On the last page of the final chapter of *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville summarizes the comparison he has just drawn between the new democracy and the old order as follows: "They are like two distinct humanities."

This is very much the feeling experienced by the partisans as well as the opponents of the modern democratic and individualist movement: a new humanity emerges from the old, separates itself from the former, and distances itself ever more. This common impression is more important than the contradictory judgments made by the two sides. It suggests that there is here something like a radical change in the situation, in the state of humanity.

Both the partisans and opponents are right. The democratic movement does mean, as its opponents affirm, a dissolution of communities and bonds. To the extent that other communities and attachments are reconstituted in democracy, it is on the basis of the individual consent that is the generative principle of the new regime. Likewise, the partisans of democracy are also correct: There is a liberation in this dissolution, since henceforth no individual can have an obligation to which he has not consented. The hopes of the partisans have perhaps been deceived, the fears of the others have no doubt not been confirmed. But the fact of the liberation which is a dissolution, or of the dissolution which is a liberation, the fact of emancipation, is there.

The communities to which men belong in the democratic world no longer command them. In the family, law has abolished the power of the male head of the household, and parents – from now on equals – demand less and less the obedience of their children, whom they perceive as more and more their equals and as similar. In the nation, the legitimately elected government no longer dares to order citizen-soldiers to die for the country. If it undertakes a military operation involving some risks, it turns it over to the military professionals and to what are called volunteers.

In the Church, the Roman Magisterium, while retaining intact the place of the "last things" in official documents, has ceased, since the last Council, in its actual pastoral activity to invoke the urgency of salvation while it agrees to come together in congress with other religions. Finally, the past itself, as the community of those who are dead, has lost all commanding authority, whether in the social, moral, political or religious order: it is now only the ensemble of "places of memory" open to a kind of historical tourism.

Let us consider the domain in which modern humanity registers its intimate life: literature. It would be vain to summarize its movement in a formula, and I do not have in my possession any "theory of literature," but it seems to me that from Proust and Celine to the theater of the absurd and to the new novel, it unmasks the deception of human bonds, the lie of love, the inanity or deceptiveness of language. It explores what it means to become an individual. It pursues this enterprise with an obstinacy and fervor that explains the obsessive concern of the literary avant-garde, and of the novelty which characterizes it, much more than does simple "fashion."

A desire to know is here at work, a desire which elaborates a sort of negative anthropology, supported not by faith, but by distrust. This movement opposes and substitutes itself for the two great authorities which previously nourished literature: the Greek and Roman models, on one hand, and the Christian Scriptures on the other. There is no longer heroic conduct, no path towards wisdom, no journey of the soul towards God, but quite exactly a "voyage at the end of the night" in which it is a matter of discovering finally what it is to be a pure individual, beyond any social bond or even any language.
What is going on, in the state of society, and by means of literature – literary investigation, the instrument of literature – is the return to what the philosophers formerly called the state of nature, the state in which there are only individuals. We see civilization perfecting itself and the democratic nations throwing over the world an ever more ample network bound together by technological, judicial and political artifices, in order to make coexist – or rather, to foster "communication" between – peoples whose geography and history inhibited them from living together.

At the same time the human mind in these same societies gives itself the task of undoing, of "deconstructing," in the element of literature and perhaps more generally in the element of art, all bonds. This double movement – of artificial construction and of deconstruction – contains nothing contradictory; its two aspects obey the same principle: Men do not have any natural connections. They therefore are the authors – the artists – of all their attachments. That is why, while the highways of communication traverse the planet, literature stubbornly says that it is impossible to say anything.

This situation of democracy, this experience of the liberating dissolution of bonds, contains a mission for each individual. His situation contains his mission: he is "condemned to be free." Recognizable in many different rhetorics, such is the specific pathos of modern individualism. Just as for Kierkegaard, to be a Christian is to become a Christian, for the modern man conscious of himself, to be an individual means to become an individual, and to become more and more an individual.

Certainly the development of modern individualism has not been a simple triumphal march, no matter how victorious liberalism appears to be today. It provoked extremely resolute opposition, especially in our century. It was against it that the two great revolutionary projects of our century, communism and nazism, were unleashed.

Instructed by the horrible lesson of this century, are we bound to accept the task contained in our situation as individuals? Are we really "condemned to be free" without being able to assume some distance from our situation in order to judge it? I do not believe so. We are and want to be individuals; so be it. But that means that we are and we want to be human individuals. Now, as men, what do we have in common? This simple, prosaic, even flat question, modern politics does not even succeed in raising. As human individuals, what is proper to each of us and what is common to all? The doctrines which founded our political regimes never confront this question because they affirm that all legitimacy has its unique source in the individual; whatever is added to the individual – and first of all the political body or state – is only a more or less unfortunate necessity, something that does not have meaning for man. However the political order, the political regime, including the liberal political regime that we are familiar with, is a certain way of putting things in common.

What are we to put in common? To answer this question it would be necessary to use the entire edifice of political philosophy, but I can give perhaps a suggestive example. To establish a political order, before consulting individual wills, is, first of all, to have a territory in common. Certainly, a territory is the lowest determination, but in a sense it is the most necessary. The proof of this is in "the construction of Europe." We must ask: what construction – and of what Europe – when from year to year the latter's territory is always expanding? What is this political body, this "political Europe" as one calls it, which is incapable of defining this minimal common thing, territory?

Western Europeans often felt themselves justified in their indifference to territory by the savage eruption of territorial re vindication in the east of Europe, in particular by the past events in Yugoslavia. In truth, however, the lesson is the reverse. The territorial hypersensitivity of the ethnic cleansers is the reverse-image, and in part the effect, of our territorial insouciance. If we do not accept the first political responsibility which is the definition of a common territory, if we do not resist the fatal notion of an indefinite extension of Europe, what we call the political construction of Europe will be in fact its dissolution, before its dislocation.
It is understood that this substitution of civilization for politics is not a simple aberration or moment of weakness. One even can invoke strong reasons in its favor. If the political order consists in putting things in common, in organizing the "common good," one cannot overlook that what unites the most is also what most separates men. In particular, the more what is common is of an elevated order, the more it is susceptible to separate men. The highest truth, religious truth, was the most active principle of unity and of community before becoming the most corrosive principle of division. It is for this reason that one finally had to subtract religious truth from the domain of the common – from public command – in order to make it something private.

It was then that the nation became the great common thing, the new context for human association in Europe. But there were several nations, and they did not delay in making terrible war on each other. Many well-intentioned and reasonable men judged that it was time to renounce this political form in Europe and to have European peoples live in the element of civilization alone. It is in this sense, that one speaks most frequently today of "Europe," which is then only the framework for the exercise of the democratic individualism which serves as the point of departure of my exposition. I admit, without any difficulty on the plane of principle, that one can reject the nation as a practical form, but I do not believe that one can live for very long in "civilization" alone, without some political attachment, without some definition of what is common.

It might be suggested that I have neglected a particularly precious possibility, that of a human bond affirmed as such. It will be said that we can affirm a principle of action which is at the same time individualist and communitarian by starting from the observation that what is common is humanity itself, the fact of being human, and by leaving this fact indeterminate.

This, in fact, is a tempting avenue because it circumvents the awkward obligation to seek what is common. It is said that one must respect the humanity of the other man. Kant already had given this procedure its most rigorous formulation: I must respect in the other the respect he has – or that he, as a rational being, ought to have – for the moral law. However, the modern individual hardly loves the law. In truth he hates it, and it is hard to see how hatred of and respect for the law can combine in him. Then, from the respect for the other man, we create a sentimental version founded on compassion. Our humanism becomes humanitarian. Alas, pity as a political principle quickly encounters its limits.

As Rousseau, its first great promoter, had noticed already, pity as compassion before suffering or physical misery hardly distinguishes between man and the animals – which is why in the West today the defense of "animal rights" assumes a growing vehemence. For this reason pity cannot be a sufficient principle for a properly human community.

Pity as such is an emotion, or a passion. It therefore is very dependent on images, and is exposed to their possible manipulation. Pity is egotistical: since its condition of possibility is that I myself am not suffering and that I am aware of this exemption, it causes me to feel the pleasure of not suffering. Pity is indeterminate: every suffering solicits it, and it by itself does not contain any principle of evaluation or of comparison. The crybaby draws tears from us as we pass by, indifferent, to the suffering of the courageous man. One might say that the urgency of action is a sufficiently clear principle. On the contrary, it is clear that this is not the case, since one must choose among the urgencies.

Moreover, pity in itself doesn't contain the idea of the action aimed at putting an end to the pitiable situation. Confronted with the torturer tormenting the victim, I can kill the torturer, interpose myself "peacefully" between the torturer and the victim, appear to interpose myself (precisely to give witness to my pity), ask myself if the victim doesn't have some responsibility for the fortune that afflicts him, remember that fifty years ago the grandparents of the victim were torturers and the torturer's grandparents were victims, etc.
One can define briefly the limits of pity: It doesn't make us leave the state of nature. Between two individual humans considered outside of any political order, it is a possible sentiment. There is no immediate evidence of being human, no immediate experience of "the other" which dispenses us from the necessity and obligation of building a political order and therefore of asking ourselves, what is common, of posing in all its amplitude the political question, the question of justice.

But doesn't our society marry individual liberty and social obligations thanks to a specific bond which defines a very characteristic form of justice: the contract? By the contracts he concludes with his fellow human beings, each individual is the author of all his bonds. At the same time he places limits on his good pleasure, since *pacta sunt servanda*, contracts are to be kept.

In truth, though, both in its reality and in its meaning, the contract is indeterminate, or at least under-determined. It depends on a context. In its poorest, but often most determinative definition, it is the relationship of forces. The socialist tradition has underscored repeatedly how much the contract for work between the worker and the employer was in itself an unequal relationship, under the appearance of a free agreement between two equal individuals. As precious as this instrument of human association may be, the contract leaves undetermined the question of what is common.

To remain with this example, what is common in the relationship between the worker and the employer? The business enterprise? The social class? The market? If one were to consider attentively another type of contract, the marriage contract, where what is most one's own, the body, becomes in some way common, one would be led to even more interesting reflections.

The justice of the contract is necessary, but it does not suffice. We certainly cannot abstain from posing the question: What is common? This, however, contains an ambiguity that I would like to expose in concluding. What is common can be the common denominator, that is, what each individual possesses and which all the others possess, for example, a body. All individuals have a body – the body is a common denominator – but the body is nothing that is common. In fact it is what is most one's own.

The distinction is of decisive importance when one considers the "rights of man" which, contrary to what certain of their most stirring defenders believe or hope, do not derive from what is common, but from the common denominator. In the strong, full, almost sacred sense of the term, the common is something which, appropriated or embraced by the individual, transforms him while enlarging him. Can we see, or discover, or somehow recognize that there is something – this would be precisely, the "public thing" – greater than us? And is it legitimate to hope that this public thing would render us greater than ourselves? By these two questions we take the measure of the amplitude and the gravity of the question: What is common?

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