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# *Man: The Lonely Animal*

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In a letter composed just three years before his death, Tocqueville wrote: “This profound saying could be applied especially to me: it is not good for man to be alone.” When I tell my students that the whole of *Democracy in America* was written under the aegis of this sentiment, under the shadow of what could be called a philosophy of loneliness, they listen. Tocqueville’s concern, I tell them, was the emergence of a new type, *homo solus*, the lonely man; and with how this new type would understand himself and his place in the world. And, so, my students approach Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America* with a sense of urgency. They soon discover that it is a book that reads their own hearts, for few things are more haunting to them than the spectre of loneliness. They seek to understand Tocqueville, so that they may understand themselves; for in Tocqueville’s writing they find an account of the etiology of the disease from which they suffer. Man, the lonely animal. That is why I ask my students around the globe to read his book. And because teachers of the history of political thought are called not only to diagnose disease but to indicate wherein health may lie, I ask my students to read *Democracy in America* so that they may also discover Tocqueville’s cautious hope that such loneliness need not be the final word about their future.

*Tocqueville was concerned with the emergence of homo solus, the lonely man.*

While loneliness has been chronicled in all ages, Tocqueville thought that it would be an especially acute problem in the

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democratic age, because the antidote that the aristocratic age before it had offered would no longer be available. That antidote was the “links,” as he called them, which tied each to everyone else. In his words:

Aristocracy links everybody, from peasant to king, in one long chain. Democracy breaks the chain and frees each link. . . . Each man is [thereby] thrown back on himself alone, and there is danger that he may be shut up in the solitude of his own heart (508).<sup>1</sup>

*Interest involves calculation between individuals, obligation entails durable relations between roles.*

The character of these links is not easily understood in the democratic age, which explains why they cannot be easily reconstructed. In the democratic age, man is largely gathered together by having interests in common. In the aristocratic age, man is largely bound together through loyalty and obligation. Interest involves conscious, ongoing calculation and negotiation between *individuals*; loyalty and obligation entail range-bound and durable relations between *roles*.

It is difficult for my main campus students to imagine the ties of loyalty and obligation. I routinely ask them, for example, whether what they do at home in the way of “chores” is undertaken because the family into which they have been born requires it. The description already anticipates the answer. Very few raise their hands. The formulation itself seems odd to them. More than any generation that has come before, they expect and receive money for the chores they do, and are seldom moved to action without it. When they are young, they are called upon to attend various family gatherings, and do so; but from adolescence onward it is increasingly difficult to concentrate their attention on such matters. Already they are on their way to breaking their attachment with their parents. Loyalty and obligation can hardly be fortified if sons and daughters begin to leave the family fold shortly after they reach puberty. And because the lesson of self-interest has often been instilled long before that, it only seems natural that it should be extended and amplified when their eyes shift elsewhere. To this should be added Tocqueville’s concern that as the administrative reach of the state extends itself further and further into everyday concerns, the real sway of the family is

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<sup>1</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. J. P. Mayer (New York: HarperCollins, 1988). Page references in the text are to this edition.

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bound to diminish. When sons and daughters anticipate that the state will keep their affairs in order from cradle to grave, they soon come to think of it as the real source of their sustenance and regeneration. That, too, encourages them to think largely in terms of their immediate interests. Nothing can really dissuade democratic man from thinking narrowly about himself if the state has taken away from him the cumbersome task of living with his family and his neighbors.

My students in Qatar, on the other hand, tell a different story. They are ever-cognizant of the family name they bear, and of both the loyalty that must be displayed and the obligations that must be borne. These do not diminish with age. Many of them, especially the women, spend evenings and weekends involved in family celebrations that routinely include first and second cousins. These gatherings bring coherence to the extended family and reconfirm its standing within the larger body social. This attentiveness to family obligations often has deleterious consequences for their studies, though in vain does the teacher implore them to place their own self-interest at the forefront. Many do not understand themselves first and foremost as individuals but rather as bearers of a family name. More accurately, while they are increasingly coming to think of themselves as individuals, they nevertheless continue to understand themselves as occupying a specific and largely unalterable role in their families and, by extension, in their societies. They occupy *roles*, yet they think of themselves increasingly as *individuals*. Therein lies their difficulty.

In America, Tocqueville thought that the state would tend to gradually undermine the family; that is why he wrote that all our efforts should be directed at fortifying it. In parts of the Middle East, on the other hand, the extended family has become further entrenched by the development of a strong state, since it is through a state patronage network that families receive their bounty. Thus, in parts of the Middle East my students are pulled both toward the de-linked condition that characterizes the democratic age and towards the roles they occupy as members of this or that family. This tension cannot increase forever without consequence.

To think of oneself as an individual rather than to understand oneself as a role is really a rather remarkable historical

*Tocqueville feared that the state in America would gradually undermine the family.*

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achievement, which my main campus students largely take for granted. The Latin term, *persona*, supposes a distinction between the actor and the mask he puts on. In the aristocratic age, the mask, the role, largely mediates relations. The individual behind the mask may strain to find the right way to wear it, but it cannot ever be wholly removed. In the democratic age, when everything is on the move, the mask seems ill-fitting and has the appearance of an awkward artifice. If donned at all, it is seldom worn for long. It is often intentionally removed, and sometimes stripped off by others. In bemused moments it is treated ironically; when it appears grotesque to its wearer, a caricature of the beauty and purity of the individual behind the mask, the tender and never-ending search for "authenticity" commences. The individual, alone and without durable linkages to others of the sort that roles can provide, searches for "meaning" in a world that seems inhospitable to his "needs."

When permanence in the social order is assured, then man can be at home in the role he occupies; when no such permanence exists, as is the case in the democratic age, man finds what permanence he may by thinking of himself as a disembodied individual who steps into the fray, hopefully at his own discretion, from some seemingly unmovable vantage point. My students in Qatar are not yet fully exposed to this fray. Their families, and the still largely fixed location of their families in society, provide them with a stability that for my students on the main campus is almost unimaginable. Both groups discover a measure of permanence, though they find it in different locations: the one in the roles they occupy in their families; the other by hovering over the world as individuals. That is why the language of "authenticity," so prevalent in America, is scarcely heard in the Middle East.

There are implications for decorum that follow from the distinction between roles and individuals, which are worth mentioning. In the Middle East, students in class are usually quite cognizant of the standing of their families in relationship to others. In America this is true to a much lesser extent, if at all. In some parts of the Middle East, for example, it is impossible to form a PTA because certain families will not condescend to talk to or even be seen with other families of lesser stature in the

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same room. That does not happen in America, though other tensions certainly exist. In the classroom this familial stratification sometimes takes the form of one student deferring to another when a teacher poses a question. For an American disposed to believe, say, as Thomas Jefferson did, that an aristocracy of talent—a “natural aristocracy” as he called it in his 1813 letter to John Adams—was the only one that can finally be tolerated, this can be maddening to witness.

On the other hand, there is also something quite heartening about manners that are scripted in advance. Knowing that they speak not simply for themselves but for their families, when they disagree with their classmates, it is with the cognizance that their families are in some way intertwined outside of the classroom as well. This would never enter the minds of my students on the main campus. They are there to debate and dispute, which makes the character to their discussions sometimes harsh and abrupt. They do not know each other’s families, and speak only for themselves, at this moment, with little concern for their relations, past, present or future. Decorum is hard to maintain when only the present moment matters. My students in Qatar are no less prone to short attention spans than my students on the main campus; their lives have taught them, however, that they do not only speak for themselves, that they occupy a role in their families which mediates all that they say and do. For that reason, they are more circumspect in how they comport themselves in class.

*Decorum hard  
to maintain  
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the present  
moment  
matters.*

The matter is made more complicated by the fact that underneath the brusque demeanor of my American students is a deep insecurity and sense of homelessness that stepping away from the family usually occasions. When their ideas are shown to be flimsy or without foundation, they become quite fragile and sometimes feel that they have been treated “insensitively.” Their reason is not yet fully formed and, so, they rely on their personal feelings as a guide and compass. My students in Qatar are no further along in the development of their reason; they are, however, accustomed to the lesson of shame that extended family loyalty invariably teaches. Guilt may animate the individual, but shame is necessary if one family is to be upheld against another. Thus, where my students in America are at once brusque and fragile, my students in Qatar are

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decorous but also accustomed to enduring what for American students would be brutal humiliation. This admixture of decorum and brutality among my students in the Middle East is not something my American students much understand; on the other hand, the admixture of abruptness and fragility among my American students is something quite perplexing to my students from the Middle East.

*To think of oneself as a disembodied individual is also to think almost without regard to the past or future.*

I have suggested that to think of oneself as a disembodied individual, as my American students largely do, is also to think almost without regard to the past or the future. When the past, present, and future are connected in a long and unbroken chain, Tocqueville tells us, the father is the natural link that holds the different moments together. When the father loses his position, as he does in the democratic age, the time horizon of each successive generation begins to collapse into an instantaneous “now.” I ask my American students if they can imagine acting with a view to what their grandparents and their unborn grandchildren might think about their public and private deeds. They cannot; they are, figuratively speaking, fatherless children. My youngest son, I tell them, routinely asks why our own house should be filled with furniture that my father and mother inherited. When I tell him that it is not mine to dispense with—that it belongs not to me, or to him or his older brother, but to his grandparents and his grandchildren—he rolls his eyes in disbelief. My students on the main campus are amused by this story, but most of them hold to their opinion that they should continue living in the moment. What can their family name mean under these circumstances? How can they understand what role they play in the succession of generations when the sentiments and thoughts that matter are largely those that happen to coalesce spontaneously?

My students in Qatar, on the other hand, can easily imagine acting with a view to what their grandparents and grandchildren think. Not surprisingly, their fathers generally play a more prominent role in their lives than do the fathers in the lives of my students on the main campus, especially when it comes to marriage. In the way they dress, comport themselves, and speak, they sense themselves to be watched over by generations past and future. This is one of the reasons that American life appears alien to so many in the Middle East. Proceeding, as the

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Americans often do, as if only the moment matters, is almost inconceivable for them. When music videos made their way to the Middle East, there was the foreseeable objection that the insinuated sexual content was *haram*, forbidden. But more telling was the incredulity that the video scenes themselves lacked a context that might give them coherence, let alone significance. They were perceived to be no more than dreamy and gratuitous imaginings that flitted from one provocation to the next without a plot. The sexual impropriety of these scenes was at issue, of course; but the more revealing objection pertained to the scope and motivation of the action that was portrayed. What sort of men and women are these, who act on impulse, and whose lives dance from one disconnected event to the next? They were certainly not men and women from the Middle East, the guidance for whose movements is choreographed by the whispering community of generations that their roles prepare for them to hear, even before they are born.

It would be misleading to say that my students in Qatar are guided in their actions solely by the roles extended family lineage bestows. I have noted that they understand themselves as occupying roles but that they increasingly think of themselves as disembodied individuals. In class one day I wondered aloud how far along this development had proceeded. Most of them indicated that they saw the significance of their roles diminishing and their status as individuals to be the most significant thing about them. They are young, of course, and cannot fully know how marriage and the burden of raising sons and daughters will temper their current thinking, and return them to roles to which youth has already familiarized them. Still, that they can—and do—increasingly think of themselves as disembodied individuals who, like many of my American students, hover over the world rather than being engaged in it, is telling. They are living, as Tocqueville put it, in “an intermediate stage, a glorious yet troubled time in which conditions are not sufficiently fixed for the mind to sleep” (642).

Most of my American students, as I have said, think of themselves almost entirely as disembodied individuals, and seldom if at all as occupying a role. They, too, will learn in due course that they are burdened by the precarious task of generation, and that this task cannot be successfully under-

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taken without condescending from the heights they now think they inhabit. From that distance, all things seem possible; and the role, say, of father or mother, is one they can scarcely imagine—or, rather, they imagine that no real bounds need be set on the kinds of fathers or mothers they will be. That is why they enter into marriage so ill-equipped for what invariably follows. My students in Qatar, on the other hand, may occasionally lose sight of the roles they occupy, but because they still largely believe that marriage is a matter of unification of families more than of personal choice, they are somewhat more prepared for what follows. That is changing, however. Divorce rates are on the rise throughout the Middle East—with all that that implies about the breakdown of durable roles and the emergence of the disembodied individuals Tocqueville predicted would occur in the democratic age.

While my students in Qatar wrestle with what it means to be located in “an intermediate stage” between occupying a role and thinking of themselves as individuals, my students on the main campus wrestle with how life might be lived without roles altogether. Rather than occupying “an intermediate stage,” they look back from the far end of the development Tocqueville thought would take place in the democratic age, and cannot help but think that roles are limits on their person, which ought to be opposed whenever they are encountered. They do not commence their thinking from the standpoint of limitation and occasionally ponder a breach, as my students in Qatar do; rather they begin from the framework of infinite possibility, and think of roles altogether as a constraint. Tocqueville had warned of this new impulse that now prevails amongst my students on the main campus.

[W]hen castes disappear and classes are brought together, when men are jumbled together and habits, customs, and laws are changing, when new facts impinge and new truths are discovered, when old conceptions vanish and new ones take their place, then the human mind imagines the possibility of an ideal but always fugitive perfection (453).

One of the awkward discoveries students from the main campus make when they come to Qatar for visits, or for junior year abroad, is that many of the students they meet there do not think of themselves as “oppressed” by the roles they occupy. To be sure, there are things about their societies that they



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would like to change, but on the whole they seem no less comfortable with their societies than my main campus students are with their own. From within the framework of infinite possibility, this comfort appears to be a form of false-consciousness, from which my students in Qatar should be “liberated.” It is not. From within the framework of infinite possibility, *all* roles, *all* less-than-cosmopolitan understandings are a form of false-consciousness. Re-education, therapy (if the problem runs deeper), and war (if the problem can only be dislodged through destruction) are its correctives. My students in Qatar alternate between being annoyed and being amused by these predictable encounters, which invariably reinforce the view already prevalent in the Middle East that for all their high-minded talk, Americans really believe in nothing at all. Little wonder so many in the Middle East think that American ideas are corrosive or vacuous. As a consequence, they do not want the “liberation” that democratic man offers. And they do not want it because they cannot imagine living in a world that presupposes infinite possibilities.

*Comfort with  
roles not a  
form of false-  
consciousness.*

Before I further explore the inner workings and implications of this frame of mind about which Tocqueville so worried, some things must be said about what is gained when democratic man comes to think of himself as a disembodied individual. Loneliness may be the obvious drawback to life in the democratic age, but the de-linkage that fosters a sense of loneliness also alters the terms of engagement with others, sometimes in salutary ways. When my students on the main campus greet me these days, they will often say, “Hey, Professor Mitchell.” I am sure they see me wince. I am old enough to remember a time when students could not have conceived of addressing their professor in that way. My students in Qatar occasionally greet me in an informal fashion, but the practice has not yet really caught on. I suspect it is done at all because they hear American students speak that way. I cannot imagine that they address adults from their own society in a similar manner. This ease and informality of relations is one of the hallmarks of the democratic age. If Tocqueville is right, we can expect more of it in the future, not only in America, but around the globe.

To be at ease in social relations entails a deep familiarity

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with the protocols and conventions that each role requires—or it entails the absence of roles altogether. My students on the main campus increasingly live as if the latter were true. They think of formalities as archaisms; and in their speech, comportment, and dress, they make no distinction between lounging around at home, going to the Mall, showing up for class, or attending church. Not occupying a role, they have nothing to demonstrate or to prove. They are largely content “just being themselves,” in whatever setting they find themselves.

The unwillingness and inability to make distinctions invites a certain coarseness of manners—mobile phone mal-etiquette, public slovenliness and other indelicacies not worth mentioning. Nevertheless, what attends these poor showings is a straight-forwardness and honesty that derives from always needing to get right to the point. It is not out of disrespect that this straight-forwardness emerges. On the contrary, it emerges because of the belief in the democratic age that, together with his neighbors, man is engaged in a grand and forward-looking enterprise of building a world that he can clearly imagine even if he cannot yet see it. True though it is that he too often settles into the moment, and wishes to stay there forever; when roused from his indolence he worries that the future world he envisions will slip away before he can grasp it, and understands that he must speak simply and without subterfuge to others if he is to be successful. Knowing he must count on his neighbor, he gives every indication that he can be trusted by him. Unable to hold fast to any role that would assure his standing in perpetuity, he must forever reach out to his neighbor with an outstretched hand, and with good will in his heart. While this does not eliminate his poor manners, it certainly attenuates them—if not throughout his day, at least for some portion of it.

The unruliness of American society is one of the first things that my students from the Middle East notice. They wonder how the Americans can accomplish anything at all under these circumstances, let alone be great. The answer is that without intact and unchanging roles on which to rely, democratic man must reach out in trust to his neighbor and speak without subterfuge, or else give up and withdraw into himself altogether. Without the aid of durable roles, through which

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he could look with reverence to the past for guidance, unruly democratic man must look forward to a future that he cannot, alone, build. An ease in social relations can make such a future possible.

*Democratic age fosters ease of social relations.*

In addition to the ease of social relations that the democratic age makes possible, “natural affection,” as Tocqueville calls it, emerges—really for the first time in history. This is quite an astonishing claim, which bears investigating. In the aristocratic age, where relations are mediated through the roles that are occupied, the thought that natural affection should prevail and direct the course of action scarcely enters the mind. Any dim impulse of affection that emerges soon dissipates if its object is not within grasp. Unnourished and unable to make its demand felt, it is soon extinguished.

When the social world begins to be disrupted and roles no longer fully mediate relations, desires that once were soon extinguished enter the mind and remain there, enlivened by the prospect that the social arrangements that precluded their satisfaction will soon be removed. In Europe this intermediate stage was the age of romanticism. Here the heart soars at one moment only to be dashed at the next. In democratic America, there was no equivalent, because the roles that proscribed natural affection were never as pronounced as they had been in aristocratic Europe. As Tocqueville put the matter:

[H]owever credulous passion may make [a man], there is hardly a way of persuading a girl [in America] that you love her when you are perfectly free to marry her but will not do so (595).

Romance in America, such as it is, has always had a practical cast; the ease of social relations brings honesty and candor; but the social equality that brings about such ease also curtails the imagination, makes it generally dull, and sometimes crass. Seldom does it soar; rarely is it sophisticated.

My students on the main campus take for granted that natural affection should prevail in their own relations. In their friendships and in their romantic life, such as it is, it scarcely occurs to them that they should arrest an affection that their heart declares. Publically they are reluctant to admit that natural affection should be constrained in any way, and generally feel embarrassed when conventions or prejudices make them-

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selves heard in spite all their efforts to blot them out. This will change as they get older, although they certainly deny it; the conventions and prejudices of their fathers and mothers will re-emerge, though in a more attenuated form than has been the case for previous generations. That is inevitable as conditions become more equal.

My students in Qatar, on the other hand, are still largely guided by the roles they occupy and, so, cannot imagine that natural affection should wholly guide them in their affairs. Their friendships are arranged more carefully, as they must be in a society that is ordered by the logic of familial standing rather than by individual choice. They are, in fact, quite astonished by how freely the American students they meet allow their hearts to wander.

In this still-aristocratic condition, it would be tempting to think, as Tocqueville did, that the heart exacts its revenge through romantic intrigue when natural affection is largely ruled out; and that relations between men and women in America are therefore healthier than they are in the Middle East. In some respects I am sure that is true, though there is every reason to worry that the more my American students think of themselves as disembodied individuals, the more misguided and reckless their relations become. I return to this matter in another place. This important caveat aside, natural affection is one of the more important achievements of the democratic age. When roles diminish and conventions lose their hold, man is almost forced to listen to his own heart. What is heard is seldom coherent and often contradictory. That is why my American students struggle so, and take so much longer to grow up than do my students from the Middle East. When natural affection is the guide, a thousand errors will be made; and from the vantage point of a society with intact roles, the entire enterprise will seem a grand folly. That judgment might be justified if, in fact, the breakdown of roles that accompanies the emergence of a democratic age could be stopped or reversed. It cannot; and I suspect that as generation succeeds generation in the Middle East each will find itself increasingly confounded by the tension between what roles require and what natural affection declares.

Aside from an ease in social relations and natural affection,

*Natural  
affection a key  
achievement of  
the democratic  
age.*

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the third great achievement in the democratic age is sympathy. When a vast and unbridgeable chasm separates families, classes, tribes or castes no real sympathy is possible. Then, obligation and loyalty hold the entire social edifice together and true sympathy is unknown. Only when social barriers begin to fall does the man who once seemed different in kind now appear to be different only in degree, if at all. Then his sufferings become recognizable, haunt the imagination, and serve as a wellspring of political action.

*Sympathy  
increases as  
social barriers  
diminish.*

Almost all of my students on the main campus are haunted by the suffering of others, and think that the sole purpose of social policy or political action is to eliminate it. When I tell them that Tocqueville thought that the sympathy they feel can only fully emerge in the democratic age, and that throughout history disregard for the suffering of others has been the rule rather than the exception, they are surprised. When their gaze fixes on a nation in which a family, class, tribe, or caste is inured to the suffering of others, they are apt to wonder how such an arrangement can be borne; yet it does not occur to them that there can be no sympathy without a notion of a common humanity in which each man participates, quite irrespective of the predicates that attach to him. In the aristocratic age, where each family, class, tribe, or caste is a species of humanity unto itself, replete with its own internal codes of honor, the idea of a common humanity scarcely enters the mind; and, so, sympathy is largely absent.

In Qatar, my students are perplexed by this fixation American students have about eliminating suffering on a global scale. It is not that they have no concern for others. Indeed, Islam, like Christianity and Judaism, is clear about the need to take care of widows, those who are poor, and those who are otherwise in need. My students from the Middle East are disposed to support the Red Crescent which, like the Red Cross, does relief work in a spirit that verges on being religious without being explicitly so. Yet they cannot quite escape the suspicion that something more than religious charity is at work in the minds of the American students they meet, something that is only thinkable when man is no longer really a member of a particular family, class, tribe, or caste. Severed from any real social location, most of my American students are capable

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of sympathy for people elsewhere in the world they will never meet, but too frequently do not even know their neighbor next door. In the Middle East, on the contrary, generalized sympathy of this kind scarcely exists, though well-articulated and concrete obligations and loyalties do.

*Generalized sympathy may reduce concern for the neighbor next door.*

Disposed as he was to think that health always lies between nodal extremes to which man is naturally drawn, Tocqueville on the one hand applauded the development of sympathy in the democratic age: suffering would thereby be cast in a brighter and broader light, and the prospect for a truly kinder and gentler world would emerge. On the other hand, his endorsement of sympathy was tempered by the worry that attentiveness to the suffering of others far away would come at the cost of reduced concern for the neighbor next door. God's love may be Infinite, but man's is not: concern and solicitude perennially directed over the horizon diminishes what is available for the neighbor who stands in front of you.

Emblematic of this emergent sentiment about the distant suffering of others is the upsurge of "humanitarian assistance" in all of its forms, which is unthinkable for peoples whose allegiance still aligns with their family, class, tribe, or caste. Not surprisingly, American foreign policy has been increasingly guided by just this sentiment, much to the dismay of political realists who argue that foreign policy should be concerned with identifiable and discrete national interests. In the Middle East, where the generic suffering of others has not yet captivated the imagination, there is a strong suspicion that American foreign policy in the region cannot really be about what it declares—for what nation would sacrifice blood and treasure to alleviate the suffering of others far beyond its borders? Surely there must be another, more sinister, motivation.

Yet for Americans, the thought that humanitarian assistance should guide foreign policy slips naturally into the imagination. I suspect that the curricular changes that have occurred in our colleges and universities during the past generation are both a cause and a consequence of this discovery of universal sympathy. Not long ago the burden of education involved a disciplined exposure to literature, history, mathematics, science, and the practical arts through which the next generation became thoughtful citizens of a middle class commercial na-

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tion. Today, increasingly, education has become an occasion, if not a pretext, to nurture the sentiment of universal sympathy that only disembodied man can fully feel—hence the deliberate attempt in our public schools to undermine national pride and any other discrete affiliation, and the platitudes that make this effort innocuous: “sharing and caring,” “everyone is special,” etc., etc. This development, long in the making, has now configured public debate so that our presumption is that America *should* offer humanitarian assistance nearly everywhere, and that for such assistance not to be extended, strong arguments to the contrary must be provided.

However sensible and compassionate this policy may seem to democratic man, its effect will be to draw America into foreign entanglements the intricacies of which it cannot fathom, and inflame the suspicions of our enemies and our allies alike. “Helping” sometimes doesn’t.

*“Helping”  
sometimes  
doesn’t.*

Sympathy extends man’s moral universe; above all, sympathy overrules his temptation to yield to self-satisfaction. It rousts man to reflection, if not to action. To dream of infinitely extending sympathy to the point where democratic man takes the suffering of the whole world in upon himself, however, is to imagine powers that he simply does not have. Many of my American students do not yet understand this; they go too far in their sympathy and, so, lose sight of their neighbor—or, rather, precisely because they are always losing sight of their neighbor, their sympathy goes too far. Very few of my Middle Eastern students, on the other hand, dream of infinitely extending sympathy. Like students nearly everywhere else in the world, they live through the roles they have inherited, and easily understand the obligations and loyalties they have to those around, above and below them. While they often long to see farther, they still strain to do so.

The picture I have given thus far of my American students is that they are easy-going, oriented by natural affection, and prone to sympathy. Tocqueville thought that these dispositions would make life in the democratic age not only decent and honest, but also warm and considerate. Improperly understood, they can also bring about the pathologies I have briefly identified above. This picture of my American students is incomplete, however, without some consideration being

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given to their relationship to money.

I mentioned earlier that my students on the main campus cannot imagine doing their chores because the family into which they have been born requires it. They do their chores, not because of obligation and loyalty, but because of the money they receive. The softer dispositions just considered might seem to be at odds with this incessant expectation that money will come their way for all that they do, but Tocqueville thought the increased focus on money, like the ease of social relations, natural affection and sympathy, was inevitable in the democratic age. As he put the matter: "In aristocratic nations money is the key to the satisfaction of but few of the vast arrays of possible desires; in democracies it is the key to them all" (615).

Why does money become so important in the democratic age? When loyalty and obligation are the real bonds that hold society together, as they are in the aristocratic age, work done or services performed do not always proceed with a view to payment. The "payment," in fact, sometimes does not involve money at all, but rather the discharge of an obligation. Here, money is out place; if offered or requested, it might even cause offense. In such a society there are, so to speak, several economies: the larger and less palpable economy whose currency is loyalty and obligation; and the smaller and more measurable economy whose currency is money.

In the democratic age, obligation and loyalty diminish in importance. As roles are abandoned, loyalty and obligation become less and less thinkable. Each man increasingly thinks of himself as being alone, as an individual who hovers over the world but who is never quite bound to it. As this self-understanding grows, the vocabulary of individual choice and self-interest comes to predominate, and thoughts of money fill the imagination. Cut off from others and alone, without deliberate effort democratic man can expect nothing of his neighbor, and his neighbor can expect nothing of him. The less palpable currency of loyalty and obligation almost disappears and money becomes the chief means by which the business of society is undertaken. In the "Manifesto of the Communist Party," written in 1848, Karl Marx put the matter in the following way:

The bourgeoisie, wherever it has got the upper hand, has put an end to all feudal, patriarchal, idyllic relations. It has

*As obligation and loyalty diminish in importance, that of money increases.*



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pitilessly torn asunder the motley feudal ties that bound man to his 'natural superiors,' and left remaining no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest, than callous 'cash payment.'<sup>2</sup>

Tocqueville saw the same development, but did not think that "capitalism" brought about this near-obsession with money. Rather, he thought that money became the universal currency, so to speak, for the same reason that the ease of social relations, natural affection and sympathy emerge so prominently—namely, the growing conditions of social equality, which undermines the economy of obligation and loyalty.

My students in Qatar are quite baffled by this constellation of American attributes, and wonder how they hold together at all. The image of the greedy, money-loving American, of Marx's heartless bourgeois man, is often fixed in their mind. That there is more to the Americans than just that attribute generally comes as a shock. Perhaps the most common thing Middle Eastern students say when they visit America for the first time is that they cannot believe how *nice* Americans are. Marx never would have predicted this.

For money to become the ubiquitous measure, the "feudal, patriarchal, idyllic relations" found in the aristocratic age must have more or less succumbed to the conditions of social equality about which Tocqueville wrote, and man must have found himself de-linked and alone in a seemingly contingent world. My students often tell me that they think of themselves in this way. When pressed to think about their future, and about how this necessary focus on money bears on the question of how they will have a family or live in the ambient natural world that makes both wealth and family possible, they have an answer which generally echoes the answers given a generation ago when their fathers and mothers wrestled with the same questions.

In the case of family, they often argue that monetary considerations—whether their career is intact, whether their house is big enough, whether they have a large enough savings account—should precede the formation of the family. In the case of ambient nature, they often argue that monetary considerations—can profit be made at the expense of pristine

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<sup>2</sup> *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2nd Edition, edited by Robert C. Tucker (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1978), 475.

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*Value of  
motherhood  
conflicts with  
ever-growing  
value of  
money.*

nature?—should be ruled out entirely. The general sentiment is that any clear-thinking student will understand that family must be understood in light of monetary calculations, and that nature, on the contrary, must not be.

The women students I teach will face the issue of family most directly. On the main campus especially, they are de-linked enough to think it important that they find worthy and high-paying careers, for they alone are responsible for their destiny. Yet they also know that it is through them that civilization will reproduce itself. “What is the value of motherhood,” many of them ask, “when money is the only value?” It is relatively easy for them to see what is lost when the aristocratic age recedes; they can understand the appeal of a society held together by obligation and loyalty, but generally prefer the current age. The unbounded opportunities that are theirs in the democratic age go hand in hand, however, with money becoming the ubiquitous measure. Obligation and loyalty between social classes may have been largely eliminated. Family, however, can never be banished. Its form can be altered, but not its fundamental task. The value of “motherhood” therefore runs headlong into the ever-growing value of money. This is a dilemma of the democratic age that can be awkwardly balanced, but I do not think it can be resolved.

In Qatar, the tenor of the discussion is less agonizing, for now. Family, in its extended form, plays a much larger part of the women’s lives there. And, so, at first glance the value of money has not yet made its assault on the value of “motherhood.” That is not quite the case, however. A college degree has been long-recognized in America as a way for men and women to advance their careers and to earn more money. In the Middle East, a hybrid version of that understanding has developed: there, a college degree is increasingly a way to “marry up” to a family with higher social—and therefore economic—standing. A college degree is still the path to more money, but it is *through* the family, rather than in spite of it, that the increase occurs. In America the domain of the family is in conflict with the ubiquitous value of money; in large parts of the Middle East that is not yet the case. Someday soon, I suspect it will be.

All of my students wrestle with the question of how the

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value of nature can be understood in light of the ubiquitous value of money. What I say here largely pertains to my students on the main campus. I mentioned a moment ago that my main campus students believe that pristine nature cannot be assigned a monetary value. Nature, unlike the family, must stand apart from the world measured by money. Many of my students would call themselves “environmentalists.” As was the case with my generation, Ansel Adams posters hang on their dorm room walls, and through their beauty declare that money is not the only measure of value.

In general, my American students think of nature as pristine, benign, and innocent. In this they follow Rousseau without even knowing it. Their use of the term “environment” as a proxy for nature suggests that man is not always-already *in* nature but rather that he can be separated from it—thus the familiar locution, “man and his environment.” Part of the reason many of my students think this way is because they have been raised in urban or suburban settings. Wishing to locate innocence somewhere, but not finding it in man, they locate it in nature, which is distant enough from them so as not to be able to disabuse them of their fancy.

Students who have been raised in exurbia or on a farm or in a fishing village could never think this way: they know that man is always-already in nature. Consequently, they tend to think in terms of stewardship rather than in terms of “environmentalism,” and are not apt to see a stark opposition between the value of nature and the ubiquitous value of money. Money must be spent in order to elicit from nature her full glory, and nature is to be used to make money. Under the banner of stewardship, both tasks will always be in tension, but always be necessary. Under the banner of “environmentalism,” however, the rapprochement between nature and money has either taken the form of cordoning off nature entirely from the activities of man or of the buying and selling of pollution credits, which purport to put a moneyed price on the damage man does through his activity. The environmental community is happy with the former, while large and successful industrial enterprises are happy with the latter. Faced with such formidable and entrenched opponents, whose opposition is only apparent, the call to stewardship is akin to a lost voice crying

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out in the wilderness. It can scarcely be heard.

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In the previous section I began by talking about the de-linked condition in the democratic age and the loneliness it brings. I paused to consider how that condition alters the terms of engagement with others, sometimes in salutary ways. In the democratic age, the ease of social relations, natural affection, and sympathy emerge almost spontaneously. This confuses many of my Middle Eastern students. They cannot make sense of what they see because while they can easily understand that the de-linked social condition leads to loneliness, their own social condition is not nearly as equalized as the one in America is. The salutary benefits of social equality therefore scarcely exist. They are also somewhat put off by the extent to which money rules the hearts of the American students they meet; yet, their affection, too, grows for it, in spite of their protestations.

These considerations are important, in part because of what they reveal about the differences between my students on the main campus and my students in Qatar. There is, however, a more significant development that occurs in the democratic age, which both groups of students evince in almost the same measure. That they each increasingly comprehend their worlds in this similar way is troubling. Tocqueville knew this would occur, worried about it, and thought that efforts must be undertaken to counteract it.

The development about which Tocqueville worried was an almost inevitable consequence of the breakdown of the aristocratic age. When each man is linked directly to the next and has only dim ideas about a generalized humanity, truth does not float freely above the nexus of social relations but rather tends to be mediated through them. An idea is believed or disbelieved more because of the standing of the man who says it. In the democratic age, on the contrary, man's tutelage is generally limited to the early years of childhood, after which point he comes to believe that the authority of others has little or no bearing on the truth he is able to discover. He trusts himself alone, as Tocqueville put it, "and from that basis makes the

*In aristocratic age, truth is mediated through the nexus of social relations.*

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pretension to judge the world" (430).

I have already noted that my students on the main campus are more disposed to think of themselves as alone and on their own than are my students in Qatar. The ties of family are looser among them, and from an early age they have been taught that the purpose of the education they receive within and without the family is to prepare them to leave it. My students in Qatar, on the other hand, are still largely bound to their families in ways that my students on the main campus cannot understand. Nevertheless, when I ask both groups of students if they think the truth of an idea is linked to the authority of the person who propounds it, of one accord they tell me that they alone must make that determination. My students in Qatar may still be attentive to the place of their family within the larger society, but they *also* increasingly believe, like my students on the main campus, that the only verifiable locus of authority lies within. Increasingly like them, they "make the pretension to judge the world" without reference to an authority outside themselves. My students in Qatar are pulled, therefore, in two very different directions. My students on the main campus have little understanding of how agonizing that can be.

When the locus of authority shifts from others to the self, as it must in the democratic age, there are no doubt great benefits. Man is almost forced to think for himself and, if all goes well, he emerges from his silent acquiescence to those above him, and speaks publicly with an authorial voice. There is another possible consequence of this shift in the locus of authority, however, which is not so salutary: the de-linked condition that all but invites him to disengage from active participation in the world may tempt him to withdraw entirely into himself. There, seemingly self-satisfied and alone, his encounter with the world, such as it is, takes the form of soliloquy rather than active engagement.

Almost all of my students are ensnared by this temptation, and show little interest in escaping from it. Indeed, many of them cannot imagine that their encounter with the world *could* take any other form than the presentation of the soliloquy they have carefully crafted, for themselves and for others. Under the guise of "social media," they post a representation

*When locus of authority shifts from others to the self, disengagement from active participation in the world may follow.*

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of themselves to “friends” they seldom see, or have never met, which has little to do with the actual life they live, such as it is. They too often mark their day by virtual events that transpire around their home page. While they may bring their computers to class, the ideas their teachers attempt to convey are often not enough to entice them away from the singularly important task of crafting themselves online. In their outreach to their “friends,” they live within themselves. In the midst of this apparent abundance, is there not ample evidence that when man has been spared from the always awkward face-to-face relationships through which society is nourished and reproduced his life is impoverished and he is most truly alone?

This collapse into soliloquy, which so many of my students begrudgingly confess, is only one aspect of this shift in the nature of authority in the democratic age. Tocqueville pointed out that the destruction of the “authority of a name” (641), as he called it, not only invites soliloquy and solipsism, it elevates the standing of public opinion in ways that would have been inconceivable in the aristocratic age. When each man is de-linked and alone, he may be proud of his independence, but he is also cognizant of his diminished stature, as well as the diminished stature of everyone else he sees. Looking up, he no longer sees any particular man hovering over him, to which he must be ever-attentive. Rather, the singular entity that is always in his sight and on his mind is “the public,” which speaks to him in the form of public opinion.

Tocqueville was not alone, of course, in understanding the growing power of public opinion in the democratic age. Writing about his native America in 1838, James Fenimore Cooper remarked in *The American Democrat* that: “‘They say,’ is the monarch of this country. No one asks ‘who says it,’ so long as it is believed that ‘they say it.’”<sup>3</sup> Tocqueville, however, seemed to understand that both soliloquy and “they say” together would constitute the new way in which authority would be understood in the democratic age. The “authority of a name” in the aristocratic age would give way to the bifurcated authority my students witness in the democratic age: on the one hand, authority is vested in an increasingly disengaged self; on the other hand, authority is vested in public opinion.

*In the democratic age, authority is divided between an increasingly disengaged self and public opinion.*

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<sup>3</sup> Cooper, *The American Democrat* (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1956), 233.

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Both my students on the main campus and my students in Qatar, as I have said, understand one portion of the bifurcated authority found in the democratic age. Many of them live largely in and through their soliloquys. Interestingly, my students in Qatar are not yet as attentive to the "they say" portion of authority that is public opinion. In the Middle East, family standing still matters. So long as this is true, the first things that my students there see are the families around them, not "the public," which does not yet palpably exist. My students in the Middle East are, it is true, cognizant of what could be called global public opinion. In that sense they live bifurcated lives akin to the sort many of my students on the main campus do. They watch the same movies and television shows, know the same songs, and are attentive to the same passing fashions, even if they cloak it under the attire that convention demands. In addition, they well-know how to converse in the global discourse of "rights" and "freedoms."

In many of their own countries, however, there is no further evidence of a broad sense of "the public" than this. When my students from the main campus visit the Middle East, one of the first things they notice is the imposing compound walls that surround so many of the houses, and the garbage that is nearly everywhere. Qatar, I should note, is remarkable for its cleanliness, though compound walls are ubiquitous. Elsewhere, however, American students wonder how it would be possible to care for gardens that flourish inside compound walls and yet ignore the garbage immediately outside the compound gate. When societies are an amalgam of families, as they are in the Middle East, the idea of a public in which each man's participation is quite independent of his familial location cannot easily take hold. Each family jockeyes for position with other families above and below it, but seldom sees any further.

It is often said that American society is too "individualistic," and that, as a consequence, it has no sense of the public. Nothing could be further from the truth. In the current age, it is in non-individualistic societies, where family looms large, that there is almost no sense of the public. The garbage outside the compound gates in many parts of the Middle East attests to this absence. So, too, does the so-called "Arab Street," which is better understood as a fierce apparition of a public

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space that cannot yet take form precisely because family name and political party have the authority that they do. From this can come conspiracy theories based on perceived or real humiliations—but not public opinion.

*When family ties are lost, the public looms large.*

When social equality comes to prevail, each man thinks of himself as standing alone, it is true; but when he has lost his ties to his family, the public is bound to loom large. The open front porch of the nuclear family, not the high compound wall, is the concomitant of public life in the democratic age.

These caveats about the status of the public in the Middle East aside, it would seem that living in this bifurcated way would be quite difficult for my students, both there and on the main campus. The distance between these nodal points of human experience, between soliloquy and “they say,” is vast; and it is hard to see what one could possibly have in common with the other. I ask my students this question, and in their self-searching moments they tell me that as different as these nodal points are, what unites them is that they allow my students to maintain their distance from the messiness of human relations. They update their home page; they jot down and comment here or there for a “friend,” spontaneously, of course; they all know and chatter about the latest television programs or games—and they fall asleep at night rehearsing their soliloquys to themselves, in a reoccurring loop that can be halted by the one thing many of them are most frightened to do, namely, involve themselves in actual face-to-face relations—not for a moment, but for an extended period. As Tocqueville put the matter:

Feelings and ideas are renewed, the heart enlarged, and the understanding developed only by the reciprocal action of men one upon another (515).

My students are more “connected” than any generation in the history of the human race. They nevertheless sense themselves to be alone. The two nodal points of soliloquy and “they say” are where they live, so to speak. It is hard to overstate the danger that this bifurcated existence which risks nothing harbors. Tocqueville’s defense of civic associations in particular and of federalism in general was meant to address it. I return to that defense at the end of this essay. Next, however, more needs to be said about the education my students receive, with



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a view to exploring how it contributes to that danger, and to how it may be attenuated.

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The de-linked condition of the democratic age not only facilitates the heightened sense of loneliness my students experience, it also establishes the sovereignty of the individual in all matters of deliberation. What hold can the authority of others have on their understanding once this has occurred?

In the aristocratic age, I tell my students, the situation was otherwise. In 1637, Rene Descartes wrote his now famous *Discourse on Method*, in which he dares to suggest that for knowledge to be trusted it must not be accounted as true if it rests on the foundation of custom or the authority of others. One of the philosophical harbingers to the democratic age, Tocqueville noted that the Americans are Cartesian without even having read him. As he put it:

To escape from imposed systems, the yoke of habit, family maxims, class prejudices and to a certain extent national prejudices as well, to treat tradition as valuable for information only and to accept existing facts as no more than a useful sketch of how things could be done differently and better . . . —such are the principal characteristics of what I would call the American philosophical method (429).

Most but not all of my students on the main campus intuitively adopt this democratic mode of understanding, if such a term can be used. They instinctively recoil at the notion that an idea should be taken seriously because of the authority of the name associated with it. Especially in America, the prevailing notion is that the political philosophers I have them read have no authority whatsoever over them. Doubtful, therefore, that there can be such a thing as a Western canon, they approach the books we read with a hermeneutic of suspicion, as it has been called.

The term, hermeneutic of suspicion, is of post-modern origin, but in Tocqueville's idiom, it merely names a democratic prejudice about authority. Doubtful that anyone can really teach them anything they have not already discovered by their own lights, my students are ill-disposed to patiently entertain the finally un-provable wagers all great philosophers make

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concerning the world, its wellsprings, and how we must, accordingly, live—unless and until my students become convinced that the questions those philosophers ask are already their own questions. Even then, the preeminent attitude is often doubt rather than deference. On more occasions than I can remember, I have looked into the eyes of my students as I have entered the room and recalled my father telling me of the nearly audible words his students would murmur as he walked into his Middle Eastern History classes at the University of Michigan in the '60s: "I dare you to teach me anything."

*At its best, a hermeneutic of suspicion encourages the development of our faculties.*

There is something salutary about this hermeneutic of suspicion. It draws man out of the complacency that can easily befall him if he accepts an idea on authority alone. Moreover, because the democratic age summons each and every person to become his own arbiter in nearly all matters, it is inevitable that a hermeneutic of suspicion should have the place that it does in our educational institutions today. "Critical thinking" is everywhere, as it should be. At its best this encourages the development of our faculties, and contributes to the formation of that most precious and rare gift: an authorial voice.

*Education based on the hermeneutic of suspicion alone leads to a collapse into solipsism.*

I do not think, however, that education worthy of the name can be achieved by the hermeneutic of suspicion alone. When suspicion is the singular principle of education, the result, unintended to be sure, is a collapse into solipsism that is no less debilitating than the complacency that blind reverence can produce. Education worthy of the name surely cannot involve a blanket dismissal of ideas because of where or when they emerged, or because of the particular people who have held them. Yet, today, that judgment has been definitively made by a vast number of students who have been nourished exclusively by the hermeneutic of suspicion. Convinced that they have found a reason to dismiss much of what has been written in the past, many of my students on the main campus think of their philosophy courses as they would a visit to a mausoleum. They wonder, in fact, why the books they read should have been declared monuments and placed there at all—and by whom, and under what authority. They wish to live among the living, who they think can neither be indebted to nor overshadowed by the dead.

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Their restlessness suggests otherwise. In the democratic age, each generation looks at its predecessor as an archaism, and revels in the novelties it has discovered and by which it has been captivated. Man, however, can never find nourishment by feasting only on what the present moment has to offer. The more he tries, the more restless he becomes. "I should be surprised," Tocqueville wrote, "if among a people uniquely preoccupied with prosperity, mysticism did not soon make progress" (535). Sooner or later evidence mounts that man's momentary impulses are flawed and his deepest convictions have been but opinions and prejudices on which no fully adequate life can be built.

*Man's  
momentary  
impulses  
flawed.*

My students on the main campus are restless, but wish to believe that the popular culture on which they have been raised provides them with all that they need to build a successful and nourishing life. In Qatar this restlessness is evident as well, though the problem is not yet as acute as it is on the main campus. In the '60s, I tell them all, my generation, too, feasted on the crumbs that popular culture offered. College campuses, however, were ablaze with debates my students today can scarcely conceive. Freud (for whom man was sick), Marx (for whom man was alienated), and Smith (for whom man could trust his conscience and his assessment of his own interests) all seemed to be viable alternatives, over whose ideas titanic battles were fought. The mood was that of anticipation, of a future freed from illnesses of the mind and of the body social, in need of one last great push forward to get us there. The popular culture of the period, as debauched as it at times was, reflected that sentiment. The ironic, post-historical, posture adopted by nearly all of my students today had not yet taken hold. In the '60s, the struggle lay ahead; for many of my students today, irrespective of the *personal* struggles they endure, the social and historical struggle of ideas is largely over, and all that remains is to implement "social justice." Amidst this certainty, their restlessness nevertheless obtrudes. Yet only under providential circumstances can they be persuaded to listen.

It would be futile to declare to them that canonical texts should be read because through them the full depth and breadth of their civilizational legacy is revealed. In the democratic age, the claim that their forefathers can help them find

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their way is bound to be questioned. Besides, many of them doubt altogether that there is a hidden depth and breadth to be discovered. In the democratic age, therefore, education worthy of the name must start with an appeal to experience—more precisely, it must begin with the gentle intimation on the part of the teacher that the “hooks” on which students “hang” their experience are not numerous or well-placed enough for them to understand their lives. That is, the task must be to show that the “hooks” they have received from popular culture are not adequate for what they in fact already experience but cannot yet quite understand.

For this to occur, the hermeneutic of suspicion, which they know by heart, must for a time be suspended. In its place must be enthroned a dangerous *maybe*—maybe the canonical authors can provide them with “hooks” on which to hang their experience; and for those hooks to emerge into the light of day students must, for lack of a better term, engage in a hermeneutic of deference. This takes the form of supposing for a moment that the canonical authors may, in fact, have understood a great deal more than my students accredit to them, and that the finally un-provable wagers found in their books are nevertheless worthy of my students’ attention anyway. Plato noted in the *Republic* that about the most important matters, conclusions “are hard to accept, but also hard to reject” (532d). Aristotle, his pupil, wrote in the *Nicomachean Ethics* that,

a well-schooled man is one who searches for that degree of precision in each kind of study which the nature of the subject at hand admits: it is obviously just as foolish to accept arguments of probability from a mathematician as to demand strict demonstrations from an orator” (1094b-24).

Notwithstanding the immense difference between them on a number of subjects, Plato and Aristotle each understood that education involves more than the conveyance of information, that the soul itself must be turned or reformed for there to be education properly understood, and that there is no explicit algorithm to bring this about. Neither suspicion nor blind reverence will cause it to happen. In the democratic age, suspicion prevails and reverence has all but disappeared. The task of the teacher, therefore, is to gently educe from students

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the recognition that they, too, have been feasting on crumbs.

When students begin to realize that they actually hunger, their disposition changes. Although they continue to trust in the authority of their own experience, they now solicit help from the authors they read so that they may understand it more deeply. In this sometimes agonizing condition, which a teacher may draw them toward but never resolve for them, real education—the turning or reforming of the soul—transpires, and a more ample basis for life is discovered.

*Real education  
brings a  
turning or  
reforming of  
the soul.*

I do not doubt that this type of education is a rare achievement. While I cannot prove it, I suspect, nevertheless, that such an education is more necessary for self-government than is often imagined. In the democratic age, man is too easily disposed toward solitude. He senses himself to be cut off and alone, and without a basis for communion with his neighbors, with nature, and even with himself. A hermeneutic of suspicion will always slip naturally into his thoughts. A hermeneutic of deference will invariably be an afterthought, so to speak, which takes hold only in the aftermath of the discovery that what he has been given in the way of popular culture cannot satisfy his hunger. The “hooks” on which to hang experience are not exhausted by what the prevailing opinions of the current moment provide. That is the wager of every educator, and one of the most important tasks set for institutions of higher education in the democratic age.

I have suggested that most of my students are reluctant to adopt a hermeneutic of deference because they think they must “judge the world” for themselves. That is true. There is another reason as well:

[As] men become more alike and the principle of equality has quietly penetrated deep into the institutions and manners of the country, the rules of advancement become more and more inflexible and advancement itself slower. It becomes ever more difficult to reach a position of some importance quickly.

From hatred of privilege and embarrassment of choosing, all men, whatever their capacities, are finally forced through the same sieve, and all without discrimination are made to pass a host of petty preliminary tests, wasting their youth and suffocating their imagination (630).

These rather prescient remarks have been sadly confirmed by developments in higher education over the last generation.

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Indeed, it is tempting to say that what occurs in many of our colleges nowadays amounts less to higher education than to Higher Certification, perhaps even Higher Stupification. The amount of coursework required is often staggering, and reflects political bargains struck among faculty constituencies rather than an overarching consensus about the kind of democratic citizens our colleges should aspire to graduate. It is not unusual for students to take five and even six courses a semester, many of them mind-numbing prerequisites which train them to flirt with ideas but not fall in love with them. Barely able to discuss an idea let alone write about one in depth or with coherence, my students are required to take tests that are more and more geared to “measurable outcomes,” to use current educational parlance. This practice overthrows an older if never fully realized understanding of the labor teachers are called to perform, namely, mentor. This relationship now almost fully undercut, if students are anxious, searching, and unsure of their bearings, they head over to an obscure corner of the campus rather than to their professor’s office—where in the not-too-distant past such “problems” might have been treated in light of the range of insights the canonical authors would have offered about them.

To these immense constraints in, and modifications of, college life should be added the proliferation of “service-learning” and extra-curricular activities, which further distract students from grappling with ideas in the classroom even while they fill out their résumés with yet another line-item. Too hindered by never-ending requirements and too frightened that their résumé will be one line shorter than the student sitting next to them, there should be little wonder that students think of college in terms of certification rather than education, or that most of them graduate without having the good opinion of their suspicion tempered by a breathtaking encounter with a seminal idea that reconfigures their understanding of their own experience.

In the democratic age, college education comes to be thought of as a universal right. As more and more students are accommodated and “forced through the same sieve,” the bond between teacher and student must of necessity be weakened, and the art of reforming character through education

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nearly abandoned. In order to facilitate this new situation, the older classroom—which required only important books, desks, chairs, blackboards, professors and students—is being replaced by an impoverished but immensely more expensive high-tech, virtual, online and remote “learning environment,” the cost of which is ultimately borne by mind-boggling student loan debt and federal funds that render colleges beholden to national government in unsavory ways as never before. This cannot end well.

There is a third, no less troubling, reason why my students are reluctant to adopt a hermeneutic of deference. During the last half-century or so there has been a tectonic shift in the way history has been taught. A perusal of the course offerings at most colleges will reveal scarcely a course about the singular actions of “great men” and a great many courses about social history—notably “race,” “class,” and “gender.” In the aristocratic age, the task of the historian was to provide exemplars for human conduct, as would be expected in an age when men looked to the past for models of action, commerce, beauty, and piety. In the democratic age, when each man becomes small and the body social looms large, a different kind of history gets written.

*In the democratic age, each man becomes small and the body social looms large.*

In reading historians of the aristocratic ages, those of antiquity in particular, it would seem that in order to be master of his fate and govern his fellows a man need only be master of himself. Perusing the histories written nowadays, one would suppose that man had no power, neither over himself nor over his surroundings. Classical historians taught how to command; those of our own time teach next to nothing but how to obey. In their writings the author often figures large, but humanity is always tiny (496).

Tocqueville did not think it inappropriate to attend to social history; he did think, however, that overemphasizing it in the democratic age taught a dangerous moral lesson to students, namely, that no single man, armed with clarity of mind and formidable character, can alter the course of history. For students habituated by the mode of history-telling that pays little attention to individual greatness, the very idea of adopting a hermeneutic of deference seems quite odd. My students on the main campus believe that the world is animated wholly by the social forces of “race,” “class,” and “gender.” How might an in-

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depth and patient study of a canonical author's ideas, which would require a hermeneutic of deference, possibly benefit them? The hermeneutic of suspicion that comes so naturally to their imagination is in some measure a consequence of the necessary prejudice about social forces in the democratic age. It is therefore very difficult to counterbalance.

In Qatar and in many parts of the Middle East, the imbalance I have noted on the main campus and at other colleges across the country does not yet exist. I dare say, in fact, that the hermeneutic of suspicion is still largely in its nascent form there. My students do not yet understand themselves to be disembodied individuals and, so, can only occasionally imagine what it might be like to "make the pretension to judge the world" without reference to an authority outside themselves. Nor has higher education become so universally available that students in the Middle East are "forced through the same sieve." In addition, the idea that history involves the movement of social forces rather than "great men" has not yet penetrated their imagination.

To these considerations, treated above, must be added another. Tocqueville wrote that whether a nation has had a political revolution or has cast aside its religion increases or diminishes the general level of suspicion toward the current state of things. Europe, of course, has both had political revolutions and largely cast off its religion and, so, it is not surprising that the hermeneutic of suspicion figures so conspicuously there. In America, there was a political founding, but no revolution. Religion here, moreover, has not quite been cast aside. That is why in America the hermeneutic of suspicion is not as prominent as it is in Europe. Said otherwise, European society is Center-Left, while American society—though not its colleges—is Center-Right. In parts of the Middle East, the political upheavals of the mid-twentieth century largely replaced an aristocracy based on family and land with an aristocracy based on party and political patronage. There was violent upheaval, but not revolution. Religion, moreover, retains its central place, notwithstanding the changes that may be underway. For this reason, and for those mentioned above, the hermeneutic of suspicion has not advanced in the Middle East as it has elsewhere.



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In light of what I have been arguing about the importance of the hermeneutic of deference, this would seem to suggest that in this one regard higher education in the Middle East is healthier than it is in America. That is not true. It is well to remember that higher education in the Middle East, with a few notable exceptions, was set up and organized when the British and French controlled the region. What remains are highly specialized, highly centralized, and governmentally controlled colleges where the deference is to the teacher—not to canonical authors, who are generally not taught at all. To this should be added that the acquisition of knowledge is often measured by how well students memorize the material their teachers have presented and repeat it back to them, verbatim.

Knowing that this model cannot produce thoughtful students or entrepreneurial citizens, government education ministries are making a great push to reform higher education. What could be called a teacher-centered model is being replaced by the latest educational fashion to sweep across America: “student-centered learning.” In America, fortunately, colleges have a long and venerable history, and only slowly do the latest fads from our educational experts make their way into the classroom. That is not the case in much of the Middle East today. Whatever else their governments and citizens may think of U.S. foreign policy in the region, ministries of education are eager, indeed fervent, that their institutions of higher education receive accreditation by U.S. accrediting agencies. By virtue of their very weakness, many of those institutions are therefore likely to be remade from the ground up, relying on techniques and theories that are dubious at best. Most notably, the prejudice that all teaching must have a “measurable outcome” now entrances and hobbles administrators and teachers alike in the region. Georgetown’s Qatar campus is fortunately immune from some of this nonsense, in large part because the curriculum run there is identical to that offered on the main campus. Elsewhere, however, the outlook is not so bright. When pressed to offer a vision of what their students should understand about their civilization and the world at large, teachers and administrators are reluctant to hazard a guess. Therefore, the “advances in education” that our experts here in America are eager to implement everywhere probably

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*Insistence on  
"measurable  
outcomes"  
will prevent  
the kind of  
education  
most needed.*

will be put to the test most completely in the Middle East and elsewhere in the developing world, where well-meaning ministries of higher education do not yet see the danger.

I have already conveyed my worries about my students on the main campus. The popular culture in which they are immersed cannot cure their restlessness, or their solitude; and the hermeneutic of suspicion they bring to bear on their studies closes them off to the very ideas that could provide the feast for which they hunger. The worry I have for my students in the Middle East is greater still. They do not suffer from an almost genetic disposition to be suspicious of ideas that come their way based on "the authority of a name." Yet their institutions of higher education may soon be reformed in such a way that what they most need, namely, an exposure to a liberal arts curriculum that draws them out of themselves, will not be provided—and this, because such courses do not easily yield the "measurable outcomes" that forward-thinking ministries of higher education believe must be demonstrated.

Can a liberal arts education in the Middle East produce thoughtful citizens, who are able to think both critically and deferentially? I cannot but think that the great challenges of the twenty-first century will require, among other things, that we "[seek] a sheltering wall against the storm and blast of dust and rain," as Plato calls it in *The Republic* (496d). The blur of daily events in the Middle East fogs the mind, and when an effort is made to understand them by withdrawing into the citadel of thought, the terms of the analysis immediately at hand often oscillate between a kind of nineteenth-century liberal triumphalism and twentieth-century post-colonial indignation. The one is unmindful of the intransigent fact that liberty is not the meta-narrative of the Middle East; the other, professing to support the indigenous peoples there with a clean conscience, adopts *European* anti-modern tropes in order to defend them. In short, the analyses rely on ideas that emerge over the period of the two-century wound that is European colonialism, but go no further. Even when purportedly pure Islamic thought is brought forth, it is, I venture to say, suffused with and overwhelmed by European anti-modern tropes. In sum, the terms of the debate are as one-sided as was colonialism itself.

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Much more is needed. My discussions with administrators, teachers, fathers and mothers in the Middle East has convinced me that, while they know their institutions of higher education must be reformed, they are also frightened by the prospect that their sons and daughters, like ours in America, may acquire knowledge that can be “measured,” but that such knowledge will contribute little to their understanding of the civilization that is their inheritance. So empowered, they will go through life possessed by

incoherent opinions still found here or there in society that hang like the broken chains still occasionally dangling from the ceiling of an old building but carrying nothing . . . [and be] borne by an unknown force toward a goal of which they themselves are unaware (32).

They will, therefore, lack the reflectivity and fluency needed to grasp the wagers made by the canonical authors who formulated the range of understandings that constitute their own inheritance and those of members of other civilizations.

We flatter ourselves to say that ours is the first global century. There is, nevertheless, an urgent need for us to begin a global conversation that neither starts from the pretense that there is a “universal human discourse” nor from a supposition that reifies civilizations or groups within them into sacrosanct and impervious “identities.” Beyond the blur of events, beyond the well-worked-out oppositions between liberal triumphalism and post-colonial indignation, lies a third alternative, still without a name, that might be called comparative canonical inquiry, which seeks to return to the origins of all great civilizations and trace their development through the great ideas that are registered in their respective canons.

*The need exists for a global conversation based on the best ideas of each tradition.*

My students in the Middle East are right to ask me why I only teach the canonical authors from the West. I tell them that I have spent a lifetime trying to understand why and how those authors may be still important for us, and that I am able to take them that far but no further. I can, nevertheless, imagine a day when a generation of scholars with a deep and reverential knowledge of their own inheritance sets itself the noble goal of placing before students around the globe the great ideas that have shaped civilizations—not in the form of taste-testing survey courses, which make all such ideas seem unpalatable, but

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*Comparative  
canonical  
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foundation  
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relations  
among diverse  
civilizations.*

in the form of an extended feast, which demonstrates beyond a reasonable doubt why those ideas have nourished the minds and hearts of generation after generation. “Variety is disappearing from the human race” (615), Tocqueville wrote with alarm. Commerce and trade can hasten that disappearance; memory and habit invariably fortify it. I suspect that only something like comparative canonical inquiry can provide a foundation substantial enough for members of different civilizations to stand on and engage in the kinds of conversations that will be required if we are to greet each other under the banner of hospitality during the rest of this already troubled century, and beyond. In the Middle East in particular, a liberal arts curriculum that includes canonical authors from its several overlapping civilizations can move students beyond the borders of thought established by the historically provincial antinomies of liberal triumphalism and post-colonial thought. In the safety of this more ambitious classroom, students can find their way to ideas that they might finally call their own, through a communion with canonical authors who give them reason to believe that they must make a longer journey if they are to find a viable antidote to the solitary, de-linked condition of the democratic age—one that takes them back much further than the last two centuries. By virtue of the sentiments and habits that already vie for the right to rule in the minds of millions of Middle Eastern students—elicited as they have been by “social media,” mobile phones and text messaging—liberal arts education of the capacious sort I have envisioned here is peculiarly well suited for a generation in search of a voice it cannot yet find.

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Higher education can and should play a prominent role in attenuating the de-linked condition my students in America already understand and my students in the Middle East at times fear. What I shall consider in the remaining pages pertains not to higher education but to American politics. One of the questions that most perplexes my students in Qatar is why American politics is so polarized. Can this bald and painful fact about the American polity be understood, they wonder,

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in light of Tocqueville's claim that the democratic age is characterized by de-linkage and loneliness? At the heart of their question, I think, is wonderment about whether the American polity has become so wounded that it cannot recover. I remind them that Tocqueville thought that the strength of the American polity arose not from individual men acting alone, or from governmental administration acting on behalf of them, but from the face-to-face relations that are nourished when politics is decentralized and the spirit of liberty prevails. Earlier, I cited a passage from Tocqueville that bears repeating here:

Feelings and ideas are renewed, the heart enlarged, and the understanding developed only by the reciprocal action of men one upon another (515).

The principal wager of *Democracy in America*, contained in this passage, is that face-to-face relations are sorely needed if democratic freedom is to endure. They are needed largely because democratic man is de-linked and alone. Through the associations he forms with his neighbors, he is drawn out of himself, his world expands, his faculties are engaged, and his disposition is enlivened. This is the inner secret of democratic freedom, and the basis of Tocqueville's worry about the growing administrative power of the state.

*Active association with neighbors required for democratic freedom to endure.*

Democracy does not provide a people with the most skillful government, but it does that which the most skillful government cannot do: it spreads throughout the body social a restless activity, superabundant force, and energy never found elsewhere, which however little favored by circumstances, can do wonders. Those are its true advantages (244).

And elsewhere,

Administrative centralization succeeds, it is true, in assembling, at a given time and place, all the available resources of the nation, but it militates against the increase of those resources. It brings triumph on the day of battle, but in the long run diminishes a nation's power. So it can contribute wonderfully to the ephemeral greatness of one man but not to the permanent prosperity of a people (88).

These compelling endorsements of limited government have not, I think, been understood in their proper light. Commerce, a contemporary argument would have it, benefits when the national government is limited. That is probably true—but that is not what most concerned Tocqueville. He thought

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that as democratic man became more and more de-linked, he needed to be *voluntarily* relinked. A strong national government, even one that is eminently fair and efficient, cannot do that. Only face-to-face relations can.

When face-to-face relations abate, a number of things happen. It is uncontroversial to say that Tocqueville thought that democratic man was untethered man, in desperate need of salutary bondage, so as to protect him from himself. One of the consequences of living without such bondage was that he would oscillate between withdrawal and frenzy. Another consequence is that man's imagination begins to wander. The resultant judgments about his fellow man are not always generous or balanced. Well-meaning public speech about "tolerance" and the like may mask those judgments, but it will not banish them. Only real face-to-face relations can, for a moment, stop the imagination from wandering.

As soon as common affairs are treated in common, each man notices that his is not as independent of his fellow as he used to suppose and that to get their help he must often offer his aid to them (510).

When all politics becomes national politics, when we less and less need to reach out to our neighbor, then political ideas need no longer be tempered or attenuated. No longer brought down to earth by the real-life compromises that neighbors must always make with one another, ideas become reified, positions harden and, most importantly, each side begins to develop a caricatured image of the other which need never be modified.

I do not doubt that the polarization between "Left" and Right" in America today will increase as neighbor becomes more isolated from neighbor. The Democratic and Republican parties, for their part, have only exacerbated this problem through periodic congressional redistricting that hollows out opposition and assures that those elected to their House seats need not discover a basis for conciliation, or earn the trust of a broad-spectrum constituency. Once in Congress, their exercise of political judgment is often abdicated and handed over to the regulatory agencies that now constitute an ever-expanding Fourth Branch of government, which adds to the sense of impotence citizens feel, and emboldens the two political parties

*When all politics becomes national, ideas become reified, positions harden, and compromise wanes.*

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to entice them with even grander claims about what they can deliver.

In the Middle East there are seemingly intractable political problems, to be sure. Polarization of the sort seen in America, however, is not one of them. In the Middle East, notwithstanding the half-century experiments with socialism, politics remains largely what it always has been—a rapprochement between the various estates that are a legacy of the aristocratic age. Brutal fighting there may be, but not polarization. That is largely an American phenomenon. In America, by virtue of the de-linkage that the Middle East does not yet fully know, democratic man does not really belong to a particular estate, and politics is largely fought out in the realm of interests and ideas. Insofar as man withdraws into himself and his imagination is left to wander, his ideas are unlikely to be tempered and political polarization at the national level will likely remain intense. Indeed, it will continue to grow.

The deeper question my students from the Middle East are asking, as I mentioned, is whether the American polity has become so wounded that it cannot recover. I tell them that, without an understanding of the disease from which democratic man suffers, there can be no remedy, no balm for the wound. The exceptional condition from which the Americans suffer is de-linkage of the sort that no other nation in history has known. That de-linkage gives rise to many of the peculiarities in American society that my students from the Middle East observe from afar even if they don't fully understand. "It is not good for man to be alone." From that luminous beginning follows the whole of Tocqueville's healing art in *Democracy in America*. Loneliness, he assures us, need not be the final word. Bleak as the condition of the American polity can at times appear to be, it can always be renewed through face-to-face relations.

The remedy is invariably painful, and will not be chosen, I suspect, until the realization dawns that the consequences of any alternative cure not involving face-to-face relations would be worse.