America After Tocqueville


Many of the difficulties we have in grasping Tocqueville’s fullest intentions in his seminal work lie in his marginalization of problems he raised in “The Present and Probable Future Condition of the Three Races that Inhabit the Territory of the United States,” the last chapter that concludes the first volume of *Democracy in America*.

Three aspects of American democracy shape Mitchell’s book. He shows that they cannot be considered apart from his predictions about the future relationship between the three original populations – the red, the white, and the black – who lived side by side yet remained apart in the United States, which he visited in the 1830s. The first centers on the tensions between ideas of equality and a political system that tries to keep it within bounds. The second is the relationship between this system and the dynamics of American capitalism. The last revolves around the criteria of inclusion and exclusion in American life.

Mitchell asks if Americans have surrendered to what Tocqueville called the materialization of life; if that compromise means they have abandoned their original spiritual quest; and if Americans are on the way to a radical alienation from politics.

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For Ruth
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References to Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America*

Throughout the text, I refer to the Bradley edition of *Democracy in America* (see note 2, chapter 1).

Bradley’s Volume I is divided into chapters. Volume II is divided into four books, each of which in turn is divided into chapters. Hence, “I” refers to Volume I, followed by chapter number and page number. “II” refers to Volume II, followed by book number, chapter number, and page number.
This book has its roots in my earlier book, *Individual Choice and the Structures of History: Alexis de Tocqueville as Historian Reappraised* (1996), which pursued Tocqueville's passionate belief that if people in the modern age wanted to enlarge the conditions of their liberty, they could not neglect the study of the past. His passion for “pondering the future” was just as intense. He conjured up the phrase for his readers with magisterial hyperbole, yet serious purpose – not common in a man only thirty – to articulate his reasons for thinking and writing about American democracy. America seized his imagination and would not let it go, from his very first visit to his declining years, during which he continued to correspond with Americans he had befriended. He summoned up his intellectual powers to tell his readers in Europe that they must recognize and acknowledge America as a wholly new and daringly innovative social and political experiment that would weigh heavily, not only on the future of Americans, but of Europeans as well. My earlier book dwelt on Tocqueville's conception of the fragile links between individual agency and large historical forces that live on opposite sides of an opaque curtain. It did not neglect the ways in which much of the power of *Democracy in America* rested on his sharp contrasts between aristocratic and democratic society. The most important revealed quite different notions of individual liberty, individual worth, and historical change.

Tocqueville's reflections on the conditions of the Indian and slave populations of the United States before the eruption of the Civil War I left for separate study. My decision proved to be the beginning of the present book. His analysis and predictions about the future of the native and black peoples in America, as I came to see them, add new meaning...
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to his sense of the past, raising such questions as the origins of cultural
difference that led to the devastating effects of Western civilization on
the cultures of aboriginal North American and North African people,
and, not least, on the people from large parts of equatorial Africa
who suffered the deaths and indignities of forced passage to and settle-
ment in the New World. The meshes and clashes of Western and non-
Western cultures in North America forced Tocqueville to ponder the
future of democracy and opened his mind to the comparative history of
civilizations.

My understanding of how the three races in Tocqueville’s America
existed alongside one another, touched one another, yet remained iso-
lated from one another, would have eluded me had I not sought answers
to his belief that the black and aboriginal populations could not be fitted
into his larger scheme of understanding the foundations of American
democracy, at the center of which equality was the inextinguishable
reality, not only in its crude and obvious form, but in its most subtle
manifestations. His most profound and provocative ideas, his pessimism
and his optimism, derive from a prolonged reflection on the meaning of
that ethos. He sought to keep in their place what were for him the dan-
gerous excesses of equality that in their striving for sameness threatened
not only personal and political liberty but the quality of life itself. The
emotional investment that values some aspects of equality as good and
better than others, of devaluing others as unworthy, and of the dis-
agreements caused by these conflicting beliefs is even more intense today.
While many Americans believe that the American Constitution can offer
solutions to some of these problems, and are certain about its soundness,
the unease caused by the debate on how to grasp the dynamics of demo-
cratic authority and the deployment of its power to ensure a decent dis-
tribution of equality is imperfectly understood. For the time being, that
question lies on the margins of theoretical consciousness. Finally, it is
impossible to move into this territory without studying how and with
what consequences Americans valorize the material satisfactions of a
capitalist consumer society – the hunger for which Tocqueville believed
would and could not be stilled, and which will surely continue unabated,
not only in America, but in all parts of the world.

This book could not have reached its present form without the drafts
of confidence that a growing familiarity with new subjects and disciplines
inspired. In its earlier versions, it benefited from Ed Hundert’s and David
Bates’ best criticism. Their encouragement helped me to complete it. My
thanks are due as well to other friends with whom I discussed many of
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