

## “Saving the West”: The New Jacobins

Claes G. Ryn

PLATO CITES VARIETY, movement, and color as attributes of democracy. Having adopted the silly and destructive assumption that all individuals and preferences have equal claim to attention, democracy exhibits a measure of tolerance as it caters to the whim of the moment. Though certainly not without application to today's Western democracies, Plato's comment regarding freedom and diversity in democracy is contradicted by another and increasingly prominent feature of today's Western societies, their element of conformity and thought-control. Through government, mass media, education, and entertainment a plebiscitary, democratist orthodoxy is promulgated and enforced which changes somewhat depending upon the fortunes of particular pressure groups. Violation of its tenets is grounds for grave suspicions about the offender and cause for ostracization, or worse. Professions of liberal tolerance and free speech somehow interfere not at all with the enforcement of ideological assent. Describing these democratist doctrines in their most recent form is beyond the scope of this essay. Suffice it to say that they lie opposite the views that people keep to themselves or express only in whispered conversation while looking anxiously over their shoulder to see who is listening. The vigilance and moralistic righteousness of those who watch over adherence to the prescribed democratist views and behaviors call to mind the French Jacobins. De Tocqueville comes closer than Plato to capturing this feature of modern democracy in his warnings about “soft” democratic despotism. Unlike older, non-democratic despotism, de Tocqueville writes, the new despotism “would degrade men without tormenting them.”<sup>1</sup>

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There are signs that with the fading of the ethos of constitutionalism democratic despotism could turn less “soft.” Individuals who find sources of personal power in the present state of democracy may become more ambitious and aggressive. They can draw for justification upon an already influential democratist ideology that invests democracy with a noble and world-wide mission. This ideology rejects what it calls moral relativism and claims to represent timeless and universal principles that should everywhere prevail. Since these principles are in substantial, if not unqualified, agreement with the beliefs of today's democracy, a new moral legitimacy is conferred upon it. The diligent promotion of these principles is seen as the way to overcome social fragmentation. Replacing diversity with unity is for many today an appealing vision. So is national assertiveness abroad in behalf of allegedly universal principles. Many speak and act as if the virtuous course is to impose an artificial,

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external order of principles on a disintegrating society while giving that society a moral mission beyond its borders. The moralistic language often masks strong political ambitions.

Among those who advocate a morally unified and internationally ambitious democracy it is common to draw prestige to their own preferences by ascribing them to various historical figures of moral and intellectual stature. Often a loosely defined “Western tradition” is invoked. Various of its great books are reinterpreted as