

Alexis de Tocqueville – Excerpts from *Democracy in America*,\* Vol. 2, March 1840

## **Feelings and Opinions: Passion for material well-being**

### **Preface to Volume II**

**The Americans live in a democratic state of society**, which has naturally suggested to them certain laws and a certain political character. This state of society has engendered a multitude of feelings and opinions which were unknown among the aristocratic communities of Europe; it has destroyed or modified all the relations which before existed, and established new ones. Civil society has been no less affected by these changes than the political world ...

The subject I have sought to embrace is immense, for it includes the greater part of the feelings and opinions to which the new state of society has given birth ... If I have not been able to reach the goal, at least I have conceived and followed up my undertaking in a spirit not unworthy of success.

### **Second Book**

#### **Chapter XI. Effects of the love of material well-being in democratic ages**

... **The passion for material well-being** produces in democracies effects very different from those which it occasions in aristocratic nations.

When members of an aristocracy become exclusively devoted to material pursuits, they often concentrate in that direction all the energy which they derive from their long experience of power ...

The taste for physical comfort leads a democratic people into no such excesses. The love of material well-being may be a tenacious, exclusive, universal passion; but its range is confined: add a few roods of land to your field, plant an orchard, enlarge a dwelling, always be making life more comfortable and convenient, avoid trouble, satisfy the smallest wants without effort and almost without cost ...

This taste for material comfort is not naturally opposed to the principles of public order. Nor is it adverse to morals, for good morals contribute to public tranquility and are favorable to industry; men wish to be as well off as they can in this world, without forgoing their chance in the next ...

... (But) to those gratifications the heart, the imagination, and life itself are unreservedly directed; till, in snatching at these lesser gifts, men lose sight of those more precious possessions which constitute the glory and the greatness of mankind.

... By these means, a kind of virtuous materialism may ultimately be established in the world, which would not corrupt, but enervate the soul, and noiselessly unbend its springs of action.

\*Edited and modified from the translation by Henry Reeve, 1961, Schocken Books, NY