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Introduction

Tocqueville in the Twenty-First Century

One of the most surprising intellectual turns of the twentieth-century – a phenomenon that shows no signs of abating – was the revival of interest in the writings of Alexis de Tocqueville. In 1900, the French had almost forgotten Tocqueville, and Americans were beginning to find his famous portrait of early nineteenth-century America of dubious relevance to their increasingly industrial immigrant nation. Yet in 2000, the *Journal of Democracy* asked public intellectuals to discuss issues affecting the future of democracy – the end of history, the problem of civil society, European federalism, race and ethnicity, the collapse of communism, war and foreign policy, international inequality, women and the family, even the democratic aesthetics of post-modernism – through Tocqueville's texts. The editors commented, "one may say with little exaggeration: *We are all Tocquevilleans now*."[1] Or, as Jon Elster has put it, "A generation ago it would have seemed absurd to see Tocqueville as the greatest political thinker of the nineteenth century. Nowadays, there is nothing unusual in this view."[2]

Tocqueville's appeal has stemmed less from his ability to offer a grand theory of society and politics than from his curious role as intellectual *provocateur*, a writer who mysteriously appears to address the reader's own concerns.[3] Indeed, from the mid-twentieth century to the present, Tocqueville has manifested a unique power to bring certain political anxieties into sharper focus: anxieties stemming from efforts to sustain civic cultures that will support the practices of self-government; from attempts to create such cultures in unlikely circumstances; and, finally, from troubling questions about the need for unifying moral beliefs as the basis

for democratic viability. Tocqueville aspired to create a democratic language with which to negotiate the nineteenth-century European transition to democracy. Although he failed in that aim, the persona he created has paradoxically succeeded in becoming a powerful voice in subsequent democratic discussions, and not only in Europe.[4]

Contemporary interest in Tocqueville has been accompanied by a surge in both primary and secondary texts, including two modern critical editions of his works.[5] The *Œuvres complètes de Tocqueville* – begun in 1951 and edited by J. P. Mayer, André Jardin, and Françoise Mélonio – has now reached seventeen volumes, with several books of correspondence to come. The three-volume *Pléïade* critical edition, also edited by Jardin and Mélonio, was completed in 2004. In addition, there have been many new versions of his major works, most recently an edition of letters with the *Recollections* that serves a valuable biographical function.[6] New editions of Tocqueville's letters and political writings and speeches have also been appearing in English, and it seems that twenty-first century Americans can't have too many translations of *Democracy in America*.[7]

The secondary literature on Tocqueville – both casual and scholarly, in French and English (and many other languages) – has also continued apace. But these critical conversations have sometimes been isolated and parochial. In particular, collections of secondary work on Tocqueville in English have generally fallen into camps, either bringing together only scholars from one point of view or discipline, or dealing with only one major text (*Democracy in America*). One of the goals of this *Cambridge Companion to Tocqueville* is to cross at least a few of these national, ideological, disciplinary, and textual boundaries. A short volume cannot pretend to comprehensiveness; however, I hope that this Introduction may indicate where this book's contributors fall on the map of recent Tocqueville scholarship. To that end, I briefly gloss the twentieth-century Tocqueville revival, and then address in turn the topics used to organize this volume: Tocqueville as theorist, as writer of classical texts, as explorer of democratic themes, and as interlocutor in two ongoing conversations about democratic identity – American and French/European.

Tocqueville wrote to his friend Eugène Stoffels in 1835, "My work appeals to people of opposite opinions, not because they

understand me, but because, by considering only one side of my work, they find arguments favorable to their current whims.''[8] For this reason, Tocqueville has become a perennial favorite of politicians, who are not above bungling the quotations or citing apocryphal chapter and verse in their efforts to invoke his benediction. Yet Tocqueville also attracts those – perhaps more today than in the past – who attempt seriously to understand him. Indeed, in the twentieth century, he was claimed by several academic disciplines as a founding father. Today his work figures prominently in political science, sociology, and history; moreover, it has infiltrated the academic ranks of philosophy and literature. A consensus on what exactly constitutes ''Tocquevillean'' analysis, however, remains elusive.

I. THE REVIVAL OF TOCQUEVILLE

George Wilson Pierson's masterful *Tocqueville in America* (1938) gives us a convenient date to mark the emergence both of the American (or Yale) school of Tocqueville scholarship and to note a quickening of interest in Tocqueville by public intellectuals in the United States. After the war, Tocqueville's analysis of nineteenth-century American politics became a touchstone for theorists such as David Truman and Robert Dahl, who drew on America's practice of democracy – allegedly both exceptional and exemplary – to inform a new theory of democratic pluralism. Related to this reading, which saw in Tocqueville's attention to civil associations and parties a forerunner of interest-group theory, was the Tocqueville who allegedly explained why liberalism was hegemonic in America. Here it is hard to overestimate the lasting resonance of Louis Hartz, who brilliantly recast Tocqueville's thesis that America was exceptional because it lacked a feudal past.[9] The Hartzian thesis that America's peculiar history inoculated it against class warfare has served as both stimulus and irritant to numerous counter-arguments about how to theorize political conflict in America. Indeed, the term ''Tocquevillean'' routinely appears as a synonym for views that privilege the notion of a liberal consensus as the most suitable framework from which to analyze American politics and its history, occasionally provoking such exasperated outbursts as ''Beyond Tocqueville, Please!''[10]

More recently, however, "neo-Tocquevillean" has become a label for those American political scientists who find in the associations of civil society the "social capital" on which liberal democracy allegedly must draw in order to function well. Unlike earlier readers, these neo-Tocquevilleans are less attuned to the directly political functions of associations than to their indirect psychological and moral ones. They draw on the second volume of *Democracy in America*, which warns of the dangers of an isolating pathological individualism, and laud the unintended social consequences of voluntary association. Association combats individualism by dragging democratic individuals out of their private concerns, thus indirectly producing socialized and moralized citizens rather than atomistic consumers. In the battle over the place of associations, "neo-Tocquevillean" sometimes seems to be a shorthand substitute for the claim that civil associations automatically create the necessary social substratum for the effective functioning of political democracy; they are an American treasure that has been squandered.

This lament for a lost associational culture and a golden age of community transcends political divisions; it can emerge among both right-wing social conservatives and participatory democrats. One may attribute the alleged decline of associations, after all, to radically different causes. On the right, the culprit is the loss of individual moral fiber, muscle that was once made strong by tough forms of capitalism or traditional families and churches, but that has now become flabby with the welfare state and self-indulgent popular culture.[11] On the left, the villain is a global capitalism so caustic that it tends to corrode not only inherited social ties but all new attempts to arrest its spread throughout the world.

It sometimes seems, then, that Tocqueville has been embraced more than studied by political scientists, who use small Tocquevillean passages to stake out large theoretical territory. Indeed, in the post-war period, it was not in political science, but rather in sociology or the new field of "American Studies" that Tocqueville was read closely and integrated into university curricula. In the 1950s and 1960s, on both sides of the Atlantic, Tocqueville's works were reconstructed to provide an analysis of society and politics that could serve as a theoretical interlocutor of Durkheim, Weber, and especially Marx. Raymond Aron's *Les étapes de la pensée*

sociologiques (1967), translated into English the next year, established Tocqueville as the heir to a particular Montesquieuian sociological tradition, a tradition that focused on political culture and the comparative method. American sociologists began to find in the second *Democracy* a deep critique of the isolating and fragmenting culture of modern America. Among historians and students of American literature, the emergence of the United States as a superpower also encouraged reflection on its national identity, a reflection that always seemed to begin with *Democracy in America*. The Tocqueville read seriously by several generations of students in post-war America, then, was often a political sociologist who offered a perspective on the transition to modernity that contrasted with Marx, or a preternaturally insightful foreigner whose observations of American history and culture provided the orthodoxy with which critical thought must engage.

Tocqueville's revival in France began later and developed differently. In the last third of the twentieth century, a generation of readers – among the most important, Raymond Aron, François Furet, Claude Lefort, Raymond Boudon, and Michel Crozier – rediscovered Tocqueville in the context of reclaiming the French liberal tradition.[12] In the 1970s, for example, Furet used his reading of Tocqueville to contest the dominant historiography of the French Revolution, to urge an abandonment of economic and structural theoretical lenses for cultural and contingent ones. In this way, he also assessed the burden of inherited political cultures on the democratic present, and in particular explored the twin legacies of absolutism and revolution that inhibited France's emergence as a liberal republic. Today, French interest in Tocqueville has broadened to a wide current of historical scholarship contextualizing his work among nineteenth-century historians and liberals.[13] Among political theorists, the twentieth-century receptions and major interpretations of Tocqueville have themselves become a subtle medium for reflecting on contemporary French political philosophy and for exploring the resources of a "republican" language of politics.[14]

The Tocqueville revival, then, has inspired political scientists, instructed sociologists, provided a necessary foil for those who study American history and literature, and produced more than one historical and theoretical epiphany in France. As we move further

into the twenty-first century, what does it mean to be a theoretical "Tocquevillean"?

II. THEORY

One cannot begin to grasp Tocqueville's approach to explanation without understanding that his thinking is always and everywhere inflected by a restless comparative movement among what he perceives to be the relevant cases, a movement that creates the generalizations that inform his new "science" and "art." He once confessed, "without comparisons, the mind does not know how to proceed."[15] But comparison is not simply a way of gaining a theoretical purchase on the new logic of democracy that Tocqueville saw unfolding everywhere around him; it also clarifies the possibilities for action. As Seymour Drescher notes, "comparative analysis posits plurality – of pasts and presents." Thus, comparison for Tocqueville also means the recognition and renegotiation of alternatives, "a means of navigation towards a differently imagined future," a series of moral choices as well as a method of empirical clarification.[16] Drescher's essay gives an overview of the comparative dimensions of Tocqueville's thought (his global reach as well as his core preoccupation with Europe). He argues that despite Tocqueville's urge to rise to an ideal-typical level of abstraction, he in fact remained tied to his core cases, and in particular to a complex and shifting conceptualization of Anglo-America as against France-Europe. Drescher, then, does not attempt to find in Tocqueville a sociological model or an all-encompassing theory, but rather extracts theoretical guidance from Tocqueville's practice, from his repeated attempts to look beyond his own society in order to understand it.[17]

In "Tocqueville on 1789," Jon Elster draws a different kind of theoretical inspiration from Tocqueville's practice. Like Drescher, he thinks it a mistake to seek a theoretical consistency "of the whole"; indeed, he has argued elsewhere that in Tocqueville, "the details are of greater interest than the whole, the reasoning is more compelling than the conclusions, and the partial mechanisms more robust than the general theories."[18] Those details, insights, and partial trains of thought, according to Elster, provide a remarkable conceptualization of social psychological causal mechanisms that

revolve around desires, beliefs, and actions. In *Political Psychology*, Elster examined the "equilibrium analysis" of *Democracy in America*; in this essay, he analyzes the process of long-term social change as presented in the *Old Regime and the Revolution* and in Tocqueville's notes for a second volume. In both, Elster seeks to isolate particularly fertile causal hypotheses – patterns in which psychological effects interact to produce larger-scale social phenomena. "Tocqueville on 1789," beyond offering new insights into the essential structure of the text, breaks down Tocqueville's explanation of the fragmentation of elites in the old regime into the different causal "mechanisms" surrounding envy and hatred, and also analyzes Tocqueville's own versions of the "Tocqueville paradox" (the insight that reforms may trigger revolutions). Elster thus sees Tocqueville as a theoretical ally: a powerful generalizer who rises above mere narrative, but who nevertheless avoids arid nomological dead ends, achieving, in his best moments, a "superb understanding of social explanation."[19]

Tocqueville, then, continues to inspire those who are attracted to a particular kind of explanation of social phenomena, an explanation that falls somewhere between cultural reconstruction and theoretical generalization, and that illuminates precisely because it works in this "half-light."[20] Perhaps more surprising, however, is the recent inclusion of Tocqueville in the pantheon of political philosophers on both sides of the Atlantic. In the past, rarely placed among the great political philosophers, or even among the canonical theorists who figure in histories of political ideas, Tocqueville is now included on the syllabus for the French *agrégation de philosophie*, and generates an unusual amount of attention among academic political theorists. One might well echo Pierre Manent: "what are we to think of this belated promotion of Tocqueville to the rank of philosopher?"[21]

Harvey Mansfield and Delba Winthrop explore this question by finding yet another kind of theoretical inspiration in Tocquevillean practice. Developing themes articulated in the introduction to their translation of the *Democracy*, they argue that Tocqueville's new political science, "embedded in fact rather than abstracted in a theory," must be inferred from the practice of Americans, and preeminently from their characteristic manner of promoting religion, pursuing self-interest, and practicing democratic *moeurs*.[22]

They position this political science against the old political science of Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau, which defined itself by a focus on political legitimacy and the techniques of liberal government. Tocqueville, then, is a democratic liberal who unsettles the modern liberal project by ignoring its characteristic apparatus (the state of nature, the social contract, the right of consent, and sovereignty) and substituting an implicitly Aristotelian concern for judging and training souls. And this is the crux of Pierre Manent's elevation of Tocqueville to the role of philosopher: democracy reveals itself as one of the two possible archetypes of the human soul – democracy and aristocracy. These archetypes serve as modern reincarnations of ancient regimes. Indeed, the polarity between democracy and aristocracy is expressed in "the very language in which politics was first articulated when it was brought to light in the political life, and through the political philosophy, of ancient Greece."[23]

For Mansfield and Winthrop, as well as for Manent, Tocqueville's subtle juxtaposition of what one might call the different "life-forms" of aristocracy and democracy presents the reader with implicit lessons about how to rise above both the mediocrity and the dangers of the democratic *état social*. Manent's is perhaps the darker view of those dangers. On his account, equality of conditions (*le fait générateur*) fused with the dogma of the sovereignty of the people (*le principe générateur*) unleashes human willfulness in a destructive cycle that continually threatens to undermine the natural order of human life. But for all three theorists, Tocqueville can be understood to have reintroduced an irresolvable tension (conceptualized as a theoretical gap between greatness and virtue, or between grandeur and justice) that is more ancient than modern.

Theorists who are influenced by Leo Strauss's view of the modern project are not alone in reading Tocqueville in two uncommon contexts – as against the political thought of the ancients and against the modern liberal tradition of natural rights from Hobbes to Rousseau. For example, Sheldon Wolin in *Tocqueville Between Two Worlds* also situates Tocqueville in the company of theorists that he rather conspicuously avoided. Tocqueville had, after all, "barely read" Plato and Aristotle,[24] he admonished himself not to use inapt examples from the ancient world,[25] and he hardly mentions the modern liberals. These silences seem not to matter. Tocqueville

becomes a political philosopher because of his implicit critique of modernity – his view that democracy tends to obliterate pride, or greatness, or, in the case of Wolin, those episodic, rare, and heroic moments when the truly political is possible.

III. TEXTS

Tocqueville has left us four major texts: the two volumes of *Democracy in America*, the posthumously published *Recollections*, and the *Old Regime and the Revolution*. Perhaps the most striking evidence that Tocqueville has become a "great" is that these works are now routinely referred to as literary classics.[26] And one reads a classic not simply for what can be culled to further an intellectual agenda, but with a peculiar kind of respect for a unique textual world that deserves to be understood in its own terms. Thus Tocqueville is not just someone whom we can mine for guidance about our own problems, not just an alternative to Marx, or precursor of Weber, or liberal sage, or denouncer of tyranny; rather, he represents a complex puzzle in his own right. The appearance of concurrent English translations of *Democracy in America* has tended to intensify this focus on language, style, tone, and rhetoric. How did Tocqueville create the distinctive voice that speaks to us from his texts?

Both James Schleifer and Arthur Goldhammer, translators who have spent years living with the text of Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, remind us of his extreme self-consciousness as a writer, his effort to shape his insights about democracy into a persuasive rhetoric of common sense and reassurance, and his conviction – in Goldhammer's words – that the "classical armature" can be made adequate to rendering new things and persuading a new generation. (The relationship of Tocqueville's style to the French classical moralists is also elegantly dissected in Françoise Mélonio's situation of Tocqueville in the French literary tradition.)

James Schleifer's study of the unpublished notes and archival sources for the two *Democracies* reveals a writer constantly rethinking, rewriting, and attempting to distill new material into concise deductive trains of reasoning or into striking spatial and visual metaphors. He shows us a Tocqueville – we will see the same authorial impulse at work in the *Old Regime* – omitting distracting

exegesis and deliberately suppressing his sources in order to establish a direct tie to his readers and better influence their practice. Goldhammer reflects explicitly on this rhetorical attempt both to describe and shape democratic practice by focusing on two allusive Tocquevillean terms: *l'intérêt bien entendu* and *l'instinct*. By textualizing these terms (within *Democracy in America*), contextualizing them (within Tocqueville's literary universe), and exploring their resonances (in French and English), Goldhammer meditates on the "art" of shaping politics and texts. He employs a classical metaphor also frequently revived in the nineteenth century: writers and statesmen as voyagers navigating uncharted and dangerous waters. The legislator and the translator sail by "instinct," and only retrospectively – by a safe arrival in port – know whether their choices are justified.

Laurence Guellec and Robert Gannett take up, among many other matters associated with the composition of his texts, Tocqueville's own failure to arrive safely in port. Tocqueville's rhetorical stance in the *Democracy* failed to persuade. Indeed, undermined by his own awareness that democracy demotes the all-seeing "writer-orator" to the status of just another competitor for the public's ear (an awareness revealed by his irony, his distancing metaphors, and his self-confessed failure to achieve the "divine point of view"), Tocqueville abandoned his initial effort to create a new democratic language. Hence the very different writerly persona of the posthumous *Recollections* (satirical chronicler who mocks the grotesque language of democracy) or of the *Old Regime and the Revolution* (master archivist who unearths shocking historical secrets). At the end of her essay, Guellec raises a question that becomes one of Gannett's "shifting puzzles." What are we to make of Tocqueville's statement in the *Old Regime* that liberty is a sublime taste, even an inexplicable gift of grace, appreciated only by the few?[27] Gannett's scholarly reconstruction of the genesis and composition of the *Old Regime* revisits several historical controversies about the text, but perhaps most importantly suggests that these statements about liberty should be taken neither as retreat nor as lament. Rather they are consistent with a new rhetorical strategy to confront citizens with the nature of their servitude, to shame them with their long acquiescence in despotism, and to jolt them into a new form of prideful self-assertion.