

## Reading Tocqueville

A little over a year ago, a friend acquired for me a new translation of Tocqueville's Democracy in America, the Arthur Goldhammer translation published in the Library of America series, and shortly thereafter, a life by Hugh Brogan, Tocqueville's most recent biographer. I had first read Democracy thirty years ago, at the end of my undergraduate years at Berkeley. A political science instructor assigned the Henry Reeve translation, the one that appeared in England shortly after the original French was published in 1835. Tocqueville, who traveled to England a number of times and was acquainted with J. S. Mill, spent time with Reeve to make sure his masterpiece would reach his English audience in accurate form.

Several years after finishing at Berkeley, I returned to the Reeve, in the winter of 1984. I was attending a seminar led by Allan Bloom and Saul Bellow at the University of Chicago. Our instructors had said at the end of the fall term that we would be spending the winter quarter reading important texts dealing with America. They would include Dickens (Martin Chuzzlewit), Henry James (The American Scene), a few brief essays by Auden and, of course, Tocqueville. I devoted the Christmas holidays, including New Year's Eve, to these lengthy books, determined to finish each and every one by the first Monday of the year, when our seminar was scheduled to resume.

This labor was not entirely necessary. There was undoubtedly value in re-reading Henry Reeve's translation, but we never got to that text. The winter term was all Chuzzlewit, Henry James, and various books by Wyndham Lewis, including Rude Assignment, Men Without Art, and the more obscure America and Cosmic Man; Bellow

was forever quoting or referring to Lewis, and urging us to read him, and we passed some lively afternoons listening to him recite and discuss long passages from one Lewis book or another. Because we were near the 150th anniversary of the publication of Volume I of Democracy, we students, Bloom said, could satisfy our interest in the book with the lectures and symposia the university had planned for the occasion.

Many years later, in 2007, I began to attack Tocqueville anew, when I was given the Goldhammer translation--a fine, readable text--along with Brogan's biography. With diminishing enthusiasm, I finished the Brogan, which is heavy, dry, overly casual in its style, and strangely hostile to its subject. I had long wanted to read a life of Tocqueville, but had failed to read the version produced by Andre Jardin in the 1980s. Oddly enough, my first information on Tocqueville and his voyage to the U.S. came from a Russian colleague of mine, a young woman whom I met during a semester teaching at Moscow State University in 1997. I no longer remember the context, but it was she who told me that his grounds for coming to the U.S. in 1831 were, of all things, to study American prisons. That turned out to be true. Here are a few more details, which I owe to various biographical of Tocqueville.

### Tocqueville's Trip

Tocqueville, born in 1805, derived from the old provincial nobility of Normandy, and his father was nearly executed during the Revolution. After the Restoration in 1815, Tocqueville studied law, and by 1830 was a jeune magistrat, in effect an unpaid lawyer, at a French court of assize in Versailles. Tocqueville and his family were loyal to Louis XVIII and Charles X, the last Bourbon kings to occupy the throne; when Charles lost his title after the July Revolution, the Orleanist Louis-Phillippe was installed as the new monarch. Tocqueville and his boon companion, Gustave Beaumont, were not precisely in danger (this was the early nineteenth century), but as advocates of the House of Bourbon felt trapped in Versailles between partisans of the two ruling families. Reluctantly, Tocqueville took an oath to the House of Orleans, but both he and Beaumont felt it best to attract as little attention to themselves as possible. They then conceived the idea of taking unpaid leave and traveling to America and justified the trip to the government--because they did need formal grounds for leaving the court--by the need to study American prisons.

Tocqueville's decision to leave with his friend for America is one of the most significant events in U.S. intellectual history. Even those with no more than an undergraduate degree have read at least a few pages of Democracy in America; few have tried to interpret the country without reading the book with care. Yet it might never have been written. There are surface reasons, which Brogan emphasizes and Jardin mentions in passing, and profounder ones, which only Jardin identifies. There was in Tocqueville's day an ample body of literature, English and French, that captured or sought to capture the American world. Smarting over military defeats after 1776 and 1812, the English material is on the whole critical of the U.S. The French are more favorable. Eager to

support the enemy of their enemy, the French of course aided the colonies in the War of Independence, and in the early years of the American Republic French liberals were even known to celebrate the Fourth of July. French literature from Chateaubriand (a distant relative of Tocqueville's), Crève-Coeur and others, influenced by Rousseau, was enthusiastic. American Indians as Noble Savages, large tracts of untouched forest, immense rivers like the Ohio and the Mississippi, "Nature," what Jardin calls "the exotic attraction" of the U.S.--all were frequently irresistible to French readers. Indeed, Jardin reports the remarkable fact that Fenimore Cooper's The Last of the Mohicans was translated into French immediately after publication, so keen was French interest in the subject.

This history affected Tocqueville, but he had deeper reasons yet. "In truth," writes Jardin, "Tocqueville had been induced to come to America much more by a profoundly uneasy desire to attempt to predict whether future societies would be capable of preserving America's freedom than by the project of observing how the American institutions operated." Would the danger of anarchy implicit in freedom overwhelm the New World, or would, in Jardin's words, a "reasoned patriotism" become "a permanent foundation" for the young country?

Tocqueville had learned English before leaving his country in the spring of 1831 and took informal lessons on the voyage over from a young American woman returning home. Especially after arriving in New York, his proficiency quickly improved. There, he and Beaumont were treated as celebrities, two aristocrats in their twenties who flattered local society simply by taking the trouble to cross the Atlantic to study American prisons. Tocqueville and Beaumont discovered that few Americans had a very

distinct sense of rank and were astonished to learn that Enos Throop, then governor of New York, was boarding at a rooming house no different from their own. He was strangely eager to meet them. "One day," writes Brogan, "the mayor, the aldermen, and it seemed, every public official in New York turned up in five carriages to take them on a tour of the city's prisons, deaf-and-dumb asylum, workhouse and madhouse."

The routine was exhausting, but productive. The two Frenchmen, says Jardin, used social occasions as "fishing ponds." Those they met who seemed capable of offering insights were later interviewed privately, and others agreed to prepare reports that might be useful. Up the Hudson River to Albany they went, with side trips to Ossining, where the two studied Sing-Sing, in existence as long ago as that, only to turn west to Auburn, in the Finger Lakes region near Syracuse. Tocqueville and Beaumont chanced to reach Albany in time for the Fourth of July, and observed the local ceremony which, according to Jardin, gave them both "occasion to smile." Trade associations and the local militia marched in solemn, grave style, and in church people sang verses to the Marseillaise accompanied by a single flute. A local lawyer made a speech that was perfectly banal. But when people recited the Declaration of Independence, Tocqueville later wrote, "It was as though an electric current passed through the hearts of everyone there. It was in no way a theatrical occurrence. In this reading of the promises of independence...there was something profoundly felt and truly great."

The original itinerary called for New York, Boston, Philadelphia, Washington and Charleston, the last to obtain some sense of southern society. Boston society seemed more refined than New York's. "From what we have seen of the inhabitants so far," wrote Tocqueville, "they differ completely from the people we met in New

York...Luxury and refinement reign. Almost all the women speak French well, and all the men we have met so far have been to Europe." Before leaving Boston, Tocqueville dined with the retired president John Quincy Adams, who also spoke excellent French and discoursed on the expansion of slavery in the south, describing the planter class as an American aristocracy. Tocqueville quotes him as saying that equality among whites in the U.S. was nowhere greater than in the South. "In the South," says Adams, "every white man is an equally privileged being whose destiny is to make Negroes work without working himself. You cannot imagine how far the idea that labor is shameful has come to dominate the mind of the south."

Back to Albany and over the Buffalo, then Detroit. They moved further west into Michigan, finding the untamed, unconquered wilds they had sought, pushing west to Saginaw, Pontiac and the Flint River, often alone save for a young Indian guide from the Chippewa nation. Here was the original world they sought, "the immensity" of the forest, Tocqueville wrote, "that assails you. The endless iteration of the same scenes, their monotony astonishes and overwhelms the imagination." At night, "the silence is so deep that the soul is penetrated by a kind of religious terror." A tiny outpost, Saginaw had no more than 30 residents, but it already presented a diverse America, with European settlers that Jardin calls "the advance guard of the inexorable march west," French hunters, and Indians who lived in wigwams on the edge of the village.

By August first they were back in Detroit, after taking a quick look at Michigan state prisons. They had planned to return to Buffalo but learned that a steamer had just arrived and was bound for a voyage to Green Bay, Wisconsin via Sault Sainte Marie. This was a remote detour, or excursion, but the offer proved irresistible to the

adventurous young men, so off they went with 200 others to parts of the Upper Midwest that had hardly been seen by French or English explorers. They disembarked at Sault Sainte Marie with a French-Canadian guide and visited Indians in their wigwams and sat by their campfires. Struck by the French-Canadians living in the area of the Great Lakes, Tocqueville and Beaumont added Francophone Canada to their itinerary, where they were indignant to find a large population of French living under British colonial rule. The French in France were, in fact, amazingly ignorant about the territory that once was called New France and believed that the former French colony had been entirely Anglicized. In fact, though Canada had been granted limited independence in 1791, the French-Canadians remained a distinct minority under the suzerainty of the English. Nearly all the civil servants there were English, as well the upper classes and members of the professional class. The area was slowly becoming an outpost of Scottish and Irish immigrants, and the two visiting aristocrats were disappointed at how little resistance the French were putting up to these intrusions and to their subordinate status generally.

Determined to see what was then considered the West, Tocqueville and Beaumont went back to Boston, west to Philadelphia and then south to Baltimore. Philadelphia and Baltimore, in fact, marked their first contact with America's black population, the freed slaves, and both cities were strictly segregated. According to Jardin, both travelers found Quaker Philadelphia somewhat more agreeable than New York, dominated by commerce, and Boston society, refined but somewhat hemmed in by its Puritan heritage. Tocqueville interviewed the mayor of Philadelphia, the governor of the state, and Nicholas Biddle, a prominent banker who was establishing himself as an authority on the national economy. Despite the pleasure of access to important people, the issue of

segregation intruded itself continually for Tocqueville and Beaumont. The races were kept strictly apart at a performance at a theater they attended in Philadelphia. Jardin claims that Tocqueville and Beaumont added Baltimore to the itinerary because of "their eagerness to see a state in which slavery still existed." There were even more appalling things to observe there: Attending a horse race, the two saw a black man venture onto the track with some white men. "When one of the whites drove him away by beating him with his cane, no one was surprised, not even the black," notes Jardin. Although the two reached what used to be called "the deep south" later on, after arduous and dangerous travel, their stay in Baltimore (it lasted a week) was their only prolonged contact with urban southern society. There were more dignitaries to meet there--"they went from dinner to dinner," says Jardin--as well as an evening with the 95-year-old Charles Carroll, the largest landowner in the U.S. and the last surviving signer of the Declaration of Independence. "He retained," writes Jardin, "an accurate enough memory to be able to describe the days of the Revolution."

Indeed, the issue of slavery and race relations received unexpected attention at the end of August, when Nat Turner organized in Southampton, Virginia the only known slave rebellion in the U.S. The two Frenchmen were actually in Baltimore at the end of October, when Turner and sixteen of his companions were captured (they were tried and hanged).

By November Tocqueville and Beaumont were making their way across Pennsylvania and down the Ohio River. One night on the great river near Wheeling, West Virginia, the steamboat struck an unseen boulder and rapidly took on water. Beaumont and Tocqueville were impressed with the calm with which their fellow



passenger bore the experience; both were convinced that death was close at hand. "I have never heard a nastier noise than the noise the water made as it rushed inside the boat," Tocqueville wrote to a friend two days later. But amazingly, the boulder that pierced the hull also fully plugged the hole, and the craft floated placidly in the water till another steamer heaved into view for rescue the next day.

The treacherous Ohio was not the only perilous moment Tocqueville and Beaumont experienced in their ten months in America. In Cincinnati they lingered, spending their time with lawyers, including Salmon Chase, later a Chief Justice of the Supreme Court; Jardin says that Ohio, granted statehood in 1801, was virtually unique in having a state constitution granting universal suffrage. By the first week in December, the mighty Ohio froze over, but the two young Frenchmen refused to be trapped, and at Westport, Kentucky, they actually trudged 25 miles in knee-deep snow to Louisville while a hired hand pushed their possessions in a cart. They had hoped to reach the Mississippi River and travel south, and therefore aimed for Memphis, traveling on a stagecoach that traversed dreadfully rutted and uneven roads. The cold would not let up, and Brogan claims that the winter of 1831-32 was the coldest the region had seen in fifty years. The two briefly gave up their push to the Mississippi between Nashville and Memphis, and spent one night in a poorly built cabin that let in icy drafts. Tocqueville experienced severe chills and a fever, and Beaumont had to nurse him through the night, piling on blankets and keeping up the fire. Tocqueville struggled with his health for a number of days, resumed the journey, and soon discovered at Nashville that the Mississippi had frozen over as well. While waiting for the river to clear, he discovered a defeated, demoralized tribe of Choctaw Indians, driven west to what later became

Oklahoma. The Indians and several other tribes joined the two Frenchmen when they went south on the river, disembarking in Arkansas. It was a distressing and dismal spectacle. "There was a general air of ruin and destruction in this sight," Tocqueville wrote to his mother, describing the bedraggled Choctaw, "something that gave an impression of a final farewell, with no going back; one couldn't witness it without a heavy heart."

Tocqueville and Beaumont finally reached the south. They toured a sugar plantation in Louisiana, their first and only stay on a plantation, but did not otherwise linger. After three days in New Orleans, they crossed Alabama, Georgia, and North Carolina in extreme discomfort on various coaches. To maintain their schedule--they wanted to see Congress reopen at the end of January and to set sail for France the next month--they abandoned a possible hour with James Madison on his Virginia plantation, which Brogan calls "the greatest loss of their entire journey." Reaching Washington, they met President Jackson. The exchange was conventional, but the two were impressed that anyone who visited the White House on the day set aside for such things could shake hands with the American president:

If the president has courtiers, they are not very assiduous in their attentions, for when we entered the room he was alone, although it was the day he devotes to receiving the public, and during the whole of our visit only two or three other people came in...He gave us each a glass of Madeira for which we thanked him, calling him 'Sir' like the first visitor.

Back to France in February, 1832, and within three years, the first volume of Democracy in America. According to Tocqueville, the French printers in Paris, central participants in the July Revolution of 1830, took especial care in the production of Volume I, "and seemed passionate for the success of a book in which each felt honored to

have a concern." I had long wondered when Democracy acquired its classic status, and the answer is--at once. Publication in 1835 of Volume I became the talk of Paris, and even then word-of-mouth marketing, spurred by favorable reviews, stimulated interest in France as well as in England. Five years later, when Tocqueville was a member of the Chamber of Deputies, he published Volume II.

### Brogan's Study

The most recent contribution to the already-ample body of literature on Tocqueville is a weighty, 644-page biography by the English scholar Hugh Brogan. A regrettable production, the book is dutiful in its presentation of the facts of Tocqueville's life, but is in no way inspired, and the tone is often snide and tendentious. The style is inappropriately conversational and unduly informal, in a manner all-too-characteristic of published work today, and the writing is frequently sloppy. The result is a presentation more suitable for entertaining a large lecture hall filled with undergraduates while proving one is still au courant. The study contains a wealth of detail that I assume is factually accurate, but Brogan fails to establish the formal and serious tone essential for scholarly biography, and has the truly capital flaw of not finally capturing his subject at all. I have read Democracy in America three times, the third for this review, along with the autobiography and the truncated history of the French Revolution. I do not recognize in Brogan's study the Tocqueville who wrote a book universally recognized as a masterpiece where ever it is read. Brogan notes Tocqueville's brilliance, as all commentators do, but the praise is altogether perfunctory. By far the main energy of the

book is directed at tearing down Tocqueville's achievement by exposing what he takes to be its limitations.

Consider this silly comment, by no means uncharacteristic, describing one Elam Lynds, former chief warden of the prisons at Auburn and Sing-Sing: "Lynds, not to mince words, was a sadistic bully, of an American type all too familiar today from films and novels about US Marines in the Second World War, and recent outrages in the prisons at Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib." Tocqueville's famous and all-too-accurate claims about conformity in the U.S. ("I know no country where in general there prevails less independence of mind and true freedom of debate than in America") is called "famous but preposterous." A passage celebrating the scale of liberty in the U.S. Brogan identifies as reflecting Tocqueville's "cult of the rule of law." On at least two occasions Tocqueville is diagnosed as "neurotic," a word Brogan employs rather casually. What he considers "blemishes" in Democracy in America are traced to the author's "neurotic refusal to plan his book carefully." Later: "The sense that the book is shaped as much by personal neurosis as by logic and observation," Brogan continues, "becomes overwhelming when we scrutinize his pages on the democratic family." "Neurotic" has become a catch-all word to suggest a weird or inexplicable tendency; without elaboration, it does not mean very much.

Brogan condescends to Tocqueville when he isn't explicitly hostile. The author was a racist and an elitist. His views on marriage and the family "are sadly commonplace," and he engages in terminological confusion, failing to properly distinguish words such as liberty, equality and democracy. Tocqueville was "nostalgic" for aristocratic eras that he misrepresents, and "bore a snobbish prejudice against

bourgeois society." Tocqueville is not even granted the claim that he supports the new political order in the U.S., because in truth he "regards egalitarianism with hostility and dread." "The Christian world is condemned to democracy," Brogan continues, summarizing (or trying to) Tocqueville's thought in language that the latter never uses. At the risk of challenging the reader's patience, I'll add one last remark; Brogan repeats himself in a slightly different way, so eager is he to establish his point. Note the use of the word "caste": "Democracy in America is the work of a man who regards the egalitarian phantom he has conjured up with deep hostility and dread, and wants to rally his caste to defeat it."

All of this begs an obvious question. If the charges of elitism, racism and the like are true, why should we read Democracy in America or Brogan's biography at all?

In notes at the end of his text, Brogan writes that "Tocqueville is one of my oldest and dearest friends (I have known him for fifty years), and although I used a friend's privilege to be frank about what I take to be his weaknesses, no-one else had better do the same in my presence."

But after the lashing Brogan has given, no one else need bother.

### Democracy in America

I believe Brogan's essential complaint is that Tocqueville is not a conventional, modern twenty-first century liberal extending unqualified support for all the standard goals of modern liberalism. Thus, every little sign that he lacks enthusiasm for the modern agenda needs to be tracked down and exposed. But if Tocqueville were no more

than that, and had he written a book that only reflected contemporary opinion, there would be very little reason to read him today. We would immerse ourselves in the journalism and ephemera of the hour, the material that keeps us imprisoned, as Tocqueville predicted it would, in the fashionable and the contemporary, in short, in the realm of public opinion. I do not have the time or space to challenge every charge Brogan brings against the French analyst, but I would like to respond to a few of the more important, including the one that he is an elitist, and also describe what one might approximately call his attitude toward the United States. I hope to add a few comments on why Brogan's study should be disregarded, and why Tocqueville remains the foremost analyst of American life, indeed, why he remains more important than ever.

I want to begin with two passages from *Democracy in America*, one lengthy and the other relatively brief. These passages appear near the middle of Volume I, and establish the fundamental grounds for the several hundred pages of analysis that follow. These passages are frequently cited in studies of Tocqueville, because they neatly summarize his comparative study of democracy and aristocracy and demonstrate his adamant support of the first. Here is Tocqueville, in the Goldhammer translation:

What do you want from society and government? Clarity on this point is essential.

Do you wish to impart a certain loftiness to the human mind, a generous way of looking at the things of this world? Do you want to inspire in men a kind of contempt for material goods? Do you hope to foster or develop profound convictions and lay the groundwork for deep devotion?

Is your goal to refine mores, elevate manners, and promote brilliance in the arts? Do you want poetry renown and glory? Do you seek to organize a people so as to act powerfully on all other peoples?

Would you have them embark on enterprises so great that, no matter what comes of these efforts, they will leave a deep imprint on history?

If...these are the main objectives that men in society ought to set for themselves, do not choose democratic government, for it offers

no guarantee that you will reach your goal.

But if it seems useful to you to turn man's intellectual and moral efforts to the necessities of material life and use them to improve his well-being; if reason strikes you as more profitable to man than genius; if your purpose is to create not heroic virtues but tranquil habits; if you would rather see vice than crime and are prepared to accept fewer great deeds in exchange for fewer atrocities; if, instead of a brilliant society as a stage for your actions, you are willing to settle for a prosperous one; and if, finally, the principal purpose of a government is not, in your view, to make the nation as a whole as glorious or powerful as can be but to achieve for each individual the greatest possible well-being while avoiding misery as much as possible; then equalize conditions and constitute a democratic government.

Here is the second passage, which comes a few pages earlier in the text:

No one has yet discovered a political structure that promotes the development and prosperity of all classes of society equally. ...Experience has shown that it is almost as dangerous to entrust to one class the fate of all the others as to make one people the arbiter of another's destiny. When the rich alone govern, the interests of the poor are always imperiled; and when the poor make the law, the interests of the rich are seriously at risk. What, then, is the advantage of democracy? The real advantage of democracy is not, as some say, to promote the prosperity of all, but merely to foster the well-being of the greater number.

People who write philosophy distinguish between solid floors and high ceilings.

Platonism and the Church Fathers present their disciples with high ceilings. Political philosophy in recent centuries, not quite as lofty, offers solid floors. These citations from Tocqueville capture this distinction. On the one hand, he is a staunch advocate of democracy, because it is the form that best allows the state to achieve a just political order. There is a second, somewhat unexpected justification that comes at the beginning and end of the two-volume study. The unfolding of the French and American revolutions, the slow but ineluctable emergence of the democratic spirit throughout the western world, the waning of the aristocracy almost everywhere--these momentous

developments reflect what Tocqueville ultimately calls "the democratic society in which God had decreed we must live." Tocqueville fell away from the Catholic Church in his youth, rejoined it at the end of his life, and in the decades inbetween remained a believer in his own way. There is a plan for the world, it has been established by God, and it calls for the rise of democracy. He says at the beginning of Volume I, "To wish to arrest democracy would seem tantamount to a struggle against God himself."

But as the first passage establishes, Tocqueville is by no means fully persuaded of the results, and it is probably true that Volume II (from 1840) is more qualified in its enthusiasm for democracy than Volume I. The claims that need to be examined are 1) whether Tocqueville considers himself and his estate a superior order of some kind, which is what it means to be an elitist; and 2) if Tocqueville really does, as Brogan asserts, fear the spread of democracy

It is clear, as I have written, that Tocqueville was not unalloyed in his admiration of the United States; who from Europe or America worth reading on the subject ever has been? Tocqueville does explicitly say that the Americans of 1831 were the most enlightened people on the planet, and certainly the freest. The great French political analyst Raymond Aron, a far profounder student of Tocqueville than Brogan, agrees in one of his many essays on the subject that Tocqueville "was by no means an entirely enthusiastic admirer of American society or democracy." Noting that Tocqueville was sensitive to the mediocrity inherent in democratic life, Aron adds that "He brought to modern democracy neither the enthusiasm of those who expected from it a transfiguration of the human lot nor the hostility of those who saw in it no less than the decomposition of society."



Brogan, as others have, accuses Tocqueville of terminological vagueness, but what does the biographer himself mean when he calls the author an "elitist"? There are many orders of life that constitute an elite, and Brogan never specifies which he means, if he is using the word as anything more than a general term of abuse. He himself belongs to an elite, the rare few with extensive education and a permanent university position. Is he an elitist by virtue of belonging to an elite? Or does he escape that condition by heaping opprobrium on one of the very greatest thinkers of the nineteenth century? And thereby establish his unassailable liberal credentials?

It is true that Tocqueville does make a claim (or impose a demand) on some kind of an elite; and I suppose it is fair to assume that he considers himself part of it. In the introduction to Volume 1, he writes that

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 instinct; to adapt government to its time and place; to alter it to fit circumstances and individuals--this is the primary duty imposed on the leaders of society today.

But is there anything malevolent, harmful or otherwise untoward about such a demand? Are not public schools designed to educate students in civic and republic virtue? Can this ringing, superbly condensed remark remotely be said to reflect an attempt to control (much less divert) the vast political tides ushering in the egalitarian order--even if such a goal were attainable? Elitism is offensive when it is connected to snobbery and a taste for exclusiveness and exclusion; Democracy in America is available to everyone with a library card who wishes to study and learn, to the few who belong to that natural aristocracy determined by neither wealth nor birth. Tocqueville participated in the first English translation of his book, to assure it the widest readership and greatest impact

possible. I note in passing that Tocqueville's wife, Mary Mottley, was nine years his senior, an English commoner and an immigrant to France. Does she sound like the probable choice of an aristocrat who is an elitist and a snob? "The marriage caused some scandal," writes Jardin, "and [Tocqueville's] family resigned themselves to it without enthusiasm."

In the second quarter of the nineteenth century, France was a very partial democracy, a kind of constitutional monarchy under the direction of an Orleanist king (Louis-Philippe) who made a half-hearted effort to restore monarchical rule in the decades after the fall of Napoleon. His was a feeble regime, and in 1848 it took very little effort to topple it. Until then, there was a Parliament with limited powers, a limited franchise (or suffrage), and restricted press liberties. Tocqueville's hope, largely disappointed, was to bring to France the best democracy had to offer, to limit its maleficent results, to a country, in the words of Aron, "lacking a local democracy at the root of public life, and torn by so many tragic memories and incompatible loyalties, still subject to sudden crises..."

Equality of conditions and liberty, which basically define what Tocqueville means by the use of the word "democracy," have the great value of protecting the mass of humanity from the depredations of the rich and powerful few. That is for Tocqueville its principal justification. But the condition unavoidably comes at a very considerable cost, which he doesn't hesitate to point out. For one thing, the U.S. is, to put it simply, a very boring place. This comes as a very interesting remark about us, appearing as it does in the early years of our history, and given that we continue to attract masses of immigrants from all over world. But there it is. "It is impossible to imagine," he writes in Volume II,

"anything as insignificant, dull, or encumbered with petty interests...as the life of an American." And later on: "The United States, it seems, is unmatched when it comes to arousing and sustaining our curiosity...In the long run, however, this very agitated society can seem monotonous, and the spectator, having contemplated this very fluid scene for some time, succumbs to boredom."

We are avaricious and dreadfully prone to discontent. Once Americans acquire the position they have aimed for, they find something insufficient about it, and try for something else; little holds them for very long when the prospect of more is dangled before them. Tocqueville, like his contemporary Emerson, is endlessly quotable, and some of his very sharpest remarks are reserved for the American acquisitiveness. Near the very beginning of the book, he writes that "I know of no other country where the love of money occupies as great a place in the hearts of men." This apparent criticism is modified later in the text, when Tocqueville explains that in a world of free markets, where everyone depends on the power of money to buy essential articles, and where the traditional loyalties of an older Europe have never taken root, financial gain becomes a necessity. The individual is isolated and weak; "society" and public opinion are everything. Nowhere in the world or in its history have people been more fully shaped by public opinion or have paid a higher price for trying to avoid its reach. Tocqueville is especially emphatic about this, and returns to it over and over again in different contexts, contemplating the multiple effects of a single enveloping condition. Not falling in step with current opinion, resisting the cosmic force money now presents, seeking success and following other conventions as they are commonly understood--failure to acknowledge the primacy of these things is equivalent to exile to another planet.

What calls for the closest attention today is the play of materialism, individuality and religion. I should like to emphasize this point, one of many that could be made regarding Democracy, because seldom have Americans ever pursued money, comfort, and material goods with quite the avidity they do so today. Anyone who has read the book with the least amount of care knows the central role Christianity plays in the origins and preservation of democracy. Here are a few sentences from the middle of Volume II:

Though man delights in this proper and legitimate search for well-being, there is reason to fear that he may in the end lose the use of his most sublime faculties, and that, while bent on improving everything around him, he may ultimately degrade himself. There, and nowhere else, lies the peril. Hence, law-makers in democracies and all decent and enlightened men who live in them must apply themselves unstintingly to the task of uplifting souls and keeping them intent on heaven... Democracy encourages the taste for material gratifications. If this taste becomes excessive, it soon leads men to believe that everything is mere matter, and materialism in turn adds to the forces that propel pursuit of those same gratifications with wild ardor.

Tocqueville calls the quest for well-being "proper and legitimate," but he also reminds us of values that go beyond the tangible and the transitory, lest we all sink into the debasement of "well-being." Christianity is supposed to prevent that from happening, or at least lessen its danger. "Religions inculcate the general habit," he writes, "of acting with an eye to the future...Once men stop worrying about what is to come when their lives are over, they lapse easily into [a] state of complete and brutish indifference..." Tocqueville emphasizes this point a few pages before, commenting that "I am so convinced that Christianity must be maintained at all costs...that I would rather chain priests inside their sanctuaries than allow them to venture out."

It should be clear why these ideas call for the most attentive regard. Tocqueville, perhaps more than many of his contemporaries, understood the waning power of religion. He nevertheless believed that Christianity in 1831 maintained enough authority in America to contain one of the most powerful and potentially dangerous passions of democratic life. Pervasive religious belief has since disappeared from American life. Tocqueville foresaw that if it did, the ensuing moral vacancy would provoke a reaction, potentially sharp; our born-again Christians, the evangelicals, the charismatics, not to mention a flourishing interest in "eastern religions," reflect a search for spiritual meaning. Meanwhile, the national obsession with money appears to intensify decade by decade.

A companion danger involves our vaunted individualism, which Tocqueville analyzes with considerable subtlety. He presents an important distinction between "egoism" and democratic individualism which is more essential than ever to ponder. Egoism, he tells us, is a "passionate and exaggerated love of self" that leads people to consider most if not all matters in life solely in relation to their own wants. Egotistical people prefer themselves to everything and everyone else. That characteristic, Tocqueville says, has existed from time immemorial, and is "as old as the world." Individualism, on the other hand, the quality of a democratic era, is a "reflective and tranquil sentiment" that encourages men and women to cut themselves off from the rest of society and "withdraw into a circle of family and friends." Society-at-large is left to take care of itself, which is surely not desirable but perhaps to one degree or another unavoidable. The trouble is that the second characteristic--democratic individualism--can all too easily give way to egotism pure and simple. A socially atomized population, which to one degree the U.S. has always been, naturally fosters a disregard for the

common good, which appears remote and abstract. This tendency needs to be checked by the force of religion. "Egoism," Tocqueville writes, "shrivels the seed of all virtues; individualism at first dries up only the sources of public virtues, but in the long run attacks and destroys all the others and in the end will be subsumed by egoism."

Democracy in America was the product of a rather young man and a remarkable mind. I am risking very little by claiming the book is more essential than ever. Here is Raymond Aron once more, in extracts from two essays on Tocqueville that he prepared in 1978 and 1979, the first titled "On Progress After the Fall." A few years before it was written, Alexander Solzhenitsyn had been expelled from the Soviet Union, and his trilogy of books on the Gulag Archipelago stripped Soviet communism of what little prestige it still commanded in Europe while obliging French writers to consider available options in light of its diminishing prestige. "Certainly," write Aron, "our civilization tends toward a utilitarian or hedonistic morality. Who evokes the categorical imperative?" He goes on: "I belong to the school of thought that Solzhenitsyn calls rational humanism, and says has failed....The rationalist bets on the education of humanity, even if he is not sure he will win his wager.... The pressure of technical rationalization and the religious desert incite and renew revolts. Perhaps Spengler is right, and pitiless decadence is striking at formless and godless urban civilization." Aron concluded the essay with a qualified hope that "reason," more discredited now than ever, might yet rescue western societies from Spengler's grim prediction.

One year later, Aron received the Tocqueville Prize, an award given to scholars and writers who produce works that reflect the spirit of the author for whom the prize is named. This is taken from his acceptance address:

To his dying day, Tocqueville refused to despair of the French, to disdain men, as his friend Arthur de Gobineau called on him to do. On the contrary, he took a profound and noble pleasure in following his principles, the liberty and equality of men. Like so many others, I have been tempted in the past forty years by despair and disdain. I hope I have not succumbed. Every time I read Tocqueville's letters, I receive a lesson in courage, as though it came, across the years, from a teacher and a friend.

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