Introduction

Revisiting *Democracy in America* in the Twenty-First Century

Richard Boyd

Originally published in two volumes in 1835 and 1840, and translated into English in multiple recent editions, Alexis de Tocqueville's classic *Democracy in America* is among the most widely cited accounts of the distinctiveness of American democracy. US presidents as different as Ronald Reagan, Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama have all invoked the authority of Tocqueville's *Democracy* in support of divergent visions of the American regime. The work is selectively quoted – often at cross-purposes – by politicians, pundits, and intellectuals on both the Left and the Right. Hardly a week passes by without a snippet from *Democracy* appearing in a newspaper of record or some major popular journal of opinion. It is no exaggeration to say that Americans have come to know themselves, at least in part, through the pages of Tocqueville's book.

Democracy is not only ubiquitously referred to as an authoritative account of American politics and culture. It has also exerted a remarkable influence on the academic disciplines of political theory, sociology, American studies, American political development, intellectual history, and even literature. Some of the most noteworthy currents in postwar sociology took as their starting point Tocqueville's criticisms of democratic culture and mass society, the vagaries of public opinion, the pathologies of individualism, and the alleged breakdown of civic life in the United States.[1] Recent fascinations with civil society – both in the United States and abroad – can be traced back to the author's insights into the role that intermediary associations play in the well-functioning of democratic institutions.[2] Major debates in history and political sociology over "American

exceptionalism," or indeed whether America's political development should be understood as primarily "liberal" or "illiberal," originate in observations drawn from *Democracy*.[3] In sum, the book's views of the global tendencies of democracy and the peculiarities of America live on in some of today's liveliest academic debates.

Like many great works, *Democracy* also has a compelling backstory. As reconstructed by George Wilson Pierson, James T. Schleifer, and other more recent biographers, the story of the book's composition is by now legendary.[4] The young aristocrat Tocqueville – accompanied by his boon companion Gustave de Beaumont – contrives a visit to the United States in 1831, ostensibly to study the American penitentiary system.[5] While doing so, the two take a quick measure of polite society on the East Coast before decamping for the American West in pursuit of the wilderness, not to mention a better understanding of the peculiar institution of slavery. Their nine-month tour of North America – retraced by C-Span in 1997 – carries them across a wide swath of the United States and Canada. Upon returning to France in 1832, Tocqueville sits down to his notes and over the next few years produces a work that is both panoramic in its vision of the universal tide of democratic equality and scrupulous in its grasp of the minutiae of American culture, manners, and mores. The book he composed – to great acclaim both at home and abroad – became an instant classic.

Some of *Democracy*'s allure in the United States has always stemmed from the mistaken notion that the book is all about *America*. How flattering that a brilliant young nobleman should come all the way across the Atlantic and deem the Americans' political institutions, habits, and everyday life to be of world historical significance! Yet despite the book's gratifying pretense that Americans are the sole people on the earth in the 1830s who have managed to make democracy work, it is important to keep in mind that the book was intended to be a broader meditation on the genus of democracy as a "social condition," especially in Tocqueville's native France. America may be remarkable as the regime that has most

successfully balanced democracy and political liberty, but it is also worth studying as a harbinger of that "providential" equality unfolding around the world. The riddle, whose partial solution he finds in the United States, is how, in the face of this inexorable democratic revolution, can the novel equality of conditions be reconciled with a respect for political liberty? Given the book's profound insights into this dilemma, it is no surprise that *Democracy* has been hailed as a resource for democratic revolutions in successive centuries from Latin America to Eastern Europe and the Middle East.

Much has changed in the nearly two centuries since Tocqueville's visit. The French have managed to achieve what Tocqueville despaired of during his own lifetime, namely a stable balance between democracy and individual liberty. As he predicted, the Americans have proven to be both a superpower and the vanguard for the dissemination of democratic equality across the globe. Even so, many perils he spied on the horizon have also come to pass. By many accounts, Americans have become less civically engaged than Tocqueville found them in the first half of the nineteenth century. If neo-Tocquevillean critics of the strange decline of social capital in the United States are to be believed, latter-day Americans are more akin to nineteenth-century Frenchmen than the sturdy New England citizens Tocqueville lionized. Pathologies of "individualism," "tyrannical majoritarianism," "materialism," and even "soft despotism" have arguably reared their ugly heads in the intervening century and a half, as he feared;[6] and some of the anomalous illiberal institutions Tocqueville glimpsed beneath the pleasing facade of "democratic paint" – the nagging problem of race relations, the banality of bourgeois culture, the vagaries of public opinion, the vestiges of old privileges, and the growth of a new industrial aristocracy – seem only to have compounded in the following centuries.[7]

This present volume is not meant to serve as hagiography in service of the notion that the visionary Tocqueville once and for all "got America right." Nor is it intended to suggest, as have critics in the intervening decades, that Tocqueville was wildly off target.[8]

Rather, the aim is to show that, for all of his limitations, Tocqueville nonetheless managed to identify in *Democracy* the quintessential tendencies, contradictions, and dynamics inherent in the global process of democratization and that his book remains just as relevant in the twenty-first century as the day its first two tomes of volume 1 appeared in 1835.

In what follows, I sketch out some of the major questions raised by the text – and explored in more depth by the contributions that follow. These are organized around several key themes. First, there are matters surrounding the composition and reception of the book. How did it come about, from what sources, and how has it been read by subsequent generations in France, the United States, and elsewhere in the world? Second, we must take note of substantive issues Tocqueville identified and the extent to which his insights still hold sway in light of democracy's transformations over the past 190 years since his visit. Finally, how do his ideas point us ahead and guide attempts to reckon with some of the greatest challenges – many old, others novel – that democracy faces in the twenty-first century?

DEMOCRACY IN CONTEXT

Democracy may strike readers as *sui generis*. Or at least it is hard to fathom what kind of book Tocqueville meant it to be. Although normative in its lessons and philosophical in its conceits, *Democracy* is not an abstract rumination on the origins of government in the manner of Hobbes, Locke, or Rousseau. While it surveys history and makes surmises based on a distinctive schema of historical development reminiscent of G. W. F. Hegel or Karl Marx, neither is it a work of history in any straightforward sense. It purports to be a work of nonfiction, at least insofar as Tocqueville denies interjecting his own opinions beyond where firsthand evidence would lead him, but its themes and manner of argumentation are distinctively literary in character.[9] It may bring to mind earlier and roughly contemporaneous travelogues on America by the likes of François-René de Chateaubriand, Michel Chevalier, Captain Basil Hall, and

Mrs. Frances Trollope, but many of *Democracy*'s most profound insights are not so much artifacts of foreign discovery as confirmation of ideas Tocqueville held well before he set sail for the United States.[10]

One common way of understanding any book is to read it in light of conspicuous influences. In the case of *Democracy*, however, we confront a twofold dilemma of obscurity and even misdirection. Tocqueville is notoriously opaque about sources.[11] When commenting on general features of the United States he occasionally refers to an authoritative author or book – say, Thomas Jefferson or *The Federalist*. Yet he also takes pains to hide his immediate interlocutors, lest he be accused of betraying their confidence or implicating them in his controversies. With the benefit of his working notes and correspondence we can identify traces of his American associates, but even in hindsight their insights seem to have been deliberately cast in the shadows.[12] With respect to broader philosophical sources, the task is more complicated still. Earlier philosophical inspirations can be intuited in Tocqueville's writings, but these usually rest on similarities rather than specifiable matters of cause and effect. Thus, on the one hand, we have a reticent author who takes pains to disguise the provenance of his ideas.

On the other hand, though, *Democracy*'s author may have complicated the task of assessing the book by his own testimony. Readers of *Democracy* have long been preoccupied by Tocqueville's famous quip to his lifelong friend Louis de Kergorlay about communing daily with the intellectual triumvirate of "Montesquieu, Pascal, and Rousseau."[13] As confirmation, many read *Democracy* as developing the political sociology and study of regimes found in Montesquieu's *Spirit of the Laws*.[14] Surely there is much to support the centrality of Montesquieu to Tocqueville's thinking, and his most astute contemporary readers were quick to apprehend similarities between these two works. Many including the likes of Pierre Paul Royer-Collard and John Stuart Mill heralded Tocqueville as the Montesquieu of his age.[15] High praise, indeed.

Like his distinguished eighteenth-century predecessor, Tocqueville is concerned with regime types. Collapsing Montesquieu's tripartite forms of tyranny, monarchy, and republics into two, Tocqueville ends up with a typology of "aristocracy" and "democracy." Each of these is oriented toward a sort of Montesquieuean virtue, "honor" and "well-being," respectively. Rather than confining his attention to formal institutions, though, Tocqueville focuses like Montesquieu on the animating spirit or underlying cultural mores that breathe life to each regime. In terms of the independent variables that account for political liberty in the United States, Tocqueville again follows Montesquieu in trying to disentangle the relative influence of circumstances, mores, and laws. More broadly, in terms of methodology, Tocqueville emulates *Spirit of the Laws* in moving back and forth between abstract generalizations and specific empirical examples.

Less obvious was the influence of Pascal, although here too the fingerprints are discernible. As many interpreters have suggested, Tocqueville's theological notions of historical development, his sense of moral freedom, his emphasis on the naturalness of the religious experience, and his understanding of human agency and finitude are steeped in Pascalian language. Whether it is his view of the restlessness of the modern condition or his reckoning of freedom as a spiritual dilemma, it is hard to read *Democracy* without being deeply impressed by the significance of Christianity in Tocqueville's Jansenist worldview.[16]

Tocqueville's self-professed debt to Jean-Jacques Rousseau is more puzzling, for, as Allan Bloom has noted, it is hardly intuitive what the relationship could be between the Genevan apostle of republicanism and the young French aristocrat's ambivalent rendition of American democracy.[17] At the institutional level one could point to Tocqueville's celebration of the New England township as a cradle for American democracy. Rousseau's romanticized Swiss cantons appear on the other side of the Atlantic disguised as Puritan municipalities. At a deeper level, however, Rousseau leaves his imprint on Tocqueville's moral psychology of equality. Both thinkers conceive

of democracy in terms of the passing of aristocracy's invidious conventions. Their affirmation of the naturalness of democracy and the ways in which it elevates feelings of compassion and a common sense of humanity seems one of the most appreciable sources of agreement, if not outright influence, between the two thinkers.[18]

Whereas each of these three enumerated figures has already proven the subject of voluminous scholarly discussion, which need not be replicated here, Tocqueville's other sources for *Democracy* are less obvious. Despite the wide range of classical and contemporary philosophical sources we know he consulted during the period of composition of volume 2, there are scant references to particular thinkers.[19] Suggestive reconstructions of Tocqueville's immediate political context have established the young Frenchman's indebtedness to the scheme of historical development espoused by François Guizot and other liberal Doctrinaire thinkers such as Royer-Collard and Charles de Rémusat.[20] We know that Tocqueville attended François Guizot's lectures on European civilization at the Sorbonne in 1829–1830 and that he went so far as to write from America asking that copies of Guizot's lectures be sent to him to aid in his project.[21] Both thinkers identify a dawning tide of equality spreading throughout the globe, express concerns for how a liberal regime can be established in the wake of a democratic revolution, eschew centralization in favor of local liberties, and seek to understand democracy primarily in terms of a novel "social condition."[22]

Lucien Jaume has further sketched out the aristocratic intellectual milieu of Restoration France from which Tocqueville may have derived some of his most renowned ideas. While *Democracy* strikes contemporary readers as novel, many of its central themes were widely debated in Legitimist circles of the day.[23] If Jaume is right, some of *Democracy*'s most distinctive ideas may be much less original than we have come to believe. Concepts such as "the social," "generative principles," and the critique of "individualism," materialism, and "administrative despotism" for which Tocqueville is renowned were already found in writings of reactionary figures such

as Félicité Robert de Lamennais, Joseph de Maistre, and Guillaume-Chrétien de Lamoignon de Malesherbes, not to mention Tocqueville's own kinsman Chateaubriand.

Beyond direct comparisons with an already familiar cast of characters, this volume seeks to reframe Tocqueville's ideas against the broader context of the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Should Tocqueville be considered an Enlightenment or anti-Enlightenment thinker? How much ground does he ultimately break from his innumerable seventeenth- and eighteenth-century sources? What ideas and concepts does he share with other leading thinkers of his own generation, and to what extent does his aristocratic vantage inform his concern to preserve some remnants of an aristocratic age?

For his part, Ryan Patrick Hanley in Chapter 1 observes that Tocqueville's political thought has often been cast in terms of whether he sides with or against the Enlightenment philosophies of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Yet, as Hanley notes, this oversimplifies to the point of meaninglessness. Rather than a binary choice, we may more profitably ask what *kind* of Enlightenment figure is Tocqueville? Of the various strands of Enlightenment thinking, which ones does he endorse or denounce as pernicious? Locating Tocqueville's thought squarely in the path of the so-called Moderate Enlightenment, Hanley suggests that one of the most illuminating comparisons is to the Scottish economist and moral philosopher Adam Smith, whose relationship to Tocqueville has been lamentably unexplored.

In Chapter 2, Aurelian Craiutu surveys Tocqueville in light of the concerns of his immediate generation and identifies traces of this milieu in some of the key themes of *Democracy*. What is often referred to as the Generation of 1820 came of age during the Bourbon Restoration. Its notable members such as Théodore Jouffroy, Charles de Rémusat, François-René de Chateaubriand, and Félicité de Lamennais all shared with Tocqueville a distrust of revolution, a sense of the providential march of equality, and unease about

the novel social conditions of skepticism and individualism. With respect to Chateaubriand's influence in particular, Craiutu offers a clue as to why Tocqueville may have first turned to America – rather than Montesquieu's England, like so many peers – as a model for France to emulate in its own pursuit of liberty.

One perennial question about Tocqueville's formative environment is his relationship to aristocracy. Most readers take Tocqueville at his word when he says at the opening of *Democracy* that the passing of an aristocratic age is by now a *fait accompli*. Yet even if democracy is the wave of the future, as he says, this may be all the more reason to hold on to vestiges of an aristocratic past. Should this prove impossible, maybe new forms of aristocracy can be cultivated to leaven democracy's most deleterious features? Some have gone so far as to make nostalgia for the passing of the *Ancien Régime* the centerpiece of Tocqueville's thought.[24] Yet, as Richard Avramenko argues in Chapter 3, the key to appreciating Tocqueville's fondness for aristocracy may not be vague nostalgia, family pedigree, or the ostensible influence of French royalist thinkers, as others have assumed. Rather, we can best understand his affinities for aristocracy by consulting the most unlikely of sources, namely *Democracy* and his quest to create a new political science for a new age.

While many ideas and concepts found in *Democracy* were hardly original to Tocqueville, as we will see, it is almost surely not the case, as Lucien Jaume has gone so far as to allege, that there is little new in Tocqueville's analysis of democracy.[25] Despite the difficulty of pinpointing Tocqueville's ultimate inspirations, situating *Democracy* against these backdrops helps readers to appreciate better the book's originality and the author's undeniable genius.

CONTEMPORANEOUS RECEPTIONS

Besides likely sources and intellectual influences, we learn important things about any classic text by considering how it has been received and deployed by others. Indeed, the measure of a great work is its ability to speak to a wide range of audiences, fulfill different

contemporary needs, and inspire divergent interpretations. If longevity and global relevance are hallmarks of classic texts, then *Democracy* is surely a book of the foremost caliber. *Democracy* not only served contradictory aims in the France, Britain, and United States of its own day but has subsequently been adopted for a wide range of political causes, whether liberal, conservative, or revolutionary.

French Celebrity

It may seem obvious in hindsight that *Democracy* would cause a stir, but the book's wary publisher Charles Gosselin committed to an initial print run of only 500 copies. His surprise upon the book's success ("Now then! It seems you've written a masterpiece!") sums up the instant celebrity the author achieved in his native France with the publication of the first part of the work in 1835.[26] Tocqueville professed to be just as taken aback not only by the magnitude of attention the book garnered but also by the degree to which this favorable assessment was shared across the political spectrum.[27] Three print runs totaling 2,000 copies rapidly followed in 1835, and within a few years of subsequent editions the total copies in circulation numbered approximately 6,000.[28]

Other European commentaries on the United States were of interest in direct proportion to their political tendentiousness, but Tocqueville's book succeeded at least in part because his analysis impressed readers as dispassionate. As detailed by many historians, the book struck timely chords in its French readership: a perennial French fascination with understanding America, all the more so during a period in the 1830s of great diplomatic stress between the two nations; concerns about the future trajectory of democratic equality in French politics; matters of constitutionalism and legislation; and the vexing question of the relationship between religion and politics.[29]

Democracy's notoriety began with the first published review by Léon Faucher appearing before the book was in print in the