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Democracy in America in Contemporary Language Volume 2

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**Democracy in America:
In Contemporary Language**

Volume 2

Alexis de Tocqueville

Doug Good, editor

Part I

Influence of Democracy on the Evolution of Intellect in the United States.

Chapter I: Philosophical Method among the Americans

Among all nations *in the civilized world*, the United States pays the least attention to philosophy. Yet all its inhabitants follow a school of thought characterized by avoidance of habit, class, or tradition. The common person uses facts as information for making fresh choices. Without realizing it, Americans practice the method of Descartes; each follows *the individual exercise of his own understanding alone*. There is too much *flux* in the democratic community for the ties of one generation to another to hold tightly. *People easily lose track of the ideas of their ancestors*. And without the existence of classes to designate any scale of greatness or superiority, each *person is forced back* on his own reason. *Everyone shuts himself up tightly within himself and insists upon judging the world from there*.

Because Americans feel they can, *unaided, overcome all the petty difficulties of practical life, they readily conclude that everything in the world can be explained and that nothing surpasses the limits of understanding*. Thus they are *quick to deny what they cannot comprehend, which leaves them with little faith in the extraordinary, and an almost insuperable distaste for the supernatural*. They acknowledge only what is plain and obvious, and condemn *outward forms as useless and inconvenient veils placed between themselves and truth*.

In Europe, beginning with the 16th century, events show the same independence of spirit developing as equality of individuals improved. Religious reformers [e.g., Luther] questioned church dogma. In the 17th century Bacon and Descartes overthrew *received formulations, traditions and authority*. Then in the 18th century Voltaire and other philosophers continued this individual scrutinizing with even more expanded application. The religious reformers restricted their iconoclasm to the religious realm and Descartes limited his method of reasoning to philosophy.

But finally the method of challenging set forms broke out of *the schools and into society*. The enlivening of *common intelligence* became popular first in France, but spread *either openly ... or secretly* throughout Europe. The *political laws, the social state, [and] the habits of mind* inhibited the movement until equality of conditions gained rise.

Chapter 1: Why Democratic Peoples Show a More Ardent and Enduring Love of Equality than of Liberty.

The *love of equality itself* is the *most intense of the passions* to arise in a democracy, even more than devotion to liberty. And this is not unique to the United States.

In a democracy, liberty and equality ride in tandem. In their perfect expressions they *touch and become one*. Where completely free, people *will all be entirely equal*, and where equal, free. The two are in free flow together. But short of this ideal, liberty and equality can take other forms. When in sync, they seem synonymous, but each can be seen to have distinguishing marks.

In *civil life*, people may have equal opportunity to engage in like work and play, but not join in government; or they may be treated equally by a controlling political leader. Liberty, too, may be found independent of democracy; and it does not commend itself openly and convincingly to all individuals.

Every century develops *one singular, dominant, integrating* notion that grows into a *fundamental thought and principle passion*. Equality is such. In this role it attracts *other feelings and ideas to itself and carries them along*. Liberty is like a *tributary* that the *great river* of equality seems to absorb. Equality is the strong current, the dominant passion in democratic ages.

In government equality and tyranny are mutually exclusive. A tyrant has no power if all are equal to him and liberty prevails. Conceptually, equality and liberty work together.

Equality is as hard to lose as it is to attain. Once an idea is accepted, it becomes preferred. As it translates into law and habit, it takes over the social mores. *To lose political liberty, however, is easy: fail to hold on to it, and it slips away.*

That too much political liberty *can endanger the tranquility, property, and lives of private individuals* is clearly seen and immediately felt. But it takes special alertness to notice the *perils* of equality. *By the time they have become most virulent, habit has already ensured that they will no longer be felt.* The benefits of liberty show *only in the long run*, and are easily attributed to the wrong cause. *Equality provides a multitude of lesser pleasures to everyone every day.* And its *charms are within reach of all*. Both *powerful and general* is the passion aroused by equality.

In contrast, liberty takes *sacrifice to obtain*, while equality *offers up its pleasures for the asking*. ... *To savor them one has only to live.*

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