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This is a wise book. It invites comparison with another French book, the best ever written about democracy, Alexis de Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America*. As Tocqueville did for his time, Philippe Bénéton provides for ours a lucid account of the deep structure, both intellectual and institutional, of threats to the human soul. At the same time, again in a way worthy of his great predecessor, the author offers a vivid, concrete portrayal of the manners, morals, sensibilities of us late moderns, of peoples who have nearly lost the capacity to articulate and thus to recognize their own humanity. His account is illustrated and adorned by literary references that will be familiar to American readers (Shakespeare, Chesterton), but also by references that might, for many of us, suggest a delightful expansion of our horizon (Corneille, Racine, Péguy).

Bénéton’s vision is sobering, to say the least, darker on balance than Tocqueville’s (which was already darker, more foreboding than is commonly appreciated), but somehow not a vision of despair. Tocqueville averted fruitless reaction before the leveling advance of democracy by straining to judge the new world from the standpoint of a God beyond all aristocratic prejudices, thus finding a way to accept and thereby to channel the democratic transformation of
politics and society. Bénéton’s situation is of course different: he addresses a world in which this democratic and individualistic transformation of life has already proceeded far beyond the point Tocqueville provided for (if not beyond what he had the power to foresee). In our time, the option of sanctioning or sanctifying this transformation in order to moderate it is no longer viable. There is no longer any alternative to exhibiting in broad daylight the hollowness of pure, formal democracy, to plainly stating the dependence of democracy on understandings of human dignity that cannot be extracted from the pure form of democracy.

Tocqueville, despite profound aristocratic misgivings he would not purge, had something of a positive if general program for the direction of democracy to offer his readers. Bénéton has only a warning. By lucid analysis of ideas coupled with astute observation of our democratic lives, he lays bare the bankruptcy and bad faith of our democratic formalism and the hollowness and self-deception of our pride in modern mastery. And yet, although this book addresses our need to hope with little or nothing that could be called programmatic, it is not a gloomy work. This is in part because its author believes that we might still hope to preserve the last threads that tie our late-modern democratic individualism to a biblical view of the transcendent dignity of each human being. In this sense, whereas Tocqueville needed to moderate the love of some and the hatred of others for democracy, Bénéton needs to remind us why it might be loveable.

Finally, though, this book is hopeful because in it we hear the authentic voice of a man whose humanity we cannot help but admire, a man whose sometimes stern judgments against late-modern ways are never divorced from a benevolent concern for his fellow human beings. If the late-modern rebellion against all limits on rights is finally driven by a hatred of our concrete humanity, as the last pages of this book suggest, then we face down this rebellion at every moment in which we recognize a love of which we are not ourselves the omnipotent authors.
I am honored to have a part in presenting this book and this author to an American audience. I thank Arek Butler for assistance with the manuscript of the translation, as well as readers and editors at ISI for many excellent suggestions, and for saving me from more than a few errors. And I acknowledge especially the assistance of the author, my friend Philippe Bénéton, who was good enough to review every page of this translation and to assist me in solving a number of problems.
This is an essay on the modern world, a world that has now reached the condition of late modernity. My purpose is less to describe this world than to attempt, by climbing on the shoulders of giants of thought, to make visible what is going on in this world and what the results have been. In Western countries, which are the sole focus of this essay, modernity (in its liberal version) spread its influence gradually over two centuries; then, in the sixties, it spun out of control. This is when it crossed a threshold, opening the era of late modernity, which one might also call the era of radical-liberal modernity. Some time later, the rival formula vanished: the communist idea died along with the regime that embodied it. Deprived henceforth of its enemy, left to itself and to its own successes, late modernity is triumphant but disenchanted. But still it continues on its way. Modernity’s conquests remain incomplete in two main ways: not all human beings today are yet uniquely and wholly modern; and modern principles continue to follow the same inclination and the same logic, that of radicalization. The modern world continues to “modernize.” The subject of this work is this very
movement that sweeps Western civilization along, or sweeps it away. Thus we can agree at the outset that every generalization is valid only in identifying a tendency—and by no means an absolute necessity somehow inscribed in history. As La Rochefoucauld wrote, “We have more strength than will, and it is often to excuse ourselves that we imagine that things are impossible.”

Finally, I would like to thank some colleagues and friends who helped me in different ways: Harvey Mansfield, Tilo Schabert, Daniel Mahoney, and Ralph Hancock. To the last, I am especially grateful: his translation is remarkably faithful, and it is also a sign of our friendship.

Some of the ideas developed here have previously been sketched or set forth elsewhere—in particular in various articles of *Famille chrétienne* and in the following collections or periodicals:


The auditorium is crowded. It is the beginning of classes in the first year of law school. The students are there, a little slow to get started but determined to take notes, to underline, to darken page after page. There is no ambiance of disorder, no spirit of rebellion—these students of the new century are light-years from earlier generations. They are without political passions; they accommodate themselves to the rules of the game that are imposed on them; they are well behaved; and they are nice. By all appearances, these are peaceful times for professors.

And yet I sense a distinct sullenness in the atmosphere. The students are here under orders; they take down the words, but they are not excited by the subjects they are studying; they lend a part of themselves because they feel obligated to do so, but in their deeper selves they are absent. At the slightest digression their attention is immediately elsewhere. As soon as the students have the feeling that I am departing from the specific framework of the class and thus from what relates to the examination, I lose them, they’re gone. If I should happen to interrupt the regular flow of a lecture by expressing interest in a certain book, I sense in their attitude a leaden
indifference somewhat softened by indulgence for the unaccountable tastes of professors. If I emphasize the limits of our knowledge, if I risk saying “I don’t know” in order to give them an example of acknowledging ignorance and suspending judgment, I see raised pens and surprised eyes. Are we supposed to write down, “the teacher does not know”? What are we supposed to write on the fateful day of the exam? There is only one thing that keeps their attention: the test. The rest is the least of their concerns.

The job of the professor, like that of the stage actor, has its blessed moments, times when a connection is made, when the lights turn on. I have known some of these moments when the atmosphere becomes intense, when speaker and listeners are on the same wavelength—in reading a great and beautiful text, for example, or when recalling great stories from the past. But here all my efforts seem pointless. Whatever I might say of the greatness of Plato, the boldness of Machiavelli, or the insightfulness of Tocqueville, however I might try to show them that the great works are great adventures, that they are written by people “who have no fear” (Orwell), the icy atmosphere of an imposed exercise remains. The students’ capacity for surprise and admiration seems to be obliterated, stifled. The bow is unstrung; they seem jaded, worn out before their time. I have the feeling that nothing can touch their hearts.

This powerful inertia is especially perceptible in the early months. This is not because the students change but because the most reticent leave and because the course, a general introduction to political and constitutional questions, includes two quite distinct parts. The first part raises the fundamental questions, which are philosophical questions: the ends of politics, the problem of the best political order, the different versions of liberal democracy, and so on. I try to show them that these questions are not only course requirements, but that the great debates carried on over centuries by Aristotle, Saint Thomas, Hobbes, Locke, and all the great minds also illuminate fundamental alternatives, and thus that there is a reason to take an interest in them as human beings and as citizens. In other words, I try to involve them, to give them knowledge that
matters for their lives; this does not determine their choices, of course, but it aims to put life more under the control of reason. That is the traditional mission of the university. But this is no longer commonly understood. Students do not want to invest themselves; that is not what they are there for—real life is elsewhere; why doesn’t the university mind its own business?

The second part of the course, devoted to French constitutional law, is more technical. Students sometimes struggle, but they are more at ease. At bottom, they are looking for raw knowledge. They are uncomfortable with disputed questions, vital issues, avowals of ignorance. “We are already embarked on our journey in this world,” Pascal said. Maybe, the students implicitly respond, but that is none of your business.

Of course I am simplifying and generalizing excessively. Among some, I think, the bow is not unstrung and the interest is real; a number of excellent papers serve as evidence and increase the professor’s morale. But such exceptions do not disprove the rule: the minds and hearts of most are not open to true intellectual work.

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Why this attitude, which has become more pronounced in recent years? Some students, a growing number, are lost in the university; unequipped or disinclined to learn, they waste a year or more. To give an extreme example, one student whom I was questioning in an oral examination on a certain book we had analyzed in class answered me quite matter-of-factly: “You know, I don’t like to read.” Many are worried about their future and this anxiety causes them to adopt a utilitarian attitude. But there is also something else. The spirit of the age pervades the consciousness of students and leads to this fact: for most of them, knowledge is radically cut off from life. All Western education was founded on the guiding idea that culture is a treasure of powerful thoughts and deep experiences; the analysis and discussion of great texts will serve to broaden the mind and lead it toward greater autonomy. But no idea could be more foreign to today’s students. To study in order to be liberated
from opinion and convention, in order to enlighten and enrich one’s life, to study by attending to voices from the past—what a notion! No, true life has nothing to do with the university. On the one hand, there is education, with its required exercises; on the other, there is life, with my own personal choices. This dissociation occurs in primary and secondary school, and it goes on from there. In effect, how are we to conceive the idea of vital knowledge when autonomy is no longer a lofty goal but a given? That is the key: students, or many of them, feel and believe themselves to be autonomous. “Vital questions are beyond rational discussion; they are matters of opinion and not of knowledge, and all opinions are equal. Let each person decide for himself, and all choices are equally valid. In this case, let the professor mind his own business! When he takes up vital questions and claims to enlighten them by methodical discussion and by experiences he calls profound, he is violating my sovereign and arbitrary freedom; he is encroaching on my rights. By what right may anyone harp about what old Socrates said? He had his philosophy, and I’ve got mine.”

From this perspective, the university no longer has anything to transmit, and the student asks nothing of it except knowledge of a utilitarian kind. Knowledge is only a tool; it has no connection with the way one lives. The feeling of autonomy anchored in the prevailing relativism of the day relaxes the desire to know and closes the mind. It follows that the relation between teacher and students tends to change. It remains unequal, to be sure, but this inequality is perceived as purely functional; it withdraws into the realm of technical competence. During class time and within the limits of a specialized discipline, the student admits without difficulty that the teacher knows more than he. He plays the game, but only provided that significant questions are excluded. As soon as they walk out the door, students are the same as their professors; they are equal and isolated by this very equality. Outside the strictly “professional” relationship, teachers and students are strangers to each other.

This state of mind has increasing influence over the university and those who teach in it. Students aspire to the knowledge of spe-
cialists, and this is how professors increasingly see themselves. The university has less and less in common with its original calling as the ideal place for the autonomous work of reason, the disinterested search for truth, and the transmission of a heritage. It becomes rather a soulless place where academic specialties coexist and proliferate in disorder. It no longer has a guiding principle. Henceforth, life has nothing to do with reason; consequently, the circle of knowledge shrinks, and it has no center. The university is emptied of substance, a victim of equality by default.

None of this benefits the students. It certainly does not contribute to their autonomy. He who challenges or is incited to challenge all forms of authority becomes vulnerable to social pressures. There is one thing that cannot fail to surprise us: how is it that these allegedly autonomous students are all so alike? Late modernity has accomplished this tour de force: it preaches autonomy and produces conformism. Our autonomous children are well-behaved children: autonomous because they are modern, autonomous within the circle traced by modern ideas. Is this autonomy not then a confinement? Is it not also a form of abandonment? Can the modern imperatives that adults, or certain adults, inculcate in generations of youth help them to live? How many youths, as victims of the spirit of the age, are fundamentally crippled by this modern-style autonomy, to which they see no alternative?