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Olivier Zunz, ed., *Alexis de Tocqueville and Gustave de Beaumont in America: Their Friendship and their Travels*. Translated by Arthur Goldhammer (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2010), 784 p. \$ 60.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN-10: 9780813930626

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Alexis de Tocqueville and his friend Gustave de Beaumont spent a little over nine months in North America, from May 9, 1831 to February 20, 1832. In that short span of time, Tocqueville nearly died—not just once, but twice. The first time was in November 1831, when they traversed the icy cold Ohio River on the steamship *The Fourth of July*. Suddenly, their ship hit a reef and cracked open. It quickly started sinking. With two hundred passengers on board and but two small lifeboats, the travelers seemed doomed. Tocqueville and Beaumont took one last look at each other and shook hands in a mark of farewell. Only the chance arrival of another steamboat, which was able to take the passengers of *The Fourth of July* on board, prevented the two Frenchmen from drowning in the Ohio.

Tocqueville's second brush with death occurred a few weeks later, in December 1831. The North American continent was in the grip of a major cold snap, and in an attempt to find a navigable river, Tocqueville and Beaumont travelled ever further south. While they were heading from Nashville to Memphis by stagecoach in freezing temperatures, a wheel broke and then an axle followed. They had to continue their way on foot while it got colder and colder. After crossing the Tennessee, they boarded another stagecoach. But by now, Tocqueville was frozen through and shivering. He was clearly ill. It was impossible to go on, and they had to stop. But where? How? There was no inn on the road. At last, the two French aristocrats ended up in a simple log cabin made of rough-hewn oak logs piled one on top of another. Here, Beaumont nursed Tocqueville slowly back to health. But for his friend, the author of the *Democracy in America* might never have returned from the trip that ended up making him famous.

Both Tocqueville and Beaumont left vivid descriptions of these and other mishaps in their letters and travel writings. (The incidents above are chronicled on pp. 175-178.) Between the two of them, they sent over seventy letters home. These, together with Beaumont's diary fragments and Tocqueville's travel notebooks have now been made accessible to an Anglophone audience in a translation by Arthur Goldhammer, edited by Olivier Zunz. The resulting volume, *Alexis de Tocqueville and Gustave de Beaumont in America: Their Travels and Their Friendship*, also contains excerpts from what may be described as the "minor" writings produced in the wake of their trip to the United States. Thus, Tocqueville's and Beaumont's writings on the penitentiary system are included as well as excerpts from Beaumont's 1835 anti-slavery novel, *Marie: Or Slavery in the United States*, and letters concerning the United States written after their return home in 1832. All this has been published in a beautiful, hefty volume by the University of Virginia Press, with illustrations by Beaumont, for a mere sixty dollars.

Of the wealth of materials included in the book, the letters and travel notebooks penned during Tocqueville's and Beaumont's stay in the United States provide the most interesting read. In addition to their many narrow escapes from death and discomfort, the letters allow us to glimpse, raw and unedited, their initial impressions of the United States. Many of their observations were written to amuse their friends and family at home, and they still manage to provoke a smile. Our friends were struck by how much Americans ate. Tocqueville informed his mother that "In addition to breakfast, dinner and tea, with which the Americans eat ham, they also serve a very copious supper and frequently a snack." (p. 10)

They frequently remarked upon the tin ear of Americans, and they were especially horrified by the singing of American ladies. They made fun of the “American museum” in New York, which instead of paintings contained a “magic lantern and a few stuffed birds.” (p. 66)

But there is real meat here as well. The letters, notebooks and diary fragments provide a unique window into the development of Tocqueville’s and Beaumont’s ideas, as they evolved in the course of their journey through the United States. Recent trends in Tocqueville scholarship have tended to downplay the impact of the American journey on Tocqueville’s intellectual development. Historians are more inclined to emphasize that Tocqueville’s most important ideas had their roots in the political controversies of Restoration France and the early July Monarchy (I plead guilty in this regard as well). Both the problems which Tocqueville addressed in his *Democracy in America* (1835–40) and the solutions which he proposed, it has been argued, were inspired by those debates and by positions earlier articulated by a wide gamut of French politicians and journalists, ranging from liberals such as Francois Guizot to royalists such as Charles Cottu. Even the vocabulary which Tocqueville used to express his ideas—key concepts such as centralization, individualism, democracy, etc.—were a product of that intellectual context.[1]

While there is no reason to doubt that these contextualist readings are generally correct, reading Tocqueville’s letters from America, especially in conjunction with those of Beaumont, does make clear the extent to which his actual experience of American life also needs to be taken into account in order to come to a more complete picture of his intellectual development. As Zunz rightfully emphasizes in the introduction to the volume, reading Tocqueville’s letters leaves it beyond doubt that his stay in the United States, brief as it was, did have a crucial impact on his intellectual development and on formulating the position he would eventually take up in *Democracy in America*. The American journey, in Zunz’s words, “turned Tocqueville’s strong intuition that democracy was the prominent feature of modern life into a viable theory of democratic practice”, while “he could not have intuited this conclusion without intense firsthand observations.” At the same time, it makes clear that Beaumont, “from the same set of observations, went on to a different assessment.” (p. xxii)

The letters provide ample illustrations of that point. Originally, both Tocqueville and Beaumont perceived American society as so mercantile and materialistic that it left no room at all for political life. Americans, they both reported, were apolitical people and as such very different from the passionately political French. Thus, on May 28, 1831, Tocqueville wrote to his brother Edouard that the only thing Americans thought about was the acquisition of wealth, that it was “a nation of merchants” which took up public affairs only “when its work leaves it the leisure to do so” and that hence “you’d have to be really blind to want to compare this country with Europe and adapt what works in one place for use in the other.”(p. 24) On June 3, Tocqueville noted to his father that American newspapers were more interested in the price of cotton than in political issues. The political institutions of America, if transplanted, “would inevitably bring upheaval in France.”(p. 30) Beaumont came to similar conclusions.

Yet, in Tocqueville’s case, this initial disdain rapidly gave way to a more positive appraisal of American society and especially of its political life. The clearest indication of this change of heart is provided in a long and thoughtful letter Tocqueville wrote on June 29 to his friend Louis de Kergorlay, in which he in effect ended up outlining the most important ideas that would eventually find their way into the first *Democracy* of 1835. He now described equality of conditions as the most important characteristic of American society and praised Americans for understanding that decentralization was the best way of fostering political freedom in such a context. “I am reporting all my impressions as best as I can,” he reported to his friend. “All in all, they are more favorable to America than they were during the first days after my arrival.”(p. 56) This new outlook led him to see Americans very differently. On July 17, 1831, in describing a visit to the house of a simple farmer, he noted that to talk politics was the American farmer’s “first concern.” (p. 82)

Tocqueville's change of heart is all the more striking when his letters are read in conjunction with those of Beaumont. Unlike his friend, Beaumont continued to think that the American political system, and American society more generally, held no lessons for France. As he wrote in a letter to his sister Eugénie, he felt no enthusiasm for the government of the United States, and he was firmly convinced of the impossibility of "establishing their political institutions in France." (p. 73) In sum, it's not much of a surprise that Beaumont's big book on the United States—his *Marie*—offered a far more negative impression than Tocqueville's *Democracy* as well as focusing on what both friends agreed was the biggest blot on the American record—the existence of slavery in the South. It also hints at a possible reason why the original plan of the two friends to collaborate on a book about America was eventually abandoned and why two very different books were written.

Of course, none of this information is really new. Most of the sources reproduced in *Tocqueville and Beaumont in America* have long been available to scholars, either in the original French or in many cases even in English translation.[2] The volume by Zunz and Goldhammer might therefore hold its greatest appeal for a more general audience with an interest in Tocqueville and/or the early days of the American Republic. However, one wonders whether such readers might not prefer the slimmer and even more affordable volume recently translated and edited by Frederick Brown under the title *Alexis de Tocqueville: Letters from America*. [3] Alternatively, Tocqueville aficionados could turn to earlier collections of letters such as Zunz's and Alan Kahan's 2002 volume, *The Tocqueville Reader: A Life in Letters and Politics*, which is more selective but covers more aspects of Tocqueville's life and interests. [4] Alternatively, they might pick up George Wilson Pierson's *Tocqueville and Beaumont in America*, the classic account of the trip of the two young Frenchmen to the United States first published in 1938 but still eminently readable, which covers much of the same ground as the materials reproduced in the volume under review. [5]

That being said, there is considerable merit, as Zunz himself also argues in the introduction to the volume, in "isolating the texts of the trip from the rest of the corpus." (p. xxii) Especially considering the dispersion of the original letters and the travel notebooks over several different volumes of Gallimard's *Oeuvres complètes* and of the *Pléiade* edition, it is useful to have all the materials related to the American journey together in one handy volume. In addition, the fact that we have here not just Tocqueville's voice but also that of his travel companion Beaumont is more than an added bonus. The comparison with Beaumont, as this volume makes clear, is crucial for understanding how the actual journey impacted the two friends in very different ways. In addition, the letters and other writings are beautifully translated by the unparalleled Arthur Goldhammer, and the footnotes and scholarly apparatus are meticulously researched as well as user-friendly. All in all, *Tocqueville and Beaumont in America* is a worthy and important addition to the ever-increasing volume of Tocqueville's translated *oeuvre*.

NOTES

[1] In 1980, James Schleifer already noted that "the sources for Tocqueville and his book went beyond his voyages to America and England, his friends, and his readings. *Democracy in America* also reflected the concerns of contemporary France." Cf. Schleifer, *The Making of Tocqueville's Democracy in America* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2000 [1980]), p. 341. Francois Furet made a similar point in his classic article "The Intellectual Origins of Tocqueville's Thought," in Jesse Pitts and Olivier Zunz, eds., *The Tocqueville Review* 7 (1985/86) 117-129. Larry Siedentop highlights the importance of the political debates of the Restoration period for Tocqueville's intellectual development in his *Tocqueville* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994). Aurelian Craiutu focuses on the influence of the doctrinaires on Tocqueville in his "Tocqueville and the Political Thought of the French Doctrinaires" *History of Political Thought* 20 (1999) 456-495. For a discussion of Tocqueville's aristocratic liberalism in context: Annelien De Dijn, *French Political Thought From Montesquieu to Tocqueville: Liberty in a Levelled Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008). Cheryl Welch likewise pays much attention to Tocqueville's French context in her *De Tocqueville* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

[2] This is recognized by Zunz and Goldhammer. See the “Note on Sources”, pp. 659-661, for an extensive discussion of previous editions of the material covered in *Tocqueville and Beaumont in America* in both French and English.

[3] Frederick Brown, *Alexis de Tocqueville: Letters from America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).

[4] Olivier Zunz and Alan Kahan, eds., *The Tocqueville Reader: A Life in Letters and Politics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002).

[5] G.W. Pierson, *Tocqueville in America* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996 [1938]).

[15] Zunz, “Introduction”, p. xxii.

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