

# H-France Review

Volume 8

2008

*H-France Review* Vol. 8 (February 2008), No. 28

Copyright © 2008 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. No republication or distribution will be permitted without permission.

ISSN 1553-9172

H-France Review Vol. 8 (February 2008), No. 28

*The Tocqueville Review/La Revue Tocqueville*, Alexis de Tocqueville (1805-1859). A Special Bicentennial Issue. Vol. XXVII, No. 2, 2006, 600 pp. ISSN 0730-479X.

Review by Aurelian Craiutu, Indiana University, Bloomington.

A century and a half ago, the famous French literary critic Sainte-Beuve[1] predicted that Tocqueville's writings would become an inexhaustible subject of reflection for future generations of scholars. Two centuries after Tocqueville's birth, almost everyone agrees that *Democracy in America* and *The Old Regime and the Revolution* are indispensable sources for any student of modern democracy.[2] In memorable pages, Tocqueville described the key features of the democratic revolution at the core of which lies the trend toward greater equality of conditions. He surpassed his contemporaries in being able to shed fresh light on the main dilemmas of democracy, a regime which, he argued, has to be purified of its potentially destructive elements in order to be able to survive in the long-term.

We often tend to forget that *Democracy in America* was the book of a twenty-nine year old author, with almost no first-hand political experience. When Volume One came out in January 1835, Tocqueville's work was immediately compared with Aristotle's *Politics* and Montesquieu's *The Spirit of the Laws*. "I have read it five times," the venerable Royer-Collard confessed, "it is for me an inexhaustible source of instruction and pleasure." [3] Tocqueville must have certainly been pleased with the reception of his book, for he had an unusual intellectual and political ambition and set his goals very high. Upon the publication of his book, he received numerous invitations to the most selective Parisian salons and began thinking about making his debut in politics. But not everyone was entirely charmed by the new star. Describing an encounter with Tocqueville, the Marquis de Custine referred to him as "a puny, thin little man" and went on to add: "His expressive countenance would have captivated me had I distrusted him less; but I saw that he spoke with a forked tongue, and that he believes only what will further his aims." [4]

It is important to underscore Tocqueville's unique intellectual and political ambition because the latter provides an indispensable key to understanding his fascinating personality. [5] Tocqueville felt himself called to create a new political science for a new world, as he famously put it in the introduction to Volume One of *Democracy in America*. He entertained a lofty view of the task of legislators in modern societies. Their mission, he wrote, is "to educate democracy—if possible, to revive its beliefs; to purify its mores; to regulate its impulses; to substitute, little by little, knowledge of affairs for inexperience and understanding of true interests for blind instincts." [6]

That Tocqueville achieved his highly ambitious goals was confirmed by no one else than John Stuart Mill, who praised Tocqueville in unambiguous terms. "You have accomplished a great achievement," Mill wrote to Tocqueville in 1840; "you have changed the face of political philosophy, you have carried on the discussions respecting the tendencies of modern society ... into a region of height and of depth, which no one before you had entered, and all previous argumentation and speculation in such matters appears but a child's play now." [7]

Although Mill's claim was justified, Tocqueville's destiny was far from a being a simple success story. As Françoise Mélonio demonstrated, [8] in his own native country Tocqueville's had a surprisingly long posthumous *saison en enfer*. A century ago, in 1905, there were no celebrations on either side of the Atlantic to mark the centenary of his birth. No new edition of *Democracy in America* was published

between 1913 and 1947, a period dominated by Marx, Lenin, and Comte in France. When Tocqueville's writings were finally given due attention in the 1950s, it was Tocqueville the sociologist rather than the political philosopher or the historian that was brought to the attention of the public. Tocqueville's comeback owed a lot to Raymond Aron who placed his works on the same par with those of Montesquieu, Marx, and Weber.[9] In 2002, Tocqueville's stature as a first-rate (political) philosopher was confirmed by the decision to include him in the syllabus for the *Agrégation de philosophie*.

In the English-speaking world, this Tocquevillian renaissance is evinced, above all, by the publication of no less than four new translations of *Democracy in America* in the last seven years by University of Chicago Press (trans. Delba Winthrop and Harvey C. Mansfield), Hackett (trans. Stephen D. Grant), Penguin (trans. G. Bevin), and the Library of America (trans. Arthur Goldhammer). A fifth bi-lingual critical edition, prepared by Eduardo Nolla and translated by James T. Schleifer, containing all of Tocqueville's notes from Yale University's Beinecke Library, will be published by Liberty Fund shortly.

In 2005, the bicentennial of Tocqueville's birth was widely celebrated in academic conferences organized on four continents (United States, Italy, Belgium, Germany, Poland, Canada, Argentina, and Japan). The papers presented at two such international colloquia at Cerisy-La-Salle (May 26-31, 2005) and Yale University (September 20-October 2, 2005) have been collected and published in a special issue of *The Tocqueville Review/La Revue Tocqueville* (Vol. XXVII, No. 2, 2006) that brings together an impressive array of Tocquevillian scholars (Françoise Mélonio, Laurence Guellec, Jean-Louis Benoît, Agnès Antoine, James T. Schleifer, Robert T. Gannett, Alan Kahan, Seymour Drescher, and Cheryl Welch) and distinguished political scientists and historians from France and the United States (Lucien Jaume, Gerard Gengembre, Jean-Claude Cassanova, Keith Baker, Oliver Zunz, James T. Kloppenberg, Robert Dahl, and Steven B. Smith). This special issue is organized around six main sections: Tocquevillian concepts and languages, religions and democracy in Tocqueville's work, associations and institutional life, Tocqueville's Old Regime, American history according to Tocqueville, and comparative and national contexts in Tocqueville's works. The texts included in this special volume touch upon many important issues such as Tocqueville's new political science, his unorthodox methodology and vocabulary, and his political views as illustrated by his views on liberty, religion, civil society, and self-government.

The diversity of methodological and ideological perspectives offered in this special issue reflects the contributors' desire to engage in an open-ended conversation with Tocqueville. His writings have always been creatively appropriated by thinkers of various ideological persuasions who admire him either for his insightful views on democratic citizenship and the art of association, or for his defense of decentralization and self-government and his skepticism toward big government. What makes Tocqueville's case truly unique, arguably more so than any other modern thinker (including Marx and Rousseau), is that many ideas of *Democracy in America* appeal even to his more skeptical readers who do not always agree with his conclusions and methodological assumptions [10] This is hardly surprising since, as Robert Nisbet once claimed, that there are "many Tocquevilles" [11] speaking various languages and addressing various constituencies, on both sides of the political spectrum.

All the essays collected in this volume demonstrate the veracity of Nisbet's remark and remind us why Tocqueville is a major reference point for us today. As James T. Kloppenberg points out, "readers of popular books and periodicals in America are subjected to a steady stream of prose written by Americans or visitors who self-consciously follow in Tocqueville's footsteps" (p. 353). Nonetheless, the current fascination with Tocqueville's writings has deep roots that go beyond the trends of the moment. On a more general level, the return to Tocqueville owes a great deal to the triumph of democracy across the globe. As the editors of the tenth anniversary issue of the *Journal of Democracy* (dedicated entirely to the author of *Democracy in America*) acknowledged, the democratic revolution about which Tocqueville wrote so convincingly has spread far beyond the United States and Europe to every corner of the globe.[12] Not surprisingly, Tocqueville has become the hero of our times to whom we regularly turn

for insight and advice.

Although the contributors to this special issue of the *Tocqueville Review* do not necessarily agree on or support all of Tocqueville's conclusions, predictions, and normative prescriptions, their texts demonstrate why his ideas offer an indispensable starting point for anyone interested in evaluating the prospects for democracy today. As Cheryl Welch argued, contemporary scholars enjoy conversing with Tocqueville because his works retain "a greater measure of normative and exploratory power—and intellectual provocation—than that of many other nineteenth-century thinkers." [13] The first anthropologist of modern equality, Tocqueville addressed important topics such as civil society, pluralism, religion, centralization, participatory democracy, democratic mind, and the limits of affluence that retain significant contemporary relevance today.

Why do we feel the need to converse with Tocqueville's "complex mixed messages of dire warning and hopeful counsel" [14] even when we find his unconventional form of liberalism, so skeptical toward the virtues of the bourgeoisie, puzzling? [15] The essays collected in this volume might help us answer this question. The Frenchman offered a new way of analyzing social and political phenomena, one that went beyond the method used by his contemporaries. This point looms large in James T. Schleifer's essay (pp. 403-23) that reexamines the significance of the American journey for Tocqueville's conceptual framework. Tocqueville came to America with many preconceptions about the fundamental nature and the direction of modern society. But Tocqueville was open to new experiences and willingly embraced new challenges. America, Schleifer notes, "provided him with unexpected lessons that deflected his thinking in significant ways" (p. 404). Moreover, he vehemently opposed rigid deterministic theories of political and social development that other thinkers of his time enthusiastically endorsed. He also sought to adjust his own methodology to the ever changing contours of political reality and, in so doing, he displayed, as James Schleifer's, Seymour Drescher's and Alan Kahan's contributions remind us, a sharp awareness of being an innovator and a pioneer.

Furthermore, Tocqueville's particular combination of historical, philosophical, and sociological investigations provides us with a set of valuable psychological insights into what Lucien Jaume calls the "democratic heart." [16] Tocqueville's genius can be measured by the fact that he has something valuable to teach us about our own problems, as if he were writing for us today. His works allow us to understand the American exception, the roots of *le mal français* and the difficulty of reforming French society, the "immanentization" of religion, the privatization of social life, the tendency to vulgarity and social anomie, the development of individualism, skepticism and relativism, the softening of mores, the affirmation of the values of the middle class, and the nature of war in democratic times. All these issues are explored in special sections of this volume focusing on religion and democracy (essays by Agnès Antoine, Pierre Gibert, and Frank M. Turner) and associational and institutional life (essays by Jeffrey C. Alexander, Jean-Louis Benoît, Robert T. Gannett, and Cheryl Welch).

Tocqueville not only had a particular gift for field research and but also a particular eye for general comparisons. The innovative comparative dimension of Tocqueville's works is highlighted and examined by Seymour Drescher ("Tocqueville's Comparisons: Choices and Lessons," pp. 479-516) and Françoise Mélonio ("Tocqueville européen: la France et l'Allemagne," pp. 517-32). Along with Schleifer's essay, their analyses demonstrate Tocqueville's sharp self-awareness as a thinker and writer. Other essays collected in this volume (by Frédéric Attal, David A. Bell, Gerard Gengembre, Regina Pozzi and Frank M. Turner) attempt to contextualize Tocqueville's work by exploring his affinities and dialogue with Malesherbes, Burke, J. S. Mill, and Louis de Bonald. In so doing, they reaffirm the importance of studying the political and intellectual context for understanding Tocqueville's own ideas. The relevance of this approach was first emphasized by the late François Furet whose path-breaking essay "The Intellectual Origins of Tocqueville's Thought" remains a classical reference for any Tocquevillian scholar. [17] Recent works have pointed out that Tocqueville did not arise out of an intellectual vacuum and that he might have written a different book on America had he been educated in

a different milieu in France.[18]

Also worth mentioning is another facet of Tocqueville's works. Several essays included in this volume touch upon Tocqueville the writer and explain why (re)reading his works is always a genuine intellectual delight. As both Raymond Boudon and Laurence Guellec point out in their essays included in this volume, Tocqueville's unique style gives to his readers a genuine intellectual shock, which explains why every rereading of his works sheds fresh light on his ideas. Not surprisingly, he is now regarded as a first-rate writer and moralist in the best French classical tradition. This image was strengthened by the publication of a recent selection from Tocqueville's correspondence containing 1,400 pages full of great insights and memorable phrases worthy of Montaigne and La Rochefoucauld.[19] Tocqueville believed that the style and form of his writings were as important as his ideas and drafted many pages and notes before settling on a definitive version. His most recent translator, Arthur Goldhammer, characterized Tocqueville as "an architect of language" who "sought to create a harmonious edifice, a structure in which each part was carefully proportioned and subordinated to a conception of the whole." [20]

Finally, all the essays collected in this special issue demonstrate that in spite of his current popularity, Tocqueville remains a notoriously difficult subject and a surprisingly elusive target for his interpreters and critics alike. To make him a prophet would be as great a mistake as to pretend that he should have entirely shared our contemporary lenses and ideas. Tocqueville's method as a social scientist and observer of American democracy has lately been the object of criticism among some historians and political scientists.[21] Some of them went so far as to suggest that Tocqueville simply "got America wrong" because he worked with a flawed method that made him perceive only what suited his ideological biases and intellectual inclinations. For these interpreters, Tocqueville's conclusions were a strange concoction of mostly unwarranted generalizations and impressionistic observations based on *a priori* ideas which he allegedly brought with him from France. According to these critics, the final portrait of the whole that we get from Tocqueville's writings is to be taken with a grain of salt since it might tell us more about his own intellectual inclinations than about the new world that he set out to describe to his fellow countrymen.

The essays collected in this volume are not silent on Tocqueville's limitations. His understanding of American politics, both Holly Brewer and Oliver Zunz suggest, was far from perfect. Among other things, Tocqueville overlooked the role played by political parties and had little to say about key institutions such as the Congress or the Supreme Court. Yet in many ways, as Keith Baker argues, the study of Tocqueville's blind spots might be as instructive for his interpreters as focusing on his most perceptive theoretical insights. For example, in his analysis of the Old Regime, Tocqueville downplayed the political contestations before the Revolution of 1789. Baker attributes this curious oversight in part to the fact that Tocqueville "found the parlementaires a particularly egregious example of the transformation of the nobility into a self-interested caste seeking to restrict their membership to a small, closed aristocracy." (p. 270)

Robert T. Gannett's "Tocqueville and the Politics of Suffrage" as well as Cheryl Welch's "Tocqueville on Democracy after Abolition" explore two important facets of Tocqueville's political career: his position on limited suffrage and his views on slavery. Gannett insists on the frequent shifts in Tocqueville's political and rhetorical strategies and explains them in light of Tocqueville's "own fiercely independent and original calculations of what he believed best for France at each given moment and within each given regime" (p. 221). In 1842 and 1847, Tocqueville was inclined to view universal suffrage as a threat to democracy and voted against expansion of the suffrage to include more citizens with a right to vote. In 1848, he changed his mind and endorsed universal suffrage as being compatible with a stable democracy. Gannett's essay is a welcome reminder that from an early age on, Tocqueville entertained great political ambitions and dreamt of playing an important role on the political scene of his country.[22] Alas, his political career never matched his brilliant literary achievements. Tocqueville

lacked the qualities necessary to succeed in politics (his wife, Marie de Tocqueville, used to joke that her husband did not have the ... stomach of a statesman!). And Louis-Napoléon's infamous *coup d'état* of December 1851 derailed Tocqueville's political trajectory, giving him instead the leisure to research and write Volume One of his last book, *The Old Regime and the Revolution* that appeared in 1856.

The diversity of interpretations offered in this special bicentennial issue of the *Tocqueville Review* demonstrates the richness and depth of Tocqueville's political philosophy. One might surmise that the author of *Democracy in America* would have not been surprised by his current star status, even if we would have wondered about the accuracy of most interpretations of his works. In 1837, Tocqueville confessed to his English translator, Henry Reeve: "Independently of the serious interest I take in the opinions others may hold of me, it delights me to see the different features that are given to me according to the political passions of the person who cites me. It is a collection of portraits that I like to assemble. To the present day, I have not yet found one of them that completely looked like me. They absolutely want to make me a party man and I am not in the least; they assign me passions and I have only opinions, or rather I have only one passion, the love of liberty and human dignity." [23] This was no novel development for Tocqueville, since he had previously made a similar point in a letter to his friend Eugène Stoffels. "I please many persons of conflicting opinions," Tocqueville wryly remarked, "not because they understand me, but because they find in my work, by considering it only from a single side, arguments favorable to their passion of the moment." [24]

Be that as it may, the question remains: what were Tocqueville's true political convictions? Should we view him, to use François Furet's words, as "a democrat by intellect, but an aristocrat at heart"? [25] Was he an aristocratic liberal, as Alan Kahan claimed? [26] And last but not least, do all these labels *really* matter? Fitting awkwardly into our conventional political categories, Tocqueville continues to defy our back-and-white political vocabulary. The different labels used to describe his political outlook suggest that the greatness of Tocqueville does not lie in any single doctrine that he may have espoused or promoted but in the creative ways in which he analyzed the multiple facets of modern democracy. The essays collected in this special issue of the *Tocqueville Review* are a timely reminder of his greatness and a vindication of Saint-Beuve's prescient remark.

## NOTES

[1] See C. A. Sainte-Beuve, *Nouveaux Lundis*, Vol. X (Paris: Michel-Lévy Frères, 1874), 330.

[2] Among the most important new interpretations of Tocqueville published in the last few years are: Sheldon Wolin, *Tocqueville between Two Worlds: The Making of a Political and Theoretical Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); Cheryl Welch, *De Tocqueville* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); *The Tocqueville Reader*, eds. Oliver Zunz and Alan S. Kahan (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002); Agnès Antoine, *L'impensé de la démocratie: Tocqueville, la citoyenneté, et la religion* (Paris: Fayard, 2003); Michael Drolet, *Tocqueville, Democracy, and Social Reform* (Hampshire and New York: Palgrave, 2003); Robert T. Gannett, *Tocqueville Unveiled: The Historian and His Sources for the Old Regime and the Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); Jean-Louis Benoît, *Tocqueville moraliste* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2004); Laurence Guellec, *Tocqueville et les langages de la démocratie* (Paris, 2004); Serge Audier, *Tocqueville retrouvé. Genèse et enjeux du renouveau tocquevillien français* (Paris: EHESS/Vrin, 2004); *The Cambridge Companion to Tocqueville*, ed. Cheryl B. Welch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

[3] See Alexis de Tocqueville, *Œuvres Complètes, XI. Correspondance d'Alexis de Tocqueville et de Pierre-Paul Royer-Collard. Correspondance d'Alexis de Tocqueville et de Jean-Jacques Ampère*, ed. André Jardin (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), v.

---

[4] Marquis de Custine as quoted in Hugh Brogan, *Alexis de Tocqueville: A Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 289.

[5] This dimension was highlighted by Hugh Brogan, in his biography, *Alexis de Tocqueville: A Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).

[6] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (New York: The Library of America, 2004), 7.

[7] Letter of J. S Mill (May 11, 1840) in See Alexis de Tocqueville, *Œuvres Complètes, VI:1. Correspondance anglaise. Correspondance d'Alexis de Tocqueville avec Henry reeve et John Stuart Mill*, eds. J.-P. Mayer and Gustave Rudler (Paris: Gallimard, 1954), 328.

[8] Françoise Mélonio, *Tocqueville and the French* (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1998).

[9] Raymond Aron's *Les Étapes de la pensée sociologique* was originally published in 1955. Tocqueville's writings occupied a major part in Aron's analysis.

[10] See Jennifer Pitts's introduction to Tocqueville, *Writings on Empire and Slavery*, ed. and trans. Jennifer Pitts (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000); Melvin Richter, 1963; Roger Boesche, "The Dark Side of Tocqueville: On War and Empire," *The Review of Politics*, 67: 4 (2005): 737-52.

[11] Robert Nisbet, "Many Tocquevilles," *The American Scholar*, Winter (1976-1977): 65.

[12] "Introduction," *The Journal of Democracy*, 11: 1 (2000): 6.

[13] Welch, *De Tocqueville*, 1.

[14] Welch, *De Tocqueville*, 217.

[15] This is the title of Roger Boesche's book, *The Strange Liberalism of Alexis de Tocqueville* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987).

[16] Lucien Jaume's essay is entitled "Le 'cœur démocratique' selon Tocqueville" (pp. 35-44). On this issue, also see Pierre Manent's analysis of Tocqueville's interpretation of democratic mind in Pierre Manent, *Tocqueville and the Nature of Democracy* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996).

[17] Furet's essay was originally published in *The Tocqueville Revue / La Revue Tocqueville*, 7 (1985-1986): 117-27. It has recently been republished in *Tocqueville et l'esprit de la démocratie*, ed. Laurence Guellec (Paris: Presses de la Fondation Nationale des Sciences Politiques, 2005), 121-40.

[18] Tocqueville's intellectual debt to the French Doctrinaires (Guizot, Royer-Collard, and Rémusat) is examined in Aurelian Craiutu, *Liberalism under Siege: The Political Thought of the French Doctrinaires* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 87-122.

[19] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Lettres choisies. Souvenirs*, eds. Françoise Mélonio and Laurence Guellec (Paris: Gallimard, Quarto, 2003)

[20] Arthur Goldhammer, "Translator's Note," in Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (New York: The Library of America, 2004), 873.

---

[21] Rogers M. Smith, "Beyond Tocqueville, Murdal, and Hartz : The Multiple Traditions in America." *American Political Science Review* 87 (3): 549-566 ; Gary Wills, Did Tocqueville 'Get' America?" *New York Review of Books*, April 29 (2004): 52-56.

[22] See Alexis de Tocqueville, *Œuvres Complètes, XVIII: 1. Correspondance d'Alexis de Tocqueville et de Gustave de Beaumont*, ed. André Jardin (Paris: Gallimard, 1967), 93.

[23] Letter to Reeve (March 22, 1837) in Alexis de Tocqueville, *Selected Letters on Society and Politics*, ed. Roger Boesche, trans. Roger Boesche and James Toupin (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), pp. 115-16.

[24] Tocqueville, *Selected Letters on Politics and Society*, pp. 99-100.

[25] Furet, "The Passions of Tocqueville," *The New York Review of Books*, June 27, 1985, 23.

[26] Alan S. Kahan, *Aristocratic Liberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

Aurelian Craiutu  
Indiana University, Bloomington  
[acraiutu@indiana.edu](mailto:acraiutu@indiana.edu)