



TOCQUEVILLE'S NEW SCIENCE OF POLITICS REVISITED

*Aurelian Craiutu argues that **Tocqueville** was not just an observer of democracy in America but also a theorist of democracy who wanted to create “a new science of politics” suitable to the new world which was beginning to take shape at that time. Craiutu points out four dimensions of Tocqueville’s new science of politics that might help us better understand his thinking. The first is that Tocqueville’s new science of politics is fundamentally cross-disciplinary, at the intersection of political science, sociology, anthropology, history, and philosophy. He then goes on to discuss the other dimensions such as its comparative, normative, and political dimensions. He concludes that his works must therefore be seen as belonging to a larger French tradition of political engagement and political rhetoric in which the writer enters into a subtle and complex pedagogical relationship with his audience, seeking to convince and inspire his readers to political action. This thesis is discussed by Daniel J. Mahoney of Assumption College, Filippo Sabetti of McGill University, and Jeremy R. Jennings of King’s College London.*

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by Aurelian Craiutu

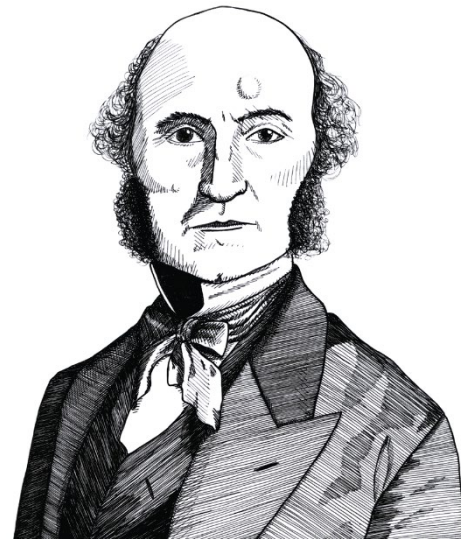
Related Links:

- [Alexis de Tocqueville \(1805-1859\)](#)
- [Democracy in America](#)
- [19thC French Liberalism](#)

“A new political science is needed for a world entirely new.” [1]

In 1840, soon after the publication of volume two of *Democracy in America*, John Stuart Mill wrote a letter to Alexis de Tocqueville in which he expressed his strong admiration for the new book. “You have accomplished a great achievement,” Mill wrote, “you have changed the face of political philosophy, you have carried on the discussions respecting the tendencies of modern society ... into a region both of height and of depth, which no one before you had entered, and all previous argumentation and speculation in such matters appears but as child’s play now.” [2] At that time, Mill’s words might have appeared as an exaggeration (and

Tocqueville’s fame, to be sure, declined for a long time after his death), but with the benefit of hindsight, it is now evident that Mill hardly overstated his point and his praise was entirely justified.



John Stuart Mill

Over the past century or so, Tocqueville’s writings have proved to be a rich source of inspiration for political scientists, sociologists, philosophers, legal scholars, and historians alike. Only in the last two decades a high number of new interpretations of Tocqueville’s works have appeared in both French and English, shedding

fresh light on lesser-known facets of Tocqueville's persona: the philosopher, the moralist, the writer, the politician and the defender of French colonization of Algeria.^[3] In 2005 the bicentenary of his birth was widely celebrated on four continents, thus showing that Tocqueville's works have achieved a truly universal appeal transcending national or continental boundaries. In this regard, no one could rival his star status with the possible exception of Marx, whose reputation declined, however, abruptly in 1989-91 with the fall of communism in Eastern Europe and Russia. Perhaps even more importantly, Tocqueville's ideas have been creatively appropriated and respected by thinkers on *both* the Left and the Right, which is uncommon in academia and beyond. The first admire Tocqueville for his perceptive thoughts about equality, democratic citizenship, and the art of association, while the latter praise his defense of religion, decentralization, and self-government along with his skepticism toward big government.

In spite of all this, Tocqueville defies our black-and-white categories and generalizations and his writings still pose significant challenges to his interpreters. What were his "true" beliefs? Are the two volumes of *Democracy in America* parts of the same conceptual project, or are they different books? What was the relation between Tocqueville's theoretical project and his political life? Did he really understand America, or was he only interested in France?

The difficulty of answering these questions can be explained in light of Tocqueville's highly ambitious intellectual and political agenda. By writing *Democracy in America*, he did not seek to produce a mere travelogue; nor was his intention to offer a comprehensive analysis of the American democracy and its political system. True, he was fascinated by what he discovered in the New World but, as he himself acknowledged, in America he saw "[much more than America](#)": he grasped the image of the new democracy itself, with its virtues, inclinations, habits, excesses, and promises.^[4] His was a book primarily about *democracy*, and America was only a case-study. Tocqueville offered pertinent answers to dilemmas that transcend temporal and geographical boundaries and

apply not only to America but also to Europe and other parts of the world.

On a deeper level Tocqueville had another highly ambitious goal when writing *Democracy in America*. He aspired to create, in his own words, "a new science of politics" suitable to the new world which was beginning to take shape at that time. But what did he actually mean by this? According to Sheldon Wolin, for example, Tocqueville's model was "not that of the scientist but that of the painter" and his theoretical method should be described as a form of "political impressionism"^[5] based on ideal types, strong impressions, vast panoramas, and powerful insights. Yet Tocqueville himself seems to have had a different view on this topic and did not behave like an impressionist painter when it came to thinking about politics. In both his *Recollections* and *The Old Regime and the Revolution*, he criticized, in fact, the "[literary](#)" (i.e., [impressionistic style of politics](#)) of his predecessors (and contemporaries) who looked for what was ingenuous and new rather than what was appropriate to their particular situations.^[6]

The best expression of Tocqueville's conception of his "new" political science can be found in an important (and generally overlooked) speech he gave in April 1852 at the Academy of Moral and Political Science in Paris. In this speech he distinguished between the *art* of government and the *science* of government and suggested that he had virtually nothing to do with the first. The art of government follows the ever-changing flux of political phenomena and addresses daily challenges posed by events and changing political circumstances.^[7] The true science of government, argued Tocqueville, is different. Covering the spaces between philosophy, sociology, and law, it seeks to highlight the natural rights of individuals, the laws appropriate to different societies, and the virtues and limitations of various forms of government. It is grounded not in fleeting circumstances but in "the nature of man, his interests, faculties, and needs and teaches what are the laws most appropriate to the general and permanent condition of man."^[8] As such, it never reduces politics to a mere question of arithmetic or logic; nor does it attempt to build an imaginary (or utopian)

society in which everything is simple, orderly, uniform, and in accord with reason.



Alexis de Tocqueville

In what follows I would like to point out four major dimensions of Tocqueville's new science of politics that might help us better understand the differences between his views and our conception of political science today. The first thing worth mentioning here is that Tocqueville's new science of politics is fundamentally *cross-disciplinary*, at the intersection of political science, sociology, anthropology, history, and philosophy. As "the first anthropologist of modern equality," [9] he addressed important and diverse topics that are rarely treated in one single book or field today: civil society, pluralism, religion, centralization, participatory democracy, democratic mind, and the limits of affluence, to name just a few. His writings analyzing the great democratic revolution unfolding under his own eyes also shed light on the privatization of social life, the tendency to social anomie, the development of individualism, skepticism and relativism, the softening of mores, and the rise of the middle class. Such breadth can no longer be expected (or found) in the writings of contemporary political scientists who must focus on a narrowly defined set of dependent and independent variables.

The second aspect that accounts for the originality of Tocqueville's new science of politics and singles it out among his peers is its *comparative* dimension. [10] The comparative method is at the heart of not only *Democracy in America* but also of *The Old Regime and the Revolution*. [11] Tocqueville offered a new way of analyzing social and political phenomena in comparative perspective (America-France, New World-Old World, England-France, France-Islam), which was based on ideal types (democracy-aristocracy, liberty-equality) that went beyond the method used by most of his contemporaries. [12] It is known that he came to America with several ideas about the nature and the direction of modern society that he had already acquired in part by attending Guizot's lectures on the history of the European and French civilization. [13] But Tocqueville remained open to new experiences, and America provided him with several unexpected lessons that influenced his thinking and made him explore new vistas. By viewing in America the shape of the democracy of the future, he was in a better position to grasp what had to be done in France in order to put an end to the cycle of revolutionary turmoil that had plagued the country for almost half a century. While Tocqueville's book allows us to understand the American exception, it also explains for us (as it did for his contemporaries) the deep roots of *le mal français* and the difficulty of reforming French society in the aftermath of the turbulent French Revolution. Again, this is due in large part to his comparative method and ideal types, which he used with great dexterity to illuminate the universality of the democratic revolution beyond national or continental borders.

Third is the *normative* dimension of Tocqueville's new science of politics. This, I argue, must be understood against the larger background of what we may call, in the absence of a better term, his "philosophical" views. (He never had too much trust in pure philosophy.) Tocqueville sought to understand how democracy changes the human condition and modifies the ways in which people think, speak, dream, relate to each other, and work in modern society. That is why, as Pierre Manent showed in a classic study originally published three decades ago, Tocqueville should (also) be studied as

a normative political philosopher, endowed with a true Pascalian sensibility. [14] He did not write *Democracy in America* and *The Old Regime and the Revolution* in order to contribute to a purely scholarly debate. A moralist in the great French tradition, [15] he was an intellectual and politician whose ambition was to participate in the education for liberty of democratic citizens (beginning with the French ones). As such, he was concerned with the chances of survival of a genuinely democratic regime in a society in which the majority of individuals only want to get rich and are ready to abandon public affairs for the pursuit of their narrow private interests. Tocqueville entertained a lofty view of the task of political philosophers and legislators in modern societies. Their mission, he wrote, is to propose and promote a new civic spirit, in other words, “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.” [16]

Tocqueville’s status as a *political philosopher* has not always been properly understood. Many anthologies of political thought still do not include *Democracy in America*, and he is often missing from introductory courses into political theory in which the obvious candidates are always Plato, Aristotle, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Marx, and Mill. Manent has explained Tocqueville’s recent addition to the French *Agrégation de philosophie* on the grounds that his striking models, often likened to sociological ideal types, are in fact better understood as broad anthropological types that remain linked to the language in which politics was first articulated in ancient Greece. On this reading, Tocqueville can be understood to have reintroduced a tension between democratic justice and greatness that goes as far back as Plato and Aristotle. Another emphasis on the philosophical side of Tocqueville (from a postmodern viewpoint this time) can be found in Wolin’s *Tocqueville between Two Worlds*, which used Tocqueville to analyze the “many forms of postmodern political predicament.” [17] In spite of their ideological differences, both Manent and Wolin see Tocqueville as caught between the competing values of democratic justice, “greatness,” and “the political” as

possibilities of modern life. They read Tocqueville in dialogue with the early modern philosophical tradition encompassing Machiavelli, Descartes, Montesquieu, Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau.



René Descartes

Fourth, I should like to underscore the *political* dimension of Tocqueville’s new science of politics. Never losing sight of France, he wrote the book mostly for his fellow countrymen who, given the tragic experience of the Terror, tended to equate democracy and anarchy and did not view with confidence the principle of popular sovereignty. He wanted to convince them that they could (and should) embrace political democracy and that the latter could be properly moderated, educated, and purified of its excesses and anarchical tendencies. This was the goal of *Democracy in America*, a book in which he articulated, between the lines, a political program for the French and proposed concrete remedies for democratic ills. As James Schleifer duly noted, “We need always to remember that what Tocqueville said about the America republic is largely in response to his French audience. He had both positive and negative views of America, but in his *Democracy* he chose to highlight the positive; he wanted to counter French fears and blunt the usual criticisms of democracy.” [18]

It is then all the more surprising to note that this political dimension of Tocqueville's work has often been underappreciated. He had a strong passion for political action—"I have always placed action above everything else," [19] he once confessed to his friend, Louis de Kergolay—and played an important role in the politics of his country. He spent almost 12 years in politics and was, for a short period in 1849, minister of foreign affairs under the Second Republic. As [Eduardo Nolla](#) reminded us, "For Tocqueville, [reflection joined to practice](#) constitutes the nature of what he calls his political science." [20] His works must therefore be seen as belonging to a larger French tradition of political engagement and political rhetoric in which the writer enters into a subtle and complex pedagogical relationship with his audience, seeking to convince and inspire his readers to political action. [21]

In the end, I would like to propose a small thought experiment. Suppose that Tocqueville were to submit *Democracy in America* as a doctoral dissertation to the faculty of a political science department at a top research university. Would those of our colleagues who stress the importance of statistical and quantitative skills be willing to give him a pass, given his imprecise use of the concept of democracy, his unique style of explanation that made him prone to contradict himself, and his many omissions (political parties, industrial revolution, etc.) from his analysis? Would they accept the work of someone who rarely acknowledged his sources, asked his readers to [take him at his word](#) [22] and openly recognized: "[I give myself over to the natural movement of my ideas](#), allowing myself to be led in good faith from one consequence to another. The result is that, as long as the work is not finished, I do not know exactly where I am going and if I will ever arrive?" [23] Would our fellow political scientists accept the moralist side of Tocqueville, who claimed in the introduction to his masterpiece that he strives to see "farther" than all the parties of his day and that, "while they are concerned with the next day, [he] wanted to think about the future"? [24] And would the more philosophically inclined ones forgive Tocqueville for introducing the term "justice" (in the eyes of God!)

only in the very last chapter of his two-volume work on democracy?

These questions seem (almost) rhetorical. Although Tocqueville was among the first to do serious "fieldwork," many of our fellow political scientists (including theorists) would probably criticize him for being hopelessly confused, lacking a clear "dependent variable," and working with (far) too many meanings of his main concept (democracy), thus creating unacceptable confusion and tensions in his arguments. To be sure, in *Democracy in America*, the term "democracy" designates many different things: a revolution dating back to the 12th century, an unstoppable and irreversible movement willed by God, the equalization of conditions, a democratic social condition, popular sovereignty, rule by the majority, the reign of the middle class, democratic republic, representative government, and a way of life. How all these meanings relate to one another is by no means entirely clear. Some argued, in fact, that Tocqueville got America "wrong" [25] because he worked with a flawed method that made him perceive only what suited his ideological biases and intellectual inclinations. For others, many of Tocqueville's conclusions were the outcome of unwarranted generalizations and impressionistic observations, hardly based on facts. Still others complain that Tocqueville was *not* a systematic thinker and believe that he failed to provide a rigorous political science. In Jon Elster's view, for example, Tocqueville's masterpiece (and especially its second volume) has a "hugely incoherent structure" [26] and is marred by "constant ambiguity, vagueness of language, tendency to speculative flights of fancy, and self-contradictions." [27] Who would then give a pass to such a poor social scientist whose many academic sins far outweigh his few intellectual virtues?

Related Links:

- [Gustave de Beaumont \(1802-1866\)](#)
- [Marie: ou l'Esclavage aux États-Unis \(1835\)](#)
- [Ireland: Social, Political, and Religious \(1839\)](#)

I have had a chance to address these critics elsewhere, [28] and here I should like to point out only

two things. The first is Tocqueville's inclination to avoid one-sided definitions of his main concepts, beginning with democracy, continuing with equality, and ending with liberty. He refrained from using an ideological [29] approach to democracy—*Democracy in America* is hardly a clear-cut indictment of modern democracy, even if it is not an unqualified endorsement either—at the same time that he avoided offering a purely technical definition of this key concept. As Schleifer demonstrated in his classic study, [30] one can find [over 10 meanings of the word “democracy”](#) in Tocqueville's book. His alleged lack of precision in defining democracy and identifying the prerequisites of democracy along with the fundamental distinction between democracy as a form of society (*état social*) and a form of government was a self-conscious strategy on his part, as is evident from reading the drafts and notes in the Liberty Fund critical edition of his work. Anyone who reads them will see Tocqueville engaging in a fascinating dialogue with himself, as well as with his father Hervé, his brother Édouard, and his friends Gustave de Beaumont and Louis de Kergorlay. Tocqueville constantly drafts outlines and writing strategies and carefully considers his choices of words, reflecting upon the proper definitions of his key concepts. It is therefore impossible not to conclude that the vagueness which Elster and others dislike so much was a highly *calculated* strategy on Tocqueville's part, and that, in Schleifer's words, “Tocqueville's very failure precisely to define *démocratie* accounts, in part, for the brilliance of his observations.” [31]

The second point is that Tocqueville's new science of politics rejected rigid and one-dimensional accounts of history and politics and never lost hope in the future of freedom, although toward the end of his life he came to espouse a darker view of his own country (and even of democracy in America). [32] His anti-positivist science of politics went against all forms of historical determinism threatening to rob individual human beings of their freedom and capacity for autonomous choice and action. As an important passage from his *Recollections* shows, he detested “[those absolute systems](#), which represent all the events in history as depending upon great first causes

linked by the chain of fatality, and which, as it were, suppress men from the history of the human race. They seem narrow under their pretense of broadness, and false beneath their air of mathematical exactness.” [33] Many political events, he believed, could not be accounted for by theories pretending to explain or foresee with precision the development of societies. “Men,” Tocqueville wrote, “[grasp fragments of truth](#), but never truth itself.” [34] As a follower of Montesquieu, Tocqueville recognized that all societies are diverse and pluralistic, being influenced in many ways by their history, physical environment, culture, and laws. [35] He believed that in order to adequately explain social and political phenomena, an open and flexible method is required, one that does not lead to reductionist and one-dimensional theories of social and political change and does not use an unduly sophisticated vocabulary. That is why Tocqueville would have been surprised to hear that his work illuminates, as Elster argued, free-rider obstacles to collective action, the implications of “pluralistic ignorance,” and “spillover,” “compensation,” and “satiation” effects and mechanisms. Tocqueville's analysis of the virtues and limitations of democracy was alien to such a mechanistic and simplistic way of thinking.

To conclude, I fear that Tocqueville's work might have not passed a final hypothetical doctoral defense in which he would have been expected to use the language and methods of “rigorous” contemporary political science. At best, I surmise, he would have been given a “revise and resubmit”; most likely, his work would have been found defective on (too) many accounts. To his critics, Tocqueville would probably have repeated what he had written to his English translator, Henry Reeve in 1837: “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.” [36] His anti-positivist new science of politics reflects his openness and strong attachment to moderation in the pursuit of liberty and dignity.

Endnotes

[1.] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, four-volume bilingual critical edition, ed. Eduardo Nolla, trans. James T. Schleifer (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2010), I, 16. All subsequent references are to this edition.

[2.] From Mill’s letter of May 11, 1840 in published in Tocqueville, *Œuvres Complètes, VI: 1. Correspondance d’Alexis de Tocqueville avec Henry Reeve et John Stuart Mill*, eds. J.-P. Mayer and Gustave Rudler (Paris: Gallimard, 1954), 328.

[3.] Five new English translations of *Democracy in America* have been published in the last two decades by Stephen D. Grant (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2000), Delba Winthrop and Harvey C. Mansfield (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), Gerald E. Bevan (London: Penguin, 2003), Arthur Goldhammer (New York: The Library of America, 2004), and the Nolla-Schleifer critical edition published by Liberty Fund (Indianapolis, 2010). At the same time, two new translations of *The Old Regime and the Revolution* came out. The first one was made by Alan Kahan (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998 and 2001), while the second one was by Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012). For an overview of recent works on Tocqueville, see Cheryl Welch, “Introduction: Tocqueville in the Twenty First Century,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Tocqueville*, ed. Cheryl B. Welch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 1-20; *The Tocqueville Review/La Revue Tocqueville*, XXVII: 2 (2006).

[4.] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, I, 28.

[5.] Sheldon Wolin, *Tocqueville between Two Worlds* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 140. On Tocqueville’s new science of politics, see *ibid.*, pp. 184-97 and Saguiv A. Hadari, *Theory in Practice: Tocqueville’s New Science of Politics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989).

[6.] Tocqueville, *Recollections*, trans. A. Teixeira de Mattos, ed. J.-P. Mayer (New York: Meridian Books, 1959), 67.

[7.] Tocqueville, *Œuvres Complètes, XVI: Mélanges*, ed. Françoise Mélonio (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), 230.

[8.] *Ibid.*, 230. Also see 231-32.

[9.] *Ibid.*, 50.

[10.] The comparative dimension of Tocqueville’s works is highlighted and examined by Seymour Drescher (“Tocqueville’s Comparisons: Choices and Lessons”) and Françoise Mélonio (“Tocqueville européen: la France et l’Allemagne”), both published in *The Tocqueville Review/La Revue Tocqueville*, XXVII: 2 (2006): 479-516 and 517-32.

[11.] See Alan Kahan, *Alexis de Tocqueville* (New York: Continuum, 2010), 61.

[12.] One exception is worth mentioning here: Tocqueville’s best friend and travel companion, Gustave de Beaumont, also espoused a comparative method in his writings on America (*Marie ou l’esclavage aux États-Unis*) and Ireland. Beaumont commented on many drafts of *Democracy in America* and helped Tocqueville finish the latter.

[13.] I commented on this issue in Aurelian Craiutu “Tocqueville and the Political Thought of the French Doctrinaires,” *History of Political Thought*, XX: 3 (1999): 456-93. Also see: Lucien Jaume, *Tocqueville: The Aristocratic Sources of Liberty* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 249-318; and François Furet, “The Intellectual Origins of Tocqueville’s Thought,” *The Tocqueville Review / La Revue Tocqueville*, 7 (1985-86): 117-27.

[14.] Pierre Manent, *Tocqueville and the Nature of Democracy*, trans. John Waggoner (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996). The original French edition was published by Fayard in 1982.

[15.] This dimension is well highlighted in Jaume, *Tocqueville*, 145-92.

[16.] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, I, 16.

[17.] Wolin, *Tocqueville between Two Worlds*, 564.

[18.] James T. Schleifer, *The Chicago Companion to Tocqueville's Democracy in America* (Chicago: University Press of Chicago, 2012), 156.

[19.] Tocqueville's letter of October 4, 1837, in Alexis de Tocqueville, *Œuvres Complètes, XIII: 1 Correspondence avec Louis de Kergorlay*, ed. Jean-Alain Lesourd (Paris: Gallimard, 1977), 47.

[20.] Nolla, "Editor's Introduction," in Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, I, cxxi.

[21.] Pierre Manent, "Tocqueville, Political Philosopher," in *The Cambridge Companion to Tocqueville*, 111; Laurence Guellec, "Tocqueville and Political Rhetoric," *ibid.*, 170. Also see Eduardo Nolla's "Editor's Introduction" in Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, I, xlvii-cxlix.

[22.] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, I, 30.

[23.] From Tocqueville's letter to John Stuart Mill, in Tocqueville, *Œuvres Complètes, VI: 1*, 314.

[24.] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, I, 32.

[25.] Gary Wills, "Did Tocqueville 'Get' America?" *New York Review of Books*, April 29 (2004): 52-56.

[26.] Jon Elster, *Alexis de Tocqueville, the First Social Scientist* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 1.

[27.] *Ibid.*, 2.

[28.] See Aurelian Craiutu, "What Kind of Social Scientist Was Tocqueville?" in *Conversations with Tocqueville: The Democratic Revolution in the Twenty-First Century*, eds. Aurelian Craiutu and Sheldon Gellar (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, Rowman & Littlefield, 2009), 55-81; and my review of Jon Elster's *Tocqueville* in a symposium on this book published in *Perspectives on Politics*, 9: 2 (2011): 363-68.

[29.] For example, Tocqueville does not regard democracy as a short-hand for universal bliss, a synonym for utopia, or a false religion.

[30.] James T. Schleifer, *The Making of Tocqueville's Democracy in America*, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2000), 325-39; also see Jaume, *Tocqueville*, 15-94.

[31.] *Ibid.*, 339. Also see Schleifer, *The Chicago Companion to Tocqueville's Democracy in America*, 38-42.

[32.] See especially Tocqueville's correspondence with his American friends from 1853-59 in *Tocqueville on America after 1840: Letters and Other Writings*, eds. and trans. Aurelian Craiutu and Jeremy Jennings (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 142-308.

[33.] Tocqueville, *Recollections*, 64. On Tocqueville's method, see Raymond Boudon, "L'exigence de Tocqueville: la «science politique nouvelle»," in *The Tocqueville Review/La Revue Tocqueville*, XXVII: 2 (2006): 13-34.

[34.] Quoted in Nolla, "Editor's Introduction," cxxii.

[35.] This is what Sheldon Gellar calls Tocquevillian analytics, borrowing this term from Vincent Ostrom. See Gellar, "Tocquevillian Analytics" in *Conversations with Tocqueville*, 33-54; also Vincent Ostrom, *The Meaning of Democracy and the Vulnerability of Democracies: A Response to Tocqueville's Challenge* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1997).

[36.] From Tocqueville's letter to Henry Reeve (March 22, 1837) translated 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), 115-16.

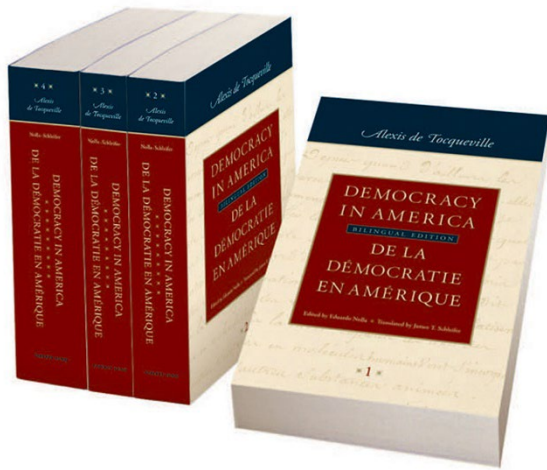
WHAT KIND OF "NEW POLITICAL SCIENCE"?

by Filippo Sabetti

I welcome the opportunity to share with colleagues my reactions to Aurelian Craiutu's thoughtful and thought-provoking paper. Aurelian offers much learning and wisdom in a few pages. I am grateful that he reminds us of why we need to return to Tocqueville and how much we, modern political scientists, can learn from him about the human condition and the prospects of free and responsible individuals in the modern age. It is hard to take issue with what he says about Tocqueville's writings,

and my comments are thus at the margin of Aurelian's stimulating reflections.

Aurelian is correct in reminding us of the important, if often overlooked, speech Tocqueville gave in April 1852 in which he distinguished between the art and science of government. But that does not mean that in Tocqueville's analysis of the two, art and science, each need always to go their separate ways. In fact, Aurelian himself draws attention to this point when he observes, in his discussion of the four major dimensions of Tocqueville's new science of politics, that Tocqueville's originality was in combining empirical and normative analysis -- in effect, combining art and science; for Tocqueville, Aurelian correctly notes, did not write *Democracy in America* and *The Old Regime and the French Revolution* just to contribute to a purely scholarly debate. Tocqueville also wished to promote a new civic spirit, to participate in the education of liberty of democratic citizens and to educate democracy itself.



Aurelian's thought experiment is a good one. My sense is that there are still quite a few places, Indiana University included, where Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, if submitted as a doctoral dissertation, would still be accepted. Sheldon Wolin's and Jon Elster's views are not universally shared. Moreover, the very Liberty Fund bilingual edition of *Democracy in America*, with its extensive selection of early outlines, drafts, manuscript variants, correspondence, and other materials, provides unprecedented insight into the power of observation and

method of inquiry and scholarship Tocqueville displayed in his American voyage, and how much he engaged in a conversation with himself and with others. The notes and marginalia in the Liberty Fund edition of *Democracy* also confirm and reinforce what many careful readers of the work have pointed out -- Tocqueville's conscious effort to be descriptive, analytical, and philosophical all at once. [37]

We know now [38] the impact that Francois Guizot's lectures on civilization had on the formation of Tocqueville's mode of analysis. But, I would add, the notes of Tocqueville's travel to Sicily in 1827 reveal key elements that shaped Tocqueville's formidable apparatus of research [39] that allowed him to launch a political science appropriate to the new world of democracy. For the first time, I think, we see in his notes on Sicily features in Tocqueville's mode of analysis that emerge in full force and are uniquely conveyed in *Democracy in America*: his mental habits, skills of observation and conceptual apparatus, passion for comparison as the heart of clear thought and action in understanding human affairs, and composition of what he has seen and understood with concision and force, as well as a way of sharing with the reader a commentary on his own thoughts and writings. [40] In the notes he based the discussion of human behavior on a given society and not on some abstract conception of human nature, while emphasizing the importance of general ideas for making sense of what he found. Recurring themes in *Democracy* -- the physical conditions, the powerful force of nature, and the fragility of human civilization -- can be first observed in the Sicilian notes. In the essay "A Fortnight in the Wilderness," first written in 1831, Tocqueville recalled visiting the site in Sicily where the city of Imera had been built, noting that "never in our path had we encountered a more magnificent witness to the instability of things human and to the miseries of our nature." [41] Thus his voyage of discovery from Sicily to America was as much the discovery of new realities and relating them to his own country as it was the maturation of a mode of analysis that has given his work enduring quality.

Aurelian draws attention to the comparative dimension of Tocqueville's work. We need to keep in mind that Tocqueville was writing at the time when the nascent social science did not provide much help. In taking hold of the subject matter, he made a skillful use of "[general ideas](#)" [42] to launch "[a new political science](#) ... needed for a world entirely new." [43] This allowed him to do several things: to go beyond the "[apparent disorder](#) prevailing on the surface," to "examine the background of things," [44] and to achieve and communicate understanding of the democratic revolution through the use of paired comparison. To be sure, he was not the first analyst to use that mode of analysis. What made his method of paired comparison exceptional for his, and our, own time was its animating spirit: he combined a passion to understand public affairs with a passion for liberty, and, concurrently, a deep concern that a misguided spirit of equality and republicanism in both American democracy and Western civilization posed a potential threat to individual liberty and self-government.

The framework of analysis that Tocqueville constructed for a new science of politics included multiple dimensions:

1. Large processes (aristocracy versus democracy; long-term developments toward social equality; the democratic revolution and democratic despotism; democracy versus civilization).
2. Country comparisons (America versus France; America versus England; Anglo-America versus New France Quebec and Latin America).
3. Different levels and foci of analysis (federalism versus centralized government and administration; political centralization versus decentralized administration; local liberties in unitary and federal systems; state government in federal systems versus provincial administration in systems of centralized government and administration; prospects for institutional reform and learning in federal versus unitary systems; contrast between American and European republicanism).
4. Micro-level analysis focusing on what motivates individuals to act and what shapes law and ethics, public opinion, including democratic despotism, in different political regimes (showing a fusion of concepts and ideas later dichotomized as republican and liberal discourse involving: human virtues and self-interest; priority of both individualism and collective life; individualism versus egoism; love of country and fraternity; democratic and aristocratic sentiments; sources of pride in self-government; and moderation in religion).
5. The art of association and the accompanying associational topography (permanent associations; political associations; civic associations; and private associations, without losing sight of the question of whether particular kinds of constitutional and institutional arrangements make a difference in promoting or hindering self-government and civic spirit).
6. The most fundamental "pairs in tension" may be the volumes of *Democracy* themselves: the first two volumes (of the Liberty Fund edition) focus on liberty and the institutions of self-government; volumes three and four on the soft despotism that Tocqueville saw as democracy's drift, something that in his own time was already happening in France. Just as the French needed to appreciate how the Americans had developed quite a different system of republican institutions that offered the prospects of maintaining liberty under conditions of social and economic equality; so the Americans could look to France to understand the vulnerability of democracy to the administrative state and soft democratic despotism.

This way of proceeding allowed Tocqueville to dig below the "appearance of disorder, which reigns on the surface" of American society, [45] and contrast the government that administers the affairs of each locality (France) with one where the citizens do it for themselves. In comparing the two systems, he concluded that, "[the collective](#)

[strength](#) of the citizens will always be more powerful for producing social well-being than the authority of the government.” [46] The American case demonstrated how it is possible for self-interest to work for the common good and to address issues of interpersonal relationship or the practice of civic virtues. [47] Whereas freedom and order were understood in Europe to be in conflict with one another, the American experience suggested that they could be put together to work for the common weal. This is a chief lesson that can be taken from *Democracy in America*. He went on to observe that, excepting the United States,

[there is no country in the world](#) where men make as many efforts to create social well-being. I know of no people who have managed to establish schools so numerous and so effective; churches more appropriate to the religious needs of the inhabitants; town roads better maintained. So in the United States, do not look for uniformity and permanence of views, minute attention to details, perfection in administrative procedures. What is found there is the image of strength, a little wild, it is true, but full of power of life, accompanied by accidents, but also by activities and efforts. [48]

The American form of government founded on the principle of sovereignty of the people provided Tocqueville with an approach to politics that led him to question the entrenched view of the European state and to place in sharp relief the importance of federalism. Unlike the Europeans, Americans had successfully found a way to address the issue of power, not by decreasing it but rather by dividing it. And in an often cited passage, Tocqueville forcefully drew out the distinction, with clear comparative and evaluative dimensions:

[What most strikes the European](#) who travels across the United States is the absence of what among us we call government or administration. In America, you see written laws; you see their daily execution; everything is in motion around you, and the motor is nowhere to be seen. The hand that runs the social machine escapes at

every moment. But just as all people, in order to express their thoughts, are obliged to resort to certain grammatical forms that constitute human languages, all societies, in order to continue to exist, are compelled to submit to a certain amount of authority; without it, they fall into anarchy. This authority can be distributed in different ways, but it must always be found somewhere. [49]

But Tocqueville did not stop there. As Aurelian notes, one of the great merits of *Democracy in America* is that it makes us understand how democracy itself changes the human condition not always for the good. Systems of centralized government and administration are not unique to particular European nations. They are very much part of the habits of democracy. Centralization is a universal tendency, “the natural government.” By contrast, “[individual independence and local liberties](#) will ever be the product of arts” [50] that can easily be brushed aside as people become intolerant of differences and acquire a misguided spirit of equality and republicanism. The vulnerability of democracy to forms of democratic despotism is real. This is so, Tocqueville warned, because

[Men who live in democratic centuries](#) do not easily understand the utility of forms: they feel an instinctive contempt for them.... Forms excite their scorn and often their hatred. Since they usually aspire only to easy and present enjoyments, they throw themselves impetuously toward the object of their desires; the least delays lead them to despair. [51]

Tocqueville further explained,

[This disadvantage that men of democracies](#) find in forms is, however, what makes the latter so useful to liberty, their principal merit being to serve as a barrier between the strong and the weak, those who govern and the governed, to slow the first and to give the second the time for them to figure things out. Forms are more necessary as the sovereign power is more active

and more powerful and as individuals become more indolent and more feeble. [52]

The political science that Tocqueville constructed for himself allowed him to anticipate the possibility that egalitarian envy might lead to centralization of authority in the American federal system as well. [53] Hence, he saw the need for the new political science to ask how liberty and institutions of self-government could be maintained to promote a society of free men and women. In his view, the threat to freedom posed by the natural tendencies of democracy toward despotism could be held in check in several ways: through the practice of interest well understood and tempered by religion; recourse to “a science of association” to take advantage of the “utility of forms”; and the design of self-governing institutions so as to maintain freedom under conditions of equality. This way the vulnerability of democracies might be held in check. [54]



Comparativists and methodologists alike remind us that paired comparison has its pitfalls. It does not follow, for example, that the observed variables will cover all the possible causes of particular outcomes. There may be other factors at work missed by the researcher. The fact remains that no method of analysis, no matter how good it may be, points to exactly what the researcher should study, or guarantees that it will be used properly, with both internal and external validity. Against this backdrop, it is no surprise that even some sympathetic readers have drawn attention to facts that possibly Tocqueville overlooked. [55] The criticism seems overdrawn -- when we consider that researchers today have not yet found ways to insure reliability in the practice of empirical

research – and misguided, as noted earlier, when ranged against what Tocqueville wrote in the first version of the drafts and that he did not say everything he had found but only those facts that shed light on his main concern. Indeed, one of the unique features of the bilingual edition of *Democracy* is that it brings to light the truly massive scholarship and care behind the work. Indeed, for this reason, it is hard not to marvel at the manner in which Tocqueville used paired comparison as an analytical leverage to make several discoveries, to emphasize what was distinctive and universal about the political dynamics in the United States, and to gain institutional leverage for predicting differences in intra-systemic behavior.

In fine, I share Aurelian’s analysis. The method of analysis that Tocqueville constructed for a new science of politics allowed him to generate findings about the American Republic that ran radically counter to the Jacobin way of understanding republicanism, and to give a hand to, and go beyond, the growing liberal traditions in France and the rest of Europe of his time. In taking hold of the American political experiment, Tocqueville truly showed a way “to study the future of the world.” [56]

Endnotes

[37.] Roger Boesche, *Tocqueville’s Road Map. Methodology, Liberalism, Revolution and Despotism* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2006), 2-26; Seymour Drescher, *Tocqueville and England* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1964), 26; Joseph Epstein, *Alexis de Tocqueville: Democracy’s Guide* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006), 58; Andre Jardin, *Tocqueville. A Biography* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press 1998), 67.

[38.] Thanks to Aurelian Craiutu, *Liberalism under Siege: The Political Thought of the French Doctrinaires* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2003), 92.

[39.] This point is powerfully brought out by Jeremy Jennings, in his review of the Liberty Fund edition of *Democracy in America*, “Origins of Democracy,” *Times Literary Supplement*, October 8, 2010, 10-11.

[40.] See also Roger Boesche, *The Strange Liberalism of Alexis de Tocqueville* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press,

2006); Seymour Drescher, "Tocqueville's Comparative Perspective," in Susan B. Welch, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Tocqueville* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006) 21-48; Epstein, *Alexis de Tocqueville*, 4, 41; Saguiv A. Hadari, *Theory and Practice: Tocqueville's New Science of Politics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989); James T. Schleifer, "Tocqueville as Historian: Philosophy and Methodology in the *Democracy*," in A. S. Eisenstadt, ed., *Reconsidering Tocqueville's Democracy in America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1988), 121-38.

[41.] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* IV, 1354.

[42.] Ibid., III, 728-29.

[43.] Ibid., I, 16.

[44.] Ibid., I, 152.

[45.] Ibid., I, 152.

[46.] Ibid., I, 153.

[47.] Ibid., III, pt. 2, chaps. 8-9.

[48.] Ibid., I, 156-57.

[49.] Ibid., I, 116.

[50.] Ibid., IV, 1206.

[51.] Ibid., IV, 1270.

[52.] Ibid., IV, 1271.

[53.] Ibid., IV, pt. 4, chaps. 6-7. Modern expressions of this concern can be found, among others, in Vincent Ostrom, *The Meaning of Democracy and the Vulnerability of Democracies: A Response to Tocqueville's Challenge* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1997), and Paul A. Rahe, *Soft Despotism, Democracy's Drift: Montesquieu, Rousseau, Tocqueville and the Modern Prospect* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

[54.] This is also the major concern of Vincent Ostrom's analysis in his *The Meaning of Democracy and the Vulnerability of Democracies*.

[55.] See, among others, Hugh Brogan, *Alexis de Tocqueville* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 277-78; Epstein, *Alexis de Tocqueville*, 44; Françoise

Melonio, *Tocqueville and the French* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1998), 77, 147; Garry Willis, "Did Tocqueville 'Get' America?" *New York Review of Books*, April 19, 2004, 52-56. But cf. Aurelian Craiutu, "What Kind of Social Scientist was Tocqueville?" Department of Political Science, Indiana University, paper 2008; Schleifer, "Tocqueville as Historian: Philosophy and Methodology in the *Democracy*," 158-60; and Alan B. Spitzer, "Tocqueville's Modern Nationalism," *Society for the Study of French History* 2005, 48-66.

[56.] Catherine Zuckert, "The Role of Religion in Preserving American Liberty. Tocqueville's Analysis 150 Years Later." In E. Nolla, ed., *Liberty, Equality, Liberty* (New York: New York University Press, 1992), 21.

AND YET THIS BOOK IS STILL READ

by Jeremy Jennings

Aurelian Craiutu's thoughts on Alexis de Tocqueville's new science of politics end with the intriguing thought experiment of how *Democracy in America* would have been received as a doctoral dissertation in a top research university. How, he invites us to reflect, might a group of today's distinguished political scientists armed with all manner of quantitative techniques and sophisticated methodologies respond to the work of a young and enthusiastic researcher recently returned from a 10-month research trip who manifestly managed to miss the compulsory course on research methods?

This is no idle question, as anyone who has presented a paper on Tocqueville before an audience of political scientists will be aware. I recently had this experience, although I should add that the very able political scientist who quizzed me was strongly of the view that, with a bit of effort, Tocqueville's ideas could be operationalized, and with considerable benefit. This, we agreed, was a project for the future.



Alexis de Tocqueville

However, and as Craiutu observes, Tocqueville would undoubtedly have been found wanting on a number of counts, a lack of conceptual clarity and insufficient empirical evidence being just two of them. Nevertheless, we should perhaps not be too hard on Tocqueville's imaginary examiners if this were the case, as it is well to remember that these very criticisms were made at the time of *Democracy in America's* publication.

For example, when Tocqueville's good friend Jean-Jacques Ampère visited America in the early 1850s, he recorded that Americans were almost universally agreed that, on one thing, Tocqueville had been mistaken: the possibility of a tyranny of the majority was unfounded. The most intriguing of Ampère's encounters, therefore, was with John C. Spencer, author of a preface to the first American edition of *Democracy in America*. According to Spencer, the ever-changing nature of majority opinion ensured that no "lasting tyranny" could be established. Spencer himself attributed Tocqueville's error to the peculiar political circumstances pertaining during his stay: namely, the support of the overwhelming majority for President Andrew Jackson's populist measures, which might have given the impression that the minority was "crushed" and without the power to protect itself, but it was nevertheless an error.^[57] Another of Tocqueville's American acquaintances, Jared Sparks, was more

damning. In a letter to Professor William Smyth, of Cambridge, England, dated October 14, 1841, Sparks wrote that, on the subject of the tyranny of the majority, Tocqueville's

imagination leads him far astray. In practice we perceive no such consequences as he supposes. If the majority were large and always consisted of the same individuals, such a thing might be possible; but with us, as in all free governments, parties are nearly equal, and the elections are so frequent that a man who is in the majority at one time is likely to find himself in the minority a few months afterwards. What inducement has a majority thus constituted to be oppressive? Moreover, M. de Tocqueville often confounds the majority with public opinion, which has the same tendency, or nearly so, in all civilized countries, whatever may be the form of government.... He is apt to theorize. ^[58]

The eminent jurist Joseph Story was even less generous. The "main body of his materials," he wrote to Francis Lieber, had been taken by Tocqueville from the Federalist and Story's own *Commentaries on the Constitution*. You, Story told the German, "know ten times as much as he does of the actual workings of our system and its true theory."^[59] The charge that Tocqueville had been unduly influenced by Federalist opinion in Boston was not one that was to go away.^[60]

The fact of the matter, then, is that, both at the time of its publication and since, there has been a steady stream of criticism claiming that central aspects of Tocqueville's analysis were flawed. The amount of time he spent in America was too brief. He never managed to escape his own aristocratic prejudices. He knew nothing about economics and showed no interest in America's burgeoning commercial economy. Philosophically he was a complete mess and couldn't get religion out of his head. He wasn't really interested in America and only wrote his book because he wanted to make a name for himself.

One wonders how many a doctoral candidate has suffered similar criticism from his or her examiners. How might the young Alexis de Tocqueville have responded?

First of all, he might have replied to his examiners that they had misunderstood what he was trying to achieve. Mine, he would have told them (as he told Gustave de Beaumont), is a “philosophical-political work.”^[61] I fully accept that the development of industry and of new modes of transport will transform America but that is not the most important thing that is going on. As my notes show, the most important thing we can learn from America is something about “[the gradual development of democracy in the Christian world.](#)”^[62] That is why I didn’t visit the town of Lowell, Massachusetts, like every other French political scientist who carries out research in America. Yes, it’s true that I do not know enough about the slave states of the South and that my visit was of too short a duration – a minimum stay of two years would be required to prepare “a complete and accurate picture” of the whole country^[63] – but it is not true that I learned nothing while I was there. I admit that I reached certain conclusions quickly – about the impact of inheritance laws in America, for example – and that I was perhaps too ready to accept the views of certain distinguished academics I met. But while there my research associate and I were “the world’s most merciless questioners.”^[64] We were constantly “striving for the acquisition of useful knowledge”^[65] and turned ourselves into veritable “examining machines.”^[66] I believed that, upon my return, “I might write something passable on the United States” and that, knowing more about America than is generally known in France, I might be able to say something of “great interest.”^[67] The guiding hypothesis was that, beyond a legitimate curiosity in things American, one could “[find lessons there](#) from which we would be able to profit.”^[68]

Like Aurelian Craiutu, I have the distinct feeling that the young Tocqueville would not have satisfied his earnest inquisitors, but we, for our part, might be prepared to concede that Tocqueville displayed a level of methodological self-awareness and sophistication that was unusual for the age and certainly unusual for the subject matter. In the printed text of *Democracy in America* and his notes, Tocqueville acknowledged that both he and his book could be criticized. Anyone, he recognized, determined “[to contrast an isolated fact to](#)

the whole of the facts I cite, a detached idea to the whole of the ideas” could do this with “ease.”^[69] Yet he remained adamant that he had “[never yielded, except unknowingly,](#) to the need to adapt facts to ideas, instead of subjecting ideas to facts.”^[70] To this disclaimer he added a clear statement of his method. “[When a point could be established](#) with the help of written documents,” Tocqueville explained, “I have taken care to turn to original texts and to the most authentic and respected works. I have indicated my sources in notes, and everyone will be able to verify them. When it was a matter of opinions, of political customs, of observations of mores, I sought to consult the most enlightened men. If something happened to be important or doubtful, I was not content with one witness, but decided only on the basis of the body of testimonies.”^[71] To an extent, Tocqueville conceded, this had to be taken on trust, as too it needed not to be forgotten that “[the author who wants to make himself understood](#) is obliged to push each of his ideas to all of their theoretical consequences, and often to the limits of what is false and impractical.”^[72]

Tocqueville therefore, and not without some justification, made a plea for generosity on the part of the reader. “[I would like you,](#)” he remarked, “to grant me the favour of reading me with the same spirit that presided over my work, and would like you to judge this book by the general impression that it leaves, as I myself came to a decision, not due to a particular reason but due to a mass of reasons.”^[73] In his unpublished notes he added the following remark: “[To whoever will do that](#) and then does not agree with me, I am ready to submit. For if I am sure of having sincerely sought the truth, I am far from considering myself as certain to have found it,”^[74] Tocqueville’s modesty in this and (as we have seen) with regard to other elements of his inquiry on America seems frequently to have been overlooked by his critics.

So what would follow from Tocqueville’s hypothetical doctoral defence and his examiners’ decision to allow him to revise and resubmit? My guess is that Tocqueville might have concluded that he got his strategy all wrong

and that it would have been much wiser to have submitted a dissertation devoted to the American penitentiary system. Here, after all, was a subject that would appeal to policy analysts and possibly even to government (especially as it recommended a policy that might save money), where there was plenty of readily available empirical evidence and plenty of people only too pleased to respond to a well-crafted questionnaire and to be interviewed. All it would require would be a few prison visits in America and France and a few months of serious reading. Nicely edited with plenty of notes and appendices -- and such a thesis might even win a prestigious prize!

This of course is exactly what happened to Tocqueville and Beaumont's *Le Système Pénitentiaire aux États-Unis et son application en France*.^[75] Praised for its impartiality and solid documentation, it duly won the Prix Monthyon awarded by the Académie des Sciences morales et politiques. Yet who now reads it?

In contrast, and despite myths to the contrary, *Democracy in America* has always been read and continues to be read. This is not to suggest that the principles of Tocqueville's "new political science" for a "world entirely new" are as clear as they might be, but we read *Democracy in America* precisely because Tocqueville approached his subject with a broad philosophical and creative sweep and never just as a scientific investigator. And it is for this reason that *Democracy in America*, unlike the countless other books on America written by foreign observers in the 19th century, is so much more than a book about America.

Endnotes

^[57.] J-J Ampère, *Promenade en Amérique* (Paris: Michel Lévy, 1856), I, pp.337-41.

^[58.] Quoted in Herbert B. Adams, *Jared Sparks and Alexis de Tocqueville* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1898), p. 606.

^[59.] William W. Story (ed), *Life and Letters of Joseph Story* (Boston: 1851), II, p.330.

^[60.] See Garry Wills, "Did Tocqueville 'Get' America?," *New York Review of Books*, April 29, 2004, pp.52-6.

^[61.] *Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1967) VIII (1), p.176.

^[62.] *Democracy in America* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2010), I, p.4., n.c.

^[63.] *Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: 1998), XIV, p.165.

^[64.] Françoise Mélonio and Laurence Guellec (eds), *Tocqueville : Lettres choisies, Souvenirs* (Paris : Gallimard, 2003), p.183.

^[65.] *Œuvres Complètes*, XIV, p.92.

^[66.] *Œuvres Complètes*, XIV, p.100.

^[67.] *Œuvres Complètes*, XIV, p.165.

^[68.] *Democracy in America*, pp.27-8.

^[69.] *Democracy in America*, p.31.

^[70.] *Democracy in America*, p.30I.

^[71.] *Democracy in America*, p.30.

^[72.] *Democracy in America*, p.31.

^[73.] *Democracy in America*, p.31

^[74.] *Democracy in America*, p.3, n. a

^[75.] See *Œuvres Complètes* (Paris : 1984), IV.

WISDOM, HUMAN NATURE, AND POLITICAL SCIENCE

by Daniel J. Mahoney

Aurelian Craiutu has written an admirably clear and insightful reflection on Tocqueville's "new political science ... for a world entirely new." In the course of his presentation it becomes evident that the great Frenchman's political science is not entirely new and that democracy does not *wholly* transform human nature or the nature of society. Tocqueville thus deliberately overstates when he emphasizes the radical "newness" of

the democratic dispensation that was in the process of transforming the European-Christian world, and that had already reached its “natural limits” in the New World. Tocqueville, too, cannot but help make reference to the sempiternal insights of classical political philosophy and to human nature *sub specie aeternitatis*. Yet his emphasis lies elsewhere.



John Stuart Mill

John Stuart Mill was not wrong when he praised Tocqueville for changing the very face of political philosophy. [76] The author of *Democracy in America* had indeed taken the discussion of the “tendencies of modern society” into “a region of both height and depth” and illumined the great “democratic revolution” like no one before or after him. Tocqueville is the great phenomenologist of modern democracy -- he *describes* it with some fear and trembling but with hope that it can ultimately be made to coexist with the liberty and dignity of human beings. That hope depends on the salutary presence of “political science” in the new democratic world. Craiutu rightly differentiates Tocquevillean political science from every version of “literary politics,” the utopian illusion that one can draw on the “ingenious or new” in contradistinction to the hard realities that persist in any political and social order. Tocquevillean political science is above all a teacher of moderation and possibility -- it teaches restraint to democratic man even

as it reminds him of a “greatness” that is occluded by the march of democratic equality. As Craiutu points out, the tension between human greatness and democratic justice is at the heart of Tocqueville’s “philosophical” reflection, his *normative* political science, and connects his work to the deepest themes of classical political philosophy. Tocqueville, the sincere and thoughtful partisan of democratic justice, is also a partisan of political greatness, a Gaullist *avant la lettre*. Aristocracy is dead as a “social whole,” as a full-fledged human and political possibility, but it lives in the souls of men who love liberty as an end in itself and who hold on to honorable self-regard. The specter of the “last man,” devoid of concern for excellence and preoccupied with what Heidegger called “average everydayness,” haunted Tocqueville no less than Nietzsche. The difference lies in Tocqueville’s refusal to jettison common humanity, political freedom, and a theism that respected the moral law bequeathed by the Christian heritage of the West.

In my view, Craiutu creates too much symmetry between the Left and Right appropriations of Tocqueville. There are no doubt communitarians who draw upon the Tocquevillean critique of “individualism” and his accompanying defense of the “art of association.” But Tocqueville is too critical of individual autonomy, of the pantheistic denial of a transcendent God, and too ambivalent about equality and human leveling for him to be truly admired by the contemporary Left. An initially friendly critic like Sheldon Wolin finally denounced Tocqueville as a reactionary because of his sympathy for aristocracy and his opposition to socialism in all its forms. Tocqueville is indeed a “moderate,” but his moderation fits well within the purview of what we might call “conservative liberalism.” In the end, Tocqueville cannot appeal to those who wish to erode all the extra-democratic supports of our democratic dispensation, who wish to fully “democratize” democracy.

I fully share Aurelian Craiutu’s admiration for Tocqueville’s great speech on political science that he delivered to the French Academy of Moral and Political Sciences in Paris on April 3, 1852. The distinction he makes on that occasion between the “art” and “science”

of government helps us understand that all practical political activity must be attentive to philosophy and history and to those features of enduring human experience that speak to “the general and permanent condition of humanity.” This is the *science* of government as opposed to the *art* of government, which addresses “the difficulties of the day.” The speech also admirably highlights the connections between political science, contemplation of truth, and a regime of political liberty. (Its Appendix could not be read under the semi-despotic conditions of Bonapartist rule.) But I differ from Aurelian in my estimation of how much this speech illuminates the “new science of politics” that Tocqueville spoke about in the “Author’s Preface” to *Democracy in America*. In the 1852 speech, Tocqueville freely draws on the ancient “publicists” such as Plato and Aristotle; in 1835 he seems to suggest that they are more or less irrelevant to the political science necessary for the new democratic world. I would suggest that Tocqueville had gone too far in *Democracy* in emphasizing the new or original character of his political science. As Pierre Manent and Sheldon Wolin have both pointed out, the tensions between justice and greatness and the status of the “political” are central concerns of Western political philosophy dating back to Greek antiquity itself. Perhaps the April 1852 speech on political science is best seen as a self-correction, one that places Tocqueville’s political science into proper dialogue with some of its great predecessors and inspirations.

I think that a better entrance into Tocqueville’s “new political science” lies in the distinction he makes in *Democracy in America* between the “nature” of equality and the “art” of liberty. As Tocqueville writes in Vol. II, Section IV, chapter 3 of *Democracy in America*, the “idea of intermediate powers” does not naturally come to the minds of people in an egalitarian age. Distrusting intermediate powers, democratic man succumbs to the “thought of a unique, uniform, and strong government.” (All quotes from the [Liberty Fund Schleifer translation](#).) Tocqueville is quite insistent: “[Centralization will be the natural government](#)” in a democratic age (my emphasis). In democratic centuries, “individual independence and local liberties will always be a product

of *art*.” (Again, my emphasis.) There is something Sisyphean about this constant effort to keep centralization at bay and to defend individual independence, intermediate institutions, and local liberties against the tendency toward concentration and centralization. This dialectic of nature and art is *the* key to Tocqueville’s new science of politics.

There are many gems in Craiutu’s essay. He rightly emphasizes Tocqueville’s opposition to every form of historical determinism, to the effort to shear history and politics of the human element. No Churchill, no victory in the Battle of Britain. No Hitler, no Holocaust. As the historian John Lukacs has suggested, every sentence in Tocqueville’s chapter on historians in democratic centuries could be turned into a paragraph, and every paragraph into a chapter. The chapter is that discerning. Social scientists may be concerned with “dependent variables,” but they forget that human agency is itself a variable that is not reducible to things outside itself.

Craiutu’s “thought experiment” about Tocqueville’s fate in a modern scientific political science department speaks for itself. The bloodless and soulless advocates of scientism cannot understand “social wholes” or an action that is not determined by something outside itself. They have severed political science from a concern for the soul and the liberty and dignity of human beings. They want absolute precision where reality (such as the nature of democracy) demands a respect for the phenomenon in all its amplitude and variety. We should judge academic political science by the heights and depths to which Mill referred and not by a petty scientism that cannot understand things as they are. If Tocqueville could not be awarded a dissertation for *Democracy in America*, there is something deeply wrong with a profession that in its dominant parts has forgotten *sagesse* (wisdom) in both its theoretical and practical forms.

Endnotes

[76.] John Stuart Mill’s reviews of the two volumes of *Democracy in America* can be found in *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill, Volume XVIII – Essays on Politics and Society Part I*, ed. John M. Robson, Introduction by Alexander Brady (Toronto: University of Toronto Press,

London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977): [Volume 1](#) and [Volume 2](#).

TOCQUEVILLE'S UNMET CHALLENGE

by Filippo Sabetti

Clearly, Tocqueville did not directly discuss what we might call, after James Buchanan, constitutional choice, though chapter 5 in the first volume on the township can be taken as illustrative of this. [\[77\]](#)

Tocqueville posed a challenge to our understanding of democracy, centralized government, and administration. This challenge has yet to be met directly, though Vincent Ostrom sought in his 1997 work, *The Meaning of Democracy and the Vulnerability of Democracies*, to address it. [\[78\]](#) No wonder Vincent's work has not received the attention it deserves. Many in and outside academia want to forget that challenge. The idea of responsible and free individuals is alien to them, as they prefer to emphasize equality or inequality above all else. See how Thomas Picketty's work, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, has been received in North America. [\[79\]](#)

Endnotes

[\[77.\]](#) "Of the Town System in America" in Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Vol. .

[\[78.\]](#) Vincent Ostrom, *The meaning of democracy and the vulnerability of democracies: a response to Tocqueville's challenge* (Ann Arbor : University of Michigan Press, 1997).

[\[79.\]](#) Thomas Picketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Harvard: Belknap Press, 2014).

AN EXCELLENT WORK

by Aurelian Craiutu

I would like to thank the other participants in this forum for their thoughtful and generous responses to my initial essay, which ended with a thought experiment about Tocqueville's presumptive dissertation. I was delighted to see that others found it of interest and shared my fears and doubts. Daniel Mahoney concludes his essay by acknowledging that if Tocqueville could not be awarded a Ph.D. for *Democracy in America* today because of his methodological vagueness and ambiguity, something would be deeply wrong with a profession that in its dominant parts has succumbed to scientism and behaviorism and has forgotten wisdom. I can hardly agree with him more. A fuller discussion on this issue would be in order, and this thought experiment could (and should) be explored in further detail in a special issue of a prominent academic journal (*Perspectives on Politics*, for example).

What the conversation has revealed thus far is that we all share a genuine appreciation for the originality and depth of Tocqueville's multifaceted and comparative analysis of democracy, and his passion for liberty and politics. Filippo Sabetti provides a detailed and useful outline of the main components of Tocqueville's framework of analysis that includes various foci and levels, small and large processes, and fundamental pairs (democracy-aristocracy, freedom-equality, New World-Old World, England-France). We also agree that the renewed interest in Tocqueville has a lot to do with democracy's present triumph across the globe. The democratic revolution about which Tocqueville wrote two centuries ago has spread far beyond the United States and Europe to every corner of the globe. As Sabetti reminds us, Tocqueville wanted to promote a new civic spirit and sought to participate in his countrymen's education in liberty. It would be hard to find two more urgent priorities for many parts of the world today, starting with Russia and Eastern Europe and ending with the Middle East and China.



Charles Louis de Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu

We also agree that, appearances notwithstanding, it is *not* easy to read *Democracy in America* correctly. Tocqueville asks us to judge the book by the “general impression” that it leaves rather than by its explicit arguments, and we must constantly keep in mind the secret chain that links all his reflections. (In this regard, I note an interesting affinity with Montesquieu’s *Spirit of the Laws*.) In a letter to Louis de Kergorlay on December 26, 1836, Tocqueville wrote: “To point out if possible to men what to do to escape tyranny and debasement while becoming democratic. Such is, I think, the general idea by which my book can be summarized and which will appear on every page.”^[80] He deliberately avoided including many figures and statistics in his book because such things change quite rapidly and become obsolete. We are also warned that “the author who wants to make himself understood is obliged to push each of his ideas to all of their theoretical consequences, and often to the limits of what is false and impractical.”^[81] This is likely to surprise many readers and make the reading of the book at times an arduous enterprise.

Arguably the greatest ambiguity concerns the concept of democracy, which is at the heart of Tocqueville’s work. He saw many things in Jacksonian America; some of them he liked, some he disliked or failed to understand properly. He decided, however, to call all of them “democracy” in spite of the diversity of the country and the strong differences about the practical application of the principles of democracy in America (starting with the

vexing issue of slavery). To his credit, Tocqueville himself was not unaware of these problems, as the drafts and notes in the Nolla-Schleifer critical edition clearly demonstrate. As he was finalizing volume one of *Democracy in America*, he pointed out the great difficulty in untangling what is democratic from what is commercial, English, and Puritan in America.^[82]

For all of his star status, Tocqueville was not and should not be treated as a guru or infallible prophet. Moreover, we need to pay heed to his plea for generosity on the part of his readers. As Jeremy Jennings reminds us, several important objections were raised immediately after the publication of Tocqueville’s book. Even a close friend and correspondent such as Edward Everett did not shy away from claiming: “There are several mistakes, as to matters of fact, some of considerable importance; there is occasionally a disposition shown, almost universal among intelligent original thinkers, to construct a theory, and then find the facts to support it.” Nonetheless, Everett added, these were only “slight defects in an excellent work.”^[83] One can hardly agree more with his conclusion.

Endnotes

^[80.] *Democracy in America*, I, 32, note x. All references are to the Liberty Fund critical edition of the book (2010).

^[81.] *Ibid.*, 31.

^[82.] See Jean-Claude Lamberti, *Tocqueville et les deux démocraties* (Paris: PUF, 1983), 26.

^[83.] Edward Everett, review of Tocqueville’s *Democracy of America*, volume one in *The North American Review*, XLIII: 92 (July 1836), 179.

A CONSERVATIVE LIBERAL

by Daniel J. Mahoney

I would like to say a word about Tocqueville's relationship to the liberal tradition. At various times, he described himself as a "strange" and "new kind" of liberal, thus highlighting the fact that he was not a liberal of the conventional sort. As he told his English translator Henry Reeve in a letter dated March 22, 1837, he had one passion alone, "the love of liberty and human dignity." He did not identify that passion with either the aristocratic or democratic dispensation even if he resigned himself to a new democratic age where a kind of "decent mediocrity" might reign. In a private note to himself penned in 1841, he made clear his "hatred" for democratic demagoguery and the "envious passions" and "irreligious tendencies" of the lower classes. He had an "intellectual preference for democratic institutions," but declared himself "an aristocrat by instinct." He passionately loved freedom, legality, and the respect for rights but not democracy. In that same note he made clear that he belonged to neither the revolutionary nor the conservative party even if he shared the ends of conservatives while repudiating both the ends and means of the revolutionary party. Only by adapting oneself to the best of democracy could those conservative ends be safeguarded in a democratic age.

Tocqueville is best seen as a conservative liberal, one who defended liberty "[under God and the law](#)" (to cite *The Old Regime and the Revolution*) and who rejected *avant la lettre* the ideal of humanity emancipated from divine and natural restraints. His was a liberalism with rare spiritual depth. He refused to choose between democratic justice and the grandeur of the human soul. He passionately opposed the collectivist state, but perceived its origins in an abstract individualism that undermined substantial human ties and bonds. He would have no sympathy for what goes by the name of libertarianism today. He believed in the dignity of politics and the imperative of self-government. He held on to few "absolute truths," but believed in God, an immaterial soul, and the moral law. He was a theist and what one might call a Catholic fellow-traveler. A man of

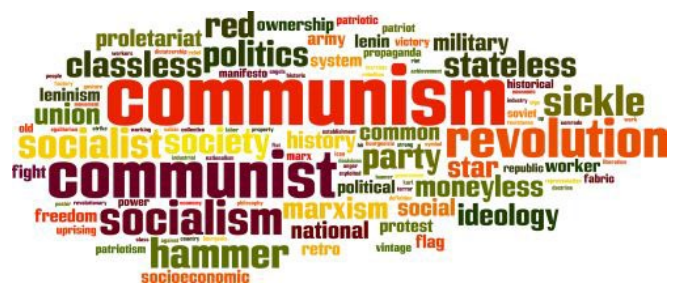
noble character, he believed that "life is neither all pleasure nor all pain; it is a serious responsibility of which we are duty-bound to acquit ourselves as best we can," as he put it in a letter to a friend in 1831. This aristocrat by instinct hated slavery and had nothing but contempt for the racialism of his friend and confidant Arthur de Gobineau. Tocqueville would have despised every form of totalitarianism as well as the softness and relativism that goes by the name of liberalism today. He is an inspiration for every friend of liberty who refuses to identify democracy with bloodless nihilism or petty self-indulgence.

(In this post I have drawn on translations by Roger Boesche, Olivier Zunz, and Alan S. Kahn as well as by Frederick Brown).

WAS TOCQUEVILLE RIGHT ABOUT DECENTRALIZATION?

by Aurelian Craiutu

Upon rereading the three responses, I realized again that when interpreting Tocqueville's writings, it is essential to remember that he lived in an age of *transition* and belonged to a generation whose main mission was to bring the French Revolution to a peaceful end. It was also an age when firm beliefs were dissolved to make way for a universal and relentless questioning of all dogmas, principles, and authorities. In this regard, we may seem to live in a similar age, and this should bring Tocqueville even closer to us.



I would like to also confess that my interest in Tocqueville has never been purely academic. I first read

him while studying in France in the aftermath of the fall of communism in Eastern Europe and have been rereading him ever since in light of that first encounter. More than any other political thinker, Tocqueville seemed to be my contemporary because he asked the very question that preoccupied me at that time as Eastern Europe was making the transition to an open society. (Has it ended, I wonder?) The question was how to bring the revolution(s) of 1989 to a peaceful end by constitutionalizing the liberties gained in that *annus mirabilis* which saw the fall of the Berlin Wall.

If communism challenged the imagination and conceptual resources of academics and politicians alike, the same can be said about postcommunism. The debates over the true meanings of the 1989 revolution, the legacy of communism, and its impact on subsequent transitions to democracy show that political scientists have put forward different theories of democratization that attempted to make sense of the new political and social scene in Eastern Europe (and Russia). In what ways can Tocqueville's new science of politics help us analyze and understand better the new political landscape in that region?

For the sake of debate, I would like to take up an issue that looms large in *Democracy in America*: decentralization. Tocqueville ascribed the vigor of the American democracy to both self-government and administrative decentralization. In *The Old Regime and the Revolution* he presented centralization as one of the most disturbing vices of nondemocratic regimes and suggested that decentralization should be seen as an essential precondition of democratic regimes. How does this square with the post-1989 situation in Eastern Europe?

The aftermath of communism witnessed in the region a swift economic and partial administrative decentralization that led to a paradoxical outcome: the rise of local (and often mafia-like) elites exerting territorial and logistical control in their respective regions. This made possible the appearance of local powerful barons that were extremely deft at appropriating national and European funds, which they channeled more into their private business than into public projects. In

retrospect it is obvious that this decentralization, although good in principle, had perverse consequences and was not the type of thing Tocqueville would have liked or endorsed. This perverse form of decentralization did not contribute to a better form of self-government but to the consolidation of perverse local institutions and entrenched local economic and political elites.

And yet, as a good friend of mine and an expert on the region, Venelin Ganey (Miami University of Ohio), once noted in our private exchanges on this topic, "Democracy did in fact take root, despite the 'bad' decentralization." All this should lead us to conclude that Tocqueville's celebration of decentralization might have gone too far or might be in need of nuances. Is that right?

WHAT KIND OF LIBERAL?

by Filippo Sabetti

It's hard to disagree with Dan Mahoney and Aurelian Craiutu. There is no doubt that Tocqueville spoke of the imperative of self-government as a sort of universal civilization and that his work is indeed an inspiration for every friend of liberty. But what kind of liberal was he? If we confine ourselves to labels, it's hard to say what kind of liberal he truly was. After all, he seemed to have been indifferent or agnostic about the subjugation of people by the French in North Africa and elsewhere. The same applies *mutatis mutandis* to John Stuart Mill and India.

If we read Tocqueville for gems of wisdom here and there, as was my first experience in reading him, then there is not much else to add. I think Tocqueville may be better appreciated if we view his attempt to understand democracy in America as part of a longer tradition of thought. Vincent Ostrom used to start with the *Federalist* and then move to Tocqueville in the first volume of *Democracy in America* for an appreciation of how the system of government created by Americans drew on the creative capacity of people to give themselves institutions for self-rule extending from the local level to the nation as a whole. The second volume

draws attention to the vulnerability of self-governing systems.

But this reading of Tocqueville applies to North America and cannot be extended to South America. I once gave a lecture on self-government and federalism at a Mexican university and was sharply reminded of the history of United States vis-à-vis Mexico and how mistaken or biased was Tocqueville.

So what's left of Tocqueville? I will try to answer this question in my next posting.

BEYOND LABELS

by Aurelian Craiutu

I would next like to take up the question raised by Daniel Mahoney regarding what kind of “liberal” Tocqueville was. Mahoney is justified, I think, in calling him a “conservative liberal,” but one wonders what Tocqueville would have said about that. I have no way of offering a clear answer to this question, but as a second best, I propose that we consider three key passages drawn from different writings of Tocqueville from 1837 to 1841. The first one is a note accidentally found and published for the first time by his biographer, Antoine Redier in 1925; the second is from Tocqueville's notes for *Democracy in America*; the third is from a letter to his English translator, Henry Reeve.

In the first, “My instincts, my opinions” (probably from 1841), Tocqueville described his political beliefs as follows:

I have an instinctual preference for democratic institutions, but I am aristocratic by instinct, that is I despise and fear the crowd. I passionately love freedom, legality, the respect for rights *but not democracy*. This is the base of my soul. I hate demagoguery, the disorderly action of the masses, their violent and uneducated participation in affairs, the lower classes' envious passions, the irreligious tendencies.... I belong neither to the revolutionary party nor the conservative party.

But in the end *I hold more to the latter than to the former*. For I differ from the second more by the means than by the end, while I differ from the former by both means and end. Freedom is the first of my passions. This is what is true.

Here we have the conservative side of Tocqueville, who distrusts the disorderly actions of the masses.

The second fragment seems to tell a slightly different story and was written in 1837-38, as Tocqueville was conceiving volume two of *Democracy in America*.

[You see that my tendencies are always democratic.](#) I am a partisan of democracy without entertaining any illusions about its flaws and without ignoring its dangers. I am an even greater partisan [of democracy] since I believe that I see more clearly than others, because I am profoundly convinced that there is no means of stopping its triumph, and that it is possible to diminish the evils it brings and to produce the good it promises only by working with it and guiding it as much as possible.

Tocqueville argues here not only that democracy could not be stopped, but also that its triumph was both right and beneficial for mankind, if democracy can be properly “moderated” and purified of its anarchical tendencies.

Finally, in a famous letter to Henry Reeve in 1837, Tocqueville presented himself as an impartial observer placed in a perfect equilibrium between past and future, or between aristocracy and democracy. The chance of birth had made him very comfortable defending both the values of aristocracy and democracy. “In a word,” he concluded, “I was so thoroughly in equilibrium between the past and the future that I felt naturally and instinctively attracted toward neither the one nor the other. I did not need to make great efforts to cast calm glances on both sides.”

What then of Tocqueville's “true” convictions? François Furet once described him as “a democrat by intellect but an aristocrat at heart,” while Alan Kahan referred to him as “an aristocratic liberal.” I once described him as an unconventional, eclectic moderate. All these labels are

probably justified, but they may not render full justice to the complexity of Tocqueville's political vision. Yet they all suggest that the greatness of Tocqueville does not lie in any single doctrine that he may have espoused but in the ambivalent and critical ways in which he analyzed the multiple facets of democracy as a new social condition and form of government.

IMPERFECT LABELS

by Daniel J. Mahoney

Filippo Sabetti is certainly right to remind us that Tocqueville was an advocate of civilizing empire and that his support for French colonialism in Algeria is at some tension with his liberalism. On the other hand, there is a growing academic industry that aims to summarily indict Tocqueville for his views on empire rather than making an elementary effort to understand them. As Raymond Aron once put it, "[T]his prince of the mind did not turn his back on either the greatness of the country or the liberty of its citizens." A careful reading of Tocqueville's writings on empire shows that he thought it a worthy pursuit of a free and great people, but that he never justified cruelty or the injustice that was slavery. His beautiful testimony against slavery that appeared in *The Liberty Bell* in 1856 made clear his absolute opposition to "personal servitude" and "man's degradation by man." "An old and sincere friend of America," he lamented that slavery tarnished her glory and gave support to her detractors. He hoped "to see the day when the law will grant equal civil liberty to all the inhabitants of the same empire, as God accords the freedom of the will, without distinction, to the dwellers upon earth." And he had nothing but contempt for his friend Arthur de Gobineau's emphasis on the allegedly scientifically founded "inequality of the races." As he wrote to Gobineau on January 24, 1857, "Christianity manifestly has tended to make all men brothers and sisters." Tocqueville remained faithful to that Christian insight even as he supported France's right to exercise what I have called civilizing empire. These tensions

deserve reflection rather than moralistic disdain of the type put forward by contemporary academics.

On another front, Aurelian Craiutu helpfully reminds us of the myriad ambiguities that make it difficult to label once and for all Tocqueville's "strange kind" of liberalism. Perhaps Pierre Manent provides a helpful clue when he suggests that there was also a tension in Tocqueville's mind between justice and grandeur. We underestimate Tocqueville as a thinker when we fail to see that his judgments of the "head" also had a place for magnanimity or greatness of soul. To be true to democratic justice while still honoring man's capacity for greatness might even be said to be a serviceable definition of the Tocquevillian enterprise. Labels such as "conservative liberal" and "aristocratic liberal" are necessarily imperfect efforts to do justice to that insight.

CAN TOCQUEVILLE ANSWER PIKETTY?

by Filippo Sabetti

I found the most recent comments of Daniel Mahoney and Aurelian Craiutu most interesting. I have been thinking about them as I travel in the areas that Tocqueville travelled in Sicily. I will limit myself to two comments.

First, Tocquevillian analytics. I know that Aurelian tried to promote this form of analytics as a way of making explicit what in Tocqueville is implicit, a particular framework of analysis. But I am afraid I have lost track of the reception of Tocquevillian analytics. Maybe Aurelian can remind us if what he proposed has been applied and met some success.

The second is directed to Dan as well as Aurelian. Glad that reference is made to the work of Pierre Manent for placing in sharp relief the tension in Tocqueville's mind between liberty and equality. I know this is an old theme, and I am away from the sources and cannot do justice to them by memory. This old theme has been given renewed emphasis as Thomas Piketty's *Capitalism in the Twenty-First*

Century is gaining traction in academia -- that is, that wealth has produced and is producing greater and greater inequality and that this state of affairs raises serious questions about the prospects of maintaining a liberal order. What kind of liberty can exist in a social and political order marked by greater and growing inequality? Should we find in Tocqueville a way of addressing Piketty? Just some thoughts.

TOCQUEVILLE AND EQUALITY

by Filippo Sabetti

Aurelian draws attention to a foundational issue: the importance that Tocqueville attached to the equality of conditions. Another way of putting Thomas Piketty's argument forward is to speculate about what happens when taxation and related features promote great wealth for a small segment of the population (Piketty). Equally important, to my mind, is the case of government regulations and welfare policies promoting excessive reliance on government and undermining the capacity of people to become responsible individuals (Charles Murray). Both conditions, if true, can and do promote conditions of life that erode the prospects for equality of conditions for a substantial part of the population. Some people may be permanently poor from generation to generation. This I believe was the point that Charles Murray made about what he called the underclass.^[84] So Piketty is not alone in raising these issues, which makes Tocqueville's point – equality of conditions – an important issue worth considering. And thanks to Aurelian for putting contemporary debate into a historical Tocquevillian perspective.

One more thought came to mind. How about what in Tocqueville's time was called pauperism?^[85] Tocqueville wrote perceptively on this topic after his journey to England. Unfortunately I don't have that paper handy and cannot quote from it. But all this makes me appreciate Tocqueville's reflections and insights even more.

Endnotes

^[84] Murray, Charles A., *The Underclass Revisited* (Washington, D.C.: AEI Press, 1999).

^[85] "I. Memoir on Pauperism (Tocqueville)" in *Tocqueville and Beaumont on Social Reform*. Edited and translated with an Introduction by Seymour Drescher (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1968).

MOBILITY VERSUS INEQUALITY

by Aurelian Craiutu

Over the past years, I have been asking the students in my modern political thought class to write an essay imagining what Tocqueville might have said if he visited America today. This is an enjoyable open-ended assignment that invites them to select a few major concepts from *Democracy in America* and apply them to our contemporary context. This year, somewhat predictably for me, many students focused on the concept of equality of conditions, the *idée mère* of Tocqueville's masterpiece, and questioned to what extent Tocqueville's notion still makes sense in a country divided between the 99 percent and the famous 1 percent. This is a timely question, and I was not surprised to find a similar question in one of Filippo Sabetti's earlier posts: "What kind of liberty can exist in a social and political order marked by greater and growing inequality? Should we find in Tocqueville a way of addressing [Thomas] Piketty?"

I must admit that I am not sure how to answer properly this question since my knowledge of Piketty's work is limited to the reviews I have read lately in several newspapers. I have noticed though that my students tend to have a hard time understanding (and accepting) what Tocqueville meant by equality of conditions, in spite of the clear remarks that can be found at the outset of volume one of *Democracy in America*. For Tocqueville, the existence of equality of conditions was *not* incompatible with the persistence of economic inequalities. (Marx thought differently, of course!) It might be better

described as the defining trait of the new (democratic) social condition, as social mobility, or the absence of caste-like inequalities. Equality of conditions is the opposite of civil inequality, the antithesis of aristocratic or caste-based privileges. It is at the heart of what Tocqueville calls the “[double revolution](#)The noble will have slipped on the social ladder” that had taken place in the social condition of the Old World: “, the commoner will have risen; the one descends, the other ascends. Each half-century brings them closer together, and soon they are going to touch” (*Democracy in America*, I, 10).



Alexis de Tocqueville

Tocqueville was not oblivious to the existence of economic inequalities in America. True, at times he did refer to the “[surprising equality](#)” in fortunes that reigned in early 19th-century America, but he also noticed the potential for the appearance of what he called an “[industrial aristocracy](#)” in America. (He did not have good things to say about it in the chapter he devoted to this concept in volume two.) All in all, he did not believe that the existence of this type of aristocracy would be enough to call into question the future of American democracy as long as social mobility continued to exist in the New World. This led my students to examine social mobility in some detail, and the conclusions they reached were somewhat surprising. They argued, based on reliable studies, that contrary to the common perception, overall social mobility in America has not decreased substantially in the last 50 years in spite of the non-negligible growth of economic inequality. I am aware that some might want

to question this point, but there is evidence to support it, and we should critically discuss it.

LE SENTIMENT DE L'ÉGALITÉ

by Aurelian Craiutu

I would like to add a few remarks on the notion of equality in Tocqueville. As James Schleifer reminded us in the recently published *The Chicago Companion to Tocqueville's Democracy in America* (2012), the concept of equality of conditions is better described as a “package” of many equalities. Among other things, equality of conditions is linked to the concept of the democratic social state (*état social*) in America, a key notion analyzed in the first part of volume one of *Democracy in America*. Democracy, [Tocqueville wrote in a note](#), constitutes the social state while the principle of popular sovereignty refers to the political rule. Equality of conditions also connotes a certain set of mores and egalitarian attitudes and beliefs along with a deep “sentiment of equality” and individual dignity. Democracy is an eminently fluid society in which wealth is no longer fixed forever in the hands of certain families and in which individuals constantly climb and descend on the social ladder; it implies an open form of society in which everyone believes in his or her power to succeed. All people point to a shared form of democratic education and a strong conviction of equality, which are as important as social mobility and the constant circulation of wealth and property in democratic societies.

Why do I insist on all this? Mainly because I think it is important not to lose sight of equality as a package, or, to put it differently, it is important to stress the existence of several different meanings of equality (beyond economic equality). It can be argued that in spite of the rise of economic inequalities in contemporary America, the culture and mores of society remain egalitarian. Our lifestyles are still egalitarian, as are our ideas, norms, and conventions. The psychological dimension of equality, that is, the unshakable conviction in the worth of equality,

is a principle as widely accepted as the doctrine of popular sovereignty. Tocqueville seems to have been quite prescient in insisting on the importance of what he called *le sentiment de l'égalité*. The real danger, I would add, is when the latter is being eroded and people no longer endorse it. Fortunately, we probably are far from that point even if we live in an age of increasing economic inequality.

MOBILITY COUNTS

by Daniel J. Mahoney

Aurelian Craiutu has nicely highlighted the rich and capacious Tocquevillian notion of the “equality of conditions” and how it is compatible with economic inequality in a society that nonetheless remains democratic and mobile. Our sentiments and mores remain broadly democratic, perhaps excessively so. I would simply like to add a qualification inspired by the work of Thomas Sowell. In works such as *Intellectuals and Society* (2009)^[86] Sowell has shown that debates about income distribution in the United States have been distorted by a preoccupation with statistical categories. We are repeatedly told that the rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer. The problem with these affirmations is that people move with some frequency from category to category over time. Only 25 percent of the “super rich” in 1996 were still “super rich” in 2005. Over half of those making at or near the minimum wage are between the ages of 16 and 24. The age category continues indefinitely even as people advance to higher statistical categories as a result of work and experience. Intellectuals tend to identify inequalities with “inequities” where no injustice exists. The conclusion is clear: America allows a great deal of economic mobility even as income inequalities persist and in some cases deepen.

Endnotes

[86.] Thomas Sowell, *Intellectuals and Society* (New York: Basic Books, 2009).

TOCQUEVILLE'S BALANCING ACT

by Jeremy Jennings

Let me return to Aurelian Craiutu's reflections on Tocqueville's new science of politics and Dan Mahoney's comment that perhaps Tocqueville's science of politics is not as new as we might at first imagine.

There are three obvious ways in which Tocqueville followed the conventions of his day. First, he agrees that something, if not everything, can be learned from the physical location and form of a country. Note that the first chapter of *Democracy in America* is devoted to an examination of “the external configuration” of the United States. Second, although he does not make much of this in his published text, Tocqueville assumes, like Montesquieu and others, that climate has an impact upon the behavior of a people and therefore upon its politics. Third, he believes quite strongly that the national character of a people has an important bearing upon its political institutions and practices. Here Tocqueville specifically accepts the then widely held view that, in terms of language and heritage, Americans possessed no distinct national identity: hence his frequent reference to Anglo-Americans.

Perhaps more importantly, Tocqueville assumed that it was politics and political institutions, and not economics, which acted as the principal drivers of the development of a society. To state the obvious: as political scientists we now tend to assume that it is the other way around. It is this primacy accorded to politics that in part explains the frequent criticism directed at Tocqueville of late that he failed to take adequate notice of the economic and technological innovations that were so transforming America in the early decades of the 19th century.

It can also be argued that Tocqueville shared what was the prevailing assumption that, if the tide of democracy could not be turned back, democracy was also potentially dangerous and needed to be kept in bounds. On this view, Tocqueville simply repeated the Federalist line of argument he had been fed by those he met in Boston

upon first arrival in the United States. To this we might add that it can likewise be argued that Tocqueville said little about the functioning of democracy in America that was not already common knowledge.



Basil Hall

As an example of the above, we might cite Basil Hall's *Travels in North America in the Years 1827 and 1828* – the second of the two books taken by Tocqueville when he set sail from Le Havre in 1831.^[87] The practical operation of democracy, Hall wrote, “neither brings the most qualified men into power, nor retains them long” because “the actual, practical, efficient government of the country has got into the hands of the population at large.” “The voice of the multitude,” he observed, “regulates everything.” The effects of this “torrent” of democracy extended across both public and private life. They lowered “the standard of intellectual attainment” and diminished “the demand for refinement.” Consequently “great men” – be they politicians, scientists, or writers – were in short supply. The abolition of primogeniture meant that, if Americans were good at making money, they lacked “the art of spending it like a gentleman.” American judges disregarded “the collective wisdom of ages” in preference for “what appears right and proper at the moment.” Everybody in America, Hall observed, was “on the move.”

Nevertheless, it is Tocqueville we still read and not Basil Hall, nor many other visitors to America in this period. Why? Well, it might not be because Tocqueville set forth a new science of politics.

This in turn invites us, as Dan Mahoney suggests, to reflect upon what kind of liberal Tocqueville was. Conventionally, liberals of a European stamp are divided up into Kantians, utilitarians, and advocates of versions of Lockean natural-rights theory. None of these adequately describes the position taken by Tocqueville. Mahoney suggests that Tocqueville is best seen as a liberal conservative, and this rings true, but might it be better simply to see Tocqueville as a conservative? Admittedly this is hard to contemplate in a French context, where conservatism might conjure up names such as Maistre and Bonald, but from a British 19th-century perspective this would make perfect sense. For all the fact that Tocqueville thought that Edmund Burke misread the French revolution, there is undoubtedly something of the Burkean about him. For Tocqueville's admiration of associative life in America read Burke's famous evocation of [the little platoons](#); and so on. No one can deny that Burke, like Tocqueville, was a defender of individual liberty, but each feared the actions of the impulsive masses and each, to quote Mahoney on Tocqueville, rejected “the ideal of humanity emancipated from divine and natural restraints.” Jennifer Pitts has pointed out the similarity of their views on Empire. Both saw its potential benefits for the colonized, but both were equally adamant in their condemnation of its abuses.

Of course, and as we agree, labels are at best imperfect, but here they do perhaps highlight another problem that faces admirers of Tocqueville. It is hard not to empathize with Aurelian Craiutu's account of his own reading of Tocqueville in the aftermath of the fall of communism in eastern and central Europe. Many of us, I am sure, have been moved by the autobiographical accounts we have heard from colleagues condemned to decades of sterile Marxism-Leninism and their sense of personal liberation when they were at last able to read and talk freely of the works of Aron, Popper, Hayek, and, of course, Tocqueville. Yet, if we are honest – and as Craiutu

acknowledges – the outcomes were not always as promising or as positive as originally hoped. Can Tocqueville still act as a guide in these postcommunist societies? Craiutu thinks that they can, but his is far from being a resounding endorsement!

Filippo Sabetti next asks if, in the light of the recent praise for Thomas Piketty’s international bestseller, *Tocqueville* can have much purchase in a world where western societies are increasingly characterised by growing inequality. Here, for the sake of argument, let us grant that Piketty is right in his claim that under the normal conditions of capitalism the rate of return on capital will tend to be larger than the rate of growth and therefore the rich will continue to become relatively richer.^[88] It was only the unusual circumstances created by the global conflicts of the 20th century, Piketty contends, that temporarily masked this tendency. Tocqueville, contrary to what is sometimes argued, was far from economically illiterate, but he, unlike Karl Marx, seems to have started from the assumption that inequality would decrease with the development of commercial society. Adam Smith shared this assumption. Yet, in the second volume of *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville identifies an emerging “[manufacturing aristocracy one of the harshest that has appeared on the earth](#),” and clearly saw that the profits generated by their large industrial enterprises ran counter to what he took to be the democratic and egalitarian direction of society as a whole. At this point he escapes the difficulties this might pose for his account by suggesting that such enterprises were “an exception, a monster, in the entirety of the social state.” Nonetheless, in describing this new aristocracy as “” he perceived that its existence might generate renewed class struggle.

This fear was only confirmed with the passage of time. In a letter written to Theodore Sedgwick in October 1856, Tocqueville spoke of a “race of desperate gamblers” brought forth by American prosperity that combined “the passions and the instincts of the savage with the tastes, needs, vigour and vices of civilized men.” Who can say, he continued, “where this might lead if they ever gain the upper hand.” As Aurelian Craiutu and I commented in our introduction to *Tocqueville on America 1840*,

“[I]mplicit in this passage is the idea that the market was difficult to control once free reign was given to individual ambitions and interests.”^[89]

In truth, we did not need Thomas Piketty to tell us what the dangers were. It has long been recognized that free-market economic policies run the risk of destroying the cultural resources of social solidarity and association that occupy such a central place in Tocqueville’s hopes for the maintenance of a democratic polity. The unequal distribution of wealth, in other words, destroys the social glue that holds society together and that allows it to function. In such a society there can be no talk of the common good and of social justice and little, if any, benefit accrues to the worst off.

How could Tocqueville respond? Tocqueville, it might be argued, faced the dilemma of having to reconcile the claims of liberty and individualism and those of stability and a sense of community. But if we take Tocqueville to be a liberal, he is forced to prioritize the former over the latter. Accordingly he has little by way of intellectual armory to respond to the free-floating, self-realizing individual so dear to modern liberal philosophy, or to the utility maximizer of market economics. The Tocquevillian balancing act collapses.

There is much that might be added to this by way of commentary on the fit, if any, between Tocqueville’s ideas and the structure and dynamics of actually existing society, but here it might be sufficient to say that what I have characterized as Tocqueville’s dilemma is one that those of us who continue to admire his work also share and need, with increasing urgency, to resolve. If not, we might all find ourselves paying “Piketty taxes”!

Endnotes

^[87.] Basil Hall, *Travels in North America in the Years 1827 and 1828* (Cadell: Edinburgh, 1829), 3 volumes.

^[88.] The *Financial Times* has challenged these statistical findings.

^[89.] *Tocqueville on America after 1840: Letters and Other Writings*, eds. and trans. Aurelian Craiutu and Jeremy

Jennings (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p.30.

TOCQUEVILLE HIMSELF ON AMERICAN EQUALITY

by Aurelian Craiutu

It is fitting, I think, to give the last word to Tocqueville. Since we discussed several meanings of equality, here is an insightful (and lesser-known) long passage from his voyage notes in which he compares equality in America and France (all quotes are from Alexis de Tocqueville, *Journey to America*, ed. J.P. Mayer, trans. George Lawrence, Yale University Press, 1962, pp. 258-60)[\[90\]](#)

He begins by highlighting the advantage of America as follows:

The relationship between the different social positions in America is rather difficult to understand, and foreigners make one or the other of these two mistakes: either they suppose that in the United States there is no distinction between man and man except that of personal merit, or else, struck by the high standing accorded to wealth here, they come to think that in several of our European monarchies, in France for instance, we enjoy a more real and more complete equality than that of the American republics. I hold, as I said above, that both of these ways of seeing the matter are exaggerated. First, let us get the ground clear: equality before the law is not at the moment in question, for that is complete in America; it is not only a right, but a fact. One might even say that for whatever inequality exists elsewhere, the world of politics makes ample compensation in favour of the middle and lower classes, who, with the inheritors of historical names, hold almost all the elected offices. I am talking of equality in the exchanges of social life: the equality which draws certain individuals to come

together in the same places, to share their views and their pleasures, and to join their families in marriage. It is in that that one must make distinctions between France and America. The differences turn out to be essential. In France, whatever one says, prejudices of birth still hold very great sway. Birth still puts an almost insurmountable barrier between men. In France, the profession a man exercises still to a certain extent places him socially. These prejudices are the most fatal of all to equality, because they make permanent and almost indelible distinctions, even when wealth and time are against them. Such prejudices do not exist at all in America. Birth is a distinction, but it does not in the least place a man socially; it carries with it no right and no disability, no obligation towards the world or towards oneself; class structure by professions is also almost unknown; it certainly does make a definite difference to the position of individuals, a difference of wealth rather than of standing, but it does not create any radical inequality, for it by no means prevents the intermarriage of families (that is the great touchstone).

After pointing out the advantage of America over France, Tocqueville goes on to explain what makes America different:

This is the difference for the worse: The first of all social distinctions in America is money. Money makes a real privileged class in society, which keeps itself apart and rudely makes the rest conscious of its preeminence. This preeminence of wealth in society has less fatal consequences for equality than those which spring from prejudices of birth and profession. It is not at all permanent; it is within the reach of all. It is not radical, but it is perhaps even more offensive still; it is paraded in America much more impudently than with us.

And here is Tocqueville's conclusion:

To summarize then, men in America, as with us, are ranked according to certain categories by the give and take of social life; common habits, education, and especially wealth establish these classifications; but these rules are neither absolute, nor inflexible, nor permanent. They establish passing distinctions and by no means form classes properly so called; they give no superiority, even in thought, to one man over another. So that although two men may never see each other in the same drawing-rooms, if they meet outside, they meet without pride on one side or envy on the other. At bottom, they feel themselves to be, and they are, equal.

Who can say all this better and more elegantly than our beloved Tocqueville?

Endnotes

[90.] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Journey to America*, ed. J.P. Mayer, trans. George Lawrence, Yale University Press, 1962, pp. 258-60.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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& Littlefield/Lexington Books, 2003), won a 2004 CHOICE Outstanding Academic Title Award. It was also translated into French in a revised and enlarged edition as *Le centre introuvable: la pensée politique des doctrinaires sous la Restauration* (Plon, 2006). His most recent book is *A Virtue for Courageous Minds: Moderation in French Political Thought, 1748-1830* (Princeton University Press, 2012). Dr. Craiutu also published two books in Romanian, *In Praise of Liberty: Essays in Political Philosophy* (1998), and *In Praise of Moderation* (2006), both with Polirom Publishing House. He has also edited five books: François Guizot, *History of the Origins of Representative Government in Europe* (Liberty Fund, 2002); Germaine de Staël, *Considerations on the Principal Events of the French Revolution* (Liberty Fund, 2008); *America through European Eyes* (co-edited with Jeffrey C. Isaac, Penn State University Press, 2009); *Conversations with Tocqueville* (co-edited with Sheldon Gellar, Lexington Books, Rowman & Littlefield, 2009); and *Tocqueville on America after 1840: Letters and Other Writings* (with Jeremy Jennings, Cambridge University Press, 2009).

Jeremy R. Jennings is Professor of Political Theory at King's College London. Having received his doctorate from the University of Oxford, Jeremy taught at the University of Swansea (1979-1995), the University of Birmingham (1995-2005), and Queen Mary University of London (2005-2013). He served as Head of Department in Birmingham and at Queen Mary, was Vincent Wright Professor at the Fondation Nationale des Sciences Politiques in Paris in 2006 and was also a visiting fellow at the University of Columbia Research Centre in Paris. Jeremy holds a visiting professorship with the Fondation Nationale des Sciences Politiques. Jeremy's research focuses upon the history of political thought in France. In 2011 he published *Revolution and the Republic: A History of Political Thought in France since the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford University Press). This book won the Franco-British Society's Enid McLeod book prize. He has also co-edited *Tocqueville on America after 1840* (Cambridge University Press) and edited Destutt de Tracy's *A Treatise on Political Economy* (Liberty Fund). He is currently working on a book entitled *Travels with Tocqueville*. He writes regularly for the monthly magazine *Standpoint* (for

which he also sits on the executive board). A larger, long-term project is to write a history of the concept of liberty.

Daniel J. Mahoney holds the Augustine Chair in Distinguished Scholarship at Assumption College in Worcester, MA. The author or editor of a dozen books, he has written extensively on Tocqueville and French political thought. He is also widely recognized as an authority on Raymond Aron and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. His articles and reviews have appeared in *National Interest*, *The Public Interest*, *First Things*, *New Criterion*, *Commentaire*, *The Claremont Review of Books*, *National Review*, *Perspectives on Political Science*, *The Wall Street Journal* and many other journals.

[Filippo Sabetti](#) is a professor in the Department of Political Science at McGill University and a senior research fellow at the Vincent and Elinor Ostrom Workshop in Political Theory and Policy Analysis, Indiana University. He works on a range of issues across the subfields of Canadian politics, comparative politics and political theory aiming to uncover the mechanisms that enable social cooperation to emerge among individuals and to show why centralization need not be an inevitable tendency of democracy. His most recent study, *Civilization and Self-Government: The Political Thought of Carlo Cattaneo* (2010), reveals why the 19th-century pioneering analysis of Carlo Cattaneo merits a place, alongside John Stuart Mill and Alexis de Tocqueville, in the continuing debate about the meaning of civilization, liberty, and self-government. Thanks to a three-year research grant from the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada, Sabetti is now extending that inquiry to the mechanisms of self-governance, organizational innovation, and wealth creation of the past to improve the future.

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