

See the 19th Century America *through the Eyes of Alexis de Tocqueville*

1830s

In democratic centuries when almost everyone is engaged in active life, the darting speed of a quick, superficial mind is at a premium, while slow, deep thought is excessively undervalued.

IT MUST BE ADMITTED THAT few of the civilized nations of our time have made less progress than the United States in the higher sciences or had so few great artists, distinguished poets, or celebrated writers.

Everyone is on the move, some in quest of power, others of gain. In the midst of this universal tumult, this incessant conflict of jarring interests, this endless chase for wealth, where is one to find the calm for the profound researches of the intellect?

Most of the people in these nations are extremely eager in the pursuit of immediate material pleasures and are always discontented with the position they occupy and always free to leave it. They think about nothing but ways of changing their lot and bettering it. For people in this frame of mind every new way of getting wealth more quickly, every machine which lessens work, every means of diminishing the costs of production, every invention which makes pleasures easier or greater, seems the most magnificent accomplishment of the human mind. It is chiefly from this line of approach that democratic peoples come to study sciences, to understand them, and to value them. In aristocratic ages the chief function of science is to give pleasure to the mind, but in democratic ages to the body.

In America the purely practical side of science is cultivated admirably, and trouble is taken about the theoretical side immediately necessary to application. On this side the Americans always display a clear, free, original, and creative turn of mind. But hardly anyone in the United States devotes himself to the essentially theoretical and abstract side of human knowledge. . . .

But just at the time when the Americans were naturally inclined to require nothing of science but its limited application to the useful arts and ways of making life comfortable, the learned and literary men of Europe were undertaking the search for the basic principles of truth, and at the same time improving everything that can minister to the pleasures or satisfy the wants of men.

The people of the United States were particularly closely linked by their origin and common habits to one of the leading nations in the cultural life of the Old World. They found distinguished men of science, able artists, and great writers among this people and so could gather the treasures of the mind without working to produce them themselves.

Thus the Americans are in an exceptional situation, and it is unlikely that any other democratic people will be similarly placed. Their strictly Puritan origin; their exclusively commercial habits; even the country they inhabit, which seems to divert their minds from the study of science, literature, and the arts; the accessibility of Europe, which allows them to neglect these things without relapsing into barbarism

The Americans are a very old and very cultivated people who have fallen on a new and unbounded country in which they could spread out at will and which they could make fertile without difficulty. That is something without parallel elsewhere in the world. In America everyone finds opportunities unknown anywhere else for making or increasing his fortune.