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978-0-521-51844-4 - Alexis de Tocqueville, the First Social Scientist

Jon Elster

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## Alexis de Tocqueville, the First Social Scientist

This book proposes a new interpretation of Alexis de Tocqueville that views him first and foremost as a social scientist rather than as a political theorist. Drawing on his earlier work on the explanation of social behavior, Jon Elster argues that Tocqueville's main claim to our attention today rests on the large number of exportable causal mechanisms to be found in his work, many of which are still worthy of further exploration. Elster proposes a novel reading of *Democracy in America* in which the key explanatory variable is the rapid economic and political turnover rather than equality of wealth at any given point in time. He also offers a reading of *The Ancien régime and the Revolution* as grounded in the psychological relations among the peasantry, the bourgeoisie, and the nobility. Consistently going beyond exegetical commentary, Elster argues that Tocqueville is eminently worth reading today for his substantive and methodological insights.

**Jon Elster** currently holds the position of Professor at the Chaire de Rationalité et Sciences Sociales, Collège de France. He previously held teaching positions at the University of Oslo, University of Chicago, and Columbia University. He is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, Académie Européenne, and the Norwegian Academy of Science. He is also Corresponding Fellow of the British Academy and Doctor honoris causa of the Universities of Valencia, Stockholm, and Trondheim. His numerous books include *Explaining Social Behavior: More Nuts and Bolts for the Social Sciences* (2007), *Closing the Books: Transitional Justice in Historical Perspective* (2004), and *Alchemies of the Mind* (1999).

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## Preface

I first read Tocqueville almost fifty years ago, as part of my French studies at the university. As I was largely ignorant of social science and of history, I was unable to benefit from him. When I returned to *Democracy in America* fifteen years later, having spent most of the intervening years learning those disciplines, I had an experience I have only had with two other books, Thomas Schelling's *Strategy of Conflict* and Paul Veyne's *Le pain et le cirque*. The work put me in such a state of intellectual and nervous excitement that I could not sit still, but had to get up from my chair and walk about from time to time.

When I tried to penetrate more fully into the work, its brilliance began to seem more blinding than illuminating. As I explain in the Introduction and document throughout the book, Tocqueville's unsystematic, not to say incoherent, analyses detract from the value of *Democracy in America* as a guide to either democracy or America. On further reflection, however, I was able to understand why my initial impression was justified. Instead of assuming that Tocqueville was a political theorist or an observer of American society, I began reading him as a social scientist. *Democracy in America* is filled to the brim – indeed, sometimes overflowing – with small and medium-sized causal mechanisms and highly sophisticated methodological insights that, although they do not add up to the grand theory to which he aspired, have lasting value. Even today, it seems to me, they are not as fully explored and utilized as they ought to be.

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Although this reassessment put me in a different camp from virtually all writers on Tocqueville, it was not a solitary work. From the very beginning it was an enterprise carried out jointly with Stephen Holmes. In two footnotes I point to specific points on which he shaped my reading of *Democracy in America* and of the *Recollections*, but the importance of our collaboration is both much greater and more diffuse. On several occasions we taught Tocqueville together to our students at the University of Chicago. We also sat down, in Oslo, Paris, or Chicago, side by side, and read the main texts page by page, paragraph by paragraph. In so doing we hammered out an overall understanding of Tocqueville as a social scientist, as well as our interpretations of specific passages and arguments. Often, I cannot tell whether this or that idea originated with him or with me. Many conclusions were such a natural outcome of our exchanges that they seemed almost unauthored. While Steve ought to receive a great deal of credit for whatever is valuable in this book, it should go without saying that he is not responsible for any of its shortcomings.

The book grew out of a course I taught at Columbia University in 2007. As with many of my earlier books, the interaction with my students was essential for sharpening the argument and clearing up confusions. Two of their specific contributions are acknowledged in the footnotes. I also thank Diego Gambetta, Peter Stone, and several anonymous referees for their valuable comments on the manuscript. In addition, I am indebted to discussions with Arthur Goldhammer, H el ene Landemore, and Bernard Manin for the meaning of some particularly dense passages in the French texts. Finally I thank St ephanie Novak for her painstaking checking of the passages I cite from Tocqueville.

## A Note on the Texts

I cite *Democracy in America* (DA) from Arthur Goldhammer's translation for the Library of America (2004). In a few cases, I have made minor tacit emendations to that text. On one occasion I also cite a text that is included in the Lawrence translation, *Democracy in America*, New York: Anchor Books 1969. I cite from the drafts of the work by referring to the edition in Tocqueville, *Oeuvres* (Pléiade), vol. II, Paris: Gallimard 1992, abbreviated as *O II*. Translations from the drafts are mine.

There is no good English translation of the *Ancien régime* (AR). In my article "Tocqueville in English," *Archives Européennes de Sociologie* 40 (1999), 148–55, I point to severe flaws in the two existing translations.<sup>1</sup> The texts cited here are translated by Arthur Goldhammer, who is preparing a new translation of the work to be published by Cambridge University Press. The page references are to the edition of AR in Tocqueville, *Oeuvres* (Pléiade), vol. III, Paris: Gallimard 2004. Goldhammer has also translated the passages I cite from Tocqueville's notes for the projected second volume of the *Ancien régime*. I cite most of these by referring to the same edition as *O III*. For a few passages from these notes that are not included in the Pléiade edition, I refer to vol. 2 of the edition of the *Ancien régime* in the *Oeuvres Complètes*, Paris: Gallimard 1954, as *OC II-2*. I refer to vol. 2 of his *Ecrits*

<sup>1</sup> The new Penguin translation by Gerald Bevan appeared after the manuscript to the present book had been sent to the publisher.

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*et discours politiques*, Paris: Gallimard 1985, also in the *Oeuvres Complètes*, as OC III-2.

I cite Tocqueville's 1836 article for the *Edinburgh Review* on "Political and social condition of France" by referring to O III, as above.

R refers to the *Recollections*, New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers 1987.

L refers to the *Lettres choisies*, Paris: Gallimard 2003. Translations are mine.

ER refers to *The European Revolution and Correspondence with Gobineau*, Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith 1968.