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Introduction

IN A CULMINATING moment of the 2018 documentary film *What is Democracy?*, its director, Astra Taylor, interviews political theorist Wendy Brown at the latter's office at the University of California, Berkeley. The brief exchange, a fragment of a longer conversation, begins with Taylor asking if democracy could ever live up to its promise. As Brown's eloquent argument unfolds, the camera roams over a shelf with the collected volumes of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. Moving through a stack of books on latter-day revolutionaries, it lingers in front of a bright window as if to ponder the relationship between what is being said and the world outside. Democracy, Brown declares, needs clear limits: "To have democracy, there has to be a 'we.' . . . In order to govern ourselves we need to know who the "we" is who is doing the governing . . . and what our bounds or limits are." That "we," she explains, is founded on differences and exclusions, as well as on borders that delimit who is part of the democratic process and, by implication, who is not. "Democracies have almost always been premised on terrible forms of marking, stratifying, and naming who is human and who is not human . . . I am not defending those," Brown is quick to add, "but I am defending that democracy has to have bounds; it has to have a constitutive 'we.'" Only this bounded "we," she asserts, can stand up to the pernicious expansion of globalized capitalism. Brown's defense of constitutive exclusions is as striking as her insistence that these are "*almost* always . . . terrible." Could

there be exclusions that are not “terrible”? She does not say, and Taylor does not ask. As if to highlight the conceptual aporia, the story moves abruptly to a contemporary Greek border where a throng of Syrian refugees armed with handmade placards demand free passage and the immediate abolition of borders. “We are human,” they chant—in English.¹

The sudden change of scenery enacts a rupture between two perspectives that reflect two meanings of democracy. On the one side is the right of a democratic people to foster and protect its collective existence and historic identity: its language, culture, territory, and distinct way of life—in short, its right to self-determination. On the other, stands an exasperated crowd of children, women, and men, young and old, diffident and hopeful, fleeing poverty and war, disenfranchised, disinherited—a make-shift gathering of what Frantz Fanon in a prophetic turn of phrase called “the wretched of the earth”—demanding their equal right to decent life and human flourishing.² Both sides appeal to a vision of democracy; both have a point. Between them stands a wall or a border whose meaning and validity—and with it the legitimacy of the entire system of nation-states by which the world is organized and governed—seem to be called into question. Is there a way to affirm human equality without undermining the legitimacy of particular societies and cultures, or, conversely, to mark and maintain political and cultural specificities without denying our common humanity? Can we be equal and yet legitimately different, or distinct and separate, yet, nevertheless, equal? Having forcefully visualized these questions, the film comes to a pause. Against the sunlit Greek landscape with its relentless blue sky a caption appears with Socrates’s striking prophecy from book five of Plato’s *Republic*: “Until philosophers become kings or those in authority begin to philosophize, there will be no rest from troubles.”³

The irony is deeply felt. For at this point, the viewers have been encouraged to doubt that any philosopher, whether enthroned by

current popularity or intellectual tradition, might have much to propose as a coherent solution to democracy's dilemma. This, the film carefully suggests, is owing to the distance between the confidence of theoretical reason and the disheartening complexity of lived human lives. And yet, if a theoretical insight may not be in a position to formulate the sought-after answer, it is, as Taylor's film eloquently testifies, uniquely fit to help us crystallize the questions and to call to our attention the gulf that separates arguments from phenomena: the logic of intellectual constructs from the conundrums with which the political and social world presents us.

The purpose of this book is not to propose a philosophical cure or defend the possibility of a conceptual solution to the challenges before us. Its aim is to help us better comprehend these challenges. In so doing it pursues two goals simultaneously. It reconstructs Alexis de Tocqueville's account of three pivotal dimensions of modern politics—popular sovereignty, nationhood, and globalization—thus putting into sharp relief neglected aspects of his thought and practice. It also seeks to shed light on contemporary trends. By bringing Tocqueville to bear on our dilemmas, this book offers a fresh analytical lens through which to view liberal democracy today and understand its travails.

I seek to show that today's crisis of liberal democracy, made palpable by the worldwide resurgence of nationalist sentiments and authoritarian movements, is not in itself a novelty. Although triggered by specific conditions that are yet to be fully understood, and catalyzed by the failures of the liberal order itself, our illiberal moment reflects and responds to dilemmas that are inherent in modern society. These dilemmas are rooted in the very tension Taylor's film points to: the tension between the universal scope of democratic principles and the particularity and limits of any social and political attempt to realize them in practice. This constitutive tension, and the dilemmas to which it gives rise, were already in plain sight in the nineteenth century, and Tocqueville's account of them is not only among the first but also among the most

comprehensive and profound. Tocqueville analyzed with clarity and depth how the practical political attempts to grapple with modern society's built-in tension could lead to different democratic outcomes: liberal and illiberal. In this sense, he could be viewed as a pioneering theorist both of liberal democracy and of its illiberal others. Tocqueville's work thus offers a compelling framework for understanding the challenges of liberal democracy today and for charting a way forward.

Drawing on Tocqueville's widely celebrated analysis of American democracy and his lesser-known policy writings, my aim is to recover a broader, nondogmatic liberalism capable of weathering today's political storms.⁴ If liberal democracy has a future, I suggest, it is in recognizing the enduring dimensions and deep sources of contemporary policy dilemmas and in navigating these in a moderate and nonideological way. Just as liberal democracies should refuse to choose between equality and self-determination, so too they ought to reject the false dichotomies of nationalism and democracy, and of sovereignty and globalization.

Illiberal Democracy?

The greatest challenge to liberal democracy today comes from the ascent of political movements often labeled "populist" and regimes calling themselves "illiberal" that claim the mantle of democratic sovereignty. In the name of equality and popular sovereignty, these forces seek to consolidate authority by striking at the very foundations of constitutional order. Often staying within formal electoral rules, populist parties and charismatic leaders contest embedded norms such as the rule of law, individual rights, and a constitutional system of checks and balances that have long been recognized as the bedrock of democratic freedom. By attacking liberal institutions in the name of democracy, they embrace the possibility of a democratic order that is not liberal, or is expressly anti-liberal. Behind them stand vast publics that condone or welcome this state of affairs.⁵

The popularity of illiberal models, even within established liberal democracies, reflects the deeper shifts taking place in political systems worldwide. It feeds on a growing skepticism—shared by the political Right and Left—about the capacity of liberal institutions to deliver political legitimacy, national security, and an equitable distribution of wealth. On one side, national sovereignty is reaffirmed as the only viable response to democratic deficits, economic hardship, and high waves of migration and cultural dislocation, as well as a brake on liberal globalism. From this vantage, liberal elites, driven by their own class and partisan interests, have severed ties with large parts of the electorate and failed to provide for the public good. Viewing society as a set of abstract rights or commercial transactions, the liberal crusade to emancipate individuals from the shackles of custom and tradition undermines the civic bond and the sense of belonging that any decent polity depends on. Liberalism, critics from the Right aver, lacks a coherent vision of national and economic security, and of the social glue that both constitutes individuals and holds democracy together.⁶

If the Right sees liberalism as too thin and parasitic on social and cultural conditions that it cannot reproduce, the Left views it as too thick, pointing to its structural and normative underpinnings as evidence of inequalitarian biases. From this perspective, liberal principles and the international regime they undergird have failed to guarantee genuine equality and full representation. Decrying these failures, critics on the left take to task core liberal values—such as the rule of law or human rights—unmasking them as little more than cynical instruments of political and economic exploitation. As they charge, liberalism’s universalistic assumptions about reason, citizenship, and humanity are mere rhetoric covering the profit-seeking nature of corporate capitalism and the real chains of Western neocolonial domination.⁷

However different in motivation and substance, these critiques share similarities. They draw on current dissatisfactions with the political status quo in order to contest not only specific policies or orientations, but also liberalism’s normative and institutional

foundations. Opposed to what they see as oppressive “liberal hegemony,” they appeal to democratic ideals and egalitarian aspirations, thus seeking to divorce liberalism from democracy as two distinct and separable political visions. These contestations have given rise to an impassioned debate about the meaning of democracy and its relationship to liberalism, in which questions of sovereignty, national identity, and the political and ethical dimensions of globalization stand paramount.⁸

As this book aims to show, these challenges, though newly urgent, are not new.⁹ Topical and timely, they are also *topoi*: that is, recurring themes and, in a sense, timeless questions of modern politics. To adequately address present challenges, we need to grasp not only their immediate triggers, but also their enduring dimensions. Beyond policy proposals tailored to particular contexts, defending liberal democracy today requires that we re-examine its intellectual foundations, as well as the practices and preconditions that make it work. Such a rethinking may help us recover a richer, less ideological liberalism that can propose liberal democratic alternatives to contested policies. No modern thinker seems better placed to aid this effort of recovery than Tocqueville, one of liberal democracy’s greatest champions and most incisive critics.

Why Tocqueville

Alexis de Tocqueville (1805–1859) was a liberal, yet, as he insisted, “a liberal of a new kind.”¹⁰ First among the novel facets of his liberalism was his understanding of the character of modern society and the new dilemmas it faced. Whereas his liberal predecessors—notably Baron de Montesquieu and Benjamin Constant—considered commerce and the social reorganization it involved as that which made society modern, Tocqueville proposed that not capitalism but democracy and its core value—equality—is the defining feature of the modern age. Born into an old aristocratic family decimated in the French Revolution (his parents barely escaped the guillotine), Tocqueville was preoccupied all his life

with the meaning and causes of this world-historical upheaval. *Democracy in America* (1835–40), Tocqueville’s most celebrated work, proclaimed the soon-to-be-global rise of democracy as the substance and motor behind revolutionary change.¹¹

As early as 1835, Tocqueville announced that there were no viable alternatives to the principles of democratic equality and popular sovereignty in the modern world. The success of the Atlantic Revolutions of the eighteenth century and the resulting defeat of aristocracy as a social system relocated political struggle within the framework of democracy itself. Henceforth, the primary political question was no longer whether to have democracy, but what kind: how to embody democratic ideals in institutions and practices, and what precise shape these should take. Tocqueville expected these same questions to reach and revolutionize every corner of the world, and reshape the global order.

Tocqueville defined democracy not as a political order but above all as a “social state”: a condition of society in which status is not fixed at birth but must be acquired. This democratic social condition entails a mindset characterized by the “ardent, insatiable, eternal, invincible” love of equality itself. Tocqueville credited the egalitarian mindset with driving political dynamics and transforming all aspects of social life: economic and class relations as well as the conceptual and moral horizon. Rather than a static arrangement, democracy is an ongoing process of equalization, a social revolution without visible end. Tocqueville famously called for, and pioneered, a “new political science” to instruct and guide this democratizing process.¹²

If Tocqueville proclaimed democratization “irresistible,” he did not view it as following a fixed path. Inflected by historical and cultural contexts, the struggle for democracy is undetermined in crucial respects. Democracy’s social base and the passion for equality that define the modern age are compatible with two radically different political scenarios: one that postulates universal rights and protects equal freedoms, the other predicated on an omnipotent state that pursues equality by demanding the equal

powerlessness of all. These alternative outcomes stand as two global models, which Tocqueville identified with the United States and Russia.¹³ So against the hopes of twentieth-century modernization theory, liberal democracy in Tocqueville's view is not a necessary outcome of democratization. With the demise of traditional orders and alternative regimes, the fundamental modern political choice lies between a democratic republic and egalitarian despotism. For "equality produces, in fact, two tendencies: one leads men directly to independence . . . the other leads them by a longer, more secret, but surer road toward servitude." Not only does democracy's rise not necessitate a liberal outcome: the drive toward ever-greater equalization continually tempts peoples to trade their civic freedoms for another step along the egalitarian road, making liberty's prospects ever less certain.¹⁴

Tocqueville, then, saw from afar the danger of illiberal democracy. He was already haunted by the specter of our times. While hailing the global rise of democratic equality, his work highlights the tensions between equality and freedom that define the main challenges of modern politics. If today's anti-liberals distinguish liberalism from democracy and purport to embrace the latter while rejecting the former, Tocqueville insisted on this distinction in order to enhance liberal self-understanding and to protect democratic freedom at the same time.

Yet, unlike current and past attempts to draw a clear line between liberal and nonliberal forms of democracy, for Tocqueville the distinction is both all-embracing and ambiguous. It is not simply a matter of economic relations (free vs. regulated market) or institutional forms (representative vs. direct), of normative principles (majoritarianism vs. rule of law), or a particular definition of freedom (individual vs. collective), as recent commentators have proposed.¹⁵ A viable and free democratic order must include all these dimensions. What is more, liberal democracy for Tocqueville depends on deeper things: intellectual and spiritual orientation, modes of relating to the past and the political community as the product of a particular historical trajectory, as well as

on the place of religion in social and political life.¹⁶ Tocqueville held these ethical and psychological aspects of democratic life as crucially important. As this book will argue, his insight into the affective foundations of liberal democracy is the moral core of his liberalism and among the most important contributions of his new political science.

Democracy's Dilemmas

While Tocqueville understood the relation between liberalism and democracy as pervasive, he traced the tension between them to two distinct, if interrelated, understandings of democracy and to the illiberal potential each of them carries. For Tocqueville, modern democratic society rests on two pillars: the universalist principle of equality, which pushes against all limits and borders, and popular sovereignty: that is, the ideals and practices of political self-rule that require both a particular community—a people—and a notion of rule or sovereignty. Democracy cannot be liberal if either of those pillars is missing. But their combination generates tensions and dilemmas that shape the stakes of modern politics. The ways in which modern societies understand and navigate the often conflicting aspirations to equality and difference, to universality and particularity, are critical for the possibility of democratic freedom.

The tensions between modern democracy's two principles—equality and self-rule—give rise to structural challenges as well as recurring policy dilemmas. Revisiting three pivotal aspects of Tocqueville's analysis, this book contends that liberal democracies face three interrelated questions: How to construe and institutionalize the principle of popular sovereignty?; How to define and mobilize the civic allegiance and social solidarity that democratic sovereignty relies on?; and finally, How to negotiate the processes of globalization that, while propelled by democracy's universalizing claims and egalitarian promise, stand in an often conflicting relation to the legitimacy of its particular instantiations? These

questions yield a range of difficult choices: between sovereign power and participatory freedoms; between national cohesion and individual rights; between compliance with transnational norms and accountability to a particular people. By calling them dilemmas, I want to suggest that these are not either-or choices, where one must be opted for at the expense of the other. Like the two meanings of democracy that ground them, these dilemmas point to a set of alternatives, neither of which can fully exist on its own, nor produce a satisfactory outcome.

Drawing on Tocqueville, I argue that to remain liberal, modern societies require both horns of each of these dilemmas. They should refuse to choose, but seek to find ways to negotiate and allay the tensions between them. The language of dilemma also implies the lack of ready-to-hand ideological answers. Dilemmas complicate neat definitions and simple notions of right and wrong. They require that we weigh competing, often incommensurable, goods and corresponding dangers. While resisting definitive solutions, dilemmas structure the field of available alternatives. They call for careful consideration and balanced judgment—and for acknowledging trade-offs too. Along with being distinct and inherent—hardwired so to say—in the modern democratic project, the dilemmas that pertain to institutionalizing popular sovereignty, sustaining national identity, and deepening globalization are also imbricated. None of them can be fully understood or addressed without the others: for example, popular sovereignty and nationalism without the question of individual participation; or sovereignty and nationhood without the challenges posed to them by the processes of globalization.¹⁷

Proposing that we view the modern world as a matrix of inter-related conundrums, this book champions a Tocqueville-informed vision of liberalism as complex and ambivalent. While fundamentally committed to the protection of individual freedom and constitutional rights, and beholden to the universalist ethos of the Enlightenment, Tocqueville-style liberalism is not opposed to the quest for democratic sovereignty and national identity, but is

premised on a certain way of understanding and institutionalizing these aspirations. Although it seeks to articulate a comprehensive approach to modern society's inherent tensions, liberalism need not—indeed ought not—strive to resolve them. I suggest that a programmatic resistance to seeing the world through a Manichean lens of stark, irreconcilable binaries distinguishes liberal democracy from illiberal variants. Whereas the latter advance clear answers or final solutions to democracy's constitutive tensions, a liberal regime strives to live with these tensions. Viewing them as persistent, and in some sense perennial, its aim is not to sap but to harness the energy of conflicts in order to enable peaceful experimentation and an ongoing search for vital compromise.

Approaching Tocqueville

This book pursues two goals simultaneously: to shed light on liberal democracy's current crisis and to enhance our understanding of Tocqueville. These two objectives, I maintain, are best pursued in tandem: approaching a classical author through a contemporary frame and, conversely, looking at the present moment through a conceptual lens drawn from the past, can deepen our understanding of the present as well as the past.

As previously suggested, putting the political dilemmas of our time in historical perspective reveals their roots and enduring dimensions, and helps us achieve greater clarity. On the other hand, approaching Tocqueville's work with our own questions in mind brings out aspects of his analysis that, while crucial, have been overlooked by generations of readers driven by different intellectual and political priorities. To give a striking example: as I show in the first chapter, Tocqueville regards the principle of popular sovereignty as the foundation of both political life and of modern republicanism. The opening chapters of *Democracy in America* call attention to the centrality of this principle for his account of the United States and modern democracy more broadly. Notwithstanding Tocqueville's emphasis, few scholars have thematized his

understanding of popular sovereignty and probed its relationship to constitutionalism. The rare exceptions tend to downplay the significance of the concept, or present Tocqueville as a principled opponent to sovereignty understood as state centralization.¹⁸ Likewise, the importance of nationalism for Tocqueville's view of democracy, though noted, is yet to receive sustained treatment.¹⁹ Tocqueville's analysis of global politics and international relations, while heatedly debated under the rubric of empire, is often discussed in isolation from his account of democracy, or viewed as tangential to his liberalism. Considering these three dimensions—sovereignty, nationalism, and globalization—together sheds light not only on our concerns, but on Tocqueville's as well.

Tocqueville's work, moreover, is instructive for its substance as well as its approach. The tension between the universal and particular—my main object of investigation—was not only at the center of Tocqueville's analytical concerns, it also informed his methodology. Attuned, as behooves a philosopher, to the logic of ideas and to humanity's universal conundrums, Tocqueville also drew on the spirit and methods of social science (which he helped to advance) and inquired into the circumstances that would make modern society hospitable to freedom. His purpose, in short, was not merely to comprehend and describe but also to foster liberal democracy and inform political practice.²⁰ And he considered the study of the past as essential to this goal. This is one important reason why *Democracy in America* includes extensive descriptions of feudal society—an aspect I explore in this book. More than a foil or a straw man, premodern society is modernity's significant other, whose rethinking is as indispensable for political self-understanding as it is for imagining new ways to be modern.²¹

Yet, history also harbors dangers. While helping us recognize patterns of thought and action and unearth the sources of our political outlooks, attention to the past could buttress the view that we are who we were, or who we must become; that ensnared by habits and cultural path dependency, or propelled on an inexorable march of progress, all societies can do is embrace their role in

history's predetermined narrative; that, whether as tragedy or farce, history is bound to repeat itself, or else lead us, in a Hegelian comedy, toward worldly salvation.²² A keen observer of modern society, Tocqueville warned against the all-too democratic tendency to rush into the twin traps of excessive confidence and fatalism, and he reflected on the role historians can play in prodding or restraining these dangerous attractions.²³ In his view, the past is neither a barbarism from which, thankfully, we have been liberated, nor a destiny that we inexorably must repeat, but a mix of persisting questions and contingent possibilities. As this book aims to show, spanning different genres, disciplines, epochs, and regions, Tocqueville's writings were motivated by an antideterminist intent: one reason—perhaps the main—why they can be useful to us today.

Tocqueville, moreover, was keenly aware of the psychological dimensions of political life and the need to encourage a certain kind of mindset in order for freedom to be possible. As the penultimate paragraph of *Democracy in America* states:

Providence has created *humanity* neither entirely independent nor completely slave. It traces around *each man*, it is true, a fatal circle out of which he cannot go; but within its vast limits, man is powerful and free; so are *peoples*.²⁴

This short passage merits a closer look. Tocqueville was not a religious person in a conventional sense. As he states in an 1857 letter to a devout friend, "insatiable curiosity which found only the books of a large library to satisfy it" robbed him at the age of sixteen of his Catholic faith, which he likely never recovered. This has led scholars to suggest that the frequent invocations of Providence in Tocqueville's works were little more than rhetoric: a mode of speaking that reflects his contemporaries' sensibilities, or the audience he was addressing, rather than his own convictions.²⁵

And yet, while deployed to persuade, Tocqueville's providential language is more than *mere* rhetoric. If Tocqueville himself was not a believer in Providence, he was, to borrow a phrase, a believer

in belief and in the central importance of religion for democratic freedom. While estranged from the mysteries of Catholicism, he had a deep insight into the mysteries of the human psyche and the affective preconditions for a liberal order. Fleshing out this psychological dimension is a central goal of this book.²⁶

Freedom, for Tocqueville, requires trust in a moral universe supportive of human endeavor. It is grounded in the faith that, to echo Martin Luther King, the arc of the human story bends toward justice. It also draws on the belief in our individual capacity to help narrow the gap between the way the world is and how it should be. Liberty, in short, requires pride: confidence that we can improve the world and achieve something important. Yet if the struggle for freedom is premised on prideful trust in one's powers and the justness of one's cause, it also needs charity and self-restraint as well as the ability to cherish what is given. Freedom, in short, necessitates aspiration *and* humility, hope *and* realism, and striving *and* acceptance. It depends on walking a fine psychological line between ambition and modesty. Here, as elsewhere, Tocqueville's appeal to Providence aims both to boost our confidence in human freedom and to reconcile us to our limited control. Although as finite beings we cannot have either complete knowledge or full command, there is always space for choice and insight whose limits, if "fatal," are also "vast."

This view of freedom and its preconditions directly informs Tocqueville's democratic vista. While calling democracy's global rise "irresistible" and "providential," he also claims that its meaning is not predetermined but must be sought out and achieved. If the movement toward equality is divinely ordained and therefore just, its outcome remains uncertain. If there is a clear arc to history—a grand narrative that can orient our judgment—there is also room for weighing practical alternatives. The possibility of human agency depends on avoiding the twin traps of complacency and disenchantment. Warning against the attraction of extremes, Tocqueville recommends a middle, a liberal course—in a word: moderation.²⁷

Just as crucially, Tocqueville's passage quoted earlier indicates that the pursuit of liberty takes place on three levels simultaneously: humanity, people, individual. Illuminating the fate and freedom of peoples is as pivotal as that of individuals or humankind as a whole. Indeed, this book will argue that Tocqueville's liberalism is premised on the irreducibility of the middle term, peoplehood, either to individuals or to humanity. Stressing the political and bounded dimension of freedom, Tocqueville's is a political liberalism *par excellence*.²⁸

Tocqueville, in other words, grapples with the stubborn fact of pluralism and the limits it puts on our political and philosophic aspirations. He cautions against forgetting that humanity, while one, is also many. Though sharing common features and similar yearnings, human beings are divided into a great multitude of different peoples, each with its own distinct vision of what it means to be human or to live a good life. As Tocqueville helps us appreciate, this necessary and often "fatal" aspect of our condition is as much a curse as it is a blessing. By pushing us to explore who we are, the differences that divide us curb our liberty and also sustain it. In that sense, human diversity and the variety of individual and collective modes of life that aspire to self-determination are both a challenge to and a precondition for the possibility of freedom.²⁹

Tocqueville's appreciation for the particular, political dimensions of the human condition—and of the efforts to comprehend it—is one reason why his main analytical works prominently feature particular and, in their different ways, prototypically modern peoples: the American and the French. *Democracy in America*, which will be my main (though not exclusive) focus here, illuminates the modern situation by offering a comprehensive account of an actually existing democratic polity. Wary of abstract theorizing and its tendency to promote ideological shortcuts, Tocqueville set out to shed light on the promises and dangers of modern democracy by describing its paradigmatic liberal instantiation: the United States, then half a century old. Rather than defend

liberalism in theory, Tocqueville studied it in American practice, probing its past and present, its successes and its failures, and drawing general lessons from a particular democratic experience. The result is a pioneering investigation of the conceptual understanding of liberal democracy and, at the same time, a thick sociological analysis of its specific conditions and cultural underpinnings. Stressing the need to reconcile universality and difference, Tocqueville's work models the process of ascending to general insights from a particular historical and cultural context.³⁰

While I find in Tocqueville analytical and policy resources for comprehending and addressing our own times, my object is not to argue that he always got things right, or that his judgment should be adopted uncritically. By revisiting central aspects of his social and political thought, this book casts into sharp relief the tensions underlying Tocqueville's legacy: his pessimism about racial integration, his resolute (if qualified) embrace of the French colonial empire, and his preaching in theory and adopting in practice a politics of national pride that today we may well brand populist. Alongside his debatable judgments, another reason for interpretive caution is historical distance. Parallels notwithstanding, Tocqueville's situation was different from ours in important respects. To underscore the contemporary import of his work, one must grasp the historical and political span democracies have traveled over the past two centuries. For this task, too, contextualization is essential.

Tocqueville lived in a world and in a century preoccupied with its own social and political struggles and civilizational priorities. The United States, the country he pointed to as pioneering example of liberal democracy, was in fact a slaveholding republic: neither entirely liberal nor fully democratic. This young country, moreover, was yet to experience its defining historical trials: civil war and reconstruction, economic crisis, totalitarianism, and world wars—trials that would propel its development from a relatively small isolated polity to a continental and soon to be global power, from an historical outlier and a constitutional novelty to a model and defender of the free world, and from there to its current

status as a self-doubting and much resented hegemon. Tocqueville saw the New World as the hopeful future of Europe, and particularly France. Though not an example to be followed blindly, American society offered empirical support for his cautious optimism about democracy's liberal prospects. Today, as liberal institutions are under pressure in the United States, and American exceptionalism, which Tocqueville helped theorize, is increasingly in doubt, such optimism does not seem readily available. Who represents whose future has become an open question.³¹

On the other hand, though Tocqueville's historical circumstances were undeniably different, there are deep continuities between his time and ours that warrant returning to the nineteenth century to seek lessons for the twenty-first. If the democratic society Tocqueville studied was a novel "spectacle for which past history had not prepared the world," in the nineteenth century, liberalism had already attained global outreach, not least thanks to its self-righteous champion and aspiring hegemon: England.³² Extraordinarily influential and globally ascendant, nineteenth-century liberalism was also vigorously opposed. While totalitarianism was yet to appear in full stature, the ideas and sentiments that would guide liberalism's two greatest challengers in the twentieth century—scientific racism on one hand, scientific socialism on the other—were well on their way to attain persuasive formulation and popular acclaim. Liberal constitutionalism, then as today, enjoyed both fame and infamy: it was established as much as contested at home and abroad.

A participatory observer of these developments, Tocqueville was able to gauge their direction. Though the American Union he visited was still a fledgling republic without a foreign policy to speak of, his analysis anticipates the looming sectional conflict between the North and South, and points to the United States' global destiny. As a direct witness to slavery and the political construction of racist ideology in the Americas, Tocqueville was also exposed to the doctrines of scientific racism through the work of one of its early proponents, Count de Gobineau. And while we

have no evidence that he was aware of Marx, as I discuss in chapter three, the rise of socialist ideology with its statist and anti-liberal ramifications was among his greatest worries, as was religious fundamentalism in its Catholic and Islamic variety. Tocqueville's vision of the global spread of democratic civilization and his direct involvement in international politics made him a judicious interpreter of the constellation of issues and processes that shaped the following centuries, and which we today call globalization.³³

Likewise, although Tocqueville does not use our language, and many a contemporary concept in which current trends are analyzed—including “globalization,” “nationalism,” “populism,” “identity”—are not his own, in deploying these terms, this book aims to show that Tocqueville nevertheless had a deep apprehension of these phenomena. Because the issues Tocqueville pondered are in important respects the questions of our time, his work can be fruitfully brought to bear on our situation. And we stand to learn from his accounts, despite or perhaps even because they are set in a different context. Both the challenges before us and the avenues for addressing them might become easier to grasp when observed from afar, with the benefit of historical—and emotional—distance.

Approaching Tocqueville's writings through the prism of three modern dilemmas, the main goal of the chapters that follow is to probe and reconstruct his understanding of these dilemmas, and draw useful lessons. My primary mode in these expository chapters is a sustained analysis of important parts of Tocqueville's work, noting how these have been interpreted in the secondary literature and elaborating alternatives to established readings. To discern the precise meaning and test the internal coherence of Tocqueville's arguments, each chapter considers their historical and intellectual context. I seek to clarify Tocqueville's analytical stance by putting it in conversation with select interlocutors who deeply influenced his thinking, such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau and the authors of the *Federalist Papers* featured in chapter one, or J. S. Mill and François Guizot discussed in chapter two. In chapter

three I canvas Tocqueville's vision of democracy and its global ramifications against the backdrop of its most consequential alternative: revolutionary Marxism.

To bring out the practical, rhetorical dimension of Tocqueville's analysis, each chapter features what I have called a case study examining how Tocqueville applied his ideas to political practice. Chapter one probes the view of sovereignty that informs Tocqueville's account of the United States' federal system in light of his often-ignored discussion of the politics of Andrew Jackson's presidency, and of the nullification controversy of 1831—the most significant clash over sovereignty prior to the American Civil War. In chapter two, I set Tocqueville's analysis of democratic nationhood against his position on the so-called Eastern crisis of the early 1840s and the nationalist tensions between France and England that prompted his debate with J. S. Mill on national pride. Chapter three juxtaposes Tocqueville's vision of democratic foreign policy with his involvement in France's colonization of Algeria so as to explore the mechanisms and long-term prospects of globalization.

Whereas the core of the book aims to deepen our understanding of Tocqueville and his context, the concluding chapter returns to the present in order to consider the current state of democratic “disrepair,” and the prospects for liberal democracy in today's world.³⁴ Recapitulating the book's main findings, it seeks to imagine how Tocqueville would interpret our situation and respond to questions raised by contemporary analyses. By applying Tocqueville's analytical framework to our world, I draw lessons for sustaining liberal democracy in the twenty-first century.

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