

INTERPRETATIVE ESSAY

The Third *Democracy*: Tocqueville's Views of America after 1840¹

“What happens now in America must be of interest to all civilized people and is of particular interest to me, who am half Yankee” (Tocqueville, 1856).²

I. How Many Democracies?

The famous French literary critic Sainte-Beuve once predicted that Tocqueville would become an inexhaustible subject of reflection for future generations of scholars.³ A century and a half after his death, the writings of Alexis de Tocqueville remain a source of inspiration for political theorists, sociologists, philosophers, legal scholars, and historians. Today, Tocqueville is celebrated as the most prominent theorist of the modern democratic revolution. It is no mere coincidence that in the past decade alone, four new English translations of *Democracy in America* have been published.⁴ A fifth new translation by James T. Schleifer and edited by Eduardo Nolla (forthcoming with Liberty Fund) will give English-speaking readers the opportunity to familiarize themselves with Tocqueville's fascinating notes for *Democracy in America*. Two new translations of Tocqueville's *The Old Regime and the Revolution* have also been published in the last decade.⁵

Moreover, a significant number of new and provocative interpretations of Tocqueville's works have appeared in both French and English, shedding fresh light on lesser-known facets of Tocqueville's persona: the philosopher, the moralist, the writer, the politician and the defender of French colonization of Algeria.⁶ The publication of *The Tocqueville Reader*, *The Cambridge Companion to Tocqueville*, along with the third volume of his works in the prestigious Bibliothèque

de la Pléiade, have added new dimensions to our appreciation of Tocqueville. In 2005, the bicentenary of his birth was widely celebrated, with conferences in France, the United States, Italy, Belgium, Spain, Germany, Poland, Canada, Argentina, and Japan, and elsewhere across the world, thus showing that Tocqueville's works have an appeal transcending national boundaries.

Our own interest in Tocqueville can be explained by the fact that his work, to quote Cheryl Welch, "seems to retain a greater measure of normative and exploratory power – and intellectual provocation – than that of many other nineteenth-century thinkers."⁷ Tocqueville's universal appeal, Sheldon Wolin argued, can be accounted for by the acuity with which he grasped and described the key features and dilemmas of modern democracy, the complexity of democratic political culture, the importance of civil society, and the far-reaching consequences of high social mobility.⁸ In Wolin's words, "to reflect on present day American politics invites reflection on *Democracy in America* and vice versa."⁹

At the time of its first publication in France, the two volumes of *Democracy in America* (1835, 1840) offered the image of an accomplished and successful democracy based on the equality of conditions and the sovereignty of the people. The political system of the New World, Tocqueville argued, combined administrative decentralization and political centralization, allowed for self-government, and provided for a judicious separation of powers and a genuine system of checks and balances. Tocqueville contrasted the regular, stable, and effective institutions and mores of America with those existing in Europe where the relics of an aristocratic past proved to be a barrier against political democracy. In America he saw more than America. He perceived the image of democracy itself, with all its inclinations, prejudices and passions.

The extraordinary success of Tocqueville's masterpiece provided the lenses through which generations viewed and interpreted the virtues and limitations of American democracy. It also explains the often idealized image of America that admirers of Tocqueville derived from reading his book. Yet, an interesting debate arose among Tocqueville scholars as to whether Volume One of *Democracy in America* (1835) was part of the same intellectually coherent project as Volume Two published five years later in 1840¹⁰ or whether it reflects radically different concerns and preoccupations.

But was Volume Two of *Democracy in America* itself Tocqueville's definitive statement on America? After all, Tocqueville lived for nineteen more years (he died in 1859, two years before the start of the Civil War). During this period, when he became more and more involved in French politics, Tocqueville often despaired that his native country would ever be able to achieve a political regime comparable to that of America. He continued to be interested in American political events and exchanged many letters with his American friends, old and new, some of whom – such as Theodore Sedgwick and Jared Sparks – had been instrumental in providing him with essential information about the United States while Tocqueville was completing the two volumes of *Democracy in America*.

Tocqueville's letters to his American friends were published in Volume VII of his *Œuvres Complètes* (1986) and have not previously been translated into English.¹¹ The letters that he received from his American correspondents after 1840 have remained, for the most part, in the archives and have not been published to this day. In addition, Tocqueville referred to America in his published articles in the 1840s and he made frequent references to America in his parliamentary speeches and interventions in the Constituent and Legislative Assemblies of the Second Republic (1848–1851). He also spoke of America in the letters that he sent to many of his French friends. Even less known perhaps is the fact that, as Minister of Foreign Affairs for a brief period in 1849, Tocqueville was faced with an embarrassing diplomatic incident with America. Tocqueville's correspondence regarding this event has remained in the archives of the French Foreign Ministry at Quai d'Orsay in Paris and it is published here for the first time.

The existence of this important body of post-1840 writings about America prompted us to ask the following questions. Did Tocqueville change his views on America outlined in the two volumes of *Democracy* published in 1835 and 1840? If so, which of his views did change and why? What were the continuities and discontinuities in his perceptions of America? How did Tocqueville come to view the American republic as it edged ever closer to civil war? And more importantly, did the evolution of his views of America affect his theory of democracy and what were the implications of any failure of American democracy? Would it be possible to contemplate what a hypothetical “third” volume of *Democracy in America* might have looked like, had it ever been written? The materials collected in this volume answer these

questions by examining Tocqueville's diverse writings on America in the period between 1840 and 1859. As obvious an inquiry as this might be, these very questions have been largely ignored by the majority of Tocqueville's interpreters.¹² Even classic books such as André Jardin's and Hugh Brogan's biographies of Tocqueville, George Wilson Pierson's and James T. Schleifer's studies of the writing of *Democracy in America*, have virtually nothing to say about Tocqueville's *later* impressions of America.¹³



A few words about the present introductory study are in order here. It begins by exploring the image of America in France *before* the publication of Volume One of Tocqueville's masterpiece. This preliminary discussion provides the necessary background for interpreting Tocqueville's engagement with America. It also gives us a better understanding of the nature and originality of Tocqueville's analysis of American democracy placed in its original historical context. As we shall see, Tocqueville came to share some – though not all – of the opinions held by his predecessors who had espoused a critical view of America. The discussion of the image of America in France will also address, if only obliquely, the rhetoric of American exceptionalism.¹⁴

The second part of our essay examines the main points and concerns about America raised by Tocqueville in his letters to his American friends written after 1840. As we shall see, his warnings against the effects of the instability of the market on the functioning of political institutions and the damaging effects of unbridled materialism sound surprisingly fresh today when economics dominates politics to an unprecedented degree and the relationship between democracy and the market has become a key topic in our public debates. More generally, Tocqueville's remarks invite us to reflect upon the problems and dilemmas faced by an America where, according to many social critics, the vitality (as well as viability) of political and civil life seem to be on the decline.¹⁵

Tocqueville's letters represent an invaluable source of information for any student of his work. Their seminal importance is documented not only by the wide array of topics they addressed but also by his request to some of his friends to keep his correspondence. Indeed, one might go as far as to argue that, in some respects, Tocqueville's letters are as important as his published writings. Tocqueville writes so beautifully that his readers enjoy his letters both for their style

and substance. As much as in his published books, Tocqueville's correspondence demonstrates his strong passion for liberty as well as the seriousness with which he sought to apply his political and philosophical ideas to the public realm. And unlike his published writings, Tocqueville's letters allow us to trace his hopes, fears, and disillusionment with politics, such that, to quote Roger Boesche, "when we know the man better, we find him no less political."¹⁶

There is a further consideration to be borne in mind. Since Tocqueville's correspondents remained substantially the same during the entire period, covering the twenty-eight years from 1831 to 1859, we can assume that he felt no need to adopt new epistolary strategies or to tailor his comments to suit the views of his correspondents. Moreover, if the recipients of his letters remained unchanged, the views expressed by Tocqueville certainly did change over time, the most significant shift occurring in the 1850s. The early letters were usually designed to solicit information, advice, or guidance. It is only in the later exchanges beginning around 1852 that his deep misgivings and criticisms became evident and when they did so they became matters of central importance to his correspondence.

Nor should we underestimate the significance that Tocqueville attached to his career and aspirations as a politician. From his youth, he aspired to political glory and longed for recognition in the political world. Tocqueville's correspondence with Gustave de Beaumont is revealing in this regard. "It goes without saying, it is the political man that we must foster in us," Tocqueville wrote to his friend on October 25, 1829.¹⁷ Eleven years later, in August 1840, Tocqueville confessed to Beaumont: "You know what a taste I have for great events and how tired I am of our little democratic and bourgeois pot of soup."¹⁸ In 1848, upon his election to the Constituent Assembly, Tocqueville experienced an overwhelming sensation as he took his seat along his new colleagues. "I felt at once," he wrote, "that the atmosphere of this Assembly suited me and in spite of the seriousness of the situation, *I had a sense of happiness I had never known before.*"¹⁹ Thus, his parliamentary speeches, public interventions and political journalism are integral to our understanding of Tocqueville the *political* man.

Finally, Tocqueville's reappraisal of American democracy (in his correspondence) did not draw upon a rereading of his earlier evidence of American life and institutions but upon a close observation of contemporary political and social developments in America that postdated the publication of his earlier account. It was these developments, and

not the reassessment of earlier evidence, that led him in the late 1850s to the stark conclusion that America no longer held out hope for the friends of liberty around the world.

II. America in France before Tocqueville

A thorough analysis of Tocqueville's assessment of American democracy before and after 1840 requires that we first survey French attitudes toward America during the Bourbon Restoration (1814–1830) and the early years of the July Monarchy (1830–1835). This account will allow us to place Tocqueville's views on American democracy into the larger historical and cultural context to which they belonged. This is all the more significant since his analysis of America has too often been detached from this background.

Tocqueville was by no means the first person in France to write on the nature of American democracy.²⁰ Before it came to be seen as a political model for nineteenth-century Europe, America had previously acquired the almost mythic image of a country unspoiled by luxury, a land where the main occupation was agriculture and where people lived peacefully in austerity and virtuous simplicity. Crèvecoeur's letters describing the modes of farming, the manners and peculiar customs of the Americans contributed greatly to the dissemination of this pastoral and idyllic image of an American Arcadia.²¹ As such, America appeared as a boundless and bountiful continent, a virgin environment and a territory of adventure and discovery that inspired the travelers' imagination.

Eventually, this ideal came to be replaced by the image of an economic life in constant transformation, a society bent on indefinite progress and innovation. Individuals were no longer seen as deriving their happiness from living a frugal life. On the contrary, their happiness was directly related to rising living standards, comfort, and material prosperity, resulting from an ever-expanding commerce and navigation. Over time, America came to be regarded as the hallmark of utilitarianism, a country in which everything and everyone was on the move, and in constant search for ways of improving the conditions of daily life. It is worth noting that this dynamic face of America was seen as an outcome of its democratic institutions.

What is less known, however, is that in France the idea that the study of the political organization and institutions of the United States

might profit those interested in the future of democracy had appeared *before* the publication of the first volume of Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*. In fact, some ideas about America that Tocqueville used in his work were commonplace at that time. Tocqueville's analysis gained wide recognition not so much because of the originality of his ideas on America as because of the way in which he developed the commonplace into the extraordinary. As René Rémond pointed out in his magisterial study of the image of the United States during the first half of the nineteenth century in France, from 1815 to 1830 French public opinion looked favorably at America and was relatively optimistic with regard to the stability and future of its political institutions.²² In his important history of the United States published in 1825, Charles-Arnold Scheffer (1796–1853), the secretary of La Fayette and, later, editor of *Le Commerce*, claimed that the American federation showed the entire world “true popular government and liberty.”²³ The suggestion made by Scheffer was that the successful republican political experiment in America would pave the way for similar political developments in Europe. The same theme appeared in *La Revue Américaine*, edited by Armand Carrel from July 1826 to June 1827.²⁴ For example, Armand Carrel described the American constitution as “a model constitution,” adding that this was not due to the fact that the Americans possessed an instinctive political genius. “The American constitution,” he commented, “is not foreign to us; it is the daughter of eighteenth-century French political doctrines, fortunately combined with the most reasonable and tested elements of English institutions.”²⁵ Admirers of America such as Madame de Staël, Birbeck, Barboux, Vinet, Scheffer, and Barbé-Marbois invoked the wisdom of its laws, principles, and institutions.²⁶ Vinet argued that “this state seems to have solved the problem which consists in reconciling the highest degree of individual liberty and the supreme conditions of security and order.”²⁷ Other French writers claimed that, in America, power was limited, no one was above the law, and everyone obeyed the laws that were clearly formulated to serve the common good.²⁸ The American government, it was argued, imposed low taxes and treated its citizens with respect. “As the hand of Providence, it governs without being felt and almost without being perceived,” wrote the author of an article published in *La Revue Encyclopédique* in August 1819.²⁹ Other virtues of the American system highlighted by French writers included a strong educational system,³⁰ the abolition of hereditary power, the presence of exceptional political leaders,

civic-minded citizens and a solid work ethic. As importantly, French commentators emphasized the connection between liberty and religion in the United States and pointed to the important role played by religious toleration, liberty of conscience, and freedom of the press in securing civil liberties. Also worth noting in these accounts is the identification of America with liberty and the awareness of the relation that existed between freedom, reason, and civic virtue, themes that were to re-appear in Tocqueville's work a few years later.

Nonetheless, doubts about the proper functioning of American institutions began to appear gradually in France, as the United States entered a new stage of its political development with the coming of age of a new generation of politicians who brought a new political style. Thus, America appeared as a country with an uncertain future, facing a complex set of problems and challenges, and therefore unlikely to serve as a political model for Europe. What was the substance of French disquiet? The question is particularly important in light of our attempt to reevaluate Tocqueville's criticism of American democracy against the background of earlier analyses of America.

The concerns expressed in the French press in the early 1830s ranged from doubts regarding the maintenance of the unity of the country confronted with the problem of slavery to the calling into question of the existence of a genuine national character of the American people.³¹ The expanding territory of the Union now appeared as a serious challenge to national unity. Critics wondered if the American republic would be able to survive and surmised that it might be replaced by either monarchy or a new form of military dictatorship.³² More importantly, the French began questioning not only the possibility of importing the American institutions, but also their very *raison d'être*. Two of the principles that had previously been considered as pillars of American democracy – bicameralism and federalism – came to be regarded with increasing skepticism by the French. Some of them denounced American individualism as a form of “narrow rationalism” and “Protestant egoism”³³ that fueled “the materialization of human destiny.”³⁴

A further common theme in this period was the image of America as a young and immature society. “The government of the United States,” claimed François Guizot in a famous discourse from 1834, “is a good and wonderful government for the United States, in the circumstances in which this society found itself at the moment of

its birth, because it is a society that has just been born, une *société enfant*.”³⁵

Progressive republicans on the left of the political spectrum also expressed their discontent with a number of aspects of American democracy and made a fundamental distinction between the *moral* aspects of the American democracy and its *political* institutions and principles, questioning the former but approving of the latter. This dichotomy appeared, for example, in the following fragment of André Marchais and J. F. Dupont published in *La Revue Républicaine* in 1834. “From the moral point of view,” they wrote, “we do not belong to the American school. From the practical point of view, we belong to the American school . . . in this sense that we invoke the example of America as a practical proof that demonstrates the application of the republican doctrine of universal suffrage and its consequences.”³⁶

Finally, the early 1830s saw the emergence of a new topic – slavery – that had been previously underplayed by the French. The idea that slavery tended to undermine the status and future of American democracy began gaining wide currency in France at that time. In an article published in *La Revue Britannique* in 1831, its director J.-L. Saulnier denounced the hypocrisy of American democracy, which, he wrote, combined “this liberty without any limits on one side, and this abject servitude on the other.”³⁷ Alphonse de Lamartine was struck by the contrast between “this Congress where the nice words independence, human dignity, imprescriptible rights, and the inviolability of natural rights could constantly be heard” and the miserable condition of the black population that cried out against “so much philanthropic hypocrisy.”³⁸

If some critics pointed out that equality remained a mere ideal in a country with extreme forms of racial inequality, others began to see the dangers of extreme forms of equality. Théodore Jouffroy, for example, feared that the general leveling of conditions would lead to “a form of mediocre civilization.”³⁹ Many French travelers such as Édouard de Montulé, author of *Travels in America, 1816-1817*, focused on the interplay between nature, culture, and politics, raising questions about the possibility of a good life in the New World.⁴⁰ Others, like Achille Murat, chose to settle permanently in America. In *A Moral and Political Sketch of the United States of North America* (1833), Murat noted that the America of the late 1820s was an agricultural rather than a trading country, a land marked by great divisions between the slave

states and the free states, between New England and the central-Atlantic states, and between the South and the West. Murat, who settled in Florida and supported the emancipation of slaves, regarded not without bewilderment the proliferation of Protestant sects and espoused a critical view of religion in America. He praised the gracious society of the South⁴¹ and was taken aback by the absence of the art of conversation in the North, where people talked only about business and politics. In the territories west of the Mississippi, Murat remarked, social life was characterized by “a rude instinct of robust liberty, degenerating often into licentiousness, a simplicity of morals, and an uncouthness of manners, approaching occasionally to coarseness and cynical independence.”⁴² Murat also commented on the attitudes of the Americans toward government, competition – “the secret of the American system” – and federalism. He had words of praise for the Supreme Court and judicial review and criticized the electoral college system, which, in his view, thwarted the will of the majority.

Asked to clarify his own position on America, Murat concluded on a Tocquevillian note *avant la lettre*: “You will immediately ask me if I think the constitution of the United States the best possible, and if I think it applicable to France? This question has been asked me a thousand times: I do not answer it, at least at present, for it is not that which is of immediate concern. It is not so much the constitution and laws of the United States that I admire and love, as the reason why the United States have this constitution, and these laws. . . . This principle, from which so much good has emanated, and which is destined to govern the world, is what is called in America ‘Self-government,’ Government by the people themselves.”⁴³

Murat’s political assessment differed from the emphasis that other French visitors of the New World put on the uncivilized, mercantile, and materialistic character of American society. During his trip to America in 1833, Benjamin Saint-Victor wryly noted: “The main question here (and it’s the *alpha* and *omega* of life), is to gain money, and then to use this money to gain ever more. . . . The entire world does not seem to suffice to their cupidity.”⁴⁴ In the eyes of the sophisticated French, American life was monotonous and coarse because it lacked poetry and *savoir-vivre*. “America,” claimed La Menais, “is struck by the plague of commerce. The outcome is a spirit of calculation that stifles or weakens all generous sentiments.”⁴⁵ In turn, Saint-Victor deplored the restless competition and frantic