mankind has made vast strides in improvement, and may still have some to make, they assign to it beforehand certain impassable limits. Thus they do not presume that they have arrived at the supreme good or at absolute truth (what people or what man was ever wild enough to imagine it?) but they cherish a persuasion that they have pretty nearly reached that degree of greatness and knowledge which our imperfect nature admits of; and as nothing moves about them they are willing to fancy that everything is in its fit place. Then it is that the legislator affects to lay down eternal laws; that kings and nations will raise none but imperishable monuments; and that the present generation undertakes to spare generations to come the care of regulating their destinies.

In proportion as castes disappear and the classes of society approximate – as manners, customs, and laws vary, from the tumultuous intercourse of men – as new facts arise – as new truths are brought to light – as ancient opinions are dissipated, and others take their place – the image of an ideal perfection, forever on the wing, presents itself to the human

mind. Continual changes are then every instant occurring under the observation of every man: the position of some is rendered worse; and he learns but too well, that no people and no individual, how enlightened soever they may be, can lay claim to infallibility; – the condition of others is improved; whence he infers that man is endowed with an indefinite faculty of improvement. His reverses teach him that none may hope to have discovered absolute good – his success stimulates him to the never-ending pursuit of it. Thus, forever seeking – forever falling, to rise again – often disappointed, but not discouraged – he tends unceasingly towards that unmeasured greatness so indistinctly visible at the end of the long track which humanity has yet to tread. It can hardly be believed how many facts naturally flow from the philosophical theory of the indefinite perfectibility of man, or how strong an influence it exercises even on men who, living entirely for the purposes of action and not of thought, seem to conform their actions to it, without knowing anything about it. I accost an American sailor, and I inquire why the ships of his country are built so as to last but for a short time; he answers without hesitation that the art of navi-

gation is every day making such rapid progress, that the finest vessel would become almost useless if it lasted beyond a certain number of years. In these words, which fell accidentally and on a particular subject from a man of rude attainments, I recognize the general and systematic idea upon which a great people directs all its concerns.

Aristocratic nations are naturally too apt to narrow the scope of human perfectibility; democratic nations to expand it beyond compass.

~~Chapter IX: The Example of the Americans Does Not Prove That a Democratic People Can Have No Aptitude and No Taste for Science, Literature, or Art~~

~~It must be acknowledged that amongst few of the civilized nations of our time have the higher sciences made less progress than in the United States; and in few have great artists, fine poets, or celebrated writers been more rare. Many Europeans, struck by this fact, have looked upon it as a natural and inevitable result of equality; and they have supposed that if a~~

~~democratic state of society and democratic institutions were ever to prevail over the whole earth, the human mind would gradually find its beacon-lights grow dim, and men would relapse into a period of darkness. To reason thus is, I think, to confound several ideas which it is important to divide and to examine separately: it is to mingle, unintentionally, what is democratic with what is only American.~~

~~The religion professed by the first emigrants, and bequeathed by them to their descendants, simple in its form of worship, austere and almost harsh in its principles, and hostile to external symbols and to ceremonial pomp, is naturally unfavorable to the fine arts, and only yields a reluctant sufferance to the pleasures of literature. The Americans are a very old and a very enlightened people, who have fallen upon a new and unbounded country, where they may extend themselves at pleasure, and which they may fertilize without difficulty. This state of things is without a parallel in the history of the world. In America, then, every one finds facilities, unknown elsewhere, for making or increasing his fortune. The spirit of gain is always on the stretch, and the human mind, constantly diverted from the pleasures of imagination,~~