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Olivier Zunz, *The Man Who Understood Democracy: The Life of Alexis de Tocqueville*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2022. viii + 443. Note on sources, notes, acknowledgments, and index. $35.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9780691173979; $26.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 9780691254142; $26.95 U.S. (ebook). ISBN 9780691235455.

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The new paperback edition of *The Man Who Understood Democracy* comes festooned with no less than sixteen tributes in which the book is described as "authoritative," "magisterial," "masterful," and "riveting." I'm not going to quarrel with these reviewers. This is an impressive biography. It grasps Tocqueville's thought in its complexity; it gives a rich and nuanced account of his personal life; it explores in an original way conflicting elements in Tocqueville's identity; and, if not always riveting, it is eminently readable. Is there more to say? One can begin by situating this book in the broad sweep of Tocqueville studies and, more specifically, with reference to the two best known earlier biographies of Tocqueville: André Jardin, *Tocqueville: A Biography* (1989), and Hugh Brogan, *Alexis de Tocqueville: A Life* (2007).

In the early 1960s, when I was a graduate student in Paris, Alexis de Tocqueville seemed to be a non-person in France. In the bookstores, editions of *Democracy in America* were readily available, but very little else. At the Sorbonne, Raymond Aron was virtually the only French scholar who had much to say about Tocqueville; and his inclusion, along with Montesquieu, Marx and Weber, in Aron's *Main Currents in Sociological Thought* (1967) was widely regarded as an unwarranted promotion. There was no scholarly biography, and the publication by Gallimard of the *Oeuvres complètes* was proceeding in a deliberate manner under the direction of the German J.P. Mayer.

In the past sixty years the situation has changed dramatically. With the decline in the hegemony of academic Marxism and the rise of liberal political theory, Tocqueville has emerged from the shadows in France. Already in 1963 Michel Crozier was drawing extensively on Tocqueville in elaborating his comparative study of French and American bureaucracies; and by the 1970s François Furet was making the rediscovery of Tocqueville the centerpiece of his assault on the Marxist historiography of the French Revolution. In 1977 the Tocqueville Society was formed, and two years later the bilingual *Tocqueville Review* began to appear. By 1984, when André Jardin published the first full scholarly biography, a dozen first-rate monographs were out or on the way; the *Oeuvres complètes* had reached twenty volumes; and Tocqueville had entered the *Bibliothèque de la Pléiade*. By 1986 a minor work in the Tocqueville canon could provoke a vigorous joust between the President of the Republic and the *Garde des Sceaux* in the *Conseil des Ministres*. And in 1993 Françoise Mélonio published a major

work, *Tocqueville et les Français,* tracing the "querulous conversation" of the French with Tocqueville over 150 years. The conversation continues both in France and in the English-speaking world. It was only in 2021, after seventy years of editorial work, that the thirty-second and final volume of the *Oeuvres complètes* appeared.

André Jardin's pioneering *Tocqueville: A Biography* (1989) focuses on Tocqueville's public life. It is organized around a detailed narration of his political career, beginning with an account of the sufferings of both sides of his family during the French Revolution and the Terror. It then moves on to a careful discussion of Tocqueville's ambitions and choices at the outset of the July Monarchy, his career as a deputy from the *arrondissement* of Valognes, his frustrating role as a moderate republican in 1848, and his last years of internal exile. Jardin's account of the stages of Tocqueville's public life is reliable and admirably clear. But one misses a sense of the man himself--his character and personality--and while the discussion of the major works is marked by careful contextual analysis, it suffers from Jardin's lack of access to the rich body of archival sources now available to scholars concerning the elements of rethinking and rewriting that went into the composition of both of Tocqueville's major works.[1]

Hugh Brogan takes a very different approach in his biography, *Alexis de Tocqueville: A Life* (2007). Brogan offers a psychologically rich, if at times anachronistic portrait which illuminates Tocqueville's intense male friendships and his relations with the two most important women in his life: his mother and his English wife. Brogan argues, persuasively I think, that Mary Mottley provided Tocqueville with sympathy and emotional sustenance that he greatly needed. Brogan is also attentive to the literary qualities of Tocqueville's work, and he has interesting things to say about Tocqueville's early development as a stylist. But on the substance of Tocqueville's writings his original insights are often interlarded with criticism that is both superficial and extravagant. He deplores what he sees as the lack of evidence to support the conceptual framing of both the major works. He describes the first volume of *Democracy in America* as "ramshackle" and the second as "shaped as much by personal neurosis as by logic and observation." As for the ancien regime, he describes it as both a "medley of fiction and wishful thinking" and as "the work of a great historian." [2]

In contrast to his predecessors, Olivier Zunz presents a genuinely integrated account of Tocqueville's life and thought. Zunz keeps both the thinker and the political actor in focus, and he manages not only to set forth Tocqueville's ideas but also to show how he arrived at them and to describe the context in which he formulated and developed them. In the process he brings to life Tocqueville's world, the people who inhabited it, and Tocqueville himself. At the heart of the book is Zunz's insistence that reflection on the American experience remained central to Tocqueville's understanding of democracy long after the writing of *Democracy in America*. Tocqueville's time in America was just over nine months. But in America, Zunz argues, Tocqueville had the opportunity to observe "the palpable reality of a functioning democracy"; subsequently America was to remain "central to Tocqueville's thought and action throughout his life, long after the trip and in almost inverse proportion to its brevity" (p. 4). Thus in his chapter on the Second Republic Zunz's focus is on Tocqueville's attempt to "write American democratic principles into a new republican constitution" (p. 272). And in writing about the French colonization of Algeria, Zunz underlines the connection in Tocqueville's mind between Algeria and the American West. "Tocqueville came to see Algeria," he writes, "as a French version of the American frontier. His experience of democracy in America justified French colonization of North Africa" (p. 243).

One of the impressive features of this book is the richness and variety of the sources. But even more impressive is Zunz's skill in making use of the sources. He has mined the archives to illuminate Tocqueville's domestic life, his worries, his self-doubts, his gift for friendship. Zunz shows us how this shy and diffident man forged lasting friendships, many sustained more through correspondence than through regular meetings. Likewise Zunz draws on Tocqueville's working papers, his drafts, and his correspondence to chronicle the progress of his work and to illustrate the twists and turns of his thinking with regard to problems such as the relation between democracy and equality or the place of religion in democratic societies. In drawing out Tocqueville's arguments, Zunz shows remarkable sensitivity to the unresolved elements--the ambiguities, anomalies and conflicts--in Tocqueville's thought. This leaves the reader, or at least this reader, greatly impressed by Zunz's ability to guide us carefully through the most complex and problematic passages.

Zunz's skill as a guide to the stages of Tocqueville's thinking is abundantly clear in his careful tracking of Tocqueville's attempt in the second volume of *Democracy in America* to build a theory of democracy no longer specifically rooted in the history of the American experiment but in a broader movement from aristocracy to democracy. Zunz's skill as a guide is also evident in his superb unpacking of the reflections on French history that led Tocqueville to the writing of *The Ancien Régime and the French Revolution*. Here the starting point is Tocqueville's attempt to explain the cycles of revolution and authoritarian government that beset France after 1789. Why, he asks, within the space of two generations, did democratic revolutions twice culminate in the dictatorship of a Napoleon? And how could the French "so easily give up liberty gained through revolution and submit to a despot" (p. 293)?

Zunz proceeds to trace the complex route taken by Tocqueville in his effort to understand the cycle of revolution and dictatorship. He shows, step by step, how the focus of Tocqueville's inquiry shifts from the rise to power of a Napoleon to the much more difficult question of the origins of the French Revolution. Tocqueville recognizes that prior to 1789 the French people were freer and more prosperous than ever before and for that very reason less inclined to tolerate inequality. But Tocqueville's great discovery – Zunz calls it his "epiphany" – comes with his research in the summer and fall of 1853 in the archives of the department of Touraine concerning the rise of the intendants and the royal bureaucracy (p. 304). Tocqueville comes to see that "the profound transformation of France occurred before rather than after the Revolution" and that it was the creation of a strong, centralized royal bureaucracy, and not the Revolution, that brought down the French nobility (p. 304).

As Zunz traces the course of Tocqueville's thinking, his language becomes dramatic. For Tocqueville, he writes, "reading the papers of the intendancy of Tours was a shock. Tours revealed the profound penetration into the very details of daily life of ordinary people" that "the bureaucratic intendants...had achieved especially during the forty years preceding the Revolution" (p. 306). The paper trail convinced Tocqueville that, well before the Revolution, the intendants and the royal administration had taken control of local life, leaving village residents clinging to "'hollow forms' of a once-vibrant local community life." Zunz notes that the argument was overstated and "somewhat forced." But he can still conclude, "Tocqueville exposed centralization not as consequence but cause of the French Revolution" (p. 307).

Turning from the close analysis of Tocqueville's work as a historian and political theorist to his career as a political actor, Zunz places the emphasis on unresolved conflict. He sees Tocqueville as torn between conflicting elements in his own identity--and above all, the conflict between the political theorist advocating democracy and the French imperialist advocating conflict. He writes that Tocqueville "sought to be at once a patriot, a colonialist, and a democrat, even though these identities failed to cohere" (p. 226). In support of this argument, Zunz devotes an important chapter to a detailed account of Tocqueville's efforts in the 1840s to restore French influence in world affairs. He participated actively in the struggle for the abolition of slavery in France's Caribbean colonies and promoted French interests in the conflict with England for influence in the Middle East. Most importantly, Tocqueville was a strong supporter of the conquest and colonization of Algeria.

Significantly, Tocqueville did not justify the French colonization of Algeria in terms of a civilizing mission. The goal, he insisted, was not the uplift of the North African "barbarians." It was the creation of opportunities for French settlers. Zunz writes that Tocqueville saw Algeria as a place where French colonists "could rise out of sedentary mediocrity at home" and "seek a better life for themselves in a new place" (p. 242). Tocqueville did not want the French in North Africa to replicate the extermination of Native Americans committed by White settlers in America. But Zunz observes that he was still able to support Bugeaud's brutal war of conquest in Algeria and to justify burning harvests, destroying silos, and capturing unarmed men, women, and children as the "'unfortunate necessities' of colonial war" (p. 248).

Zunz is clear and unambiguous about Tocqueville's role as an apologist of the French colonial mission. But are there other moments in Tocqueville's public life about which Zunz is less forthcoming? Here the most one can say is that Zunz passes quickly over certain inglorious moments in Tocqueville's political career and that several of them center around the history of the Second Republic. Zunz has little to say, for example, about the lamentable aspects of Tocqueville's brief and frustrating tenure in 1849 as Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte's foreign minister, which began with a series of disingenuous speeches, first covering up and then justifying the order that led to the destruction of the Roman Republic by French troops. In discussing the workers' insurrection of June 1848 Zunz also does not dwell on Tocqueville's failure to reach an understanding of the motives of the insurgents, who are generally described in *Recollections* as motivated by a "mix of greedy desires and misguided theories" or simply by "blind, greedy, vulgar passions." [3]

More significantly, Zunz succeeds very well, I think, in explaining Tocqueville's thinking during the different phases of the Second Republic. After declaring himself a republican and running for election to the National Assembly in April 1848, Tocqueville supported the merciless repression of the workers' uprising in June. He believed that the insurgents, and their socialist supporters, posed a threat "not only to laws, ministries, and governments but to society itself" (p. 270). But he continued thereafter to attempt to work within the republican government. Zunz argues that in the spring of 1848 Tocqueville "recognized the potential of the revolutionary events to bring about the kind of political freedom he had always advocated," and he joined the Republic because "he believed that it gave him the opportunity to put his ideas to work" (p. 261). He continued to try, throughout the life of the Republic, to play a leading role in the shaping of events. But he kept having to make compromises, and his last effort as a political reformer was ironically a failed attempt to revise the constitution to make possible the reelection of Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte as president.

The coup of Louis-Napoleon on December 2, 1851 brought an end to Tocqueville's career as a political reformer; and the chapter of this book appropriately entitled "Crushed at the Helm" concludes with an image of Tocqueville having returned to his studies, feeling "like a foreigner in my own country," and having "reconciled himself with the idea that his true vocation was as a thinker and not a politician" (p. 286). One of the many merits of this fine biography is that it does justice to both the thinker and the politician.

NOTES

[1] André Jardin, *Tocqueville: A Biography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1989).

[2] Hugh Brogan, *Alexis de Tocqueville: A Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), pp. 259, 361, 574.

[3] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Recollections: The French Revolution of 1848 and Its Aftermath,* ed. Olivier Zunz, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2016), pp. 97, 103.

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