

# Tocqueville's "Sacred Ark"<sup>1</sup>

## El "arca sagrada" de Tocqueville

Aurelian Craiutu<sup>2</sup>

Indiana University (USA)

Recibido: 15-10-18

Aprobado: 30-04-19

---

### Abstract

This article explores several key aspects of Tocqueville's "new science of politics". By focusing on its cross-disciplinary, comparative, normative, and political components, it highlights Tocqueville's conceptual and methodological sophistication as illustrated by his preparatory notes for *Democracy in America* and his voyage notes. The essay also defends Tocqueville against those critics who took him to task for working with an imprecise definition of democracy or with an ambiguous conception of equality.

**Key-words:** Tocqueville, democracy, liberty, equality, mores, America.

### Resumen

Este artículo explora diversos aspectos constitutivos de la "nueva ciencia de la política" de Tocqueville. Centrado en sus componentes interdisciplinarios, comparativos, normativos y políticos, trata de poner de manifiesto la sofisticación conceptual y metodológica de Tocqueville, como puede observarse en sus notas

---

<sup>1</sup> A previous shorter version of this text appeared in German (trans. Skadi Krause) as "Tocquevilles neue politische Wissenschaft wiederentdecken: Einige Lektionen für zeitgenössische Sozialwissenschaftler" in: Harald Bluhm and Skadi Krause (Hg.), *Alexis de Tocqueville. Analytiker der Demokratie*, Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2015, pp. 33-51. This essay expands upon and develops several arguments originally presented in "Tocqueville's New Science of Politics," Liberty Matters Forum, Liberty Fund, Indianapolis, IN, May 2014, <http://oll.libertyfund.org/pages/tocqueville-s-new-science-of-politics>; and "The Elusive Tocqueville," in *Perspectives on Politics*, 9: 2 (2011): 361-65.

<sup>2</sup> (acraiutu@indiana.edu). Professor of Political Science at Indiana University, Bloomington. He has authored and edited several books on French political thought (Madame de Staël, the French Doctrinaires, Alexis de Tocqueville, and Raymond Aron). His most recent books are *A Virtue for Courageous Minds: Moderation in French Political Thought 1748-1830* (Princeton University Press, 2012) and *Faces of Moderation: The Art of Balance in An Age of Extremes* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017).

preparatorias para la *Democracia en América* y sus cuadernos de viaje. Este ensayo defiende igualmente a Tocqueville contra los críticos que consideran que trabaja con una definición imprecisa de democracia o con una ambigua concepción de igualdad.

**Palabras-clave:** Tocqueville, democracia, libertad, igualdad, hábitos, América.

*“A new political science is needed for a world entirely new.”<sup>3</sup>*

## Why Tocqueville?

Over the past century or so, Tocqueville’s writings have proved to be a rich source of inspiration for political scientists, sociologists, philosophers, legal scholars, and historians who have sought to ascertain what is living and what is dead in his works. Politicians, too, have often quoted him in their speeches. Only in the last two decades, a remarkable number of new interpretations of Tocqueville’s works have appeared in both French and English, shedding fresh light on lesser-known facets of Tocqueville’s persona: the philosopher, the moralist, the writer, the politician and the defender of French colonization of Algeria.<sup>4</sup> In 2005, the bicentenary of his birth was widely celebrated on four continents, thus showing that Tocqueville’s works have achieved a truly universal appeal transcending national or continental boundaries. In this regard, hardly anyone can rival his star status today, with the possible exception of Marx whose reputation declined, however, abruptly in 1989-91 with the fall of communism in Eastern Europe and Russia. Perhaps even more importantly, Tocqueville’s ideas have been creatively appropriated and respected by thinkers on *both* the Left and the Right, which is uncommon in academia and beyond. On the Left, Tocqueville is admired for his ideas on equality, democratic citizenship, and the art of association while scholars on the Right praise his

<sup>3</sup> Tocqueville, 2010, I: 16. All subsequent references are to the Nolla-Schleifer Liberty Fund bilingual critical edition in four volumes.

<sup>4</sup> In addition to the critical bi-lingual edition published by Liberty Fund in 2010, four other new English translations of *Democracy in America* have been published in the last decade and a half by the following presses: Hackett (2000, trans. Stephen Grant), University of Chicago Press (2001, trans. Harvey Mansfield and Delba Winthrop), Penguin (2003, trans. Gerald E. Bevan), The Library of America (2004, transl. Arthur Goldhammer), At the same time, two new translations of *The Old Regime and the Revolution* have also been published by the University of Chicago Press (2 vols, 1998 and 2001, trans. Alan S. Kahan) and Cambridge University Press (2012, 1 vol., trans. Arthur Goldhammer). For an overview, see Cheryl Welch, “Introduction: Tocqueville in the Twenty-First Century,” in Welch ed., 2006: 1-20.

defense of religion, decentralization, and self-government along with his skepticism toward big government. The fact that Tocqueville has been able to speak to both camps is in itself remarkable and quite rare indeed.

In spite of all this, Tocqueville continues to defy our black-and-white categories and generalizations and his writings, not devoid of normative undertones, still pose significant challenges to his interpreters. What were his "true" religious, political, and philosophical beliefs, many of us still wonder two centuries after his death? Were the two volumes of *Democracy in America* parts of the same conceptual plan, or were they, in fact, two different projects because of their different focus and content? The difficulty of answering these questions can be explained in light of Tocqueville's highly ambitious intellectual and political agenda. By writing *Democracy in America*, he did not seek to produce a mere travelogue nor was his intention to offer a comprehensive analysis of the American democracy and its political system. It is true that he was fascinated by what he discovered in the New World, but, as he himself acknowledged, in America he saw "much more than America": he grasped the image of the new democracy itself, with its virtues, inclinations, habits, excesses, and promises.<sup>5</sup> He wanted to see *farther* than his contemporaries and, as the title of his masterpiece shows (*De la démocratie en Amérique*), his was a book primarily about *democracy* as a new form of society and government, with America being only a case-study. Deeply concerned with the fate of liberty in the modern world, Tocqueville offered pertinent answers to dilemmas that transcend temporal and geographical boundaries. In so doing, he offered a critique of past approaches and proposed a new science of politics to grasp the complex nature of the "political."

Thus, Tocqueville had a highly ambitious goal when writing *Democracy in America*. He aspired to create, in his own words, "a new science of politics" suitable to the new world which was beginning to take shape at that time. But what did he actually mean by this? According to Sheldon Wolin, for example, Tocqueville's model was "not that of the scientist but that of the painter" and his theoretical method should be described as a form of "political impressionism" (Wolin, 2001: 140)<sup>6</sup> based on ideal-types, strong impressions, vast panoramas, and powerful insights. Yet, Tocqueville himself seems to have had a different view on this topic and did not behave like an impressionist painter when it came to thinking about politics. In both his *Recollections* and *The Old Regime and the Revolution*, he criticized, in fact, the "literary" (i.e. impressionistic) style of politics of his predecessors (and contemporaries) who looked for what was ingenuous and new rather than what was appropriate to their particular situations.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> See Tocqueville, 2010, I: 28.

<sup>6</sup> On Tocqueville's new science of politics, see Wolin, 2001: 184-97 and Hadari, 1989.

<sup>7</sup> See Tocqueville, 1959: 67. There is a new translation of Tocqueville's *Recollections* by Arthur Goldhammer, published by the University of Virginia Press in 2016.

One expression of Tocqueville's conception of his "new" political science can be found in an important speech he gave in April 1852 at the Academy of Moral and Political Science in Paris. In that speech, he distinguished between the *art* of government and the *science* of government and suggested that he had virtually nothing to do with the first. The art of government follows the ever-changing flux of political phenomena and addresses daily challenges posed by events and changing political circumstances.<sup>8</sup> The true science of government, argued Tocqueville, is different. Covering the space between philosophy, sociology, and law, it seeks to highlight the natural rights of individuals, the laws appropriate to different societies, and the virtues and limitations of various forms of government. It is grounded not in fleeting circumstances, but in "the nature of man, his interests, faculties, and needs and teaches what are the laws most appropriate to the general and permanent condition of man." (Tocqueville, 1989: 230).<sup>9</sup> As such, it never reduces politics to a mere question of arithmetic or logic nor does it attempt to build an imaginary (or utopian) society in which everything is simple, orderly, uniform, and in accord with reason. What Tocqueville offered in *Democracy in America* was supposed to be an example of this new science of politics.

#### Four key dimensions of Tocqueville's new science of politics

When interpreting Tocqueville's new science, it is essential to remember that he lived in an age of transition and belonged to a generation whose main mission was to bring the French Revolution to a peaceful end. It was also an age when firm beliefs were dissolved to make way for a universal and relentless questioning of all dogmas, principles and authorities. Getting Tocqueville's context right is therefore essential to understanding his general goals and method. This is one of the reasons why, appearances notwithstanding, it is not easy to read and properly understand *Democracy in America*.

Moreover, Tocqueville asks us to judge the book by its "general impression" than by its arguments. As a result, we must constantly keep present to mind the secret chain that links all his reflections (I note in passing an interesting affinity with Montesquieu's *Spirit of the Laws!*). In a letter to Louis de Kergorlay from December 26, 1836, Tocqueville wrote: "To point out if possible to men what to do to escape tyranny and debasement while becoming democratic. Such is, I think, the general idea by which my book can be summarized and which will appear on every page."<sup>10</sup> We are also warned that "the author who

<sup>8</sup> See Tocqueville, 1989: 230.

<sup>9</sup> Also see Tocqueville, 1989: 231-32.

<sup>10</sup> This letter is quoted in Tocqueville, 2010, I: 32, note x.

wants to make himself understood is obliged to push each of his ideas to all of their theoretical consequences, and often to the limits of what is false and impractical" (Tocqueville, 2010, I: 31). This is likely to surprise many readers and makes reading the book at times an arduous enterprise.

In what follows I should like to focus on four dimensions of Tocqueville's new science of politics. The *first* thing worth mentioning is that it is fundamentally *cross-disciplinary*, at the intersection of political science, sociology, anthropology, history, and philosophy. As "the first anthropologist of modern equality" (Welch, 2001: 50), he addressed important and diverse topics that are rarely treated in one single book or field today: civil society, pluralism, religion, centralization, participatory democracy, democratic mind, and the limits of affluence, to name just a few. His writings analyzing the great democratic revolution unfolding under our own eyes also shed light on the privatization of social life, the tendency to social anomie, the development of individualism, skepticism and relativism, the softening of mores, and the rise of the middle class. Such a breadth can no longer be expected (nor found) in the writings of contemporary political scientists who must focus on a narrowly defined set of dependent and independent variables. Nor could it be found in the writings of Tocqueville's own contemporaries like, say, Michel Chevalier. It is not an accident that, while we remain fascinated by *Democracy in America*, very few still read and comment on Michel Chevalier's *Lettres sur l'Amérique du Nord* (1836). The latter offered a detailed presentation of economic life in America but lacked the breadth of Tocqueville's cross-disciplinary analysis and remained in the shadow of Saint-Simon's ideas and methodology.<sup>11</sup>

It is no surprise then to find the following assessment of the originality of Tocqueville's method in one of J.S. Mill's essays in which he emphasized the methodological sophistication of the Frenchman arising from his cross-disciplinary approach. "The value of his work," Mill wrote, "is less in the conclusion than in the mode of arriving at them" (Mill, 1977: 156). What distinguished Tocqueville from his contemporaries, Mill went on, was the fact that he treated democracy for the first time from a cross-disciplinary perspective, "as something which, being a reality in nature and no mere mathematical, or metaphysical abstraction, manifests itself by innumerable properties, not by some only" (Mill, 1977: 156). In so doing, Mill explained, Tocqueville combined deduction with induction. His notorious tendency of deducing a broad philosophical picture from a specific set of facts must be related to another feature of his method and writing style: the balance between his quest for general laws and universal causes on the one hand, and immersion in

<sup>11</sup> Chevalier's book on America has been translated into English as *Society, Manners and Politics in the United States, Being a Series of Letters on the United States* (Boston: Weeks, Jordan & Co., 1839). It has been reprinted only once, in 1961, by the New-York based Doubleday. For a comparison between Tocqueville and Chevalier, see Jennings, 2007.

particular facts and historical contingencies on the other hand.<sup>12</sup> If Tocqueville did not neglect the importance of facts, as some critics argued, he deliberately avoided including many brute facts, figures, and statistics in his book because such things, he believed, change quite rapidly and tend to become obsolete.

The *second* aspect that accounts for the originality of Tocqueville's new science of politics and singles it out among his peers is its *comparative* dimension.<sup>13</sup> The comparative method is not only at the heart of *Democracy in America* (comparison in space), but can also be found in *The Old Regime and the Revolution* (comparison in time), his travel notes in England, and his writings on Algeria.<sup>14</sup> In all of these writings, Tocqueville offered a new way of analyzing social and political phenomena in comparative perspective (America-France, New World-Old World, England-France, Christianity-Islam), which was based on ideal types and contrasting pairs (democracy-aristocracy, liberty-equality).<sup>15</sup> His framework of analysis also included various *foci* and levels, small and large processes at the same time. While Tocqueville did not invent this conceptual framework and was not the first American to write about America, his genius lay in combining the insights he found in various sources and in building with them something original.

He came to America with several ideas about the nature and the direction of modern society which he had already acquired in part by attending Guizot's lectures on the history of the European and French civilization.<sup>16</sup> But Tocqueville remained open to new experiences, and America provided him with several unexpected lessons that influenced his thinking and made him explore new vistas. By viewing in America the shape of the democracy of the future, he was in a better position to grasp what had to be done in France in order to put an end to the cycle of revolutionary turmoil that had plagued the country for a long time. While Tocqueville's book allows us to understand the American exceptionalism, it also explains the deep roots of *le mal français* and

<sup>12</sup> On this issue, see Hadari, 1989: 6. Here is a revealing confession of Tocqueville, taken from a letter he sent to Gustave de Beaumont on July 8, 1838: "Le chapitre que j'écris en ce moment a pour objet d'examiner quelle influence exercent les idées et les sentiments démocratiques sur le gouvernement. J'ai commencé, m'appuyant sur tout l'édifice de mon livre, par établir théoriquement que les idées et les sentiments des peuples démocratiques les faisaient tender naturellement, et à moins qu'ils ne se retiennent, vers la concentration de tous les pouvoirs dans les mains de l'autorité centrale et nationale. ... Maintenant, je veux prouver par les faits actuels que j'ai raison. J'ai déjà beaucoup de faits généraux (car je ne puis employer que ceux-là), mais j'en voudrais davantage. ... C'est assurément un grand tableau et un grand sujet" (Tocqueville, 1967: 311; all emphases added). I have also commented on this fragment in Craiutu, 2009.

<sup>13</sup> The comparative dimension of Tocqueville's works is highlighted and examined, *inter alia*, by Drescher 2006: 479-516 and Mélonio, 2006: 517-32.

<sup>14</sup> See Kahan, 2010: 61.

<sup>15</sup> One exception is worth mentioning here: Tocqueville's best friend and travel companion, Gustave de Beaumont, also espoused a comparative method in his writings on America (*Marie*) and Ireland. Beaumont commented on many drafts of *Democracy in America* and helped Tocqueville finish the latter. For more information, see Zunz, ed. (2010).

<sup>16</sup> I commented on this issue in Craiutu, 1999; also see: Jaume, 2013: 249-318; and Furet, 1985-86.

the difficulty faced by his generation in its attempt to reform the French society in the aftermath of the French Revolution. Again, this is due in large part to his comparative method and ideal types which he used with great dexterity to illuminate the universality of the democratic revolution beyond national or continental borders.

Third, there is the *normative* dimension of Tocqueville's new science of politics. He did not write *Democracy in America* and *The Old Regime and the Revolution* in order to contribute to a scholarly debate. Tocqueville's normativity is, of course, entirely different from that of contemporary thinkers such as John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas; he does not seek to provide an abstract, systematic, and comprehensive view of how democracy ought to work. His approach, I argue, must be understood against the larger background of what we may call, in the absence of a better term, his "philosophical" views (as a caveat, I should add that Tocqueville never had too much trust in abstract philosophy). This is where his normative dimension comes to the fore. Tocqueville sought to understand how democracy changes human condition and modifies the ways in which people think, speak, dream, relate to each other, and work in modern society. He was concerned with some of those changes and sought to find ways and means to countervail them. That is why, as Pierre Manent showed in a classic study originally published three and a half decades ago, Tocqueville should (also) be studied as a normative political philosopher, endowed with a true Pascalian sensibility.<sup>17</sup>

Here, I would like to follow in the footsteps of Shiner (1988), Benoît (2004), Jaume (2013), and Kahan (2015) and insist that Tocqueville cannot be fully understood if detached from the French moralist tradition. What made him a special type of moralist was the fact that he was also an intellectual and politician whose ambition was to participate in the education for liberty of democratic citizens beginning with his fellow countrymen. If Pascal, La Bruyère, and La Rochefoucauld took humanity in general as their object, Tocqueville limited himself to studying the individuals living in democratic societies. Because Tocqueville aspired to be, in Kahan's words, "democracy's spiritual director" (Kahan, 2015), he could never limit himself to being a detached observer. He was instead an engaged moralist concerned with the chances of survival of a genuinely democratic regime in a society of individuals in which the majority of individuals only want to get rich(er) and are ready to abandon public affairs in the pursuit of narrow private interests.

To this effect, Tocqueville embraced a perfectionist image of democracy and entertained a lofty view of the task incumbent on political philosophers and legislators in modern societies. Their mission, he wrote, is to propose and promote a new civic spirit, in other words, "to educate democracy—if possible,

<sup>17</sup> See Manent, 1996. The original French edition was published by Fayard in 1982.

to revive its beliefs; to purify its mores; to regulate its impulses; to substitute, little by little, knowledge of affairs for inexperience and understanding of true interests for blind instincts.” (Tocqueville, 2010, I: 16). He saw himself called to give a sense of long-term enterprises and teach his other fellow citizens how to achieve political happiness. As all the extremes become softer and softer, he concluded in the last chapter of *Democracy in America*, our task is “to work hard to attain that type of grandeur and happiness that is appropriate to us” (Tocqueville, 2010, IV: 1283). It is no coincidence that he was so quick to call the attention of his readers to the shallow curiosity, superficiality, and chronic inattention of individuals living in democratic ages.<sup>18</sup>

Tocqueville’s status as a *political philosopher* rather than a mere sociologist has not always been properly understood. Many anthologies of political thought still do not include *Democracy in America* and he is often missing from introductory courses into political theory in which the obvious candidates are always Plato, Aristotle, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Marx, and Mill. Pierre Manent has explained Tocqueville’s addition to the French *Agrégation de philosophie* on the grounds that his striking models, often likened to sociological ideal-types, are in fact better understood as broad anthropological types that remain linked to the language in which politics was first articulated in ancient Greece. On this reading, Tocqueville can be understood to have reintroduced a tension between democratic justice and greatness that goes as far back as Plato and Aristotle. Another emphasis on the philosophical side of Tocqueville (from a post-modern viewpoint this time) can be found in Sheldon Wolin’s *Tocqueville Between Two Worlds*, that used Tocqueville to analyze the “many forms of postmodern political predicament” (Wolin, 2001: 564). In spite of their ideological differences, both Manent and Wolin see Tocqueville as caught between the competing values of democratic justice, “greatness,” and “the political” as possibilities of modern life. They read Tocqueville in dialogue with the early modern philosophical tradition encompassing Machiavelli, Descartes, Montesquieu, Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau.

Fourth, I should like to underscore the *political* dimension of Tocqueville’s new science of politics. He had a strong passion for political action—“I have always placed action above everything else,”<sup>19</sup> Tocqueville once confessed to his friend, Louis de Kergorlay—and played an important role in the politics of his country. He spent almost twelve years in politics and was, for a short period in 1849, Minister of Foreign Affairs under the Second Republic. As Eduardo Nolla reminded us, “for Tocqueville, reflection joined to practice constitutes

<sup>18</sup> On how democracy changes society and human mind, see Schleifer, 2018: 58-81.

<sup>19</sup> Tocqueville’s letter of October 4, 1837, in Tocqueville, 1977: 47.

the nature of what he calls his political science."<sup>20</sup> His works must therefore be seen as belonging to a larger French tradition of political engagement and political rhetoric in which the writer opens a subtle and complex pedagogical dialogue with his audience seeking to convince and inspire his readers to political action.<sup>21</sup> Never losing sight of France, Tocqueville wrote the book mostly for his fellow countrymen who, given the tragic experience of the Terror, tended to equate democracy and anarchy and did not view with confidence the principle of popular sovereignty. He wanted to convince them that they could (and should) embrace political democracy and that the latter could be properly moderated, educated, and purified of its excesses and anarchical tendencies. This was the goal of *Democracy in America*, a book in which he articulated, as it were, between the lines a political program for the French and proposed concrete remedies for democratic ills. As James Schleifer duly noted, "We need always to remember that what Tocqueville said about the America republic is largely in response to his French audience." True, he did not like everything he saw in the New World, but in *Democracy in America*, he chose to highlight mostly the positive side of the new democratic experiment: "He wanted to counter French fears and blunt the usual criticisms of democracy" (Schleifer, 2012: 156).

It is this political dimension of Tocqueville's works that makes him appealing to many of his readers and, at the same time, difficult to grasp. In a letter wrote to his English translator, Henry Reeve on March 22, 1837, Tocqueville presented himself as an impartial observer placed in a perfect equilibrium between past and future, between aristocracy and democracy:

Independently of the serious interest I take in the opinions others may hold of me, it delights me to see the different features that are given to me according to the political passions of the person who cites me. It is a collection of portraits that I like to assemble. To the present day, I have not yet found one of them that completely looked like me. They absolutely want to make me a party man and I am not in the least; they assign me passions and I have only opinions, or rather I have only one passion, the love of liberty and human dignity" (Tocqueville, 1985: 115-16).

## A thought experiment

In what follows, in order to highlight better the originality of Tocqueville's new science of politics, I would like to propose the following thought experiment. Suppose that Tocqueville were to submit *Democracy in America*

<sup>20</sup> Nolla, "Editor's Introduction," in Tocqueville, 2010, I: cxxi.

<sup>21</sup> See Manent, 2006: 111; Guélléc, 2006: 170; and Nolla, 2010.

as a doctoral dissertation to the faculty of a political science department in a top research university. Would those who stress the importance of statistical and quantitative skills be willing to give Tocqueville a pass, given his imprecise use of the concept of democracy, his unique style of explanation that made him prone to contradict himself, and his many omissions (political parties, industrial revolution, etc.) from his analysis? Would they accept the work of someone who rarely acknowledged his sources, asked his readers to take him at his word,<sup>22</sup> and openly recognized that he gave himself over to the natural movement of his ideas, allowing himself “to be led in good faith from one consequence to another” so that as long as the work is not finished, he could never know exactly where he am going and if \he would ever arrive?<sup>23</sup> Would political scientists accept the moralist side of Tocqueville who claimed in the introduction to his masterpiece that he strives to see “farther” than all the parties of his day and that, “while they are concerned with the next day, [he] wanted to think about the future” (Tocqueville, 2010, I: 32)? And would our more philosophically-inclined colleagues forgive Tocqueville for introducing the term “justice” (in the eyes of God!) only in the very last chapter of his two-volume work on democracy?

These questions seem (almost) rhetorical. Although Tocqueville was among the first to do serious “fieldwork,” many of our fellow political scientists (including theorists) would probably criticize him for being hopelessly confused, lacking a clear “dependent variable,” and working with (far) too many meanings of his main concept (democracy), thus creating unacceptable confusion and tensions in his arguments. Arguably the greatest ambiguity concerns the concept of *democracy*, which is at the heart of Tocqueville’s work. To be sure, in *Democracy in America*, the term “democracy” designates many different things: a revolution dating back to the twelfth century, an unstoppable and irreversible movement willed by God, the equalization of conditions, a democratic social condition, popular sovereignty, rule by the majority, the reign of the middle class, democratic republic, representative government, and a way of life. Tocqueville saw many things in Jacksonian America, some better and loftier than others. He decided, however, to consider all of them part of “democracy,” in spite of the diversity of the country and the strong differences about the practical application of the principles of democracy in America, starting with the vexing issue of slavery.

How do all these meanings relate to each other is by no means entirely clear. Some argued, in fact, that Tocqueville got America “wrong” (Wills, 2004),<sup>24</sup> because he worked with a flawed method that made him perceive only

<sup>22</sup> See Tocqueville, 2010, I: 30.

<sup>23</sup> This is a paraphrase of what Tocqueville told to Mill; see Tocqueville, 1954: 314.

<sup>24</sup> On the need to go beyond conventional interpretations of Tocqueville, see Smith, 1993.

what suited his ideological biases and intellectual inclinations. For others, many of Tocqueville's conclusions were the outcome of unwarranted generalizations and impressionistic observations, loosely based on real facts. Still others complained that Tocqueville was *not* a systematic thinker and believe that he failed to provide a rigorous political science. In Jon Elster's view, for example, Tocqueville's masterpiece (and especially its second volume) has a "hugely incoherent structure" (Elster, 2009: 1) and is marred by "constant ambiguity, vagueness of language, tendency to speculative flights of fancy, and self-contradictions" (Elster, 2009: 2). Who would then give a pass to such a poor social scientist whose many academic sins far outweigh his intellectual virtues?

### Tocqueville's conceptual sophistication

I have had a chance to address these critics elsewhere<sup>25</sup> and it is would pointless to reopen that discussion here. But in order to better assess Tocqueville's methodology, I would like to focus on his inclination to work with several definitions of his main concepts, beginning with democracy, continuing with equality, and ending with liberty. Hence, I propose that we examine in some detail Tocqueville's use of three key concepts: democracy, equality, and historical determinism.

The first thing that must be noted is that Tocqueville refrained from using a one-sided<sup>26</sup> approach to democracy; *Democracy in America* is hardly a clear-cut indictment of modern democracy, even if it is not an unqualified endorsement of the latter either. At the same time, he avoided offering a purely technical definition of this key concept. As James T. Schleifer demonstrated in his classic study on this topic,<sup>27</sup> one can find over ten meanings of the word "democracy" in Tocqueville's book. To his credit, Tocqueville himself was *not* unaware of these problems, as the drafts and notes in the Nolla-Schleifer critical edition clearly demonstrate. As he was finalizing Volume One of *Democracy in America*, he pointed out the great difficulty in untangling what is democratic from what is commercial, English, and puritan in America.<sup>28</sup> His alleged lack of precision in defining democracy and identifying the prerequisites of democracy along with the fundamental distinction between democracy as a form of society (*état social*) and a form of government can therefore be seen a *self-conscious* strategy on his part, as it is evident from reading the drafts and notes in the Liberty Fund critical edition of his work.

<sup>25</sup> See Craiutu, 2009: 55-81, and Craiutu 2011.

<sup>26</sup> For example, Tocqueville did not regard democracy as a short-hand for universal bliss, a synonym for utopia, or a false religion.

<sup>27</sup> See Schleifer, 2000: 325-39; also see Schleifer, 2012: 56-64; Jaume, 2013: 15-94.

<sup>28</sup> Also see Lamberti, 1983 : 26.

Anyone who consults them finds Tocqueville engaged in a fascinating dialogue with himself, as well as with his father Hervé, his brother Édouard, and his friends Gustave de Beaumont and Louis de Kergorlay. Tocqueville constantly drafts outlines and writing strategies and carefully considers his choices of words, reflecting upon the proper definitions of his key concepts. It is therefore possible to conclude that the vagueness that Elster and others dislike so much was a highly *calculated* strategy on the part of Tocqueville and that, to use Schleifer's words (2000: 339), "Tocqueville's very failure precisely to define *démocratie* accounts, in part, for the brilliance of his observations."<sup>29</sup>

Second, let's consider Tocqueville's use of equality. The concept of equality of conditions that looms large in his masterpiece is a notoriously complex term that is better described as a "package" of *many* forms of equality.<sup>30</sup> Among other things, the equality of conditions is linked to the concept of the democratic social state (*état social*) in America, a key notion analyzed in the first part of Volume One of his work. Democracy, Tocqueville insisted, constitutes the social state while the principle of popular sovereignty refers to the political rule by the people. The equality of conditions also connotes a certain set of mores and egalitarian attitudes and beliefs along with a deep "sentiment of equality" and individual dignity. Democracy is an eminently *fluid* and open society in which wealth is no longer fixed for ever in the hands of a few families, and in which individuals constantly climb and descend on the social ladder. All individuals share a strong belief in the legitimacy of equality which, given the democratic education they receive, becomes as important as the acceptance of social mobility and the constant circulation of wealth and property in democratic societies.

Why do I insist on all this? It is mainly because I think it is very important for us not to lose sight of equality as a *package*; to put it differently, it is important to stress the existence of several different meanings of equality beyond the economic type equality to which it is often reduced. It can be argued that, in spite of the rise of economic inequalities in contemporary America and across much of the Western world, our culture and mores remain egalitarian, *toutes proportions gardées*. Our lifestyles are still egalitarian as are our ideas, norms, and conventions. The psychological dimension of equality, that is, the unshakable conviction in the worth of equality is a principle as widely accepted as the doctrine of popular sovereignty. Tocqueville seems to have been quite aware of all this while insisting on the importance of what he called *le sentiment de l'égalité*. That is why, for him, the existence of the equality of (social) conditions was *not* incompatible with the persistence of economic inequalities (Marx and his disciples thought differently). Equality of conditions

<sup>29</sup> Also see Schleifer, 2012: 38-42.

<sup>30</sup> This point is also made in Schleifer, 2012.

as the defining trait of the new (democratic) social condition means social mobility, or the absence of caste-like inequalities; as such, it is the opposite of civil inequality, the antithesis of aristocratic or caste-based privileges. Equality of conditions is at the heart of what Tocqueville calls the "double revolution" which had taken place in the social condition of the Old World: "The noble will have slipped on the social ladder, the commoner will have risen; the one descends, the other ascends. Each half-century brings them closer together, and soon they are going to touch" (Tocqueville, 2010, I: 10).

At the same time, we must point out that Tocqueville was not oblivious to the existence of economic inequalities in America. If, at times he referred to the "surprising equality" in fortunes that reigned in early nineteenth-century America, he noticed the potential for the appearance of what he called an "industrial aristocracy" in America (he did not have good things to say about it in the chapter he devoted to this concept in Volume Two). All things considered, it is fair to say that he did not believe that the existence of this type of aristocracy would be enough to call into question the future of the American democracy as long as social mobility continued to exist in the New World.

Since we discussed several meanings of equality, I would like to quote at length from an insightful passage that can be found in the voyage notes in America in which Tocqueville compared equality in America and France. This fragment is truly exceptional and deserves to be better known. Tocqueville begins by highlighting the advantage of America as follows:

The relationship between the different social positions in America is rather difficult to understand, and foreigners make one or the other of these two mistakes: either they suppose that in the United States there is no distinction between man and man except that of personal merit, or else, struck by the high standing accorded to wealth here, they come to think that in several of our European monarchies, in France for instance, we enjoy a more real and more complete equality than that of the American republics. I hold, as I said above, that both of these ways of seeing the matter are exaggerated. First, let us get the ground clear: equality before the law is not at the moment in question, for that is complete in America; it is not only a right, but a fact. One might even say that for whatever inequality exists elsewhere, the world of politics makes ample compensation in favour of the middle and lower classes, who, with the inheritors of historical names, hold almost all the elected offices. I am talking of equality in the exchanges of social life: the equality which draws certain individuals to come together in the same places, to share their views and their pleasures, and to join their families in marriage. It is in that that one must make distinctions between France and America. The differences turn out to be essential. In France, whatever one says, prejudices of birth still hold very great sway. Birth still puts an almost insurmountable barrier between men. In France, the profession a man exercises still to a certain extent places him socially. These prejudices are the most fatal of all to equality, because they make permanent and almost indelible

distinctions, even when wealth and time are against them. Such prejudices do not exist at all in America. Birth is a distinction, but it does not in the least place a man socially; it carries with it no right and no disability, no obligation towards the world or towards oneself; class structure by professions is also almost unknown; it certainly does make a definite difference to the position of individuals, a difference of wealth rather than of standing, but it does not create any radical inequality, for it by no means prevents the intermarriage of families (that is the great touchstone) (Tocqueville, 1962: 258-59).

After pointing out the advantage of America over France, Tocqueville went on to explain what made America different. He points to the importance of money distinctions in the New World:

This is the difference for the worse: The first of all social distinctions in America is *money*. Money makes a real privileged class in society, which keeps itself apart and rudely makes the rest conscious of its preeminence. This pre-eminence of wealth in society has less fatal consequences for equality than those which spring from prejudices of birth and profession. It is not at all permanent; it is within the reach of all. It is not radical, but it is perhaps even more offensive still; it is paraded in America much more impudently than with us (Tocqueville, 1962: 259).

And finally, we come across Tocqueville's subtle conclusion that reaffirms the ubiquity of the sentiment of equality in America, in spite of the persistence of wealth distinctions:

To summarize then, men in America, as with us, are ranked according to certain categories by the give and take of social life; common habits, education, and especially wealth establish these classifications; but these rules are neither absolute, nor inflexible, nor permanent. They establish passing distinctions and by no means form classes properly so called; they give no superiority, even in thought, to one man over another. So that although two men may never see each other in the same drawing-rooms, if they meet outside, they meet without pride on one side or envy on the other. At bottom, they feel themselves to be, and they are, equal.<sup>31</sup> In other words, the key here is the sentiment of equality which seems to be deeply rooted in the American mentality" (Tocqueville, 1962: 260).

The third point that I would like to make has to do with the twin concepts of determinism and liberty. Tocqueville's new science of politics rejected rigid and one-dimensional accounts of history and politics that posited iron laws of historical development or had racial connotations. In this regard, his new science of politics was the antithesis of the deterministic science embraced by Comte, Saint-Simon, and their followers. As an important passage from Tocqueville's

<sup>31</sup> All quotes are from Tocqueville, 1962: 258-60.

*Recollections* shows, he detested "those absolute systems, which represent all the events in history as depending upon great first causes linked by the chain of fatality, and which, as it were, suppress men from the history of the human race. They seem narrow under their pretense of broadness, and false beneath their air of mathematical exactness."<sup>32</sup> Many political events, Tocqueville believed, could not be accounted for by theories pretending to explain or foresee with precision the development of societies.

The correspondence between Tocqueville and Arthur de Gobineau (included in volume IX of *Œuvres Complètes*) is a good case in point because it shows Tocqueville's firm opposition to any attempt to rob human beings of individual agency. Tocqueville understood that we remain autonomous and unpredictable agents, even in our errors and constraints. He never lost hope in the future of freedom, although toward the end of his life he came to espouse a darker view of his own country and even of democracy in his beloved America.<sup>33</sup> It is this belief in liberty that can be found at the heart of his anti-positivist science of politics. The latter opposed all forms of historical determinism threatening to rob individual human beings of their freedom and capacity for autonomous choice and action.

Tocqueville not only rejected social and political determinism; he was also opposed to pantheism in an important chapter seven of the first part of Volume Two of *Democracy in America*. By pantheism, he did not have in mind the classical definition of this term, i.e. a doctrine that equates God with the forces and laws of the universe. In democratic times, he claimed, people have a strong tendency to espouse general ideas and search for rules "applicable indiscriminately and in the same way to several matters at once" (Tocqueville, 2010, III: 728). In so doing, they develop a strong taste for those theories that emphasize unity and determinism at the expense of diversity and freedom. In democratic societies, this need "to find common rules in everything, to encompass a great number of matters within the same form, and to explain an ensemble of facts by a sole cause becomes an ardent and often blind passion of the human mind" (Tocqueville, 2010, III, 731-32).

In Tocqueville's view, pantheism is not an abstract phenomenon. On the contrary, it represents a formidable if invisible threat to preserving liberty and human greatness in democratic societies. "Among the different systems by the aid of which philosophy seeks to explain the world," Tocqueville wrote, "pantheism seems to me the one most likely to seduce the human mind in democratic centuries. All those who remain enamored of the true grandeur of man must join forces and struggle against it" (Tocqueville, 2010, III; 758).

<sup>32</sup> Tocqueville, 1959: 64. On Tocqueville's method, see Boudon, 2006.

<sup>33</sup> See especially Tocqueville's correspondence with his American friends from 1853-59 in Tocqueville, 2009: 142-308.

Pantheism tends to foster fatalism and determinism as well as uniformity and centralization of power among democratic peoples. By denying them the ability to change the course of events, it attributes to individuals “almost no influence on the destiny of the species, or to citizens on the fate of the people.” At the same time, it gives “great general causes to all the small particular facts” and tends to present all events as “linked together by a tight and necessary chain,” thus ending up “by denying nations control over themselves and by contesting the liberty of having been able to do what they did” (Tocqueville, 2010, III: 853).

This also has important implications for freedom. “I believe,” Tocqueville wrote, “that in nearly each instant of their existence, nations, like men, are free to modify their fate” (Tocqueville, 2010, III: 858, note j). Coming closer to his compatriots, he insisted that the French could gain freedom if they really wanted to be free, that is, if they refused to believe that they were ruled by forces over which they had no control. “Everything that reinforces the idea of the individual today is healthy,” he wrote to his English translator Henry Reeve in 1840 (in Zunz ed., 2010, 583-84). Correspondingly, he believed that all doctrines that seek to deny or diminish the power of individuals must be opposed and rejected as inimical to freedom.

That is why the moving and lyrical *éloge* of liberty that Tocqueville offered in *The Old Regime and the Revolution* (Book II, Chapter 11) is so important in this respect. To be free one must have the desire to be so and ought to cultivate proper habits over time. “There is nothing more fruitful in wonders than the art of being free,” he wrote (Tocqueville, 2010, I: 393); “but there is nothing harder than apprenticeship in liberty.” Tocqueville emphasized that freedom is, above all, an exquisite and uplifting sentiment which gives people profound convictions and a generous fashion of envisioning the things of this world that go beyond their material value. He preferred an aristocratic form of liberty as independence and resistance that emphasized precisely the capacity of individuals to break free from social and economic constraints. Such a manly liberty was in his view a solid antidote to the false and cowardly doctrines of fatalism and pantheism that could produce only weak and pusillanimous souls.

## Conclusion

As a follower of Montesquieu, Tocqueville recognized that all societies are diverse and pluralistic, being influenced in many ways by their history, physical environment, culture, and laws.<sup>34</sup> He believed that in order to adequately

<sup>34</sup> This is what Sheldon Gellar calls Tocquevillian analytics, borrowing this term from Vincent Ostrom. See Gellar, 2009: 33-54; also Ostrom, 1997.

explain social and political phenomena, an open and flexible method would be required, that does not build reductionist and one-dimensional theories of social and political change. Accordingly, he worked with many open-ended definitions of key terms that gave his concepts several meanings, some more fluid than others.<sup>35</sup> Several of Tocqueville's key questions remained unanswered and, as the notes in the Nolla-Schleifer critical editions demonstrate, many of his ideas were reformulated as he was drafting *Democracy in America*. He steadfastly rejected the use of single or absolute principles—the truth for him could never be found in an absolute system (Tocqueville, 2010, IV: 1281, note e)—while trying to convince his contemporaries that they could live peacefully with democracy if they learned how to purify and educate it. As Alan Kahan pointed out (2015), the list of remedies suggested by “Dr. Tocqueville” was certainly unconventional. He adopted the attitude of a teacher of life (*magistra vitae*) addressing an audience of apprentices eager to learn from him how to build the “sacred ark” that could safely carry the humankind on the ocean of democracy to the final port.

Such an ardent defense of liberty and moralistic message would have most likely been seen by the members of Tocqueville's hypothetical doctoral committee as overly normative, dangerously impressionistic, and insufficiently rigorous. For all the sophisticated use of key terms such as democracy, equality, and liberty, and his pioneering fieldwork in America, Tocqueville's work might have not passed a final defense. He would have been expected to use the language and methods of “rigorous” contemporary social science, but he chose to write like a moralist. At best, I venture to surmise, Tocqueville might get a revise and resubmit, but most likely, his work would be criticized on several fronts and grounds. Fortunately, he did not have to be accountable to any jury when he wrote *Democracy in America*. His passion for liberty led him to write a wonderful book and offer a new science of politics that we can still use as a “sacred ark” on the ocean of democracy. He may have never earned a Ph.D. in political science, but he performed brilliantly his role as the “doctor” of democracy. His marvelous medicine chest is still much needed today in our new age of anxiety.

---

<sup>35</sup> That is why Tocqueville would have been surprised to hear that his work illuminates, as Jon Elster's argued, free-rider obstacles to collective action, the implications of “pluralistic ignorance,” and “spillover,” “compensation,” and “satiation” effects and mechanisms.

## Bibliography

- Benoît, Jean-Louis (2004). *Tocqueville moraliste*. Paris: Honoré Champion.
- Boudon, Raymond (2006). "L'exigence de Tocqueville: la «science politique nouvelle»," in *The Tocqueville Review/La Revue Tocqueville*, XXVII: 2: 13-34.
- Craiutu, Aurelian (1999). "Tocqueville and the Political Thought of the French Doctrinaires," *History of Political Thought*, XX: 3: 456-93.
- Craiutu, Aurelian (2009). "What Kind of Social Scientist Was Tocqueville?" in *Conversations with Tocqueville: The Democratic Revolution in the Twenty-First Century*, eds. Aurelian Craiutu and Sheldon Gellar, Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 55-81.
- Craiutu, Aurelian (2011). Review of Jon Elster's *Tocqueville. The First Modern Scientist*, in *Perspectives on Politics*, 9: 2: 361-65.
- Drescher, Seymour (2006). "Tocqueville's Comparisons: Choices and Lessons," in *The Tocqueville Review/La Revue Tocqueville*, XXVII: 2: 479-516.
- Elster, Jon (2009). *Alexis de Tocqueville, the First Social Scientist*, Cambridge/ New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Everett, Edward (1836). Review of Tocqueville's *Democracy of America*, Volume One, in *The North American Review*, XLIII: 92 (July): 178-206.
- Furet, François (1985-86). "The Intellectual Origins of Tocqueville's Thought," *The Tocqueville Review / La Revue Tocqueville*, 7: 117-27.
- Gellar, Sheldon (2009). "Tocquevillian Analytics," in *Conversations with Tocqueville: The Democratic Revolution in the Twenty-First Century*, eds. Aurelian Craiutu and Sheldon Gellar, Lanham, Md., 33-54.
- Guellec, Laurence (2006). "Tocqueville and Political Rhetoric," in *The Cambridge Companion to Tocqueville*, 167-87.
- Hadari, Saguiv A. (1989). *Theory in Practice: Tocqueville's New Science of Politics*, Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Jeremy Jennings (2006). "Democracy Before Tocqueville: Michel Chevalier's America," *The Review of Politics*, 68: 3: 398-427.
- Jaume, Lucien (2013). *Tocqueville: The Aristocratic Sources of Liberty*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Kahan, Alan S. (2010). *Alexis de Tocqueville*, New York: Continuum.
- Kahan, Alan S. (2015). *Tocqueville, Democracy, and Religion: Checks and Balances for Democratic Souls*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lamberti, Jean-Claude (1983). *Tocqueville et les deux démocraties*, Paris : PUF.
- Manent, Pierre (1996). *Tocqueville and the Nature of Democracy*, trans. John Waggoner, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Manent, Pierre (2006). "Tocqueville, Political Philosopher," in *The Cambridge Companion to Tocqueville*, 108-20.

- Mélonio, Françoise (2006). "Tocqueville européen: la France et l'Allemagne," in *The Tocqueville Review/La Revue Tocqueville*, XXVII: 2: 517-32.
- Mill, John Stuart (1977). *Collected Works*, Vol. 18: *Essays on Politics and Society*, ed. John Robson, Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Nolla, Eduardo (2010). "Editor's Introduction," in Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, I: xlvi-clix.
- Ostrom, Vincent (1997). *The Meaning of Democracy and the Vulnerability of Democracies: A Response to Tocqueville's Challenge*, Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.
- Schleifer, James T. (2000). *The Making of Tocqueville's Democracy in America*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Indianapolis: Liberty Fund.
- Schleifer, James T. (2012). *The Chicago Companion to Tocqueville's Democracy in America*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Schleifer, James T. (2018). *Tocqueville*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Shiner, Larry (1988). *The Secret Mirror: Literary Form and History in Tocqueville's Recollections*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Smith, Rogers M. (1993). "Beyond Tocqueville, Myrdal, and Hartz: The Multiple Traditions in America," *American Political Science Review*, 87:3: 549-66.
- Tocqueville, Alexis de (1954). *Œuvres Complètes, VI: 1. Correspondance d'Alexis de Tocqueville avec Henry Reeve et John Stuart Mill*, eds. J.-P. Mayer and Gustave Rudler, Paris: Gallimard.
- Tocqueville, Alexis de (1959). *Recollections*, trans. A. Teixeira de Mattos, ed. J.-P. Mayer, New York.
- Tocqueville, Alexis de (1962). *Journey to America*, ed. J.P. Mayer, trans. George Lawrence, New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Tocqueville, Alexis de (1967). *Œuvres Complètes, XVIII: 1, Correspondance d'Alexis de Tocqueville et de Gustave de Beaumont*, ed. André Jardin, Paris: Gallimard.
- Tocqueville, Alexis de (1977). *Œuvres Complètes, XIII: 1, Correspondance avec Louis de Kergorlay*, ed. Jean-Alain Lesourd, Paris: Gallimard.
- Tocqueville, Alexis de (1985). *Selected Letters on Society and Politics*, ed. Roger Boesche, trans. Roger Boesche and James Toupin, Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Tocqueville, Alexis de (1989). *Œuvres Complètes, XVI: Mélanges*, ed. Françoise Mélonio, Paris: Gallimard.
- Tocqueville, Alexis de (2009). *Tocqueville on America after 1840: Letters and Other Writings*, eds. and trans. Aurelian Craiutu and Jeremy Jennings, Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press.

- Tocqueville, Alexis de (2010). *Democracy in America*. Bilingual critical edition, ed. Eduardo Nolla, trans. James T. Schleifer, 4 vols, Indianapolis: Liberty Fund.
- Welch, Cheryl, ed. (2006). *The Cambridge Companion to Tocqueville*, Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Wills, Gary (2004). "Did Tocqueville 'Get' America?," *New York Review of Books*, April 29: 52-56.
- Wolin, Sheldon (2001). *Tocqueville between Two Worlds*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Zunz, Olivier, ed. (2010). *Alexis de Tocqueville and Gustave de Beaumont in America: Their Friendship and Their Travels*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer, Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press.