

Democratic Despotism

In reflecting on the future of the rule of law in Western Europe, Tocqueville clearly explains that the choice is now simple, at least initially, and boils down to the alternative: democracy or despotism. However, the new political science that he helped to formulate, drawing from the model of American democracy, a heuristic rather than paradigmatic model, reveals that the initial choice can unfold in several ways. Democracy can remain a complex yet virtuous and balanced political regime, whether in the form of a republic or a constitutional monarchy, but it can also drift and give rise to monstrous political forms.

Democracy is a difficult regime that requires active citizens calling upon virtue—understood here as the democratic *virtù* comparable to that which Montesquieu deemed necessary for a republic. Citizens may lack this courage and virtue and grow weary of this "democratic condition," demanding instead a strong power, like the frogs in the fable who call upon Jupiter to send them a king that will move. The entire twentieth century was marked by harsh despotisms that all came to power with, if not total, at least majority consensus, leading to the catastrophic aberrations of fascist, Nazi, or Stalinist regimes, or others cut from the same cloth, all presenting themselves as embodiments of the popular will. Since the Terror, every tyrant has repeated: "I am the people!"

But the form of despotism toward which democracy tends almost naturally is of endogenous nature: a democracy pushed to its own extreme, which corrodes the individual, the social body, and society itself to the point of turning them into grotesque caricatures—this, for Tocqueville, is the major risk. Democracy becomes despotic by sacrificing liberty to equality, by multiplying laws through a legislative power reinforced by stifling centralism, enclosing the individual from cradle to grave. It carries within itself the seed of despotism:

"I had noticed during my stay in the United States that a democratic social state similar to that of the Americans could offer singular opportunities for the establishment of despotism. (...)

It seems that if despotism were to be established among the democratic nations of our day (...), it would be more widespread and more mild, and it would degrade men without tormenting them.

I do not doubt that in centuries of enlightenment and equality like ours, sovereigns would find it easier to concentrate all public powers into their own hands, and to penetrate more routinely and more deeply into the realm of private interests (...). But this same equality that facilitates despotism also tempers it; we have seen how, as men become more alike and more equal, public manners become gentler and more humane. When no citizen holds great power or great wealth, tyranny, in a sense, lacks opportunity and a stage. (...)

Democratic governments may become violent and even cruel at certain times of great turmoil and danger, but such crises will be rare and fleeting. When I reflect on the small passions of men today, the softness of their morals, the breadth of their knowledge, the purity of their religion, the gentleness of their morals, their industrious and orderly habits, the restraint they maintain in vice as well as in virtue, I do not fear they will find tyrants in their leaders, but rather guardians.

I thus believe that the kind of oppression that threatens democratic peoples will not resemble anything that has come before in the world. (...)

The phenomenon is new, so we must attempt to define it, since I cannot name it.

I want to imagine under what new features despotism could appear in the world: I see an innumerable crowd of alike and equal men who revolve on themselves without rest in order to obtain petty and vulgar pleasures with which they fill their souls. Each of them, withdrawn into himself, is like a stranger to the fate of all the others; his children and his close friends constitute for him the whole of humanity; as for the rest of his fellow citizens, he is beside them but does not see them; he touches them but does not feel them; he exists only in himself and for himself, and if he still has a family, at least he no longer has a homeland.

Above these stands an immense and tutelary power, which alone takes it upon itself to secure their enjoyment and watch over their fate. It is absolute, detailed, regular, provident, and mild. It would resemble paternal power if, like that, its purpose were to prepare men for manhood; but it seeks, on the contrary, to keep them irrevocably in childhood. It likes its citizens to enjoy themselves, provided they think only of enjoying themselves. It willingly works for their happiness, but it wants to be the sole agent and sole arbiter of that happiness; it provides for their security, foresees and supplies their needs, facilitates their pleasures, manages their principal affairs, directs their industry, regulates their inheritance, divides their estates—can it not entirely relieve them from the trouble of thinking and the burden of living?

Thus it reduces the use of free will every day, confines the action of the will within a narrower space, and gradually robs each citizen of even the use of himself. Equality has prepared men for all this: it has predisposed them to endure it and even to regard it as a benefit.

After having thus taken each individual in turn into its powerful hands, and molded him as it pleases, the sovereign extends its arms over the entire society. It does not break wills, but it softens them, bends them, and guides them; it rarely forces action, but it constantly opposes any action; it does not destroy, it prevents birth; it does not tyrannize, it hinders, it restrains, it enervates, it extinguishes, it stupefies, and finally reduces each nation to nothing more than a herd of timid and industrious animals, of which the government is the shepherd. (...)

To create a national representation in a very centralized country is thus to reduce the harm that extreme centralization can produce, but not to eliminate it. I can see that, in this way, individual intervention is preserved in the most important matters; but it is no less suppressed in the small and particular ones. (...) Subjugation in small affairs appears every day and is felt indiscriminately by all citizens. It does not drive them to despair, but it continually annoys them and leads them to relinquish the use of their will. In vain you will charge these same citizens, whom you have made so dependent on central power, to choose from time to time the representatives of that power; this use, so important, but so brief and so rare, of their free will will not prevent them from gradually losing the capacity to think, feel, and act for themselves, and thus falling gradually below the level of humanity.

I would add that they will soon become incapable of exercising the great and only privilege that remains to them. The democratic peoples who have introduced liberty into the political sphere, while simultaneously increasing despotism in the administrative sphere, have been led into very strange contradictions. If it is a matter of handling small affairs where mere common sense would suffice, they believe the citizens incapable; but when it comes to governing the whole

State, they entrust to those same citizens immense prerogatives. (...) It is, in fact, difficult to conceive how men who have completely renounced the habit of governing themselves could succeed in making a good choice of those who should govern them; and no one will be made to believe that a liberal, energetic, and wise government could ever arise from the votes of a people of servants.”

The Tocquevillian democratic man described here is the spiritual brother of Nietzsche’s Last Man, the one the crowd cries out for.

And Tocqueville concludes:

“A constitution that would be republican at the top and ultra-monarchical in all its other parts has always seemed to me an ephemeral monster. The vices of the rulers and the imbecility of the ruled would soon bring about its ruin; and the people, tired of its representatives and of itself, would either create freer institutions, or soon stretch itself once again at the feet of a single master.”

That master so eagerly awaited in our national tradition of Caesarism or Bonapartism.