

## Introduction

There is, in many respects, a Tocqueville enigma.

Why did Tocqueville write *Democracy in America*? The question might seem incongruous.<sup>1</sup> In fact, it is the key to understanding both the work and the man. Today we know that America was not the sole subject of the book that Tocqueville published in two volumes in 1835 and 1840. America was merely the pretext for studying modern society and the woes of France. What is more, the author's intention remains ambiguous and controversial, as does the precise scope of the book he had in mind. *Democracy in America* has become a world classic (especially in the United States, Italy, and France), yet anyone who reads it slowly and reflectively will notice that its careful prose incorporates a number of curious *signs*: the author never discloses his opinion straightforwardly but rather turns it over in his mind, modifies it, and on occasion contradicts himself.<sup>2</sup> His position on

<sup>1</sup>No one asks why Cézanne painted Mont Sainte-Victoire, because the masterpiece speaks for itself.

<sup>2</sup>To the point that Jon Elster often finds his thought to be incorrigibly incoherent: see *Political Psychology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993). Citations from *De la démocratie en Amérique* are from the 1981 Garnier-Flammarion edition, as follows: *DA I*, for the 1835 text, *DA II*, for the 1840 text, followed by a page number; citations to specific chapters take the form *DA I.2.5*, for example, to indicate the fifth chapter of book 2 of volume 1. English translations are taken from Arthur Goldhammer's translation, published in one volume by the Library of America in 2004 (hereafter cited as AG). For other texts I refer to the Gallimard edition of the *Oeuvres complètes*. For example, *OC VIII-1*, p. 72, indicates page 72 of book 1 of volume 8, which contains the correspondence with Gustave de Beaumont in three books. When necessary I also cite the Pléiade edition as follows: *Oeuvres*, La Pléiade, followed by the volume and page. This edition includes numbered excerpts from drafts and manuscripts of *DA I*, *DA II*, and *L'Ancien Régime et la Révolution* (ARR). Volume 3 (ARR) is the result of a collaboration between François Furet and Françoise Mélonio. Volume 1 was edited by André Jardin with the collaboration of Françoise Mélonio and L. Queffélec. Volume 2 was edited by Jardin with the collaboration of J.-C. Lamberti and James Schleifer. English quotations from this text are from the translation by Arthur Goldhammer, published by Cambridge University Press in 2012 and hereafter cited as AG2. There are also numerous references to the manuscripts of *DA I* and *DA II* in the Eduardo Nolla edition, published by Vrin in 1990. The reading of the manuscripts is not always reliable, but I owe a great deal to this edition, which also gives the reactions of Tocqueville's family. This is cited as Nolla I and Nolla II, followed by the page; the Nolla text is also available in a bilingual French-English edition, translated by James Schleifer (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2010); page citations to the latter version are indicated by JS, but the translations given here are Arthur Goldhammer's. Other anthologies are also cited below. In general, if a place of publication is

the great modern phenomenon that he baptized “democracy” is difficult to pin down: sometimes he praises it (human dignity, personal responsibility, feelings of sympathy and sociability), but at other times he describes its worrisome flaws (selfishness, social dissolution, mediocre leadership, materialism of private interests, tyranny of majorities, oppressiveness of the welfare state). Readers are thus led to ask themselves what they ought to think. And that is indeed what Tocqueville wanted, for he shared the view of his master Montesquieu that “the problem is not to get people to read but to get them to think.”<sup>3</sup>

The careful reader will therefore ask herself another question: “But what did Tocqueville think about what he was describing?” Tocqueville was usually at pains to conceal precisely this, however. He even made this a principle of composition, as members of his family who read and commented on his manuscripts knew well.<sup>4</sup> One of his two brothers, Édouard de Tocqueville, reminded him of this rule and scolded him a bit for seeming to reveal his opinion of centralization in France compared with what he called administrative decentralization in the United States.<sup>5</sup>

“The author,” Édouard reminded his brother, “should remain behind the curtain and content himself with producing conviction without commanding or stating it. Here, for my part, is the conclusion I draw from all this.”<sup>6</sup> Is there a “curtain” in Tocqueville’s writing? Why should authors wear masks?<sup>7</sup> Apparently the issue is a pedagogical one: the reader must be gently guided and allowed to form his own opinion, as if he had discovered it on his own. Tocqueville himself stated this view on several occasions: the purpose of *Democracy in America* was to persuade without being too obvious about it.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, to be a “great” writer, Tocqueville (again taking Montesquieu as his model) believed that one had to be capable of revealing society to itself, of enabling people to see clearly what they thought obscurely: “The success

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not given, it is Paris. English translations of many of Tocqueville’s letters can be found in Olivier Zunz, ed., *Alexis de Tocqueville and Gustave de Beaumont in America: Their Friendship and Their Travels*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2010), cited hereafter as GZ.

<sup>3</sup> Montesquieu, *De l'esprit des lois*, XI, 20, in *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Oster (Paris: Le Seuil, 1964), p. 598.

<sup>4</sup> Many of these notes have been preserved and can be readily consulted in the Nolla edition cited above.

<sup>5</sup> In fact, the term corresponded to nothing of the kind in America, as we will see in part 1.

<sup>6</sup> Letter of June 15, 1834, to Alexis de Tocqueville, cited in Nolla I, p. 69, n. c.

<sup>7</sup> Descartes: “In the theater of the world, I make my way masked” (*larvatus prodeo*).

<sup>8</sup> Another purpose of the work was to assist Tocqueville in embarking on a career in politics. He published his book in 1835 in the hope of being elected deputy, a goal he did not realize until 1839. He published the second volume with the express hope of enhancing his reputation for competence in the art of modern government. Hence in a sense the book was an action manifesto.

of a book depends more on thoughts that were already in the reader's head than on those that the writer expresses.<sup>9</sup> This is a key observation, which tells us a great deal about Tocqueville's "secret thought" (or *pensée de derrière*, to quote his other master, Blaise Pascal).

Édouard's letter was not confined to the pedagogical aspects of writing, however. Another reason for Alexis to disguise his opinions and preferences was to raise his thinking to a level of generality that would enable it to escape its historical context and partisan conflict: "In this final chapter, I find that you are on stage too much;<sup>10</sup> you enter the lists armed with your personal opinion. You apply your principles to France; you get into politics.<sup>11</sup> . . . Bear in mind that your book should not be stamped with the date 1834 or even with the colors of France. If it is to live for posterity, it should be free of the influence of time and place."

The problem, then, was to achieve a level of theoretical generality that would enable Tocqueville to deal with the problems of society and government while at the same time allowing the reader to occupy the place of the invisible author, who would meanwhile take pains to hide not only his personal opinions but also his role as mentor. The author's goal was to enable the reader to escape the context of 1834, even though that context formed the basis of the comparison between the French *commune* and the Massachusetts town.

There was also the realm of political opinion: Édouard reminded his brother that in the years after the July Revolution of 1830, many things had been called into question. Indeed, as Tocqueville well knew, change had been constant since the "Great Revolution" of 1789. These changes informed his celebrated distinction between aristocratic and democratic societies. Once again, however, the careful reader may find herself perplexed, for Tocqueville did not always use the word *democracy* in the same way. How many meanings did he ascribe to it? Three, five, eleven—estimates vary according to the commentator.<sup>12</sup>

Furthermore, this carefully maintained vagueness about the word *democracy*—which, as François Furet has noted, would disappear from *The*

<sup>9</sup>Letter to Mme Swetchine, January 7, 1856, *OC XV-2*, p. 269.

<sup>10</sup>Again we find the idea of a "curtain." In part 3 we will see that Tocqueville himself used the image of a *veil*, because truth is in any case veiled (like the God of the Jansenists), and good writing will preserve the veil that separates man from the inaccessible truth of his being.

<sup>11</sup>This was in 1834, when decentralization of *communes* was being debated. In the Chamber of Deputies, Thiers was resisting the demands of Odilon Barrot. Tocqueville made notes on the debate in his manuscripts.

<sup>12</sup>In this book I retain one meaning with three constituent elements: democracy as local power, democracy as a substitute for religion or "public religion," and democracy as a promise of "material enjoyments."

*Ancien Régime and the Revolution*—was not unrelated to the personal views of Tocqueville the man.

Tocqueville the man—and this book is also a study of him as well as his work—must be distinguished from Tocqueville the author, or, to put it another way, from the *rules* of style and expression that Tocqueville set for himself. People nowadays love to speak of “positioning themselves” in every possible way. If we ask how the author Tocqueville wanted to believe that he “positioned himself,” or at any rate how he tells us he positioned himself, the answer is: in the center.

“Amid the swirl of divisive and contradictory opinions, I have tried for a moment to forget the sympathies and antipathies that each of them may inspire in me.”<sup>13</sup> In other words, the rule was not to reveal oneself as a defender of traditional monarchy or an aristocratic society based on privilege, nor as a systematic adversary. It was not to appear republican in the French sense (that is, all too often in favor of the bloody tyranny of 1793 and of extralegal political action) or even in the American sense, by disclosing the innumerable reservations and criticisms that popular sovereignty might inspire. Tocqueville often refers to this stance as one of *impartiality* (the word appears one line before the quoted passage), a notion to which he was particularly attached. He fell into a cold rage when Silvestre de Sacy, writing in the *Journal des débats*, claimed to uncover his personal contradictions, thereby denying Tocqueville the impartiality that he claimed.<sup>14</sup>

Clearly, we have already discovered quite a bit of ambiguity in a work celebrated as one of the monuments of political thought. Who was Tocqueville the man? What did the author conceal behind what he revealed? And finally, *why* did he write this book?

As mentioned earlier, there is also another ingredient: to those with ears to hear, *Democracy in America* speaks about a country other than the United States, namely, the France of the July Monarchy, Napoleon, Louis XIV, and Philip the Fair. The author himself tells us this in a note that anticipates an important section of his 1856 work, *The Ancien Régime and the Révolution*.<sup>15</sup> It was not the Revolution that created administrative centralization in France, and the comparison with the New England town was supposed to

<sup>13</sup> *DA* II, preface, 6; AG, p. 480.

<sup>14</sup> Silvestre de Sacy’s review can be found in the appendix. He was a paragon of liberal literary criticism, the scion of a family of prominent scholars and religious leaders. Tocqueville’s mordant reply, a hitherto unpublished draft of a letter, is also reproduced in the appendix (with the kind permission of the comte d’Hérouville).

<sup>15</sup> See note K of *DA* I, p. 557: “It is not accurate to say that centralization stemmed from the French Revolution.”

lead back to the medieval commune in Europe and especially France, before the monarchy imposed centralization.<sup>16</sup>

To his cousin, confidant, and sometime collaborator, Louis de Kergorlay, Tocqueville disclosed that “although I very seldom spoke of France in that book, I did not write a page without thinking about France or without having France in a manner of speaking before my eyes . . . . The constant, unspoken comparison with France was in my opinion one of the main reasons for the book’s success.”<sup>17</sup> To believe Tocqueville, the book’s first readers had no difficulty grasping its message: they were able to penetrate the secret of the work and make the comparison that the man “behind the curtain” intended them to make.

And yet the work has remained a fundamental landmark *in America* for Americans wishing to learn about their own country. Is this paradoxical, or is it a sign of Tocqueville’s splendid success? In any event, the foreign author who has excelled all others in teaching Americans about themselves wrote a book that again and again addressed itself to French readers and spoke to them of France. Was this yet another mask, or, to use Tocqueville’s preferred image, a “veil”? Tocqueville’s America was above all a mirror of France, but France’s image was so elegantly encoded that we should speak of it as an *anamorphosis* rather than an image.<sup>18</sup> To carry the metaphor still further, one might say that Tocqueville’s portrait had several implied viewers (or readers).



The question on which our understanding of Tocqueville depends is therefore not simply “Why did he write *Democracy in America*? ” but also “For whom did he write it? ” The two questions are linked in that the existential situation of the man—a young aristocrat in conflict with the beliefs of his milieu—inspired the position and style of the author.

Before continuing, I must make one thing clear. I had long felt that I could not analyze *Democracy in America* (a text I have been studying for twenty-five years) until I had explored the intellectual and ideological landscape of French liberalism in the nineteenth century, in order to understand the

<sup>16</sup>Indeed, it was supposed to lead back to Guizot’s course on the *Histoire de la civilisation en France*, which, as we will see later, Tocqueville would transform and challenge in his *L’Ancien Régime et la Révolution*. Tocqueville attended Guizot’s lectures and took notes, which have been preserved (and published by Gallimard).

<sup>17</sup>Letter to Kergorlay, 1847, *OC XIII-2*, p. 209; GZ, p. 587.

<sup>18</sup>Recall that an anamorphosis is a visual representation in which an object cannot be perceived from certain angles and becomes visible only if the spectator occupies a certain position. The spectator’s gaze is incorporated into the structure of the painting, as Roland Barthes noted in the case of another stylistic exercise, the painting of Arcimboldo (see part 3). The reader may wish to consult Jurgis Baltrusaitis, *Anamorphoses ou magie artificielle des effets merveilleux* (Paris: Olivier Perrin, 1969).

contemporary issues in the background of Tocqueville's work. The "liberal" label is not misplaced, because Tocqueville described himself as a liberal ("of a new type," to be sure, but who would want to be an "old liberal"?). I published the results of my research in *L'Individu effacé ou le paradoxe du libéralisme français* (1997). But this was not enough. It also proved necessary to undertake a literal, internal interpretation of the text in order to understand the ideas and currents of opinion with which *Democracy in America* maintained a hidden dialogue (hidden in the sense that Tocqueville rarely cites any author by name; when he does cite a person or group—for example, the authors of the *Federalist*, or Thomas Jefferson—it means that the reference has no strong ideological valence). Yet the whole era is in the text, which bristles with contradictory voices: among them we find counter-revolutionaries (Bonald, de Maistre, Lamennais), liberal aristocrats (Montlosier, Chateaubriand), republicans (from Mme de Staël to Armand Carrel), the so-called *doctrinaires* (Guizot, Rémusat, Royer-Collard), and aristocrats such as Louis de Carné who threw in their lot with the middle class. In addition, Tocqueville's style was shaped in large part by seventeenth-century moralists, who were dear to the man as well as the author. Hence it was important to look again at the question (or myth) of Tocqueville's relation to Pascal and to Jansenism more generally.

The purpose of this book is therefore to combine a study of context with an internal reading. It is to offer not a *commentary* on *Democracy in America*—a much-practiced exercise in which the commentator paraphrases the text and comments on other commentators—but rather an *interpretation* based on signs, indices, and even stylistic turns of an author who revealed himself even as he attempted to draw a veil over his own views and who can also be heard speaking in a different register in his correspondence and manuscripts as well as in the accounts of his contemporaries.<sup>19</sup> To sharpen the intellectual portrait of Tocqueville the man, we need to identify the various *levels of meaning* contained in the text and the various audiences to which it was addressed. As Édouard de Tocqueville said, "to remain behind the curtain and produce conviction" presumes a *labor* of thought, rationalization, and even elocution by means of which Tocqueville the author was trying to persuade himself as well as his readers.<sup>20</sup> But what did he persuade himself of?

He convinced himself of precisely the same thing that he discussed with his father, Count Hervé de Tocqueville, his brother Édouard, his cousin

<sup>19</sup>This study is far from exhaustive. My goal is to open an avenue for exploring the meaning of the work and a method of interpretation that others may be able to follow.

<sup>20</sup>"Labor" here is to be understood in the sense of childbirth.

Kergorlay, and his friend Bouchitté when he had them read his manuscripts: namely, that “democracy” was already on the march and that the best one could do was to help it to understand itself and conduct itself wisely. There was no point in lamenting the bygone age of aristocracy.<sup>21</sup> Rather, one should try to *transfer* some of its noble values to a society driven by the powerful and irrepressible engine of equality. The young Alexis de Tocqueville did not reach this conclusion without pain. At the outset of his journey to America with Gustave de Beaumont, in Philadelphia, he offered the following plaintive observation, from which we gather how difficult it would be for him to attain the requisite level of abstraction, generality, and impartiality: “Tied to the royalists by shared principles and a thousand family connections, I see myself as somehow chained to a party whose conduct strikes me as often not very honorable and nearly always extravagant.”<sup>22</sup>

With these various indications in mind, it becomes clear that if we are to fully grasp the meaning of *Democracy in America*, we would do well to approach it as the historian Lucien Febvre approached the work of Rabelais: “What could a contemporary reader of Rabelais understand,” Febvre asked, “and which of our modern ideas would he certainly not have found in the work? Above all, what did sixteenth-century readers read between the well-justified lines of text?”<sup>23</sup> Indeed, we initially project onto the text our preoccupations, sentiments, and prejudices, even though the categories of the author’s thought were different. What is more, if the author of these “well-justified lines of text” is named Tocqueville and has slipped in (or involuntarily emitted) signals to certain groups of readers, then we must make every effort to avoid anachronistic readings. In 2005, the bicentennial of Tocqueville’s birth, how often did we read in the press of “Tocqueville our contemporary”?

<sup>21</sup> For Tocqueville, this meant the feudal era, as we will see: a time of honor, loyalty coupled with moral independence, chivalry in war, feudal patronage of the peasantry, etc.

<sup>22</sup> Letter to Ernest de Chabrol, October 18, 1831, quoted in Nolla I, p. xxi, n. 33. This letter will be published in the Gallimard edition of the *Oeuvres complètes*.

<sup>23</sup> Lucien Febvre, *Le Problème de l’incroyance au XVIe siècle. La Religion de Rabelais* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1942), p. 7. The fine lesson in historical intelligence that Febvre gave with his *Rabelais* was repeated in a less well-known but even more audacious work on Marguerite de Navarre, *Amour sacré, amour profane. Autour de l’Heptaméron* (Paris: Gallimard-NRF “Idées,” 1944). The following plea is worth quoting for an age like our own, which often believes that the past can easily be judged without studying it: “Let us be historians. Which means: let us not kill the dead a second time. Let us not deprive them of that which is far more precious than their material life, namely, their spiritual life—that which they thought, loved, and believed—which we do indirectly by replacing their true thoughts, beliefs, and loves with what we think of when we use the same words, what we believe when we utter the same incantations, and what we love with the same enthusiasm” (p. 356). In other words: how can we escape ourselves in order to interpret another era?

This book will *not* treat Tocqueville as our contemporary. It will seek rather to restore the distance between him and us, because Andrew Jackson's America and Louis-Philippe's France were not societies in any way contemporary with our own. Indeed, to measure the temporal distance between them and us, one would do well to begin reading those chapters of the second volume of *Democracy in America* that deal with literature, painting, architecture, and theater.<sup>24</sup> In these chapters, which most commentators avoid, we see clearly Tocqueville's relation to his own time and to what he calls "democratic literature," especially Romanticism. His critical discourse is one with which we are no longer familiar, quite conservative in its approach to art and language. Yet these attitudes constitute an important key to Tocqueville's work, since he wrote in the age of Victor Hugo, Lamartine, Walter Scott, and Chateaubriand, whom he had constantly in mind, along with the art criticism of Victor Cousin and Abel-François Villemain.

Make no mistake, however: just because Tocqueville is not "our contemporary" does not mean that he is of no use for understanding our time. Indeed, the contrary is true. By restoring *Democracy in America* to its era, with its own set of issues, we will see more clearly where and who we are. One of Tocqueville's most important ideas, "the authority of the social" (for which he was greatly indebted to Lamennais), can teach us a great deal about the growing power of civil society today, as well as about the proliferation of identity groups that compete for legitimacy with the traditional state. The force of public opinion—the great rival of states and governments, representing society's revenge on the state—is a subject that Tocqueville viewed through the lens of American communities and discussed at great length.

Having invoked the authority of Lucien Febvre concerning the question of historical interpretation, let me now quote Ernest Renan, who wrote in *L'Avenir de la science* "that true admiration is historical." Indeed, to enter Tocqueville's study (which he described in many manuscripts and letters) is in no way to disparage his work. Nor is it disparaging to show that, broadly speaking, none of the themes of *Democracy in America* was original to its author. He continually reworked themes that were circulating in the political, religious, and literary culture of his time yet drew from those themes a work that overshadowed much of the writing of his contemporaries and that stands with that of the best of them: Mme de Staël, Benjamin Constant, and François Guizot.

Henri-Dominique Lacordaire, a politically active Dominican friar whose Notre-Dame lectures Tocqueville attended along with the rest of the July Monarchy elite, imparted an important truth to his august audience:

<sup>24</sup> *DA* II, book 1, chaps. 9–21. This will be the principal subject of part 4 of the present work.

Perhaps you believe that you are self-made. You are wrong: it is the nineteenth century that made you. And what is the nineteenth century? It is the soul, which expresses itself in speech, which is transformed into public opinion, which lives in the air you breathe, which insinuates itself into your very marrow and governs you without your knowledge. . . . Even when you anticipate [the century], you are but its echoes and servants.<sup>25</sup>

All the themes that Tocqueville developed were being debated, and had already been debated, at the time he published his book. The idea of a “social state” was on everyone’s lips. The difference between “administrative” and “political” centralization was a commonplace in legitimist circles. The tyranny of public opinion in a democracy was discussed by various people in the United States, including perhaps James Fenimore Cooper. Lamennais and Leroux recognized the religious dimension of democracy, and Constant, Guizot, Royer-Collard, and Chateaubriand all believed that greater equality was inevitable. Mme de Staël contrasted democratic literature and aristocratic literature. All these were recurrent topics, as was “democracy,” which became a commonplace of French political discourse during the Restoration and July Monarchy, even if the meaning of the term varied considerably from author to author.

If we want to explore the palette of meanings in *Democracy in America*, we must therefore identify the plethora of hidden references in the text—references by means of which Tocqueville sought to educate his readers and at times to engage in polemic with the various parties in contention, as well as to elucidate the worldviews that animated their conflicts. We see this in particular in the opposition between the values of the Right and those of the liberals, because America—Protestant, republican, federal, deeply involved in commerce, and avid for wealth—provided an excellent case for Tocqueville to get his message across. Note that when Tocqueville entered the Chamber as a young deputy in 1839, he wanted to sit on the left but was actually seated with the center-left.

Since my goal was to draw an intellectual portrait of the young Tocqueville, who published the first volume of *Democracy* at the age of thirty and the second five years later, it would have been methodologically unwise to begin with his biography only to “discover” the more personal aspects of the text later on. With that type of approach, the interpreter invariably confirms what he already knew, whether right or wrong. It seemed better to proceed

<sup>25</sup> Henri-Dominique Lacordaire, 56th Notre-Dame lecture, “Sur la prophétie,” 1849, in *Œuvres de Lacordaire* (Paris: Poussielgue-Rusand, 1861), 4:111. To be sure, Lacordaire said this to underscore his point that only God’s word can set man free.

inductively: to try to understand the author by starting with what he said and the way he said it, recognizing the theories and ideas to which he was responding (usually implicitly) in order to influence his readers and only then (in part 5 of this book) to examine whether what we have learned about the author and perceived about the man can be linked to his entourage and education and to the people he chose as models and countermodels in his youth. In other words, since there is an enigma about Tocqueville, let us not try to understand who he was. Let us try rather to acquaint ourselves with his reflections on institutions, religion, literature, and so on.

The plan of the book is simple. The four parts that precede the final synthesis proceed in order of explanatory importance. We begin with the “publicist” (or political scientist, as we would say today) who explained the idea of democracy. We then turn to the sociologist, who has more to tell us about the logic of collective action. But the key to the analysis, the heart of the work, is to be found in the moralist, the admirer of La Bruyère and the seventeenth-century theorists of “self-love” (*amour de soi*). Then, in part 4, we study Tocqueville “in literature,” that is, immersed in the language, writing, and conversation from which he drew the nourishment he deemed vital to sustain his anxious attitude toward existence.<sup>26</sup> By weaving together the strands contributed by the publicist, the sociologist, the moralist, and the writer and by delving into Tocqueville’s rivalry with Guizot and debt to Chateaubriand, we will take the measure of Tocqueville’s central problem, which he approached from various angles: namely, the problem of *authority*, or, more precisely, of its collapse, as well as of the new *forms* that it was already beginning to adopt. Tocqueville pursued the question of authority in a number of areas apart from the state: religion, civil society, literature, and the family. And the fact that authority was his central problem explains why, upon returning from America, where he expressed various reservations about the subject, he decided on the phrase “democratic social state” to describe the whole range of life styles, social relations, and modes of thought that together give rise to an authority *external* to the political sphere.

The “authority of the social” is Tocqueville’s idea, but it was Lamennais who revealed it to him. The specific type of horizontal authority that he discovered in the democratic social state encourages group cohesion and identity but tends to destroy individual autonomy, individual and national

<sup>26</sup>The term “literature” in this period covered everything from philosophy to history to oratory. The reference here to literature will serve to clarify Tocqueville’s understanding of what he called (in his introduction to the 1835 volume) the “new science” that he believed indispensable for democracy not to succumb to its demons.

identity, and freedom of judgment. In this sense, the political scientist, the sociologist, the moralist, and the “lover of language” all described the same thing but as seen through different lenses: “democracy” as the creator of new forms of authority but also as the source of a novel form of despotism, all the more alarming because there is a risk that it will go unnoticed. Or, as Tocqueville memorably put it in 1835: “Democratic republics transform despotism into something immaterial.”<sup>27</sup>

In the draft of a parliamentary speech from 1844, Tocqueville noted his deep conviction and revealed the theme that obsessed both the man and the author: “After this carnage of all authorities in society, in hierarchies, in the family, and in the world of politics, one cannot live without authority in the intellectual and moral world. If it is absent there, it must be found elsewhere, where I do not want it, either in a new hierarchy or in a great political power. If beliefs are abolished, soldiers and prisons will be needed.”<sup>28</sup> The need for beliefs (an idea that Tocqueville shared with Lamennais<sup>29</sup>) contained serious ambiguities, however: if democracies adopted strong beliefs, would they therefore grant greater freedom to individuals? On this basis Tocqueville developed his thinking about religion in America, which he called a political force, in a country that had separated church and state. The question of authority was the key to Tocqueville’s reflection on religion: “When no authority exists in matters of religion, any more than in political matters, men soon become frightened in the face of unlimited independence.”<sup>30</sup>

The question of authority and its avatars is so important to Tocqueville that he returns to it in *The Ancien Régime and the Revolution* in his covert polemic against Guizot, the historian and talented author of *La civilisation en France* (see part 5 of the present work). Finally, the question of authority sheds light on a distinction that is no longer clear to us today but that was still a burning question for the descendants of the great Malesherbes, who died on the revolutionary scaffold: the difference, even among those who remained loyal to the monarchy, between the *culture of absolutism* (in which the king “rules” by divine right, as Bossuet told the Protestant Pierre Jurieu) and the vision of *aristocratic liberalism*. This difference is yet another key to the thought of Tocqueville the man and perhaps one of his reasons for writing *Democracy in America*.

<sup>27</sup> *DA* I, p. 352; AG, p. 292.

<sup>28</sup> *OC* III-2, p. 551. André Jardin, *Alexis de Tocqueville, 1805–1859* (Paris: Hachette “Pluriel,” 1984), p. 348, erroneously links this to a passage in an article published in *Le Commerce*.

<sup>29</sup> I will show that three years later Tocqueville wrote a letter of praise to a correspondent, who was very likely Lamennais, to whom he had sent a copy of *Democracy in America* in 1835.

<sup>30</sup> *DA* II.1.5, p. 31; AG, p. 503.

Clearly, then, there is no need to erect a Great Wall of China between *Democracy in America* and *The Ancien Régime and the Revolution*, as many commentators do. By the time he wrote the later work, Tocqueville had come to understand his own thought better than he had understood it in his youth, but there was no break in continuity.

Nor do we need to organize our investigation in terms of the differences between “the two *Democracies*,” a theme that has (rightly) preoccupied Tocqueville specialists.<sup>31</sup> These differences appear in a new light once we focus our inquiry on the question of authority. This leads to a full appreciation of the fact that Tocqueville believed in a novel form of despotism specific to democracy and thus was able to identify new ways for “society to act upon itself” (to use his formulation). He also believed that despotism might reemerge in history and bestow new legitimacy on the classic tutelary state.<sup>32</sup> The problem of fusion of old and new, or of the kinship of the two, points to an obscure, mysterious reality to which Tocqueville returns again and again. This obsession was an aspect of his personality and the source of a number of arguments that might otherwise be considered enigmatic.

Despite the variety of subjects treated in this book, the reader should not expect to find an analysis of Tocqueville’s views on Algeria. His numerous notes, letters, reports, and speeches on the subject provide rich material for such a study, enough to merit a separate work. Similarly, it was necessary to exclude the work of Tocqueville and Gustave de Beaumont on prisons and penal colonies. Furthermore, in investigating the sources of *Democracy in America*, I systematically favored Tocqueville’s French influences, including his contemporary contacts and readings as well as his hidden dialogues with the writers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and did not

<sup>31</sup>The debate originated early (in the 1840s) and was revived by Jean-Claude Lamberti’s *Tocqueville et les deux démocraties* (Paris: PUF, 1983), translated by Arthur Goldhammer as *Tocqueville and the Two Democracies* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), as well as by the earlier work of Anna-Maria Battista between 1971 and 1985. The question was to what extent Tocqueville saw a contrast between (French-style) revolutionary democracy and an American democracy devoid of revolutionary passions, as well as to understand why the vision of power at the end of *DA* II is very different from the view of popular sovereignty given in *DA* I. These questions are clearly discussed in Francesco De Sanctis, *Tocqueville. Sulla condizione moderna*, rev. ed. (Naples: Editoriale Scientifica, 2005), pp. 244–50 (originally published in 1993). De Sanctis offered a new analysis of these issues in *Tempo di democrazia. Alexis de Tocqueville* (Naples: Editoriale Scientifica, 2005), pp. 81–117.

<sup>32</sup>The problem of French “democracy” was that it had emerged from monarchy (allied with the Gallican church), as can still be seen in many arguments advanced today. In the United States, local and central governing authorities are (constitutionally) “vested with” or (as Locke says) “entrusted with” power. In France, the head of state “incarnates” something. In the former the law is supreme, whereas in the latter it is the person in whom power is embodied. For Édouard Laboulaye, writing on the eve of Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte’s coup d’état, this exemplified France’s Catholic heritage.

examine his American sources. Nor did I consider the accuracy of his analyses of America. The focal point of this book, it bears repeating, is *Democracy in America*, illuminated by its relationship with *The Ancien Régime and the Revolution*; my working hypothesis was that this would be enough to reveal Tocqueville the man in his intellectual, psychological, and moral dimensions. The research necessary to accomplish this task has already absorbed many long years.

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Among the documents used, Tocqueville's unpublished correspondence (roughly 1,200 letters) deserves special mention. Françoise Mélonio was kind enough to share these letters with me prior to their publication in the Gallimard edition of the *Oeuvres complètes*.<sup>33</sup> I also want to thank Yann-Arzel Marc, who invited me to join the Lanjuinais project, which will publish all of Tocqueville's correspondence with Jules Dufaure and Victor Lanjuinais. Two excerpts from the correspondence with Lanjuinais were taken from the archives of the château de Pont-Chevron, with the kind permission of Bernadette de La Rochefoucauld.

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I also wish to thank everyone who helped me to clarify my ideas about Tocqueville, starting with Francesco M. De Sanctis, who invited me to teach at the École Européenne of Naples (Institut Suor Orsola Benincasa), and whose many books on Tocqueville stimulated my thinking.<sup>34</sup> Given the partly historical nature of my research, I profited greatly from my dialogues with the illustrious Italian school of Tocqueville studies, which includes a number of scholars well versed in the history of French political culture: Vittorio de Caprariis, Anna-Maria Battista, the late Nicola Matteucci, Dino Cofrancesco, Mario Tesini, and Regina Pozzi, to name a few. Among American scholars, Melvin Richter, equally adept at interpreting Montesquieu and Tocqueville, encouraged me to pursue the comparison of the two theorists.

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Obviously a study like this one, based primarily on what is explicit and implicit in the text of *Democracy in America*, could not take account of the hundreds of commentaries that have been published in the New World as well as the Old. To have done so would have made for a very different kind

<sup>33</sup>These letters are cited as "unpublished correspondence."

<sup>34</sup>See the two works cited in note 31 above.

of book. The work of Tocqueville specialists will therefore be invoked only if truly necessary to shed light on some question treated here. It turned out to be more appropriate to discuss the thought of Alexandre Vinet or to analyze the interpreters of Chateaubriand, Sainte-Beuve, and the literary historians than to engage in dialogue with the many published studies of Tocqueville, some of which are quite brilliant yet do not discuss, say, Vinet or Chateaubriand or comment on Guizot's *Washington*, published in 1839.

Of course, none of this work would have seen the light of day without the encouragement of an understanding family, and first and foremost my wife.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHIC NOTE

Anyone looking for an introduction to Tocqueville's work may wish to consult the very fine anthology edited by Charlotte Manzini, *Qui êtes-vous Monsieur de Tocqueville?*<sup>35</sup> The most accurate biography of Tocqueville (despite a few errors) is that of André Jardin, cited above. The best introduction to Tocqueville in his time is still Françoise Mélonio's *Tocqueville et les Français*.<sup>36</sup> For penetrating overviews of Tocqueville's work, see the chapter devoted to the author in Raymond Aron's *Les Étapes de la pensée sociologique*<sup>37</sup> and François Furet's preface to the Garnier-Flammarion edition of *De la démocratie en Amérique*.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Charlotte Manzini, *Qui êtes-vous Monsieur de Tocqueville?* (Saint-Lô: Archives départementales de la Manche, 2005), published in connection with the exposition at the Archives départementales de la Manche curated by G. Désiré Dit Gosset, archivist and paleographer.

<sup>36</sup> Françoise Mélonio, *Tocqueville et les Français* (Paris: Aubier, 1993); in English, *Tocqueville and the French*, trans. Beth Raps (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1998).

<sup>37</sup> Raymond Aron, *Les Étapes de la pensée sociologique* (Paris: Gallimard/Tel, 1967); in English, *Main Currents of Sociological Thought*, vol. 1, trans. Brian Anderson (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1998).

<sup>38</sup> Antoine Révier's odd collection, *Comme disait M. de Tocqueville* (Paris: Perrin, 1925), deserves to be reprinted because commentators have often quoted it out of context or inaccurately, although Révier was one of the first to make use of Tocqueville's archives, which he began to organize. Thanks to the support of the Conseil Général of La Manche, we now possess a numerical catalog of Tocqueville's archives prepared by Vanessa Gendrin (Archives départementales de la Manche, 2007). These documents can also be consulted at the Archives Nationales in Paris (under a different system of classification).