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978-1-107-00963-9 - Tocqueville and the Frontiers of Democracy

Edited by Ewa Atanassow and Richard Boyd

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## *Introduction: Tocqueville and the Frontiers of Democracy*

*Ewa Atanassow and Richard Boyd*

### Introduction

Few thinkers in the history of Western political thought are as widely cited as Alexis de Tocqueville. Among the legions of U.S. pundits and policy makers who have invoked the Frenchman's authority, Ronald Reagan, George W. Bush, and Bill Clinton all bolstered their speeches with choice quotes from Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*. Tocqueville is embraced across the political spectrum in the United States and Europe for his advocacy of civic engagement and civil society, his praise of religion's salutary role in public life, his warnings about the growth of the centralized state, and his sometimes biting observations about the leveling tendencies of democratic culture. His thoughts on democracy in America seem to resonate just as strongly today as when they appeared in the first half of the nineteenth century.

Even so, Tocqueville's ubiquity may actually detract from the subtlety of his message. It is difficult enough to characterize Tocqueville's domestic political theory – as a nostalgic conservatism, skeptical liberalism, communitarianism, or radical participatory democracy – but the confusion is only amplified when one looks beyond the relatively settled frontiers of American or Western-European democracy.<sup>1</sup> His insights into the challenges of a globalizing age are among the most neglected and misunderstood parts of his political theory. Despite a recent surge of interest

<sup>1</sup> For a sense of the manifold ways that Tocqueville's ideas have been interpreted by both the Right and the Left in contemporary American political discourse, see especially Chad Alan Goldberg, "Social Citizenship and a Reconstructed Tocqueville," *American Sociological Review* 66 (2001), 289–315.

in Tocqueville's writings on empire, foreign policy, and European affairs, his thoughts on international relations are overshadowed by his famous book on America.

Thus it should come as no surprise that Tocqueville has been invoked in so many contradictory ways. In a recent *World Affairs* article, for example, the Hudson Institute's Seth Cropsey and Arthur Milikh argue that Tocqueville's focus on the structural preconditions of democracy bodes poorly for the fate of the Egyptian revolution. Without supporting factors such as genuinely representative political parties, a large and inclusive middle class, and administrative decentralization, the prospects for democracy in Egypt and other parts of the Middle East look dim. According to the authors, the mere "hatred of a tyrant" should not be confused with a true and legitimate "love of liberty." In their view, at least, a Tocquevillean perspective on the Egyptian revolution and other steps toward democracy in the Middle East lead to pessimistic conclusions.<sup>2</sup>

This recent "Tocquevillean" skepticism about indigenous democracy in the Middle East may seem ironic given the neoconservative appropriation of Tocqueville during the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq. Widely hailed as the intellectual architect of American interventionism, political-theorist-turned-Pentagon-advisor Paul Wolfowitz cited Tocqueville as a blueprint for democratization and constitution-building in Iraq. After first appealing to the authority of the illustrious Frenchman, Wolfowitz enthused to an Iraqi audience that "There are people in the world who say that Arabs can't build democracy . . . I think that's nonsense. You have a chance to prove them wrong."<sup>3</sup>

Critics of U.S. foreign policy plead that Tocqueville himself would hardly approve of such idealistic efforts to export American-style democracy. Left-leaning columnist Nicholas von Hoffman complains that neo-conservatives distort Tocqueville's message:

De Tocqueville explained that the American democracy which he had studied firsthand . . . was shaped by and grew out of the culture, religion, etc., of the Americans. He believed that democracy is not a collection of rules, laws and

<sup>2</sup> Seth Cropsey and Arthur Milikh, "Democracy in Egypt: Applying the Tocqueville Standard," *World Affairs* (May/June 2011). <http://www.worldaffairsjournal.org/articles/2011-MayJun/full-Cropsey-MJ-2011.html> (accessed July 21, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> As cited in David Ignatius, "A War of Choice, and One Who Chose It," *Washington Post*, November 2, 2003, p. B01. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A49310-2003Oct31.html> (accessed July 20, 2011).

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procedures which are pressed down on a people or a nation; that a political system needs to have organic unity with the society in which it operates.<sup>4</sup>

Lawrence Harrison of the Fletcher School similarly objects that surely “Bush advisers such as Paul Wolfowitz and Condoleezza Rice have read Alexis de Tocqueville’s classic *Democracy in America*. But they – and Senator McCain – must have forgotten its overriding lesson: When it comes to the viability of democracy, more than anything else, culture matters.”<sup>5</sup> Revisiting the issue in the wake of the Arab Spring, Harrison maintains his pessimism: culture still matters.<sup>6</sup>

We mention these exchanges not to take sides or to reignite old quarrels but because they so vividly illustrate the animating premise of this volume, namely that although academics and policy makers share a broad sense of Tocqueville’s importance for international politics and comparative democratization, there is no consensus whatsoever as to what his lessons consist of. Even as contemporary political scientists, sociologists, economists, and moral philosophers struggle to come to grips with the preconditions for democracy’s spread throughout the world, the questions Tocqueville originally raised have taken on new urgency. Indeed, they have become the defining issues of our time: What is democracy, and how does it emerge? Is it an inevitable stage of societal development, as many hope, or the fragile artifact of a particular cultural and historical experience, as others fear? Must democracy be actively encouraged, even by military force and conquest, or allowed to develop spontaneously according to its own logic? What are the main challenges for fostering democracy in nations in which it has not yet been established? What is the relationship between democracy and free markets, commerce, or globalization? Is democracy compatible with Islam or other non-Western religions and cultures? Are nationalism and religious fundamentalism

<sup>4</sup> Nicholas von Hoffman, “Our Idealist in Chief Promotes a Lovely War,” *New York Observer*, November 17, 2003. <http://www.observer.com/2003/11/our-idealist-in-chief-promotes-a-lovely-war/> (accessed July 20, 2011).

<sup>5</sup> Lawrence Harrison, “Want Democracy in Iraq? Culture Matters,” *Christian Science Monitor*, July 1, 2008. [http://www.rath.us/random-stuff/interesting-articles/want\\_democracy\\_in\\_iraq\\_culture\\_matters.txt](http://www.rath.us/random-stuff/interesting-articles/want_democracy_in_iraq_culture_matters.txt) (accessed July 5, 2011); for a more developed version of this thesis about how culture matters, see especially Lawrence Harrison and Samuel Huntington (eds.), *Culture Matters: How Values Shape Human Progress* (New York: Basic Books, 2000).

<sup>6</sup> Lawrence Harrison, “After the Arab Spring, Culture Still Matters,” *The American Interest*, September 1, 2011. <http://www.the-american-interest.com/article.cfm?piece=1021> (accessed January 4, 2012).

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merely transient phenomena, or are they with us to stay? These and other questions press us to think long and hard about the political, geographical, cultural, and moral frontiers of democracy.

Contributors to the present volume shift the focus away from Tocqueville's well-known and relatively sanguine thoughts on America. Instead they wrestle with his more pessimistic observations about the agonistic process of democratization in nineteenth-century France and other parts of the world that lack America's fortuitous circumstances and mores. Although these chapters all strive to take seriously Tocqueville's own writings, they also move beyond the scholar's narrow preoccupation with what Tocqueville thought or did and apply his political reflections to dilemmas of international justice, democratization, and cross-cultural exchanges. In doing so, they address not only an urgent set of contemporary problems but also a deficit in the scholarly literature.

### Tocqueville Scholarship and Comparative Democratization

With the preponderance of these themes in Tocqueville's writings, it is surprising that they have – with a few noteworthy exceptions – been sidestepped by traditional Tocqueville scholarship. One of the pioneering works to delve into these topics was Seymour Drescher's 1968 *Dilemmas of Democracy: Tocqueville and Modernization*, which explores the Frenchman's view of the rocky path of economic development. Responding to the then-fashionable school of modernization theory (what passes today as “globalization” or “economic development”) sponsored by the likes of Seymour Martin Lipset and others, Drescher uses Tocqueville to challenge the orthodox view that “modernization” is inevitably a progressive force. Drescher calls attention to the condition of many groups – African Americans, industrial workers, rural peasantry, colonial subjects, and convicts – whose “social condition did not fit well into the nineteenth-century scheme of providential equality.”<sup>7</sup> Not only is modernization far from unidirectional, but it also gives rise to new inequalities and exclusions.

Another seminal work to plumb the international aspects of Tocqueville's thought is Michael Hereth's 1979 *Tocqueville: Threats to Freedom in a Democracy*. Although Hereth is mainly concerned with the process of democratization in America and France, he is sensitive to how

<sup>7</sup> Seymour Drescher, *Dilemmas of Democracy: Tocqueville and Modernization* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1968), 15.

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Tocqueville's writings on America are inextricably linked, for example, to problems of imperialism, colonialism, and slavery – all noteworthy themes in the present volume. Hereth's study of Tocqueville the "political man" demonstrates that the latter's flirtations with nationalism, a militaristic foreign policy, the subjugation of the Algerians, and the replacement of chattel slavery in French colonies with a "new aristocracy" are all premised on a "claim to domination and leadership by Europeans over people who have not been stamped with European-Atlantic civilization."<sup>8</sup>

Tocqueville's controversial endorsement of empire has been well known at least since the publication of André Jardin and Melvin Richter's seminal articles in 1962 and 1965, respectively; however, the subject has come front and center in mainstream Tocqueville scholarship only in the past decade or so with the appearance of Jennifer Pitts's translation of Tocqueville's *Writings on Empire and Slavery* in 2001, as well as sustained engagement with Tocqueville's imperialism (and the apparent contradiction it poses to his liberalism) by Richter, Pitts, Tzvetan Todorov, Cheryl Welch, Roger Boesche, and others.<sup>9</sup> Despite the newfound attention to these themes, enduring dilemmas remain – for example, whether Tocqueville's imperialism and liberalism are compatible, and if so, on what metric; how the Algerian question relates to broader views on the civilizational vocation of European nations; and how his imperialism springs from deep reservations about bourgeois or commercial society. These themes are well covered in the present volume.

Maybe the most explicit attempt to reckon with Tocqueville's insights into the challenges of democratization was the *Journal of Democracy's* tenth anniversary symposium on "Democracy in the World: Tocqueville Reconsidered," published in January 2000, in which a number of eminent scholars reflected on Tocqueville's implications for understanding the fall of communism, U.S. foreign policy, the uneven path of economic

<sup>8</sup> Michael Hereth, *Alexis de Tocqueville: Threats to Freedom in a Democracy* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1986 [1979]), 130–165.

<sup>9</sup> André Jardin, "Tocqueville et l'Algérie," *Revue des Travaux de l'Académie des sciences morales et politiques* 115 (1962), 61–74; Melvin Richter, "Tocqueville on Algeria," *Review of Politics* 25 (1963), 365–399; Tzvetan Todorov, *On Human Diversity: Nationalism, Racism, and Exoticism in French Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998); Alexis de Tocqueville, *Writings on Empire and Slavery*, edited and translated by Jennifer Pitts (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001); Pitts, *A Turn to Empire: The Rise of Imperial Liberalism in Britain and France* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006); Cheryl B. Welch, "Colonial Violence and the Rhetoric of Evasion: Tocqueville on Algeria," *Political Theory* 31 (2003), 235–264; Roger Boesche, "The Dark Side of Tocqueville: On War and Empire," *Review of Politics* 67 (2005): 737–752.

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development in the contemporary world, the challenges of economic inequalities for sustaining democratic governance, as well of some of the side effects of democracy and economic prosperity on culture, manners, and society.<sup>10</sup>

Although this symposium's distinguished contributors brought Tocqueville to bear on many a twenty-first-century concern – exploring, among other topics, the problem of executive power in Russia, the nature and prospects for democracy in Latin America, and European federalism – the world seems to have changed profoundly since its appearance. Problems scarcely visible at the turn of the millennium have emerged in the meantime. For example, are there unique challenges presented by the spread of democracy to non-Christian or non-Western parts of the world? If, as Francis Fukuyama suggests in his contribution to the *Journal of Democracy* symposium, Tocqueville sees the March of Equality as providential or divinely ordained, does its purview extend into the non-Christian world? And if the spread of self-government presupposes an underlying democratic culture supportive of the value of equality, then what about parts of the world in which aristocratic values are deeply entrenched, as in the Middle East, or are in the process of being established by the extreme inequalities of globalization, as in many parts of Asia?

Some of these issues are posed directly and fruitfully in the recent edited collection, *Conversations with Tocqueville: The Global Democratic Revolution and the Twenty-First Century*.<sup>11</sup> In this timely set of essays, the editors Aurelian Craiutu and Sheldon Gellar lay out a stimulating framework for what they term “Tocquevillean analytics,” which various experts then apply to different nations, regions, or historical periods. Individual Tocquevillean studies of Russia, Guatemala, Latin America, Western Europe, Africa, Burma, China, and Japan are illuminating, but the volume's major conceptual innovations are developed by the coeditors in their chapters on “Tocquevillean Analytics and the Global Revolution” (Gellar) and “What Kind of Social Scientist was Tocqueville?” (Craiutu). Responding to criticisms of Tocqueville as a crude or unsystematic social scientist, Craiutu mounts a persuasive defense of Tocqueville's coherence, distancing himself from recent characterizations of Tocqueville's social

<sup>10</sup> Marc Plattner and Larry Diamond (eds.), “Democracy in the World: Tocqueville Reconsidered,” *Journal of Democracy* 11 (January 2000).

<sup>11</sup> Aurelian Craiutu and Sheldon Gellar (eds.), *Conversations with Tocqueville: The Global Democratic Revolution in the Twenty-First Century* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2009).

science as a precursor to ostensibly more sophisticated positive theories.<sup>12</sup> And as Gellar points out in his helpful “checklist” for a Tocquevillean analytics, there is indeed a discernible method at work.

Building on themes broached by Drescher, Hereth, Richter, and others – and in broad sympathy with Craiutu and Gellar – the present volume’s approach is nevertheless distinctive. Rather than assuming that Tocqueville offers a single, systematic, and readily identifiable framework for making sense of the process of democratization, our contributors are engaged in a more open-ended dialogue about Tocqueville’s relevance. There are profound disagreements about what a “Tocquevillean approach” looks like, the degree and sincerity of Tocqueville’s support for democracy, and the relative optimism or pessimism of his conclusions. Authors begin with an even more elementary set of questions. What does Tocqueville mean by “democracy,” and how does his unique (and arguably somewhat idiosyncratic) take on the process of democratization relate to the processes of globalization underway in the contemporary world? Which of his categories, themes, and insights seem to apply especially well? Which not so well? It is often assumed that democracy unfolds within the context of Westphalian nation-states, but how might Tocqueville’s account of democratization problematize the very notion of nationality and national borders, eliding the usual frontiers of democracy? Are the obligations of democratic nations the same within their borders as across them? And if culture, tradition, and religion all matter in the process of democratization, is it fair to conclude that the propagation of democracy is culture-bound, limited by the frontiers of the Occidental or developed world? We submit that Tocqueville’s writings offer fresh insights into these and other issues of pressing interest to citizens, scholars, and policy makers.

### **The Meaning of Democracy and the Democratic Revolution**

Pundits and political scientists speak approvingly of democracy and applaud its spread throughout the contemporary world. Western observers cheer developments of the past four decades in the former Soviet

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Jon Elster, *Alexis de Tocqueville, The First Social Scientist* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), and Richard Swedberg, *Tocqueville’s Political Economy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009). For an earlier and very different normative account of what a Tocquevillean political science might look like, see especially James W. Ceaser, *Liberal Democracy and Political Science* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990).

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Union, Eastern Europe, Asia, and the Middle East. However, one need not scratch too deeply beneath the surface of the rhetoric of democratization to find basic conceptual ambiguities. What does democracy really mean? In the strict sense of the term, democracy as a political system obviously has something to do with free and fair elections. Democracy allows the popular will to shape public policy, giving ordinary citizens a say in choosing their own governors. And yet above and beyond the formal requirement that a democratic regime must stand for reelection, calls for democracy today seem to be aimed more broadly at the equitable distribution of a society's resources, offices, and opportunities. In this expansive sense of the term, democracy is juxtaposed to various species of authoritarianism, oligarchy, kleptocracy, political oppression, corruption, monopoly, exclusion, and inequality.

Tocqueville's thoughts are generally congruent with contemporary expectations about democracy or democratization, but his own understanding is nuanced. Democracy may be first and foremost political – having to do with institutional questions of political participation, voting, representation, and civic engagement. However, more fundamentally, democracy for Tocqueville refers to a uniquely modern *état social*, or social condition, distinguished as much by its moral, social, economic, or even phenomenological dimensions.

As Nestor Capdevila explains in Chapter 1, Tocqueville initially defines democracy over and against its historical antecedent aristocracy. And yet as Capdevila points out, this “external frontier” between democracy and other regimes is necessarily hazy to the point of being “metaphorical.” Rather than clear-cut boundaries, democracy is characterized by a kind of hybridity. The line separating democracy as a social condition from socialism, liberalism, capitalism, or even despotism is ambiguous. One can speak of social democracy, liberal democracy, democratic despotism, authoritarian democracy, and so forth. The sense of equality at the heart of democracy is compatible with many regimes, both liberal and illiberal. What is more, the struggle to define democracy is also a political struggle internal to democracy – a contest between “different understandings of the democratic present” and of what it means to be democratic (p. 33). Although by contrasting democracy with revolution, Tocqueville sought to define democracy in a way that would exclude radicalism, his analysis suggests that contesting democracy's meaning is essential to the dynamism of democratic society. For Tocqueville, then, it remains an open question as to which understanding of democracy will ultimately prevail. This explains the “essential indeterminacy” of

democracy's providential movement through the world (p. 52). Will we enjoy equality under liberty, or suffer equality combined with servitude?

Tocqueville accepts democracy, yet he insists on maintaining a conceptual distinction between democracy and revolution. The notion of a perfect democracy is revolutionary and must be resisted as such. Here Capdevila captures the elusive reality that democracy's purview must always be limited: "democratic discourse is universal: all human beings are equal. But there are always some inequalities remaining" (pp. 43–44). Within a political community, for example, "internal" distinctions of gender, race, family, profession, or social class may cease to be relevant in some contexts, but they do not as a consequence disappear. Analogously, democracy as an "external" concept contains within itself an immanent universalism that is necessarily incomplete. Presumably democracy unfolds on the world stage – cutting across traditional frontiers among nations, civilizations, or religions. Again, however, these frontiers – while blurred or breached – do not vanish, and Tocqueville clearly supposes that the struggle for democracy takes place within the porous borders of discrete political communities.

While agreeing with Capdevila about the difficulty of drawing a bright line between democracy and aristocracy, Ran Halévi argues in Chapter 2, that Tocqueville's fundamental orientation – both personal and political – rests on his conviction that aristocracy as a social system was destined to give way to democratic equality. The frontier between these two social worlds is near-absolute, and the liminal passage between them is permanent and conclusive. Once a people crosses the democratic Rubicon, there is no turning back. Erstwhile aristocratic institutions such as lawyers, juries, civic associations, or even wealthy industrialists may perform quasi-aristocratic functions, as Tocqueville suggests, but they have nothing to do with a true aristocracy. Interpreters have repeatedly – and incorrectly, in Halévi's view – sought to paint Tocqueville as a nostalgic aristocrat. In reality, Tocqueville sees the French Revolution as marking a clear delineation between an irretrievable past and a dawning democratic age.

Several implications would seem to follow from Halévi's thesis. First, if the social and political frontier between aristocracy and democracy marks a historical turning point, and, moreover, if democracy demands a congruence between social conditions and political institutions once this frontier has been crossed, then it seems to follow that societies steeped in inegalitarian traditions face difficult transitions to a democratic future.

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If laws cannot remake mores, or can do so only imperfectly, as Halévi argues following both Montesquieu and Tocqueville, then one wonders if democracy as a political system is a realistic possibility for nations whose social lives remain profoundly undemocratic. As Halévi points out, the Bourbon Restoration and July Monarchy both failed because they rested on unstable juxtapositions of civil equality and aristocratic political institutions. One might argue that democratic institutions today suffer from a similar instability. At a minimum, democratic revolutions face an uphill battle – one that is resisted, frustrated, and thwarted at every turn and is prone to further revolutions and violence – when democratic political institutions outstrip the underlying equality of conditions that would support them.

On a more optimistic note, Halévi emphasizes that because the origins of aristocratic society are anything but natural, they require psychological acceptance on the part of the ruled. Although originally born of force or conquest, “aristocratic rule, enjoying the tacit consent of the people” must be represented as “the natural order of things” to maintain authority (p. 66). The “distinctive constituents” of an aristocracy are force and landed property, on which inequalities of birth, wealth, and enlightenment are subsequently established. Absent such an authentic aristocracy, the last vestige of support for inegalitarian political orders is the threadbare illusion that domination is somehow natural or God-given. This mythical legitimacy rapidly evaporates in the face of new technology, the experience of other neighboring nations, and the dawning notion of equality. The near-simultaneous passing of this illusion in so many parts of the world today may be precisely what Tocqueville had in mind when he spoke of democracy as providential. Much to the consternation of despots, the jinni of democratic equality will not go back in the bottle.

Revolutions are the most identifiable symbols of democratization. Revolutions underscore a rupture – often violent, bloody, and painful – between disparate regimes, time periods, and ways of life. It is only a slight exaggeration to say that history itself is composed of revolutions, with the otherwise inconspicuous passage of time punctuated by key dates and eras such as 1688, 1776, 1789, 1918, 1989, prerevolutionary, post-revolutionary, antebellum, and so forth. Describing those exceptional moments when a new nation is born, Tocqueville (perhaps thinking as much of France as America) saw in them the whole physiognomy of the future. “Peoples always bear some marks of their origin,” Tocqueville