

INTRODUCTION

Tocqueville: Democracy and Crisis

WHEN THE YOUNG FRENCH ARISTOCRAT ALEXIS DE TOCQUEVILLE arrived in America in May 1831, he was not much impressed by what he found. He had traveled to America with the ostensible aim of writing a book about the country's prison system, but he also wanted to see for himself what a functioning democracy was really like.

Tocqueville got off the boat in New York, and as so often with first-time visitors, he felt overwhelmed and disorientated. There was too much going on. No one paused to reflect on what they were doing. No one was in charge. He soon wrote back to friends in France of his amazement at the instability of American life, "the absolute lack that one notices here of any spirit of continuity and durability."¹ The Americans he met were friendly enough, but they struck him as careless and impatient. He was shocked by the ease with which they changed their homes, their jobs, their situations. He was also taken aback by the chaotic state of American politics, which seemed to reflect this restlessness.

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America's elected politicians had no more apparent sense of purpose than the people who elected them. Like most men of his class and generation, Tocqueville was a bit of a snob. What he encountered in America chimed with his instinctive distrust of democracy. There was something childish about its mindless energy. Where was the discipline? Where was the dignity? If this was democracy in action, he didn't see how it could work.

However, Tocqueville was an unusual sort of snob: he was capable of changing his mind. As he left New York City behind and continued his journey around the country, he came to feel that his first impressions had been mistaken. American democracy did work. It had an underlying stability and durability that could not be seen in its day-to-day activities. The democratic way of life had its own strengths, but it took patience to discover them. As Tocqueville wrote in volume one of *Democracy in America*, which he published in 1835: "Its faults strike one at first approach, but its qualities are only discovered at length."² The key to making sense of American democracy was to learn not to take it at face value. It worked despite the fact that it looked as though it shouldn't work. Its advantages were hidden somewhere beneath the surface and only emerged over time.

This was the most important thing Tocqueville discovered on his travels: democracy is not as bad as it looks. It represents his crucial insight into modern politics—in some ways it is *the* crucial insight into modern politics. In any durable democracy there will always be a gap between what seems to be happening and what it means in the long run. Democracy appears to be an up-front form of politics—everything is so raw and accessible. But the long-term ad-

vantages of democracy are not readily apparent. They can't be grasped in the moment. They need time to reveal themselves.

No one had quite seen democracy in this light before Tocqueville did.³ It really was his discovery. As he worked through its implications, he found many of them deeply troubling. He felt that the hidden strengths of democracy also represented its most serious weakness, precisely because they were hidden. You can't grasp them when you need them. Trying to do so often makes things worse. Yet giving up on trying to grasp them is liable to lead democracies into a state of passivity and drift. Democracies are caught between their impulse to precipitate action and their instinct to wait. There is no equilibrium between these two states of mind.

This line of thought is what makes Tocqueville such an original and important thinker. He is the best guide to the peculiar character of democracy in crisis. In this chapter I hope to show why.

THE RIVAL VIEWS

Tocqueville was certainly not the first visitor to the United States to conclude that American democracy was not what it seemed. Many travelers learned to mistrust their early impressions. But that was because they usually decided Americans were hypocrites. The common complaint against American democracy was that the reality did not match up to the fine principles: Americans preached the language of dignity

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and freedom but underneath it all they were a coarse, vulgar, money-grubbing people. Plenty of European visitors were initially enthusiastic about the unstuffy, egalitarian ethos they encountered: America often seemed like a breath of fresh air. But the more they traveled, the more they came to think it was just for show. At bottom America revealed itself to be a materialistic, exploitative society, with everyone out for himself. Worse, it was impossible to get past the fact that the apostles of liberty kept slaves, or if they didn't keep them, they tolerated the fact that other Americans did. Slavery made a mockery of American democracy.

A more typical American journey than Tocqueville's was the one made by another young European writer, Charles Dickens, a decade later. Dickens was no snob and he had an instinctive liking for democracy. He adored America to begin with, particularly since Americans appeared to adore him. He was greeted as a kindred spirit, the great champion in his novels of the poor and the oppressed. (Tocqueville was also feted when he first arrived, but he took this as a sign of how unworldly Americans were, since back in France almost no one had heard of him.) Dickens's enthusiasm did not last. As he traveled around he got sick of the attention, and also of the fact that for all their fine sentiments, Americans had no real interest in living up to their high ideals. The more he saw of them, the more he found them to be ill-mannered and self-satisfied. He also felt they were ripping him off, since lax American copyright laws meant his novels were being routinely pirated. In the two books he published about his American experiences—*American Notes for General Circulation* (1842) and the novel *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1843–44)—Dickens made it clear that he felt betrayed. He

mocked the hypocrisy of his hosts, and he excoriated them for their tolerance of slavery.

What is so unusual about Tocqueville's intellectual journey is that it went in the opposite direction. Tocqueville loathed slavery as much as Dickens did. But he did not conclude that Americans were hypocrites. Instead, he came to believe that the distinguishing characteristic of American democracy was its sincerity. One of the defining moments of his trip came on July 4 when he and his traveling companion, Gustave Beaumont, arrived in Albany, the fledgling capital of New York State, where they took part in the Independence Day celebrations. Tocqueville found the ceremony pretty ridiculous, with its marching bands and solemn speeches. The provincial self-regard made him want to laugh. But when the evening culminated in a public reading of the Declaration of Independence, he admitted, to his surprise, that he was deeply impressed. "It was as though an electric current moved through the hearts of everyone there. It was in no way a theatrical performance. . . . Here was something profoundly felt and truly great."⁴ Democracy in America was not a sham. It was more like a true religion.

Faith was the lynchpin of American democracy. The system worked, Tocqueville decided, because people believed in it. They believed in it despite the fact that it looked like it shouldn't work; from moment to moment it remained a mess. Democracy was an inadvertent form of politics, haphazard, uncoordinated, occasionally ridiculous, but somehow on the right track. Americans muddled through, sustained by their confidence in the future. This was not just blind faith, however. Time showed that American democracy did produce results, and that the messiness of demo-

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cratic life had a cumulative power that no rival system could match. Democracy, Tocqueville wrote, “does each thing less well, but it does more things.” He went on:

Democracy does not give the most skilful government to the people, but it does what the most skilful government is powerless to create; it spreads a restive activity through the whole social body, a superabundant force, an energy that never exists without it . . . [it] can bring forth marvels. These are its true advantages.⁵

The semimystical language is deliberate. There is, Tocqueville says, something “insensible” or “occult” about the way a democracy functions. By this he did not mean that democracy was sinister or fraudulent. He simply meant that it was not fully transparent. At any given moment you could not see how it worked. But you could be confident that it did.

Tocqueville came to believe that American democracy had hidden depths. That is what made him so different from other European travelers who got fixated on the mismatch between the promise of American democracy and the grubby reality. But it also marked him out from more than two thousand years of European political philosophy. The traditional complaint against democracy had always been about its hidden shallows. According to the philosophers, what lay beneath the surface of democratic life was not stability and durability, but ignorance and foolishness. The accusation went beyond hypocrisy. Democracies could not be trusted because at root they had no idea what they were doing.

Plato had set the template for this line of thought, which helps to explain its long hold over the Western political imagination. Democracy, Plato said in the *Republic*, was the most alluring of political regimes, “like a coat of many colors.” But the colorful appearance was profoundly misleading. Democracy was shiny up front, rotten underneath. In other words, it was much worse than it looked. Democracies put on a good show, but there was always something unpleasant lurking in the shadows: the people themselves, in all their greed and stupidity.

The problem was that democracy pandered to desire. It gave people what they wanted from day to day, but it did nothing to make sure they wanted the right things. It had no capacity for wisdom, for difficult decisions, or for hard truths. Democracies were founded on flattery and lies. Democratic politicians told the people what they wanted to believe, not what they needed to hear. As Plato put it, they took their failings and dressed them up as though they were virtues. If the people were ill disciplined, the politicians told them they were brave. If they were profligate, the politicians said they were generous. This would work for a while, as flattery often does. But in the long run it spells disaster, because you cannot hide from your weaknesses forever. Eventually, something will happen to expose them. At that point, democracies will discover the truth about themselves. But by then it will be too late. When the truth catches up with democracy, it tends to destroy it.

Two millennia of European political thought contained endless variations on this theme. Democracies were fickle, credulous, shameless, and lacking in self-control. They ran

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up debts, because they could not control their appetites. They fought stupid and dangerous wars, because they could not control their passions. They fell for would-be tyrants, because they could not control their craven instincts. Above all, democracy was a form of politics only suited for the good times: in a crisis, it would fall apart. It was a kind of confidence trick, unable to put off forever the day of reckoning. The only certainty about democracy was that it could not last. And if you met a democracy that did last, then you could be certain that it wasn't really a democracy. This was the flip side of the standard critique: genuine democracies couldn't be successful states, so successful states couldn't be genuine democracies. They were hiding an autocratic heart.

Tocqueville broke entirely with this way of thinking. He had no doubts that America was a genuine democracy. But he did not think that American democracy was therefore worse than it looked. How could it be, given its obvious faults? It was the outward appearance of democracy that made it so hard to have confidence in it. Plato had called democracy the most attractive of political regimes. Tocqueville thought it the least attractive, with nothing like the glamour or appeal of an aristocratic society, which really knew how to put on a show. Democracies lacked the necessary discipline and dignity to create a good impression. So yes, at some level it was true that democracies were bound to be a mess. What the philosophers had got wrong was *which* level. That was how things were on the surface. Something different was happening underneath.

By contrasting the outward failings of democracy with its hidden advantages, Tocqueville was turning the traditional arguments of its critics on their head. But it also meant that

he was rejecting the argument that was most often made in favor of democracy by its radical champions. Their case depended on the idea that democracy's great virtue is its transparency. It succeeds because, unlike every other system of government, it has nothing to hide. Democracy was the only system that laid bare its inner workings. That meant it could correct its own failings. In the words of Thomas Paine, the great democratic champion of the American and French revolutions: "Whatever are its excellencies and defects, they are visible to all. It exists not by fraud and mystery; it deals not in cant and sophistry." The cant and sophistry, Paine insisted, were all on the other side. It was monarchy that was the sham. "That monarchy is all a bubble, a mere cant artifice to procure money, is evident (at least to me) in every character in which it can be named."⁶ The enemies of democracy were the ones with something to hide.

Paine believed that democracy would succeed once people could see it for what it was, freed from the prejudices of its opponents. When they did, they would see how politics really works. What's more, they would discover that the only thing that really works is democracy. This means there is a cut-off point, or threshold, for having true confidence in democracy. On the wrong side of the line, it will struggle to gain people's trust, because they will not be able to appreciate its virtues. That's where democracy had been stuck for two thousand years. On the right side of the line, it will go from strength to strength, because the truth about politics will have been revealed. Writing at the end of the eighteenth century, Paine was sure that the world was in the process of crossing that threshold. A new order was being born. He conjured up an image for what was happening that has

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remained the preferred one for democratic optimists ever since. “It is not difficult to perceive,” he wrote, “that spring is begun.”⁷

Tocqueville did not buy it. This was not because he did not agree that democracy was on the rise. He absolutely did agree. But Paine’s belief that the hidden strengths of democracy become increasingly visible over time struck him as a fantasy. Tocqueville could not equate democracy with transparency. There remains something opaque about how a democracy works, no matter how successful it is, because the springs of its success never fully emerge from beneath the chaotic surface of democratic life. Paine wanted democracy to usher in an age of reason. Tocqueville knew the age of democracy would still have to be founded on faith. The lesson he took from his American travels is that democracy never truly reveals itself. There will always be a gap between perception and reality in a society founded on democratic principles.

There will also always be a strong temptation to try to close that gap. Genuine democracy is hard to live with because you have to take so much on faith. Tocqueville rejected the conventional arguments both for and against democracy, but he understood their appeal. Each promised to bring the truth about democracy to the surface: either its underlying strength or its underlying weakness. There is something confusing about the mismatch between the hidden strengths and visible weaknesses of democracy. We want to know which is the real story, for better or for worse. We want closure. What is much harder to live with is the knowledge that the mismatch is the reality of democratic life. That poses a very different set of challenges.

Tocqueville did not think democracy was a confidence trick. You could have genuine faith in it. In that sense, he accepted that American democracy had passed a confidence threshold. His worry was about what lay on the other side. He was afraid that confidence in democracy would prove to be a trap.

DEMOCRACY AND FATE

The name Tocqueville gave to his fears was “fatalism.” He worried that the inhabitants of a democracy would drift along with their fate and, as he put it, “follow the course of their destiny weakly rather than make a sudden and energetic effort when needed to address it.”⁸ There were two reasons why democracies were prone to fatalism. One was the clear evidence that history was on democracy’s side. Paine had been right: democracy was indeed the way the world was heading, which meant America was ahead of the curve. For Tocqueville, this was not simply philosophical speculation, nor was it vanity on the part of Americans; it was scientific fact. To know democracy is destiny, he wrote, “it suffices to examine the usual course of nature and the continuous tendency of events.”⁹ The trend toward what Tocqueville called “equality of conditions” was inexorable. Traditional political elites were being swept away by the idea that no human being is born to rule over another. Nothing could stand in the way of this idea, which meant that ultimately nothing could stand in the way of democracy. It was the providential plan of the universe. “To wish to stop de-

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mocracy,” Tocqueville wrote in the introduction to *Democracy in America*, “would then appear to be a struggle against God himself.”¹⁰

The second reason democracies tended to be fatalistic was that this knowledge of their privileged position in the grand scheme of things required taking the long view. In the short term, democracy often looked as though it was on the wrong side of history: unstable, unreliable, ineffective. You had to put your faith in the future. This meant that although you could have confidence in the strengths of democracy, you couldn’t necessarily see those strengths in action in a given political situation. Living with democracy meant surrendering to forces beyond your immediate power to apprehend. Under those conditions, it was hardly surprising if people started to feel a little powerless. Their destiny was in safe hands, but it was not clear that it was in their own hands. Something bigger was at work. A successful democracy had the power to make people feel very small.

But democratic fatalism did not always result in feelings of passivity and inadequacy. If you know history is on your side but beyond your immediate power to control, there are two ways you can respond. You could shrug your shoulders and wait for things to play themselves out. Or you could throw caution to the wind, confident that the future is secure regardless of what you do. It was part of Tocqueville’s genius to recognize that democratic fatalism went along with recklessness as well as resignation. What’s more, he understood that it could sometimes be hard to tell the difference between the two.

Tocqueville gave an example of what he meant when he recalled a conversation he had had with some Ameri-

can steamboat builders. Tocqueville had been repeatedly struck on his journey by how fragile these boats were, and how dangerous. He and Beaumont almost drowned when the one they were traveling on hit a sandbank on the Ohio River. "I have never heard a nastier noise," he wrote to a friend a few days later, "than the noise that the water made as it rushed into the boat."¹¹ Still, he behaved with admirable sangfroid in the crisis. But why did the manufacturers of the vessels not make them stronger and more reliable? "They answered that as it was, the boats would last too long because the art of steamboat navigation was making daily progress." This faith in progress, Tocqueville thought, was what prevented Americans "from aiming at the durable in anything."¹² Why take extra pains when something better was around the corner? Nonetheless, the steamboat builders were not simply passive bystanders, watching from the riverbank as the world floated by. Their shoulder-shrugging indifference went along with a kind of heedless energy. They put their inadequate vessels on the water and took big risks in doing so. They were careless of their fate and keen not to waste an opportunity to make money. Fatalists can be impatient as well as patient, active as well as passive. One way of trusting to the future is to act as though it is already here and jump right in.

What was true of the steamboat builders was true of American democracy at large. Democratic man, Tocqueville says, is both "ardent and resigned." Democracies can blow hot and cold. One question that is sometimes asked of *Democracy in America* is whether it is really two different books: volume one, which emphasizes the vitality and energy of American democracy; and volume two, published five years

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later in 1840, which is a gloomier book and emphasizes the sense of drift. But volume one and volume two simply reflect the two different sides of democratic fatalism. In the first volume, Tocqueville discusses the dangers of “the tyranny of the majority,” which makes democracies impatient and vengeful. The examples Tocqueville gives of this tyranny in action—lynching, race riots, war fever—show that he was thinking of the moments when democracies run wild, having become tired of waiting for things to happen. In the second volume, he talks about the “mild despotism of public opinion,” which is more insidious and makes people reluctant to challenge conventional ideas. As well as running wild, democracies can stagnate.

Yet both outcomes have the same cause: the knowledge possessed by the inhabitants of a democracy that theirs is the system with the underlying advantages. This can be infuriating. If democracy is such a great idea, why can't we have some action now? Or it can be enervating. Why not settle for a quiet life since nothing we do makes much difference anyway? Or it can be both. Passive democracies are easily roused; active democracies are easily quieted. Democratic fatalism is inherently unstable.

Not everyone appreciated the link between the wildness of democratic life and its tendency to drift: it was a difficult idea to grasp. Volume two got a much cooler reception than volume one. It struck many reviewers as too abstract, too paradoxical. The English philosopher John Stuart Mill was one of the very few people who liked it as much as the first volume. Like Tocqueville, Mill was deeply troubled by the problem of fatalism. In his own writing he had tried to

distinguish between the different forms it could take. There was what Mill called “pure fatalism” (or as he sometimes labeled it, “oriental fatalism”), which is the belief that a higher power has mapped out in advance everything that will ever happen to us. This, Mill felt, was a stupefying idea. Then there was what he termed “modified fatalism,” which is the belief that we are the products of our circumstances and there is nothing we can do to change that. This was the kind of fatalism that tended to hold sway in the more advanced societies of the West.¹³

Modified fatalism was not an idiotic idea, since modern science showed that we are all in some sense the products of our circumstances: causes have necessary effects (Mill was what is sometimes called a “necessitarian”). Nor did modified fatalism simply make people resigned to their fate, as pure fatalism did. Mill knew that fatalists could be dissatisfied as well as satisfied, whiny and petulant as well as quiet and accepting. Fatalism could produce complacency or it could produce irritability and volatility. Either way, though, it was dangerous. Modified fatalists had still made a basic mistake. They had assumed that because our circumstances shape us, we are powerless to do anything about who we are. But Mill insisted we can do something about it. We can change our circumstances.

When Tocqueville read Mill on fatalism, he wrote to tell him that it captured what he had been trying to say about American democracy. When he got his copy of volume two of *Democracy in America*, Mill wrote to Tocqueville to express his relief at finally finding someone who understood his concerns.

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One of your great general conclusions is exactly what I have been almost alone in standing up for here, and have not as far as I know made a single disciple—namely that the real danger in a democracy, the real evil to be struggled against, and which all human resources employed while it is not yet too late are not more than sufficient to fence off—is not anarchy or love of change, but Chinese stagnation and immobility.¹⁴

Democracies did not really suffer from oriental fatalism, however. They suffered from the modified version. They could be volatile. But alongside the volatility went a tendency to stagnate. The danger for a democracy was that no one would try to address the underlying circumstances of its politics. Instead, everyone fixates on the surface activity of political life—all the squabbling and mudslinging—as a focus for their anger and frustration, while beneath the surface nothing is really changing. In a democracy, all the energy is liable to be directed toward the effects of politics, while the underlying causes are ignored. This is how democracies get stuck.

How do they get unstuck? The basic cure for democratic fatalism, as for any other kind of fatalism, was education. Democracies needed to grow up. Fatalism was an essentially childish state of mind, since children are the exemplary modified fatalists: they spend a lot of time whining and engaged in frenetic activity, but that's because they know nothing really depends on them. They are waiting for someone to take charge. Children grow up when they learn to take responsibility for their own fate. But from whom do they learn? Mill says it is our parents and teachers who

show us “how to influence our character by appropriate circumstances.” The problem was that democracies do not have parents and teachers, or at least they ought not to have them. Monarchies are ruled by father figures. Democracies are meant to rule themselves. The risk for a democracy was that in allowing anyone to fill the role of parent or teacher, they weakened their resolve to take responsibility for their own circumstances. Tocqueville was afraid of this. “When I think of the small passions of men of our day,” he wrote, “I do not fear that in their chiefs they will find tyrants, but rather schoolmasters.”¹⁵

There was also the problem of what to teach a democracy. Tocqueville worried that simply explaining the truth about political trends would encourage people in their fatalism, since the facts pointed toward the inexorability of democratic progress. It was one of the reasons why Tocqueville believed that democratic societies needed a strong dose of religion to sustain them: democracy was best served when individuals had a personal faith that could undercut the general truths of political science. This meant that secular history was a particularly dangerous subject for democracies. Historians in the age of democracy were liable to be infected with what Tocqueville called “the doctrine of fatality” (*fatalité*). “It is not enough for them to show how the facts have come about; they also take pleasure in making one see that it could not have happened in any other way.”¹⁶ What democracies needed instead was a sense that the future lay open, and that their choices still mattered. The only way outside of religion to do this was to make sure their choices had real consequences for them. Book learning wouldn’t achieve this. Democracies had to learn from experience.

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The best way to learn from experience was to make mistakes. Mill and Tocqueville believed that a key part of education was the freedom to experiment and if necessary go wrong. However, there is a big difference between telling an individual to make his or her own mistakes and saying the same to an entire political society. When politics goes wrong, the consequences can be catastrophic for everyone. Democracies might benefit when individuals take chances and make mistakes, since this is the best way to keep politics open to new ideas. But when whole democracies take chances and make mistakes, individuals are the ones to suffer. Moreover, when democracies get things wrong, there is often no coming back.

Tocqueville was acutely conscious of this, and also conscious of why it made the United States unique in human history. American democracy could afford to get things wrong. “The great privilege of the Americans,” he wrote, “is the ability to make repairable mistakes.”¹⁷ America was big enough and isolated enough from the rest of the world that its political misjudgments need not be calamitous. There was both time and space to undo any damage. This was not true in Europe, where pressures of population and competition between states meant that a democracy that tried to learn from experience was liable to be eaten up by its rivals. The same applied to South America, where no democracy had ever lasted, because one mistake was invariably fatal. Only the United States was able to experiment with democracy without fear for the consequences.

However, the problem for American democracy was that the knowledge that it could make repairable mistakes came perilously close to the idea that its mistakes didn’t really mat-

ter. Tocqueville recognized the moral hazard at work here. If you don't fear the consequences of your choices, how can you learn to take your choices seriously? This was the difference between Europe and America. Europeans were unable to take a chance on democracy because of their fear of the consequences. As Tocqueville said, the only way any European state could be truly confident that its democracy would survive was if every European state was a democracy. Until that happened, Europeans would be stuck on the wrong side of the confidence threshold, frightened to put their trust in democracy. But American democracy, having crossed the confidence threshold, was in a different predicament. It was prone to get stuck in a childish state of mind, because nothing really bad ever happened. If anything, Americans were in need of a real fright. Since the crisis of its birth, American democracy had never had to confront another genuine crisis. "Americans have no neighbours," Tocqueville wrote, "and consequently no great wars, financial crises, ravages or conquests to fear."¹⁸ That was their biggest advantage. It was also their biggest weakness.

DEMOCRACY AND CRISIS

Tocqueville could not be sure what he wanted for American democracy. He wanted it to take responsibility for its fate. But he knew that democracy in America had flourished in large part because this had not had to happen for a long time. Americans had been able to avoid the really tough choices for more than a generation. As a result, Tocqueville

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was torn as to what he thought about the prospect of some future crisis for American democracy. Crises could be good for a democracy if they woke them up to their circumstances and gave them an incentive to take charge of their destiny. But they could be bad for democracy if they undermined confidence in the future and spread panic and fear. A crisis is by definition a dangerous time. If you wished a crisis on a democracy serious enough to get it to take its choices seriously, you also risked presenting it with a challenge that it didn't know how to solve.

There was no easy way around this problem. A crisis bad enough to do good for a democracy would also have to be bad enough to threaten real evil. What made the problem more acute was that crises are moments of danger, and yet democracies do not perform well from moment to moment. That is when they reveal their weaknesses. Democracies find it much harder than other systems of government to coordinate their actions in the short term: the haphazard and volatile quality of democratic life makes reaching timely decisions difficult. Aristocracies, Tocqueville said (meaning politically inegalitarian or autocratic regimes), are much better at focusing their resources on a single moment in time; there is, by contrast, something about a democracy that is always "untimely." In that sense, aristocracies are going to be better at the immediate demands of crisis politics: speed and decisiveness. Wishing a crisis on a democracy to shake it out of its torpor meant asking it to face a challenge that played into the hands of its rivals. How could that be a good idea?

One way it might work was if the crisis were a long one. Then the advantages of democracy could be given time to reveal themselves. Even if aristocracies are good at swift deci-

sions, they soon get stuck with the choices they make. They are not adaptable. Democracies, because they are always doing more, constantly experimenting, keeping on the move, will do better in the long run by finding different ways to meet a really difficult challenge. Given time, democracies can adapt their way out of a crisis in a manner that no autocratic system can. But does it make sense to wish a long crisis on a democracy? There are two problems. One is that crises that drag on for a long time will be full of dangerous moments. These are, after all, the crises that no one knows how to solve: the longer they last, the more scope there is for something really bad to happen. Long crises contain plenty of room for short-term disasters. The second problem is that crises are meant to shake democracies out of their fatalistic tendencies. But if they last a long time, there is a risk democracies will start to drift again, waiting for history to rescue them.

You can see some of Tocqueville's uncertainty about these questions in his treatment of the prospects of democracy at war. Tocqueville says that democracies ought to be suited by certain sorts of wars: long, difficult, arduous ones. Only then do the democratic advantages of adaptability and versatility come to the fore. Tocqueville thought that democracies were bad at the immediate challenges of international relations: they were jittery, impatient, quick to take offense but also ready to let things slide. As a result, they were prone to avoid the wars they should fight and to fight the ones they should avoid. Aristocratic societies are much better at knowing when and how to pick a fight. But once the struggle gets going, aristocracies tend to get stuck. They are too inflexible. "An aristocratic people which, fighting against a democracy, does not succeed in bringing it to ruin in the

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first campaign always runs the risk of being defeated by it,” Tocqueville predicted.¹⁹

Democracies have a vitality and an experimental quality that suits them to an extended contest. Apart from anything, they keep shuffling their military leaders until they find ones who are up to the challenge. They do not get hung up on tradition and reputation. (Though one difficulty for a democracy is that after the crisis is over, they often do get hung up on reputation: they have a tendency to reward their military heroes with political office.) Yet even long wars pose their problems for democracies. Just as democracies don’t know when to start fighting, they don’t know when to stop. “There are two things that a democratic people will always have trouble doing,” Tocqueville wrote. “Beginning a war and ending it.”²⁰

Tocqueville could not be confident that a really serious war would be good for a democracy like the United States. There was always the risk that the short-term weaknesses of democracy in action would prove fatal. But there was also the risk that in a long war, a democracy would resume its tendency to drift. American democracy had only fought one major war by this point in its existence, the War of Independence, and the evidence was mixed.²¹ The United States won that war against an aristocratic rival, but it was a close-run thing. Moreover, Tocqueville writes, “as the struggle was prolonged, one saw individual selfishness reappear.” Taxes dried up, and so too did volunteers for the army. Wars, especially long wars, are dangerous because they can breed fatalism as well as challenge it. As a result, Tocqueville says that it is very hard to be sure “what degree of effort a democracy is capable of in times of national crisis.” It would depend

not only on how long the crisis went on, but also on the extent to which individuals were willing to see their own fate bound up with the fate of their nation.

To judge what sacrifices democracies know how to impose on themselves, one must therefore await the time when the American nation is obliged to put half the revenue from goods into the hands of government, like England, or throw a twentieth of its population on the field of battle at once, as France has done.²²

That time would come, and sooner than Tocqueville might have imagined.

Wishing a long crisis on a democracy to allow it to display its advantages was inherently dangerous. But there was another problem with the idea that a crisis might wake a democracy up to its strengths. Democracies are very bad at knowing when a real crisis is upon them. This was not because they are oblivious to danger. It was because they are oversensitive to it. The secure position of the United States did not stop Americans from treating every little drama as though it were a crisis. Democracies always include plenty of people who think disaster is just around the corner. Freedom of speech includes the freedom to panic needlessly. As Tocqueville discovered on his American journey, democratic life is a succession of crises that turn out to be nothing of the sort.

The most visible of these fake crises come around as regularly as clockwork: they are called elections. In a chapter in *Democracy in America* titled (with deliberate irony) “The Crisis of the Election,” Tocqueville describes the ritualized hysteria that accompanied these events.

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As the election approaches, intrigue becomes more active, agitation more lively and more widespread . . . The entire nation falls into a feverish state; the election is then the daily text of the public papers, the subject of particular conversations, the goal of all reasoning, the object of all thoughts, the sole interest of the present.

As soon as fortune has pronounced, it is true, this ardour is dissipated, everything becomes calm, and the river, one moment overflowed, returns peacefully to its bed. But should one not be astonished that the storm could have arisen?²³

This is the other side of democratic drift: it goes along with a lot of surface activity. If drift were simply a passive state of mind, it would be easier to argue that crises might be useful in waking up democracies. But Tocqueville knew that democracies never really go to sleep. If anything, they are in a state of near permanent wakefulness, which helps to give them their manic, jittery quality. It means they are always on the lookout for a crisis. But it also means that almost all the crises they anticipate turn out to be illusions.

Elections remain the characteristic sham crises of democratic life, both for their regularity and for their transience. It is routine to describe any election as a turning point (“the most important choice for a generation,” etc.). It is also routine to discover, once the election is over, that nothing much has changed. Every now and then an election comes along that really is a turning point. But it is also characteristic of democracies, as we shall see, that these are the changes they tend not to notice at the time.

As Tocqueville says, the main culprits in this charade are the newspapers. It is the job of any newspaper (at least, any

newspaper that wants to attract readers and make money) to talk up a crisis. You can't have a democracy without a lively, argumentative press. But the very liveliness of the press made it hard for people to know when they should really be paying attention. Tocqueville found American newspapers horribly vulgar and extremely excitable. "The spirit of the journalist in America," he wrote, "is to attack coarsely, without preparation and without art, the passions of those whom he addresses, to set aside principles in order to grab men." He went on: "One must deplore such an abuse of thought . . . but one cannot conceal that the political effects of the license of the press contribute indirectly to the maintenance of public tranquillity." After a while, people get so used to the noise of a free press that they hardly notice it. Each little explosion of anger soon passes, to be replaced by another one. As a result, "the views expressed by journalists have so to speak no weight in the eyes of readers."²⁴ Newspapers, like elections, underscored how much crisis talk was a part of the routine of democratic life, and therefore how little it signified.

Newspaper hysteria was only part of the general problem: crisis might be good for a democracy, but democracies are not good at recognizing crises. They overreact; they underreact; they lack a sense of proportion. That is why it was so hard to know what sort of crisis would enable a democracy to learn its lesson. If the crisis turned out to be so bad that no one could doubt it was real, then there was always a risk that it would end in disaster. If it did not end in disaster, then there was always a risk that it would be filed along with all the other overblown crises of democratic life as a false alarm. And even the real crises—the ones no one

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could doubt—were hard to learn from. If democracy doesn't survive, you've learned your lesson, but at an unacceptable cost. If democracy does survive, then you may learn the lesson that democracy can survive any crisis. Instead of making you wise, recovering from your mistakes can make you reckless.

There was another way democracies might learn from a crisis, however. It did not have to be their crisis. They could learn their lesson from other people's mistakes. They could look at democratic disasters happening elsewhere in the world and think: we need to make sure that doesn't happen to us. Tocqueville thought that American democracy might benefit in this way from greater knowledge of what was happening in Europe, just as he hoped that Europeans could learn from the experience of America.

One reason he had written *Democracy in America* was to allow his French readers to see democracy at work in circumstances different from their own, in order to gain a sense of perspective. They would at least see that it *could* work. America, with its ability to survive its mistakes, might teach Europeans that democracy was still possible. Europe, with its enduring monarchies and its history of democratic failures, might teach Americans that democracy was not inevitable. They would see that it doesn't *always* work. A world in which democracy existed at different stages of development, and with very different chances of success, helped to break up the view that God's plan for the universe was a done deal. The future still lay open.

But were democracies capable of learning from other people's mistakes? American democracy, in consequence of being isolated from the rest of the world, was insular, pro-

vincial, self-regarding. It had real difficulty seeing beyond its own immediate horizons. When democracies run up against foreign experiences, they are liable to view them as a threat, rather than as an education. What's more, there was no guarantee that any democracy could be entirely isolated from the ill effects of democratic failure somewhere else. Even the United States, cut off from the rest of the world, could not assume that the problems of other states were simply morality tales. It was always possible that the effects of a European crisis might spill over into the United States. And then it would be America's crisis too.

Was it worth taking a chance on crisis politics in order to inject a sense of purpose back into a democracy? In the end, Tocqueville and Mill fell out over the answer to this question.²⁵ The break came not because of anything that happened in America, but because of what was happening in Europe. In late 1840 Britain and France came to the brink of war in an imperial dispute over Sudan. Mill was dead against the war. Tocqueville was enthusiastic. Mill thought any such war between two fledgling democracies was stupid and the politicians who were stoking it criminal. He reserved his greatest contempt for the bellicose British foreign secretary Palmerston, of whom he wrote to Tocqueville, with real venom: "I would gladly walk twenty miles to see him hanged, especially if Thiers [his counterpart in the French foreign ministry] were to be strung up with him."²⁶ No democracy could possibly be educated at the hands of scoundrels like these and their hysterical supporters in the press.

Tocqueville saw things very differently. Like many Frenchmen, he did not think Britain, for all its liberal traditions, was much of a democracy anyway. It was still a funda-

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mentally aristocratic society, and men like Palmerston were its typical representatives. France was much more of a real democracy (that is, further along the path toward equality of conditions) but one that had got stuck in a rut and lost all sense of its own powers in the long, miserable hangover from the revolution. It needed something to shake it out of a torpor that came all too easily to the French cast of mind. This was not going to be achieved by a spirit of international cooperation. As he wrote scoldingly to Mill in 1841: "One cannot let a nation that is democratically constituted like ours . . . take up early the habit of sacrificing its grandeur to its repose. It is not healthy to allow such a nation to console itself by making railroads."²⁷ Tocqueville thought that democracies need a real crisis now and then to show them what they are capable of. Mill thought that wishing a crisis on any democracy was deeply irresponsible, knowing what they are capable of in a crisis.

Tocqueville and Mill were on opposite sides in this dispute, but the argument reflected the two sides of their shared view of democracy. The things that democracies are good at (commerce, comfort) are bad for democracy, because they breed narrow-mindedness and complacency; the things that democracies are bad at (crisis management, international confrontation) are good for democracy, because they might broaden its horizons and shake that sense of complacency. There is no easy way out of this dilemma. The reason Mill and Tocqueville could not agree about war between Britain and France was not simply because they were on different sides. It was because in a crisis there are always two sides to a democracy—good and bad—and it can be very hard to reconcile them.

A GUIDE TO THE FUTURE

A lot of what Tocqueville said about democracy and crisis was unsystematic: his thoughts on the subject are scattered haphazardly across his writings. He is not always clear and he is not always consistent. Moreover, what he said was essentially guesswork. There was simply not the evidence to know how democracies would cope in critical situations. America had the functioning democracy but not the crises. Europe had the crises but not the functioning democracies.

Nevertheless, Tocqueville's reflections provide a relatively clear set of predictions about how democracies might fare in future. In general, democracies ought to be better at coping with crises than rival systems because they are more adaptable. But there are three problems. First, democracies are not good at recognizing crisis situations: all the surface noise of democratic politics makes them insensitive to genuine turning points. Second, crises need to get really bad before democracies can show their long-term strengths, but when they get really bad, there is more scope for democracies to make serious mistakes. Third, when democracies survive a crisis, they may not learn from the experience. All crises generate lessons about the mistakes to avoid in future. But democracies are capable of taking a different lesson: that no matter what mistakes they make, they will be all right in the end.

The nineteenth century provided limited opportunities to put these hypotheses to the test. The great crisis of French democracy came in 1848, the year of revolutions across Europe. Tocqueville, who had by now become a moderately successful

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politician, was close to the heart of these events (he ended up, for a brief time, as France's foreign minister). Nonetheless, the crisis turned into a disaster, both for him personally and, as he saw it, for his country. It woke up French democracy in the wrong way: not to its potential, but to its inadequacies. French politics was caught between the promise of revolutionary transformation and a hankering for autocratic certainties. Tocqueville felt himself buffeted by political forces beyond his power to control. He ended up caught by the thing he most despised: fatalism. He wrote in 1850, having abandoned his political career: "I see myself without a compass, without a rudder and without oars on a sea whose coast I no longer perceive, and, tired from my vain agitation, I crouch at the bottom of the boat and await the future."²⁸

Tocqueville died in 1859 and so he did not live to see the great crisis that engulfed American democracy two years later. In *Democracy in America*, he had been quite confident that the festering sore of slavery would not end up in a prolonged civil war. Democracies, he felt, were insulated from the worst effects of civil conflict because the population would not tolerate the disruption: here democratic passivity was a blessing in disguise.²⁹ Nevertheless, passivity was only one side of democracy. As time went on, Tocqueville became increasingly dismayed by the other side of American political life: its petulance and its volatility. Far from learning from its mistakes, American democracy seemed to be becoming more and more childish and obstinate. As he wrote to an American friend in 1856: "What is certain is that for some years you have strangely abused the advantages given to you by God, advantages which have allowed you to com-

mit great errors with impunity. . . . Viewed from this side of the ocean, you have become the untamed child.”³⁰ American democracy looked increasingly uneducable. Its childishness was allowing it to drift toward the abyss.

The crisis, when it came, turned out to be far longer, bloodier, and more destructive than anything Tocqueville could have imagined. Four years of civil war could have proved fatal to American democracy, but in the end they did not. The republic adapted and it survived. Was this the moment when American democracy grew up? In 1888 the British lawyer and diplomat James Bryce published a book called the *American Commonwealth*, which was intended as a fifty-years-on update of Tocqueville, designed to take account of all the things that Tocqueville either couldn't have known about or had ignored. Bryce decided that American democracy had become more stable, equable, and mature than the one Tocqueville had encountered. Tocqueville had only known American democracy when it was still young, and, as Bryce puts it, “flushed with self-confidence, intoxicated with the exuberance of its own freedom.” This had given Tocqueville the wrong idea.

The masses were so persuaded of their immense superiority to all other peoples, past as well as present, that they would listen to nothing but flattery, and their intolerance spread from politics to every other sphere. . . . As the nation grew, it purged away these faults of youth and inexperience, and the stern discipline of the Civil War taught it sobriety, and in giving it something to be really proud of, cleared away the fumes of self-conceit.³¹

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It had been a hard school, but civil war had taught American democracy its lesson.

Now Bryce detected a different problem. American political life had settled to a new, more stable pattern. The threat it faced was from what Bryce called “the fatalism of the multitude,” which was Tocqueville’s tyranny of the majority stripped of its anger and impatience. Americans had acquired sufficient evidence of the underlying strength of their political institutions that they tended to take their success for granted. This had produced an “optimism which has underrated the inherent difficulties of politics and the inherent failings of human nature.”³² Americans were no longer wild and arrogant. But they had grown complacent about their ability to survive whatever the world might throw at them. They had acquired a renewed faith in their democratic destiny that was the more robust for having been put to the test. In that sense, American democracy had not really learned its lesson. Bryce’s update of Tocqueville takes us back to where Tocqueville ended up.

As Bryce shows, it is possible to read the great crises of nineteenth-century democracy as confirmation of some of Tocqueville’s insights into the democratic predicament. It is very hard to learn the right lesson. Failure breeds despair; success breeds complacency. The line between the two is a fine one. Both are manifestations of democratic fatalism, which means success and failure often go hand in hand. But Bryce was not typical. Late nineteenth-century views of democracy more often conformed to the radical extremes. People were still looking for the underlying truth about democracy and waiting for the crisis that

would reveal it. From a European perspective, 1848 was unfinished business and the American civil war remained a sideshow. This was the age of revolutionary socialism and of rising nationalism, of extreme democracy and extreme antidemocracy. The political thinkers from this period who still get read are the world-historical Germans, Marx and Nietzsche, the apostles of democratic transformation and exposure, the sham smashers. These men are treated as the prophets of the coming century of revolution and war. No one reaches for Bryce's *American Commonwealth* looking for the key to the future.

Yet Bryce's view from the late nineteenth century proved to be the truly prescient one. Marx and Nietzsche between them helped to shape the crises of the twentieth century: theirs are the ideas people turn to when they are looking for political transformation. But the cumulative effect of these same crises fits the pattern laid out by Bryce and by Tocqueville before him: failure leads to success, success leads to failure and the truths that might close the gap between the two are always somewhere out of reach. We still read Marx and Nietzsche because we want crises to be moments of truth. What Tocqueville reveals is that moments of truth for democracy are an illusion. Democracy muddles on through war and revolutionary change, its confusions ineradicable and its progress inexorable. It never fully wakes up and it never fully grows up. And it leads to where we are now.

To see how we have arrived at this point I am going to tell the story of seven crises for established democracies over the past hundred years. The democratic crises of the nineteenth

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century were too haphazard to bear Tocqueville out: democracy was not yet established enough to reveal the ways in which it was set in its ways. It was the twentieth century that would prove him right, starting with the war to end all wars and the world-historical triumph of democracy of 1918, which turned out to be nothing of the sort.