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0521560918 - Individual Choice and the Structures of History: Alexis de Tocqueville as  
Historian Reappraised

Harvey Mitchell

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## Individual choice and the structures of history

Alexis de Tocqueville is recognized as one of the most important nineteenth-century historians. In this study, Harvey Mitchell examines afresh Tocqueville's works, in particular the *Souvenirs* of 1848 and his voluminous correspondence, to shed new light on Tocqueville's philosophy of history. Professor Mitchell exposes the tensions which Tocqueville perceived between determined actions and choice, continuity and change, asking what happens to individual liberty if it is impossible to make a clean break with the past, and if past developments continue to influence the future. Professor Mitchell argues that it was Tocqueville's related concern with liberty in a modern democratic age which led him to write his *L'Ancien Régime et la Révolution*.

Drawing on the full range of Tocqueville's writings, *Individual choice and the structures of history* reveals in them a unity of thought and a deep involvement with the philosophical questions raised by historical continuity and change.

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# Individual choice and the structures of history

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Harvey Mitchell

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*For Sheryl, Naomi, Steve, Norman, Reuben,  
Hannah, Rebecca, Molefe*

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## Acknowledgments

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My interest in Alexis de Tocqueville dates back several years to when I first thought about the nature of the French Revolution, the problems of understanding the political thought of the past and the philosophy of history. My views on these questions have been transformed over the years. The result is a study of a thinker whose demands on me were such that I often felt I could not meet them. Even now I feel that Tocqueville will continue to elude final judgment, all the more so as his linkage between contingency and necessity, choice and determinateness, painfully yet fruitfully exposes the ways in which historical study leaves many questions in a state of uncertainty.

Without the extraordinary support of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada from which I benefited over the years, this book would have surely had a more traumatic birth. In Paris, I had generous and gracious help from, as well as fruitful discussions with, François Furet and Françoise Mélonio who gave me permission to study copies of Tocqueville's manuscript notes for the two volumes of *L'Ancien Régime et la Révolution*. A visit to the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University, where I consulted the Tocqueville repository, was eased by Vincent Giroud, curator of the Library's Modern Books and Manuscripts. I wish to acknowledge, as well, the impressive historical collections of the University of British Columbia Library, and the assistance I was given by its friendly librarians on this project as well as on others over the years.

Expressions of gratitude are also owing to John Bowditch and Alfred Cobban who originally stimulated my interest in French history. When I began my studies with Alfred Cobban, I suggested that I might begin a study of Tocqueville. Though I was politely overruled, I did not lose sight of the possibility, and returned to the idea with a greater appreciation of the difficulties posed by bringing it to fruition at a time when the definitive edition of his works was still on the drawing board.

I have been particularly lucky in being able to exchange ideas with individuals whom I count as my friends, colleagues and students, many of

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Portions of this book first appeared as articles: "Tocqueville's Mirage or Reality? Political Freedom from Old Régime to Revolution," *Journal of Modern History*, 60 (1988), pp. 28–54; "The Changing Conditions of Freedom: Tocqueville in the Light of Rousseau," *History of Political Thought*, 9 (1988), pp. 31–53; "Alexis de Tocqueville and the Legacy of the French Revolution," *Social Research*, 56 (1989), pp. 127–59 [also in *The French Revolution and the Birth of Modernity*, ed. Ferenc Féher (Berkeley, Los Angeles and Oxford, 1990), pp. 240–63]. The arguments I advance in them appear in various chapters of the book, often in their original form, but just as often in different, expanded and revised versions. Permission to use these materials was granted respectively by the University of Chicago Press, all rights reserved; *History of Political Thought*; *Social Research*; and the University of California Press.



## Abbreviations

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- AT* The collection of manuscript notes for *L'Ancien Régime et la Révolution* conserved in the private Tocqueville archives. The third volume of the Pléiade edition (see below) will include all or the bulk of them.
- BYT* The Yale Tocqueville Collection in the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.
- Beaumont edn.* The first edition of Tocqueville's *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Gustave de Beaumont, 9 vols. (Paris, 1864–78).
- Nolla edn.* I and II, *De la Démocratie en Amérique*, critical edn., ed. Edouardo Nolla, 2 vols. (Paris, 1990).
- OC* This definitive edition of the *Oeuvres complètes*, prepared under the supervision of the Commission nationale pour la publication des Oeuvres d'Alexis de Tocqueville, is nearing completion (Paris, 1950–). Only the volumes from which I cite are listed below.
- I, pts. 1–2, *De la Démocratie en Amérique*. Introduced by Harold J. Laski. Preliminary note by J.-P. Mayer (1951).
- II, pt. 1, *L'Ancien Régime et la Révolution*. Introduced by Georges Lefebvre. Preliminary note by J.-P. Mayer (1952).
- II, pt. 2, *L'Ancien Régime et la Révolution. Fragments et notes inédites sur la Révolution*. Edited and annotated by André Jardin (1953).
- III, pt. 2, *Ecrits et discours politiques*. Edited, annotated and introduced by André Jardin (1985).
- III, pt. 3, *Ecrits et discours politiques*. Edited, annotated and introduced by André Jardin (1990).
- V, pt. 1, *Voyages en Sicilie et aux Etats-Unis*. Edited and prefaced by J.-P. Mayer (1957).
- VI, pt. 1, *Correspondance anglaise. Correspondance d'Alexis de Tocqueville avec Henry Reeve et John Stuart*

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*Mill.* Edited and annotated by J.-P. Mayer and Gustave Rudler. Introduced by J.-P. Mayer (1954).

VI, pt. 2, *Correspondance anglaise. Correspondance et conversations d'Alexis de Tocqueville et Nassau William Senior.* Edited and annotated by H. Brogan and A. P. Kerr. Introduced by H. Brogan. Notes by J.-P. Mayer. Preface by Lord Roll (1991).

VII, *Correspondance étrangère d'Alexis de Tocqueville.* Edited by Françoise Mélonio, Lise Queffélec and Anthony Pleasance (1986).

VIII, pts. 1–3, *Correspondance d'Alexis de Tocqueville et de Gustave de Beaumont.* Edited, annotated and introduced by André Jardin (1967).

IX, *Correspondance d'Alexis de Tocqueville et d'Arthur de Gobineau.* Edited and annotated by M. Degros. Introduced by J.-J. Chevalier (1959).

XI, *Correspondance d'Alexis de Tocqueville et de Pierre-Paul Royer-Collard. Correspondance d'Alexis de Tocqueville et de Jean-Jacques Ampère.* Edited, annotated and introduced by André Jardin (1970).

XII, *Souvenirs.* Edited, annotated and introduced by Luc Monnier (1964).

XIII, pts. 1–2, *Correspondance d'Alexis de Tocqueville et de Louis de Kergorlay.* Edited by André Jardin. Introduction and notes by Jean-Alain Lesourd (1977).

XV, pts. 1–2, *Correspondance d'Alexis de Tocqueville et de Francisque de Corcelle. Correspondance d'Alexis de Tocqueville et de Madame Swetchine.* Edited by Pierre Gibert (1983).

XVI, *Mélanges.* Edited by Françoise Mélonio (1989).

XVIII, *Correspondance d'Alexis de Tocqueville avec Adolphe de Circourt et Madame de Circourt.* Edited by A. P. Kerr. Revised by Louis Girard and Douglas Johnson (1984).

*OCR* *Oeuvres complètes de Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, ed. Bernard Gagnebin and Marcel Raymond (Paris, 1959–).

*Pléiade edn.* pt. 1, Alexis de Tocqueville. *Oeuvres. I.* Edited under the direction of André Jardin with the collaboration of Françoise Mélonio and Lise Queffélec (Paris, 1991).

*Pléiade edn.* pt. 2, Alexis de Tocqueville. *Oeuvres. II.* Edited under the direction of André Jardin with the collaboration of Jean-Claude Lamberti and James T. Schleifer (Paris, 1992).

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The following English editions of Tocqueville's works were used for the English translations in my study, but I replaced them with my own when I believed they were more faithful to the original:

*Democracy in America*. The Henry Reeve text, revised by Francis Bowen, now further corrected and ed., with introduction, edited notes, and bibliographies by Phillips Bradley, 2 vols. (New York, 1945).

*Democracy in America*. Ed. J. P. Mayer, trans. George Lawrence (New York, 1969).

*The Old Régime and the French Revolution*. Trans. Stuart Gilbert (New York, 1955).

*The European Revolution and Correspondence with Gobineau*. Ed. and trans. John Lukacs (New York, 1959).

*The Recollections of Alexis de Tocqueville*. Trans. A. T. de Mattos (New York, 1959).