

---

H-France Review Vol. 14 (May 2014), No. 71

Alan S. Kahan, *Alexis de Tocqueville. Major Conservative and Libertarian Thinkers*. New York: Bloomsburg Academic, 2013. 168 pp. \$29.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN-13: 978-1441173270.

Review by Helena Rosenblatt, CUNY—Graduate Center.

This is an excellent little book by one of the world's leading authorities on Tocqueville. It packs a great deal of information, a myriad of penetrating insights, and a considerable amount of wisdom into its brief 131 pages of written text. Alan Kahan does a marvelous job of introducing Tocqueville to the general reader in a way that is sophisticated and nuanced enough to retain the attention of the more advanced reader as well. Although Kahan is sympathetic to Tocqueville, the book is certainly not an exercise in hagiography. It is a balanced and learned treatment that does not shy away from pointing out some of the more troubling aspects of Tocqueville's thought. And to those of us who know and admire Kahan's previous work, his new "take" on Tocqueville is rather intriguing.

Kahan is in a good position to produce a concise, yet rich treatment of Tocqueville, having written extensively about Tocqueville and liberalism before. His *Aristocratic Liberalism: The Social and Political Thought of Jacob Burckhardt, John Stuart Mill, and Alexis de Tocqueville* was well received when it first came out in 1992 and continues to be an appreciated and much cited book. In 2003, Kahan published *Liberalism in Nineteenth-Century Europe: The Political Culture of Limited Suffrage*, in which he focused on what he calls the "discourse of capacity" in liberal thought. In between these two books, Kahan also co-edited *The Tocqueville Reader: A Life in Letters and Politics* and translated *The Old Regime and the Revolution*, in each case providing comprehensive introductions.[1] What one might expect from this new book, therefore, is a condensation and reiteration of Kahan's previous thoughts on Tocqueville, but this is not really the case.

In his two previous monographs, Kahan argued that "liberalism," a word and concept that he admits is very hard to define, was essentially an anti-democratic and elitist movement. Wedded to the principle of limited suffrage, and expressly concerned with restricting the political participation of the masses, it largely passed out of existence at the end of the nineteenth century, when it could no longer stem the democratic tide. Kahan described Tocqueville as an "aristocratic liberal," which he defined as someone with a marked distaste for both the masses and the middle classes, and a deep suspicion of the centralized state. Kahan wrote that although Tocqueville accepted the inevitability of democracy, he became increasingly pessimistic about it over time, eventually finding it hard to "see any alternative to despair" [2] Quoting Tocqueville himself, Kahan argued that he wrote *Democracy in America* because he "wanted expose to the light of day the great perils to which equality exposes human independence." [3] In Kahan's early reading, Tocqueville proposed precious few remedies to the "great perils" he diagnosed within democracy, except possibly for education. And Tocqueville's aversion for the state led Kahan to liken his brand of liberalism to "anarchist-libertarian" thought.[4]

Kahan's new book suggests that he has somewhat altered his view of Tocqueville, but this only becomes clear about half-way through the book. The first chapter is a brief but insightful survey of Tocqueville's life that provides a useful framework for understanding the man and the thinker. Tocqueville was, writes Kahan, a "divided soul" (p. 14), torn between his essentially aristocratic temperament and his reluctant acceptance of democracy. He was both an insider and an outsider, never quite fitting in—and

never quite wanting to fit in either. But according to Kahan, this may very well have been the secret to his success, and why he was able to see the problems of democracy so clearly. Although Tocqueville called himself a “liberal” (p. 14), he wished always to be independent of any political party. He claimed to be “aristocratic by instinct” but had a “preference for democratic institutions” (p. 11).

Despite this split personality, the “essential Tocqueville”—which is the subject of chapter two—was a remarkably consistent thinker. Kahan calls him “one of the most consistent political theorists ever to write more than one book” (p. 23). What was essential to Tocqueville, writes Kahan, was “a commitment to freedom and a commitment to France” (p. 23). His entire life’s work was devoted to figuring out how freedom might be preserved in his home country. In Kahan’s pithy words, “Freedom in France was Tocqueville’s Holy Grail” (p. 27.) Referencing the important work of James Schleifer, this chapter also alerts the reader to the many different uses of the word “democracy” that can be found in Tocqueville. [5] Kahan explains that most of the time Tocqueville meant “democracy” not in a political sense, but rather to designate “a social situation in which everyone is presumed to be equal” (p. 24.) The chapter briefly discusses Tocqueville’s intellectual debts to intellectual predecessors like Edmund Burke, Pascal, Montesquieu and even Jean-Jacques Rousseau, as well as contemporaries like Chateaubriand, Guizot and Lamennais. While Tocqueville drew from all of these thinkers, he came to very different conclusions. In America, writes Kahan, Tocqueville “learned much” (p. 34).

Chapter three on “Democracy and Freedom in America” explains the role that America played in Tocqueville’s thought. Consistent with the “essential Tocqueville,” Tocqueville studied America with a view to the lessons it could teach France. At the time, many people saw America as the purest example of an actually existing democracy and, perhaps unsurprisingly, Tocqueville identified many problems there. There was materialism and individualism and a troubling lack of independence of mind. All of this posed the grave risk of the “tyranny of the majority,” a highly centralized government, and despotism. And yet, in the end, America showed that democracy and freedom *could* be combined successfully. Kahan here seems to suggest a more optimistic Tocqueville. He finds a different quote to explain why Tocqueville wrote *Democracy in America*: he wanted “to show, by using America as an example, that laws and above all mores could allow a democratic people to remain free” (p. 24). While there were problems associated with democracy, Americans had found remedies to them: voluntary associations, enlightened self-interest, and religion. And, perhaps most interestingly for a self-described “liberal,” Tocqueville described *political activity* as fundamental to the survival of freedom in democratic societies. Political associations were the all-important training grounds that could fight the problem of centralization and allow democracy to moderate itself. Tocqueville’s message, then, in Kahan’s new reading, was mainly positive. If the French could learn from the American example, they might just put themselves on the right track. There was, however, one aspect of America that Tocqueville found especially abhorrent and about which he was prophetically pessimistic: the problem of slavery. On this issue Tocqueville predicted that “great woes certainly lie ahead” (p. 55).

Of course the French did not in fact apply the American remedies, and chapter four, “Democracy and Freedom in France,” relates what Kahan sees as Tocqueville’s growing pessimism about his home country after the Revolution of 1848. Focusing much on Tocqueville’s *Recollections*, a memoir written in 1850, Kahan argues that Tocqueville worried especially about the French bourgeoisie, which he saw as “selfish,” “greedy” and “mediocre” (p. 59). Then, in 1859 he published *The Old Regime and the Revolution*, which Kahan sees as a continuation of themes originally expressed in *Democracy in America*. He provides an excellent summary of this book, highlighting Tocqueville’s abiding concern with the relationship of freedom and democracy and also his critique of the old regime. Kahan writes that Tocqueville thought the purpose of the French Revolution was “to destroy the rotting fabric of aristocratic society in Europe” (p. 62) and that he believed that the old regime was “detestable” (p. 73). If Tocqueville was an “aristocratic liberal,” he was clearly one of a special sort.

Chapter five, on “Democracy and Freedom Elsewhere” discusses Tocqueville’s disturbing support for French colonialism, a topic that has been much debated in recent years. Kahan writes that although Tocqueville certainly rejected racism, he was also a nationalist, and never wavered in his belief that France should hold on to Algeria. He was attached to Algeria as “symbol of French power, almost of French virility” (p. 83). But Tocqueville was also “conflicted” (pp. 73, 83-84). On the one hand he worried about the barbarous fighting of French soldiers, and on the other he approved of what he referred to as certain “unfortunate necessities” (p. 83), such as burning their harvests, emptying their silos and seizing unarmed men, women and children. Here we return to Kahan’s main point about the “essential Tocqueville”—his “Holy Grail” was always freedom *in France*. It is clear, writes Kahan, that Tocqueville was “less concerned about freedom in some places than in others” (p. 89). He subscribed to his own version of the civilizing mission.

Chapter six, on “Democracy, Freedom and Poverty,” treats Tocqueville’s economic views. And here it is, I think, that Kahan’s new view of Tocqueville emerges most clearly. Kahan writes that although economic issues were never central to Tocqueville, they did attract his attention from the beginning of his adult life. As a law student, he read the work of the liberal political economist Jean-Baptiste Say, a French popularizer of Adam Smith. During a trip to England in 1833 he was struck by the problem of poverty and engaged in research of the reformed English Poor Law and its effects. When he visited England again in 1835, he was shocked by the poverty he saw in industrial Manchester, and he produced his “First Memoir on Pauperism” for the Royal Academic Society of Cherbourg. A “Second Memoir” was drafted in 1837 but never finished. Kahan spends some time discussing these interesting memoirs, which are among the less well-known of Tocqueville’s writings. They show Tocqueville to have been something other than a “classical liberal” as that term is normally defined. In them he considered three ways of helping the poor, what he called “legal,” “private” or “public” charity. “Legal charity” guaranteed the poor a right to relief, a right to work and/or subsistence by the government, and Tocqueville was against it. He thought it would be harmful both to the economy and to the morals of the poor, creating “an idle and lazy class” (p. 94). “Private charity” was provided by individuals or private associations, and Tocqueville approved of it, but he thought that it would never be enough. What France needed was something in between “legal charity” and “private charity,” and this is what Tocqueville referred to as “public charity.” Under its rubric, Tocqueville justified what Kahan describes as “a quite extensive list of government interventions, which together amount to something akin to the ‘social safety net’ of the twentieth century” (p. 95.)

Although the second volume of *Democracy in America* testifies to Tocqueville’s growing concerns with the danger of “socialism,” a document known as “Fragments for a Social Policy” written in 1847 also shows that Tocqueville pondered a reform of the French tax system with a view to relieving the burdens on the poor. In his *Recollections*, Tocqueville then returned to his worries about “socialism,” but according to Kahan, they “did not make him into a doctrinaire opponent of government intervention in socioeconomic matters” (p. 104). Kahan notes that in a now famous speech in which Tocqueville attacked socialism, he also supported the idea of introducing “charity into politics” (p. 104). Kahan writes that through his enforcement of tax reform and state economic intervention, Tocqueville went “well beyond what the typical French liberal politician of his day endorsed” (p. 104).

This is what makes Tocqueville, in Kahan’s new assessment, a “Neo-liberal,” the topic of chapter seven. Kahan describes Tocqueville as a pioneer in the trend that would eventually be called “New Liberalism” in England and “Solidarism” in France. He was for the free market as an essential ingredient in human freedom, but also understood the necessity of government intervention in specific areas, and favored a tax system favorable to the poor. This position also makes Tocqueville, in Kahan’s estimation, relevant today—“his neo-liberalism seems right for the times” (p. 128). Chapters eight and nine briefly describe Tocqueville’s reception in Europe and America, finishing on the note of his contemporary relevance.

Kahan's analyses and proposals are always interesting and thought-provoking, but one is left with a dizzying array of labels. Kahan himself knows better than anyone else how confusing the term "liberal" can be, and yet he continues to use it, and adds further levels of complication (and confusion?) on top. First one was told that Tocqueville was an "aristocratic liberal," whose brand of liberalism was similar to "anarchist-libertarian" thought. Now one is told that he should better be called a "neo-liberal," because his brand of liberalism foreshadowed the British "New Liberalism" of the twentieth century. And yet the very book in which this is stated, one cannot fail to notice, is part of a series called "Major Conservative and Libertarian Thinkers." If Tocqueville is indeed a consistent thinker, then these labels certainly are not. It would be helpful to have Kahan explain what has happened here. Anything he writes is always suggestive and illuminating.

## NOTES

[1] Alan S. Kahan, *Aristocratic Liberalism. The Social and Political Thought of Jacob Burckhardt, John Stuart Mill, and Alexis De Tocqueville* (New York: Oxford University Press 1992); *Liberalism in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003); Olivier Zunz and Alan S. Kahan, eds., *The Tocqueville Reader: A Life in Letters and Politics*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002); Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the Revolution*, Alan S. Kahan, trans., and intro., (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998 (vol. 1) and 2001 (vol. 2)).

[2] Kahan, *Aristocratic Liberalism*, p. 119.

[3] *Ibid*, p. 103.

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 157.

[5] James Schleifer, *The Making of Tocqueville's Democracy in America* (Chapel Hill: University of Carolina Press, 1980).

Helena Rosenblatt  
CUNY—Graduate Center  
[HRosenblatt@gc.cuny.edu](mailto:HRosenblatt@gc.cuny.edu)

Copyright © 2013 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/ republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172