

## THE PRESENT SITUATION

If everyone does not feel what I am talking about, I am wrong.

—Montesquieu

THE REFLECTIONS PRESENTED to the reader are, I fear, far removed from common opinion. Today, all of us—at least in Europe—are moved and even carried away by an idea that is also a sentiment and even a passion: the idea that humanity is proceeding toward its necessary unification. The “sentiment of resemblance” which Tocqueville already saw as the central emotion of human beings in democracies has become a *passion* for resemblance. It is no longer simply a matter of recognizing and respecting the humanity of each human being. We are required to see *the other* as *the same as ourselves*. And if we cannot stop ourselves from perceiving what is different about him, we reproach ourselves for doing so, as if it were a sin. But what can “same” or even “similar” mean to someone who refuses to see what is different? Vaguely perceiving differences they really do not want to see, and thus see with a great deal of pain,

DEMOCRACY WITHOUT NATIONS?

Europeans immerse themselves in an *indifference* toward the world that their humanitarian endeavors hide less and less well.

We learn to see what is similar and different in the context in which we experience these qualities—that is to say, first of all, in the *political body* to which we belong. For Europeans, for centuries this body has been the nation-state. This political form weaves together what is similar and different in particularly complex and subtle ways. Beyond its borders, each nation saw in the neighboring nation both a partner and a rival it sought to best in works of war and peace. But in truth, it shared these works in common with the other. Each nation raised its voice—its propositions on humanity—in the “European concert.” Internally, class struggles troubled each nation even as they gave birth, sometimes violently, to its unity. In short, it was across the differences of nation and class that we sought and exercised our common humanity.

The weakening of the European nations weakens this framework in which the similar and the different can be recognized and take on meaning. It is not surprising, therefore, that we seek refuge in a vague idea of human unity, an imminent unity that would resolve by a kind of internal necessity the problem of human order we no longer know how to state. This idea takes rather different forms depending upon whether one looks at “old Europe” or its cross-Atlantic progeny. But if European quietism presents a vivid contrast to American activism, the two are nonetheless versions of what one might call “democratic empire.” Both sides propose such an empire with equal conviction and even obstinacy.

THE AMERICAN VERSION of empire manifests the following traits. One central nation, the model and guardian of democracy, encourages all peoples, whoever and wherever they are, to establish a democratic regime and cultivate democratic mores. After all, democracy is natural to man. One discerns on the horizon a world made up of democratic nations; among them, the rules and

regulations of commerce and human rights compose an ever-tighter network of relations that enhance world unity every day. And if a “rogue state,” moved by the hatred evil reserves for the good, seeks to trouble this natural harmony, then the awesome military superiority of America will arrest the rebel and punish the criminal. The American version of democratic empire is characterized by a harmonious mixture of older elements, such as the maintenance of nations and willingness to take recourse to force, with newer elements. The primary newer element is the vision of a united world in which collective differences will no longer be truly meaningful or significant.

The European version of democratic empire presents other traits. Its center is not a central nation but what I will call a central human *agency*. This agency was born (since everything has to be born someplace) on either side of the Rhine. But it soon detached itself from any particular territory or people and is now occupied with extending the area of “pure democracy.” Pure democracy is democracy without a people—that is, democratic *governance*, which is very respectful of human rights but detached from any collective deliberation. The European version of democratic empire distinguishes itself by the radicality with which it detaches democracy from every real people and constructs a *kratos* without a *dèmos*. What now possesses *kratos* is the very idea of democracy. The European empire, however, has one thing in common with the American version: it too is animated by a vision of a world in which no collective difference is significant.

Europeans and Americans are therefore separated despite sharing the same idea of the world—albeit of a different color—in important respects. The explosion of human unity makes both groups less capable of actually seeing the present state of the world. Occupied with building our twin towers of Babel, we no longer appreciate the fact that separations between and among human groups cannot be entirely overcome. Nor do we see that this fortunate impotence is the condition of human liberty and diversity.

## DEMOCRACY WITHOUT NATIONS?

THE TWO VERSIONS of the democratic movement are marked by the same dizziness, even giddiness, before number (or quantity) and spatial extension. The “global middle class” is constructed in units of hundreds of millions. It is composed of those who can master the new instruments of communication and have the capacity to quickly adapt to the rules of good governance. At the beginning of a new century, the diffusion of rules and regulations provides a substitute for the reality and energies of collective willing. On the one hand, there is the indefinite extension of “the construction of Europe.” On the other, there is the American policy of “global democratization.”

This indefinite spatial extension is accompanied, especially in Europe, by an extraordinary temporal retrenchment. The past is deemed culpable, made up of collective crimes and unjustifiable constraints. As more and more populations are added to the immense “global middle class,” each people is commanded to divorce itself from its culpable past—one said to be defined by intolerance and oppression. At the same time the monuments of their crimes, whether cathedrals or pyramids, are enlisted as elements of a “global patrimony.”

But how can one simultaneously condemn all pasts and recognize all cultures? Since every *significant* collective difference puts human unity in danger, one must render every difference *insignificant*. Thus, aspects of the most barbarous past become elements of an infinitely respectable “culture,” since the only truly evil thing today is to think and act according to the idea that one form of life is better than another. To summarize our condition and conviction: the only blameworthy human conduct for us is what used to be called “conversion.” In this way, our extreme democracy, enjoining absolute respect for “identities,” joins hands with the fundamentalisms that punish apostasy with death. There is no longer any legitimate transformation or change of mind, because no one preference is more legitimate than any other. Under a flashing neon sign proclaiming “human unity,” contemporary

Europeans would have humanity arrest all intellectual or spiritual movement in order to conduct a continual, interminable liturgy of self-adoration.

NOT TOO LONG ago, the democratic idea justified and nourished the love each people naturally has for itself. But now, in the name of democracy, this love is criticized and mocked. What happened? And what future can human *association* have if no particular group, no “communion,” no people is legitimate any longer? What becomes of us if only human *generality* is legitimate?

It is amazing to see how quickly the meaning of the democratic nation has been lost in Europe—the very place where this extraordinary form of human association first appeared!

The democratic nation tied the democratic future of a people to its monarchical or feudal past. The mores of the democratic present introduced whole peoples to a wider and deeper communion. The “barbarous” past itself was redeemed by the free present, as well as by a future that was bound to be even freer. The present generation was seen as the latest advancing wave arising from previous generations. It joined the immemorial past with the indefinite future; it thus placed the present under the double authority or solicitation of these two. In this light, one can see that Ernest Renan’s famous formula stating that the nation is a “daily plebiscite” failed accurately to identify the nation—as he had aimed to do with his 1882 address, “What Is a Nation?” Each “day” of the nation is connected with its origins long past as well as its open, indefinite future. Each day of the nation connects the three dimensions of time. The warp and woof of a nation’s time is finely textured.

This in no way contradicts freedom, since no one—whether an individual or even an institution—wholly contains the nation’s time. Only political liberty offers the possibility of responding to the double solicitude of the past and the future in their unconquerable amplitude. It is well known that the European nation was extremely

DEMOCRACY WITHOUT NATIONS?

meticulous when it came to matters of space and territory. We ought not to overlook how much the nation helped us to inhabit time and hold together—with equal zeal—past, present, and future.

Today, however, this unifying principle of our lives has lost its connective force. The elements it had held together are now rediscovering their independence. As a result, we celebrate the arrival of a brighter future even as significant meaning retreats into elements of the past—into “regions” and “religion.” By stripping the nation of its legitimacy the contemporary democratic movement brings predemocratic “communities” to the fore. But the democratic nation was the mediation of mediations, bringing together consent and communion. How can we continue to live without such mediation? What human association, old or new, will be able to bring consent and communion together in a viable way?