

37 QUOTATIONS



Alexis de Tocqueville

(1805-1859)

Alexis de Tocqueville was a French aristocrat who visited the United States in 1831-32 and studied the nature and effects of its political system, then wrote *Democracy in America* (1835,1840), one of the most quoted books ever published. His major theme is how majority rule threatens individual liberty. His predictions about the course of American history have proved remarkably accurate.

ORDER OF TOPICS: Indians, wilderness, worldliness, political parties, the People, conformity, politicians, Socialism, equality, mass society, private citizens, self-interest, Democratic government of laws, religious faith, war, history, literacy, Postmodern literature to come, Feminists, Victorian gender roles, American women superior:

INDIANS

The Indian knew how to live without wants, to suffer without complaint, and to die singing.

WILDERNESS

If those nations whose social condition is democratic could remain free only while they inhabit uncultivated regions, we must despair of the future destiny of the human race; for democracy is rapidly acquiring a more extended sway, and the wilds are gradually peopled with men.

The whole life of an American is passed like a game of chance, a revolutionary crisis, or a battle.

WORLDLINESS

He who has set his heart exclusively upon the pursuit of worldly welfare is always in a hurry, for he has but a limited time at his disposal to reach, to grasp, and to enjoy it.

POLITICAL PARTIES

There are many men of principle in both parties in America, but there is no party of principle.

In politics shared hatreds are almost always the basis of friendships.

THE PEOPLE

The people reign in the American political world as the Deity does in the Universe.

CONFORMITY

I know of no country in which there is so little independence of mind and real freedom of discussion as in America.

In America the majority raises formidable barriers around the liberty of opinion; within these barriers an author may write what he pleases, but woe to him if he goes beyond them.

In the United States, the majority undertakes to supply a multitude of ready-made opinions for the use of individuals, who are thus relieved from the necessity of forming opinions of their own.

POLITICIANS

The American Republic will endure until the day Congress discovers that it can bribe the public with the public's money.

A democratic government is the only one in which those who vote for a tax can escape the obligation to pay it.

SOCIALISM

Democracy and socialism have nothing in common but one word, equality. But notice the difference: while democracy seeks equality in liberty, socialism seeks equality in restraint and servitude.

Those that despise people will never get the best out of others and themselves.

[Socialism] every day renders the exercise of the free agency of man less useful and less frequent; it circumscribes the will within a narrower range, and gradually robs a man of all the uses of himself. The principle of equality has prepared men for these things; it has predisposed men to endure them, and oftentimes to look on them as benefits. After having thus successfully taken each member of the community in its powerful grasp, and fashioned them at will, the [government] then extends its arm over the whole community. It covers the surface of society with a network of small complicated rules, minute and uniform, through which the most original minds and the most energetic characters cannot penetrate, to rise above the crowd. The will of man is not shattered, but softened, bent, and guided; men are seldom forced by it to act, but they are constantly restrained from acting: such a power does not destroy, but it prevents existence; it does not tyrannize, but it compresses, enervates, extinguishes, and stupefies a people, till each nation is reduced to be nothing better than a flock of timid and industrious animals, of which the government is the shepherd.

EQUALITY

Americans are so enamored of equality that they would rather be equal in slavery than unequal in freedom.

I have sought to point out the dangers to which the principle of equality exposes the independence of man, because I firmly believe that these dangers are the most formidable as well as the least foreseen of all those which futurity holds in store.

The nations of our time cannot prevent the condition of man from becoming equal; but it depends upon themselves whether the principle of equality is to lead them to servitude or freedom, to knowledge or barbarism, to prosperity or wretchedness.

MASS SOCIETY

Every citizen, being assimilated to all the rest, is *lost in the crowd*, and nothing stands conspicuous but the great and imposing image of the people at large.

PRIVATE CITIZENS

The health of a democratic society may be measured by the quality of functions performed by private citizens.

The greatness of America lies not in being more enlightened than any other nation, but rather in her ability to repair her faults.

SELF-INTEREST

The surface of American society is covered with a layer of democratic paint, but from time to time one can see the old aristocratic colours breaking through.

GOVERNMENT OF LAWS

There is hardly a political question in the United States which does not sooner or later turn into a judicial one.

RELIGIOUS FAITH

Liberty cannot be established without morality, nor morality without faith.

WAR

There are two things which a democratic people will always find very difficult—to begin a war and to end it.

In a revolution, as in a novel, the most difficult part to invent is the end.

HISTORY

History is a gallery of pictures in which there are few originals and many copies.

When the past no longer illuminates the future, the spirit walks in darkness.

Thus, not only does democracy make every man forget his ancestors, but it hides his descendants and separates his contemporaries from him; it throws him back forever upon himself alone, and threatens in the end to confine him entirely within the solitude of his own heart.

LITERACY

There is hardly a pioneer's hut which does not contain a few odd volumes of Shakespeare. I remember reading the feudal drama of *Henry V* for the first time in a log cabin.

The genius of democracies is seen not only in the great number of new words introduced but even more in the new ideas they express.

POSTMODERN LITERATURE TO COME

In democratic communities, each citizen is habitually engaged in the contemplation of a very puny object, namely, himself. If he ever raises his looks higher, he perceives only the immense form of society at large, or the still more imposing aspect of mankind. His ideas are all either extremely minute and clear, or extremely general and vague...

I do not fear that the poetry of democratic nations will prove insipid, or that it will fly too near the ground; I rather apprehend that it will be forever losing itself in the clouds, and that it will range at last to purely imaginary regions. I fear that the productions of democratic poets may often be surcharged with immense and incoherent imagery, with exaggerated descriptions and strange creations; and that the fantastic beings of their brain may sometimes make us regret the world of reality.

Style will frequently be fantastic...overburdened, and loose—almost always vehement and bold. Authors will aim at rapidity of execution more than at perfection of detail...there will be more...imagination than profundity; and literary performances will bear marks of an untutored and rude vigor of thought.... The objects of authors will be to astonish rather than to please, and to stir the passions more than to charm the taste.

FEMINISTS

There are people...who, confounding together the different characteristics of the sexes, would make man and woman into beings not only equal, but alike. They would give to both the same functions, impose on both the same duties, and grant to both the same rights; they would mix them in all things,—their occupations, their pleasures, their business. It may readily be conceived, that, by thus attempting to make one sex equal to the other, both are degraded; and from so preposterous a medley of the works of nature, nothing could ever result but weak men and disorderly women....

VICTORIAN GENDER ROLES

The Americans have applied to the sexes the great principle of political economy which governs the manufactures of our age, by carefully dividing the duties of man from those of woman, in order that the great work of society may be the better carried on. In no country has such constant care been taken as in America to trace two clearly distinct lines of action for the two sexes, and to make them keep pace one with the other, but in two pathways which are always different. American women never manage the outward concerns of the family, or conduct a business or take part in political life; nor are they, on the other hand, ever compelled to perform the rough labor of the fields, or to make any of those laborious exertions which demand the exertion of physical strength. No families are so poor as to form an exception to this rule. If, on the one hand, an American woman cannot escape from the quiet circle of domestic employments, she is never forced, on the other, to go beyond it. Hence it is, that the women of America, who often exhibit a masculine strength of understanding and a manly energy, generally preserve great delicacy of personal appearance, and always retain the manners of women, although they sometimes show that they have the hearts and minds of men....

AMERICAN WOMEN SUPERIOR

As for myself, I do not hesitate to avow, that, although the women of the United States are confined within the narrow circle of domestic life, and their situation is, in some respects, one of extreme dependence, I have nowhere seen woman occupying a loftier position; and if I were asked...to what the singular prosperity and growing strength of that people ought mainly to be attributed, I should reply, To the superiority of their women.

