

An Introduction to Tocqueville's Tensions in *Democracy in America*

“Do not suppose, my dear friend, that I suffer from any reckless enthusiasm for the intellectual life. I have always placed action above everything else.”—Letter to Louis de Kergorlay, 1837

A Transitional Figure

Alexis de Tocqueville was born 29 April 1805 in Paris to a Catholic, royalist aristocratic family whose head served for a number of years as prefect of Versailles under Charles X. While Tocqueville studied law and tended towards liberalism, it was only with the 1830 July Revolution in which Tocqueville's father lost his peerage, that the son was forced to consider what his future might hold. With the stated purpose of studying prison reform, Tocqueville and Gustave de Beaumont received a permit to travel to the United States in 1831. They studied the American system for a year before studying the British system briefly and returning to France. In 1835, Tocqueville published the first part of his *Democracy in America*, and married his wife, an English woman, shortly thereafter. We should remember that the book was written for a French audience and had French questions about the future of their own political system in mind. In 1840, he published the second half of *Democracy*, which most critics judge as more pessimistic about what democracy held for the future. In the years following, Tocqueville would take an increasingly active role in French politics and government. While he helped to form the new government after the 1848 Revolution, he did not stay in office long and refused to make the oath to President Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte in the coup of 1851. Tocqueville retired and wrote his second important work of political analysis, *The Old Regime and the French Revolution*, published in 1856. He would die three years later on April 16 of tuberculosis.

Tocqueville, then, was in many ways a transition figure: between aristocracy and democracy, between the Old Regime and the new modern order, between establishment Roman Catholicism and the new populist forms of Christian spirituality, between classical political theory and the new sociology, between a trust in divine providence and a trust in the predictive powers of social science. As a result, the uniqueness of Tocqueville's analysis is as much a matter of bridging nineteenth-century changes as seeking a way forward. Tocqueville, while still holding to many classic and aristocratic social forms, recognized that the direction of history was unfolding in new directions, and, thus, a wise people would seek to understand these directions and what they can both hope for and fear. The novel developments of the new political and social order were not like what had come before.

Actual Practices

This also meant for him, close attention not so much to the ideal theory of democracy, but to the actual practice of people, such as those in the United States. Tocqueville hoped to account for both historical social practices and for individual motivations and actions, without falling into either a sort of “pantheistic” force of nature that dissolves individual characters and motives, or into a reductive determinism that reduces past and future into nothing but casual factors without individual free will. He held that history was not predictable in the sense of a covering law that allowed one to determine with absolute confidence what would come—human freedom was too powerful for this, and yet one could still read the signs of the times as to what potential directions might be, given the general attitudes and changes one observed. Divine providence, even if one dare not pretend to read the mind of God, nonetheless revealed itself in the large social changes of civilizations.

Thus, Tocqueville recognized that the social order of human relations was not entirely shaped by the political ideals of the U.S. Constitution, but that the public's actual regional practices of these laws and ideals, had as much to do with landscape and geography, history and custom, and the developing class structure (which was comparatively flat to that of Europe). He tried to sketch out the factors

surrounding equality and individuality as both social causes and as learned practices (or virtues) that had the potential to disrupt each other unless played off other factors.

Part of this potential disruption had to do with the friction between the new more generally shared concerns with markets, productivity, general literacy, and civic participation—though Tocqueville was careful to try and describe the regional differences in these matters, too—and the older ideals of cultural achievement, aristocratic magnanimity, and personal honor, which Tocqueville felt had their own kinds of human freedom and cultural solidity. He was hardly what later generations would see as a quantitative sociologist; his judgments, though based on interviews and first-hand visits, are mostly expressed in literary images, analogies, and generalizations. He doesn't summon correlative data. As a French political liberal (of a moderate cast), Tocqueville was concerned that political abstraction could have a debilitating quality that encouraged people to debate too long and act too little, so he never meant *Democracy in America* to be an academic work.

At the same time, he was clearly thinking in terms of social migration and economic opportunity and development. He recognized that the 1830-40s American Republic was a rapidly growing and changing set of regions in a relatively "safe" geo-political region. (He did, however, address the ugly conditions of slavery and the mistreatment of American native tribes, though Beaumont explored it far more in writing.)

Important Themes to Look For

- Self-interest and spiritual (non-material) development
- Civil forms and rights
- The strengths of laws and/or customs
- Sovereignty of the people as public opinion rather than (metaphysical) actuality
- Self-government, townships
- Land ownership, property rights, and primogeniture
- Liberty versus equality
- Individualism and egoism
- Centralization, federations, state's rights and governance
- The future of global power
- Civic versus political associations
- Colonialism and cultural assimilation
- Women's rights and education
- The role of rhetoric and language
- The place of the arts and the sciences in a democracy
- Personal honor and pride
- Religion's value in promoting individual motivation and as social stabilizer
- The free press and public opinion

