Introduction

The title of this book places me in a minority position on two separate counts.

Most scholars of Tocqueville think he was a great political theorist, and pay little attention to him as a social scientist. They view his main concern as normative, not as explanatory. Although I intend to show that he was an important social scientist, it is of course harder to prove the negative statement that he was not a major political thinker. Indeed, I am not going to make a systematic argument to that effect. I may mention, as one indicator, that in the index to John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* there are twenty references to John Stuart Mill, but not a single one to Tocqueville. A more direct refutation of any claim on his behalf to be a great political thinker is given by the hugely incoherent structure of the work on which any such claim would have to rest, *Democracy in America*. I believe the bulk of the present book will make it clear beyond doubt that in that work, at least, Tocqueville was not a systematic thinker. Although he asserts in the Introduction to the book that a new world needs "a new political science," he does not provide it. His work on the ancien régime, while much more coherent and systematic, is a profound work of historical sociology but not of political theory. Yet, to repeat, my claim that he was not an important political theorist is strictly subsidiary to my positive argument.

Most social scientists, if they have read Tocqueville, probably do not think he is up to their standards. They may applaud his ambition, but

deny that it was matched by any actual achievements. I do not have any hard evidence to prove this statement, but a long acquaintance with the social sciences tells me that he is much less of a household name than Marx, Durkheim, or Weber. In the index to James Coleman's *Foundations of Social Theory*, these receive respectively eight, nine, and sixteen references, Tocqueville only one. The reason, I suspect, is that for contemporary social science what counts as "an achievement" is determined by a certain view of science as resting on lawlike theories and aiming at sharp predictions.

I have argued against this view in various places, most recently in *Explaining Social Behavior*, and I shall not restate my objections here. The only point I want to emphasize concerns my proposal to substitute *mechanisms* for *laws*. The spillover and compensation effects that I discuss in Chapter 1 are mechanisms, not general laws. As laws, they could not both be true; as mechanisms, they may both be applicable, albeit in different situations. The statement that "a man facing danger rarely remains as he was: he will either rise well above his habitual level or sink well below it," further considered in Chapter 4, is hardly a law, but it is not an empty statement either, since *tertium datur*. The proposition that when A favors B over C, the reaction of C is one of envy toward B rather than of hatred toward A is one premise of Tocqueville's analysis of the French Revolution (Ch. 9). In my view, it is a mechanism rather than a law: a child that is not offered the ice cream her sister received may react to the injustice of her parents rather than against the better fortune of her sibling.

It would be misleading to leave the impression that Tocqueville is completely ignored by contemporary social scientists. The "Tocqueville paradox" that I consider in Chapter 9 – revolutions occur when conditions get better, not when they are getting worse – has had a considerable influence on theories of revolutions. It is also generally acknowledged that the equally paradoxical idea of "pluralistic ignorance" that was launched by Floyd Allport in 1924 had a direct precursor in Tocqueville's theory of conformism (Ch. 2). I shall try to persuade the reader that Tocqueville has other insights worth discovering or rediscovering.

The main obstacles to this rehabilitation are Tocqueville's constant ambiguity, vagueness of language, tendency to speculative flights of fancy, and self-contradictions. These flaws are abundantly found in

Democracy in America and, to a much lesser extent, in the generally more sober and coherent *Ancien régime*.

Consider first the ambiguities. It has often been noted that when Tocqueville refers to "democracy" he sometimes means "France," sometimes "America," and sometimes "democracies in general." In any given passage, the reader has to reconstruct the intended meaning. It is also well known that he uses the term "democracy" to denote both democratic government and the social state of equality. It is less generally recognized – but a central thesis of the present book – that the term "equality" itself is highly ambiguous. Sometimes it means equality of fortune at a given moment in time, sometimes rapid changes of fortune over time. This dynamic sense of equality is the main independent variable for many of the most important phenomena in the book, notably the absence of organized classes and hence of class struggle in the United States. Another ambiguity to which I repeatedly draw attention is his tendency to use "hatred" and "envy" as if they were one and the same emotion. They are not: the action tendency of hatred is to destroy the hated person; that of envy is to destroy the envied object, not its possessor.[1] In the analysis of a revolution that began by destroying privileges, and ended by killing the privileged, this distinction is obviously important. Finally, there is his regular tendency to describe a given phenomenon first as a glass that is half full and then as one that is half empty.

Consider next vagueness of language. Tocqueville is sometimes guilty of one of the most frustrating defects in a writer, that of *not being clear enough to be wrong*. At one point below I ask myself whether there is a contradiction between two passages, and answer that one of them is "too vague to be in flat-out contradiction with anything." There is also a frustrating vagueness in the chapters on "How Americans combat individualism with free institutions" and "How Americans combat individualism with the doctrine of self-interest properly understood," as if these were conscious collective efforts to defeat a generally recognized problem. Some of this language may be innocent rhetoric, but sometimes Tocqueville gives the impression that he is transforming cause–effect relations into means–end

[1] If we are to avoid tautology, we cannot *identify* these emotions by their effects; rather, we have to look at the beliefs that trigger them.

relations. This tendency is closely related to functional explanation, about which more shortly.

Consider further the speculative tendencies. The reader of *Democracy in America* is struck by the contrast between the concrete and down-to-earth nature of the first volume and the highly speculative, almost sophomoric character of many parts of the second. Most of us are liable from time to time to speak before we think; Tocqueville often seems to have thought before he looked (Sainte-Beuve). James Bryce, who had a deep knowledge of the United States as well as of Tocqueville's work, characterized the second volume as "a series of ingenious and finespun abstract speculations . . . which . . . will appear to most readers overfanciful, overconfident in their effort to construct a general theory applicable to the infinitely diversified facts of human society, and occasionally monotonous in their repetition of distinctions without differences and generalities too vague, perhaps too hollow, for practical use."[2] The most blatant instances, perhaps, occur in his speculative explanations of various religious phenomena. As I say in Chapter 2, in these analyses, he is applying what may be called the first law of pseudo-science: "Everything is a little bit like everything else."

Consider finally the contradictions. In an earlier book that contained two chapters on Tocqueville, I wrote that "There is no point beating about the bush: There is no other great thinker who contradicts himself so often and on such central questions."[3] I now think I overdid it somewhat, by lack of exegetical charity and ingenuity. As I discuss at various places below, some of the prima facie contradictions may be rescued or explained away. Many, however, cannot. In particular, the authority of public opinion is both asserted and denied (Ch. 2), as is the capacity of democratic citizens to be motivated by the long-term consequences of their present choices (Ch. 1 and Ch. 3). On these core issues of the work *we simply do not know what he thought*. In my earlier study I noted other minor inconsistencies that, I believe, are also beyond rescue. From the perspective of the present book, however,

[2] Bryce (1901), p. 326. In his review of the second volume, John Stuart Mill remained utterly silent about these speculative ideas, a fact I tend to interpret as indicating similar disapproval on his part. His robust common sense must have told him that they were nonsense, and his friendship with and general admiration for Tocqueville prevented him from saying so. This is of course mere guesswork on my part.

[3] Elster (1993), p. 112.

contradiction is less troublesome than ambiguity, vagueness, and speculation. Each of two contradicting claims may have explanatory usefulness if both are downgraded from lawlike statements to statements about mechanisms.

In defense of his contradictions, we might also suggest, tentatively, that they were a side effect of his intense concentration on the matter at hand, which sometimes caused him to forget what he had written a few pages earlier. When generalizing recklessly from a few examples, he also pushed the implications farther and deeper than he might otherwise have done. In a somewhat Tocquevillian phrase (see *R*, pp. 144, 215), he might have probed less deeply had he been more concerned with consistency. This idea is obviously not a point to be stressed, but to be taken for what it is: a suggestion.

There is another obstacle to understanding Tocqueville for which he should not really be blamed, but which nevertheless may be partly responsible for the unjustified neglect of his views. It seems to me certain beyond doubt that Tocqueville deployed his "models" or "mechanisms" in a fully conscious way. I find it impossible to explain the consistent appeal to the spillover effect and to the desire-opportunity mechanism in *Democracy in America*, or the repeated invocation of the patterns "destroyed by success" and "saved by danger" in the *Recollections*, without assuming that he worked from abstract and general models. But perhaps out of a combination of the historian's arrogance and the aristocrat's arrogance he disdained spelling them out.[4] He seems to have preferred to hide the scaffolding and pretend that he was simply telling a story, putting one foot ahead of another, with the occasional maxim or epigram thrown in. Anything else would have smacked of pedantry and of the abstract eighteenth-century rationalism that he detested. Like Stendhal, he wrote for the happy few. That was his privilege, but perhaps posterity's loss.

The main task of this book is to argue for the relevance of Tocqueville for social science in the twenty-first century. It may be useful to frame some of the more general issues by comparing him with some of his contemporaries. I believe there may exist a consensus that the three

[4] Several readers of the manuscript objected to this claim, which I certainly cannot prove to be true. It is based on a long acquaintance with Tocqueville's prickly and intensely private personality and, as I note in the text, his dislike of pedantry.

most important thinkers on social and political matters in the second third of the nineteenth century were Marx, John Stuart Mill, and Tocqueville. The comparison between Marx and Tocqueville is especially instructive. One could also use organicist thinkers such as Hegel, Spencer, and Durkheim as a foil to bring out what is distinctive about Tocqueville.

Painting with very broad strokes, the dominant and in my view deeply pernicious features of nineteenth-century social thought were holism, organicism, functionalism, and teleology. In complex ways that I cannot discuss here, these closely interrelated approaches were partly a legacy of theology and partly a result of the influence of biology on the analysis of society. They led to all sorts of absurd arguments and conclusions, many of them deserving a prominent place in the cabinet of horrors in the history of science. With a few exceptions, Tocqueville was innocent of these sins. Among his contemporaries, only John Stuart Mill had a cleaner record in this respect.

By holism I mean the denial of methodological individualism, and the claim that supraindividual entities – be they "social facts" (Durkheim), classes (Marx), or Reason (Hegel) – have independent explanatory power. An important example is the tendency to ignore the free-rider problem in collective action, and to assume that cooperation will be forthcoming simply because it is better for all if all cooperate than if none does. Tocqueville was no sort of a holist. As we shall see, he was very much aware of the free-rider problem, and argued that either social norms or selective incentives may contribute to overcoming it. His frequent references to "mores" as explanatory variables do not presuppose that these are anything over and above (shared) individual attitudes. Moreover, Tocqueville was not only a resolute methodological individualist, but also, I argue in Chapter 8, an ethical individualist.

By organicism I mean the tendency to look at societies as analogous to biological organisms, with an implicit or explicit assumption of stability and self-regulation. In nineteenth-century sociology and in more recent cybernetic theories of society, this approach has led to a great deal of nonsense. Again, Tocqueville can be exculpated on this count. I argue in Chapter 5 that he thought America in his time was in (what I shall call) a state of equilibrium, but he did not claim that this was the natural state of all societies. On the contrary, he argued that

prerevolutionary France was progressively hollowed out and destabilized as a society over a period of three or four hundred years.

By functionalism I mean the explanation of phenomena by their beneficial effects for something (e.g., social cohesion) or someone (e.g., the capitalist class) rather than by their causes. If we observe that a group engages in successful collective action, we might explain it by its beneficial consequences for the collectivity rather than by the motives and beliefs of the individual participants. If we observe norms of vendetta and blood feuds in a backward society, we might explain them by the fact that they keep the population down at a sustainable level. Although Tocqueville never proposes any functionalist argument with that degree of crudeness, he does appeal to this mode of explanation on two important points. He believed that social norms and codes of honor exist because they satisfy the needs of the group whose behavior they govern (Ch. 4). More importantly, a key argument in the *Ancien régime* arguably rests on a confusion between accidental third-party benefits of social conflict and explanatory benefits (Ch. 9). These are rare instances, however. As shown by his analyses of religion, he was fully aware of the existence of *nonexplanatory benefits* of social practices.

By teleology I mean the idea that history has a *sense*, both a meaning and a direction. It is related to holism, but one can be a nonteleological holist. It is also related to functionalism, in the way wholesale trade is related to retail. One can be a functionalist on this or that specific issue, without being committed to large historical claims. The Introduction to *Democracy in America* may on a first reading seem to constitute a teleological argument for the irresistible and inevitable progress of equality in the modern world. I argue in Chapter 2, however, that shorn of its rhetorical style the reasoning is perfectly acceptable and valid. Chapter I.5 of the *AR* also has a bit of teleological flavor, but harmlessly so.

In the ways I have indicated, Marx and Tocqueville are at opposite poles. Except for the rare lapse into functionalism, Tocqueville looks for *microfoundations* where Marx looks for aggregate evolutionary patterns. (They have in common, however, ethical individualism.) Yet while opposite, they were also connected. We know that Marx read Tocqueville, and that he was probably influenced by his ideas about classes (or their absence) in America (Ch. 7). In Tocqueville's notes

from his travels in Germany in 1854, we find a tantalizing reference to the young Hegelians through whom "German philosophy left its elusive spirituality to fall into political affairs (*la matière et les affaires*) with a licentiousness never seen even in France" (*O III*, p. 1097). Although he did not read any German philosophy firsthand, it is possible that his secondhand source, Saint-René Taillandier, referred to Marx.[5]

It is also possible, although supported by no evidence, that Marx and Tocqueville brushed shoulders in Paris in February 1848, where Tocqueville was at the center of events and Marx had a brief stopover on his travel from Bruxelles to Germany. More importantly, they both wrote on the February Revolution, Marx from the point of view of its importance for world history and Tocqueville from the perspective of the unintended consequences of human action (Ch. 9). Nevertheless, they agreed to a considerable extent about the causes of the revolution, both citing the immense contempt into which the July monarchy had fallen. We even find in Marx a variation on the Tocquevillian theme "destroyed by success" (Ch. 9). In a comment on the political crisis in 1851, Marx writes that "Instead of letting itself be intimidated by the executive power with the prospect of fresh disturbances, [the national assembly] ought rather to have allowed the class struggle a little elbow room, so as to keep the executive power dependent on it. But it did not feel equal to the task of playing with fire."[6] Marx's powers of analysis were as strong as those of Tocqueville – at least when he did not succumb to the *search for meaning*. As I remark in Chapter 9, for Tocqueville the events of 1848 were mostly sound and fury; for Marx, even small details tended to acquire world-historical significance.

In the rest of this book I make occasional references to Tocqueville's contemporaries or predecessors. Yet the main task I set myself is to

[5] This writer does not cite Marx by name, but refers (Taillandier 1853, vol. I, p. 292) to the creation in January 1842 of the journal, *Rheinische Zeitung*. Marx wrote in this journal and soon became its editor. Puzzlingly, Taillandier cites it as the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung*, which was the name of the journal that Marx was to edit during the 1848 Revolution. It is at least possible that Taillandier was aware of Marx's contributions to both journals and that his reading of them may have colored his exposition of the young Hegelians that Tocqueville relied on. This being said, Arnold Ruge and Max Stirner play a much more important role in Taillandier's discussions of this school.

[6] Marx (1852), p. 162. As we shall see in Ch. 9, Tocqueville used the very same metaphor – tempering the fire without extinguishing it.

elucidate the structure of his arguments, their validity, and their relevance for us today. For that purpose I deliberately chose to limit the scope of the scholarly apparatus compared to what would have been appropriate for a book with a more historical focus. I rely mainly on what for me are the four primary texts: the published versions of *Democracy in America*, the *Ancien régime*, and the *Recollections*, as well as the remarkable notes for the planned second volume of the *Ancien régime*.[7] I shall also on occasion refer to the draft manuscripts of *Democracy in America*, not to reconstruct the evolution of Tocqueville's thinking, but to cite formulations that may be more poignant or striking than what we find in the published work. I decided, however, to ignore Tocqueville's other published or unpublished writings. Although I cite occasionally from his voluminous correspondence, it is mainly to add relief to ideas found in the primary works. Finally, the reader will find virtually no references to the vast secondary literature on Tocqueville, partly because the bulk of the commentaries have focused on other issues than those I discuss and partly because responding to them would have broken the flow of the argument.

Among the four texts (just mentioned) on which I draw, *Democracy in America* and the *Ancien régime* are obviously the most important. Of these the former is by a wide margin the one I cite most frequently. This may come as a surprise to readers who share Dicey's opinion that the *Ancien régime* is "by far the most powerful and the most mature of [Tocqueville's] works."[8] It is certainly more mature (or coherent) than the exuberantly inconsistent earlier work, but not, I think, more powerful. In *Democracy in America* we encounter an enormously creative sociological imagination that generates a steady stream of *exportable causal mechanisms* whose importance Dicey did not fully appreciate. Although the later work is also rich in this respect, it is in the nature of a work of history that the proportion of theory to fact will be lower.

If I can demonstrate that Tocqueville's work does indeed contain exportable mechanisms, I shall have shown him to be a social scientist and perhaps an important one. Readers will ask themselves, however, how I can substantiate the claim that he was the *first* social scientist.

[7] I draw extensively on these notes in Ch. 9. Although they are fragments of an incomplete project, they are often extremely insightful.
[8] Dicey (1915), p. 233.

Readers of the manuscript – and some who just came across the title of the book – have argued that others have a stronger claim to that distinction: Montesquieu, Hume, Adam Smith, Condorcet, or Bentham. Not all of these founding figures did, however, share Tocqueville's obsession with causality. In the writings of those who did offer causal analyses, notably Montesquieu and Adam Smith, I do not find the same density of mechanisms. This is obviously a matter of judgment. Nothing is really at stake, except the appropriateness of a catchy title. I return briefly to this question in the Conclusion.