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Sheldon S. Wolin: Tocqueville between Two Worlds

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INTRODUCTION

ALEXIS DE TOCQUEVILLE has become a fixture in contemporary American political discourse, both within the academy and outside. Arguably there have been only two classics of American political theory, *The Federalist Papers* and *Democracy in America*. It is safe to say that today Tocqueville's masterpiece is invoked more often in support of some interpretation of present-day American politics than is the *Federalist*, even though the latter is commonly represented as the thinking of the Founding Fathers. While the *Federalist* is typically cited to shed light from the past on the present, as in current appeals to the "intentions of the Framers," *Democracy in America* is summoned not only to interpret the past and present but to augur the future.

Accordingly, I have tried to present a Tocqueville who is not so firmly in the French intellectual and political context of his times as to be irrelevant to ours.¹ Scarcely a week passes without some quotation from *Democracy in America* appearing in the popular media or in literary reviews. Although John Rawls may provide the common reference point for academic philosophers and Michel Foucault for postmodern literary theorists, Tocqueville may well be the more substantial presence in the public philosophy current in the media and in the rhetoric of politicians. To reflect on present-day American politics invites reflection on *Democracy in America* and vice versa.

Unlike Karl Marx, Tocqueville serves as a unifying rather than a divisive symbol, his magistral status owing much to the consensual function he has been made to perform. Interpreters have created a certain Tocqueville, one who slips easily into the main dialogue of American politics between self-designated liberals and conservatives, with each camp claiming him as its own. To the one he is a "liberal conservative" who values freedom as well as property rights; to the other he is a "conservative liberal" who is alert to the dangers of "too much democracy" and who commiserates with the burdens borne by political elites, not the least of which is the periodic invasion of the political realm by the masses.² Both sides assume that *Democracy in America* equals Tocqueville's "theory"; that a book about America is synonymous with a book about the United States; and that whatever Tocqueville ascribed to democracy applied to the United States. Each of these assumptions is, as later pages show, either wrong or in need of significant qualification.

Throughout this volume I have tried to keep three principal concerns in mind: first, to present a conception of what Tocqueville understood by political theory, how he experienced and practiced it, and how he tried to

combine the theoretical life with the career of a politician;³ second, to examine his conception of democracy as both a political and a theoretical project; and, third, to show that Tocqueville's writings and actions were preoccupied with the emergence of what would later be called the politics of modernity. I have projected his treatment of these concerns "backward" by relating them to his theoretical predecessors, particularly to Montesquieu, Rousseau, the *Federalist*, and Burke; and I have compared his ideas with those of certain of his contemporaries, like Marx and Saint-Simon. In chapters 1 and 2 I have tried to place these concerns in a historical context in order to emphasize the theoretical and practical challenges posed by the virtually simultaneous emergence of modern democracy and what I have called "modern power." They are, I believe, the indispensable context for an appreciation both of Tocqueville's achievement and of its failures.

The diverse character of Tocqueville's numerous writings, many of them unpublished during his lifetime, poses formidable questions about which of these, or all of them together, represents "Tocqueville's theory." Is "the theory of *Democracy in America*" to be considered the same as "Tocqueville's theory"? Such questions may seem Alexandrian, yet they point to the difficulties in applying the same notion of theory to all of his major works, each of which on its face is strikingly different from the others. Recent commentators have argued that the differences between the first and second installments of *Democracy* are so marked that it should properly be read as two distinct volumes. Even if one were able to resolve satisfactorily questions about the intellectual unity of *Democracy*, a more complicated problem concerns the theoretical and political character of Tocqueville's two late masterpieces, neither of which is ordinarily treated as a theoretical work and only one of which is considered to be "political" in intention. *Souvenirs*, a work that Tocqueville withheld from publication during his lifetime, is commonly classified as part autobiography, part memoir of the revolution of 1848. *The Old Regime and the Revolution* is widely esteemed as a classic of historical writing and often reputed to be the work of a detached man who, having been forced to retire from politics, discovered the scholarly rewards of archival research.⁴ Its reputation has made it forbidden territory to the political theorist. Although there are subtle, even deliberate continuities between *Democracy* and *The Old Regime*, there are significant differences in their theoretical character and subtler ones in their politics. Each of Tocqueville's principal works represents a distinct moment in his public life and in the life of his country. This is not to represent what follows as a political biography or a study in "the life and times of Tocqueville." It can best be understood as a certain kind of biography: of political and theoretical choices made over time. Tocqueville's theory can be

considered as the complex of those decisions extending not only over time but, peculiarly, over space as well.

In trying to conceptualize these differences we might note that “theorist” derives from the Greek *theoros*, which was the name for an emissary who traveled on behalf of his city to other cities or societies. A *theoria*, from which “theory” was derived, meant “journey.”⁵ Traveling is, of course, an encounter with differences. We might think of Tocqueville as a traveler in time whose *theoria* consisted of what he saw or experienced in his different journeys.⁶ His journey to America convinced him that he had witnessed the future of Western societies. The personal recollections that formed the *Souvenirs* might be interpreted as an interiorized journey into the present of 1848. *The Old Regime* was a journey into the past, which, as it came closer to the present, was broken off. In the nature of things the same person’s journeys to different places or times are never identical. They are never one *theoria* because a journey into difference brings surprises. And yet, when recollected in tranquillity, it is unlikely that they will be presented as wholly discontinuous. In Tocqueville’s numerous introspective moments, continuities are insisted upon, even struggled for. Although he was acutely aware of living in an era of discontinuity, his *theoria* would maintain that in France one archetypal disruption, the revolution of 1789, was being replayed in the several revolutions over the next half century: disruption was the continuity. Although he would maintain that, over the years, the *theoros* had not changed,⁷ his self-perception was of someone who was “incomplete,” “incoherent,” and whose “several parts were badly joined.”⁸

THE abiding concern of Tocqueville’s thinking, the referent point by which he tried to define his life as well as the task before his generation, was the revival of the political: in his phrase, *la chose publique*. The elevation of the political and the making of a public self were conscious gestures of opposition to the privatizing tendencies for which he, as much as any writer of his time, provided the authoritative critique. Tocqueville is commonly credited with having coined the expression “individualism” and, along with its companion term “privatization,” having made them denotative marks of modernity.

Tocqueville might be the last influential theorist who can be said to have truly cared about political life. Few of his contemporaries did. Marx thought of politics as a form of combat. As for John Stuart Mill, he leaves the uncomfortable impression of a philosopher holding his nose as he writes about politics and attempts to remove its stench by having it submit to the deodorizing influence of experts. Neither Marx nor Mill could have composed the lament compressed in a note among Tocqueville’s papers, “Absence d’un véritable

parti conservateur de la vie politique . . .”⁹—roughly: the lack of a genuine conservative party in political life.

Tocqueville’s notion of the political was not obscure so much as it was split between the heroic and the mundane: the one exalted the political as noble deeds, actions that were at once individual and altruistic, self-publicizing and public-spirited; the other was formed from his experience with the small-scale politics of American townships. The latter politics, confined to the daily concerns of ordinary citizens—roads, schools, taxes—was better described as participation than as action. Participation from *pars + capio*, taking a share rather than activating. The motives at work in participatory politics appeared unheroic and parochial. When judged against the heroic standard, the stakes were hardly such as to stir a sulking Achilles. The question raised by small-scale, participatory politics was not whether it was possible but whether it was interestingly political.

Tocqueville claimed to have witnessed a vibrant political life in America and he devoted his energies, both as a writer and as a politician, to nurturing *la politique*, the political, in France. The vehicle he chose for realizing the political—and I would emphasize that his choice was a halting one—was “liberalism.” Yet it would be inaccurate to portray Tocqueville’s political thought as though it were characteristic and emblematic of liberal thinking in general, even if it is assumed that the many varieties of liberalism could be reduced to some common denominators.¹⁰ In the course of his parliamentary career French politics first lapsed into reaction, then into despotism. The issue that Tocqueville was driven to pose was whether liberalism was inherently flawed. It could not be *le véritable parti conservateur de la vie politique* because its conception of *political* liberty was too weak to resist the corruption encouraged when the content of freedom was defined by liberal economic values. There are, to be sure, very important points of contact between the evolution (in the neutral sense of that word) of his thinking and what is understood as liberalism but the same could be said of conservative elements. The complexity of his thinking had mostly to do with the difficult problems he engaged. Revolution and its aftermath, administrative centralization, the emergence of democratic politics, new forms of despotism, and increasingly self-conscious class conflicts did not readily admit to distinctively liberal or conservative solutions.

As an aristocrat he had to come to terms with a world that had once been interpretable in stability-charged and hierarchical terms. Now it was disappearing so rapidly that only traces remained. Caught between change and loss—loss of faith, of social status, and aristocratic privilege—Tocqueville was forced to deal with a world being shaped by those who, literally, were making a business of change and bore the responsibility for having destroyed much

that he cared about. He would not only try to fathom the meaning of the diverse phenomena that would go by the name of modernity but he would also reflect on what had gone from, or was going out of, the world he knew and valued. I refer to this pronounced strain of antimodernism as *ancienneté*. It colors virtually all of Tocqueville's thinking, disposing him to dwell on contrasts between the Old and the New World, between past and present, between privilege and equality. If Tocqueville's theoretical formation begins with modernity in the form of American democracy, it culminates in *The Old Regime*, the fullest exposition of the idea of *ancienneté*. Tocquevillean theory had its own dialectic, burdened with dispossession and haltingly searching for the means of retrieval.

The English political economist Nassau Senior, who maintained a continuing correspondence and personal contacts with Tocqueville over the years, remarked on his friend's "talents for exploring the connection between thought and action."¹¹ Tocqueville is among the very few writers of major stature in the history of political theory—Machiavelli was another and in their contrasting ways so were Burke, Marx, and Mill—who could claim a relatively long political career. "The connection between thought and action," preoccupied or, rather, agonized Tocqueville throughout his entire life, not in the abstract but as *the* question of how he ought to spend his life. His private writings are virtually consumed by public themes and he constantly worries about how to act on his convictions. At the same time, he is committed to theorizing politically, not with an eye to satisfying professional conceptions of disinterested inquiry but from a commitment to a life of politics.

This study of the formation of a theorist, his theories, and his political engagements is possible because of the rich sources now available. One can follow Tocqueville through his creative travails and observe the gradual emergence of form, structure, and content, as well as theoretical consciousness itself. One observes someone self-consciously constructing himself into a political man while being constructed and limited by historical legacies whose disappearance he devoted his life to explaining. We can witness a theory and a theorist in the making thanks to the preservation of the diaries and notebooks in which Tocqueville recorded his observations, interviews, and reflections regarding his American journey; to the numerous letters that he wrote from America and, later, during the composition of *Democracy in America*; and to the preliminary drafts of that work. Any student of Tocqueville is indebted most of all to the careful and affectionate labors of a long line of scholars, from the pioneering researches of George Pierson, the editorial labors of J.-P. Mayer and his successors, and the more recent contributions of Seymour Drescher, James Schleifer, André Jardin, and François Furet. We are also able to gauge the extent to which the theory matched the intentions of its author;

whether there was slippage, loss of control, and unanticipated, even unwelcome, truths revealed; whether political aspirations and exigencies skewed theoretical vision, or whether the actor was undone by the theorist.

I hope to show that Tocqueville was a far more inventive theoretical mind than he is usually given credit for. His constructions are more complex than the easy accessibility of his writings suggests—or that his numerous contradictions deny. Beyond that, what, if any, are the connections between Tocqueville's pastness and our present?

This book makes two claims. The first is that *Democracy in America* represents the moment when democracy first came into focus as the central subject of a political theory. John Stuart Mill was right when he hailed *Democracy* as "the first philosophical book ever written on Democracy, as it manifests itself in modern society." Mill identified Tocqueville's crucial contribution by the phrase "as it manifests itself in society." Early modern political theorists, such as Machiavelli, Bodin, Hobbes, and Locke—none of whom were democrats or had ever observed an actual democracy—imagined democracy as a simple political structure or constitution dominated by the "common people." Thanks partly to Montesquieu's influence, Tocqueville succeeded in restoring the connective relationships between a distinctive type of politics and the social relations and cultural values and practices that transmitted definition and character to politics. Politics was not simply the "expression" of societal beliefs and practices but was as much constitutive of society as it was reflective of it. As a result of this comprehensive, interactive way of thinking, democracy presented a serious political problem precisely because it was a political conception in which the idea of a "whole" corresponded to the reality of an increasingly inclusive society. Previous societies were alleged by theorists to be "wholes" yet theorists also insisted that political rule was rightfully exercised by a select part, a monarch, an aristocracy, or a priesthood. The serious question of democracy was whether the political demands that it placed upon the Many, upon "those who work" (Aristotle), made its workability uncertain. Hence instead of presenting a simple question of its form(s), democracy might be a question of the political commitments of the Many.

My second claim is that Tocqueville's theory represents an important early engagement between liberalism and democracy. The eighteenth-century revolutions in America and France had been widely represented as the triumph of liberalism over monarchy and aristocracy. Tocqueville's encounter with American democracy turned an aristocrat into a liberal, albeit, as Roger Boesche has argued, of a strange sort. Tocqueville's self-description as "a new kind of liberal" reflected his strong conviction that freedom or liberty was the fundamental political value and an even stronger fear that the greatest threat to freedom was from a combination of political democracy and so-

cial equality.¹² Nineteenth- and twentieth-century liberals have responded warmly to Tocqueville's criticisms of egalitarian democracy, in both its political and social forms, and to his warnings about "the tyranny of the majority." That reading of Tocqueville boasts a distinguished genealogy: the political philosopher most responsible for making antidemocracy a staple of liberal theory was John Stuart Mill, the scion of English utilitarianism. Mill wrote one of the early tributes to *Democracy in America* and, more important, incorporated Tocqueville's critique of majority rule and egalitarianism into *On Liberty*, perhaps the most influential essay in modern liberal theory. Mill also drew from Tocqueville the idea that liberals ought to rethink the idea of aristocracy, thereby making explicit the elitist element that early modern liberals had disguised (tho' thinly) as "republican virtue." Elitism provided the conduit by which liberalism transmitted aristocracy into the postrevolutionary world. That required a redefinition of aristocracy, not as a caste with inherited privileges, but as the embodiment of educated taste, ideals of public service and philanthropy, and earned superiorities.¹³

Almost without exception, the appropriation of Tocqueville, whether by liberals or conservatives, fails to come to terms with the driving force behind his concern about the disappearance of aristocracy. For the political to take hold and be nurtured, there had to be a class that could serve as its historical carrier. Numerous commentators have emphasized his use of aristocratic notions in constructing a liberal critique of democracy but few have noted that Tocqueville's experience, even infatuation, with the American version of participatory democracy became the basis of a bitter indictment of middle-class liberalism in the *Souvenirs*. It was, he claimed, the inability of the bourgeoisie to temper self-interest with *civisme* that undermined the July Monarchy. If the bourgeoisie's politicians could not be depended upon to practice public virtue, liberalism might become a stalled ideology, content to stand behind constitutional arrangements whose purpose was to block the Many.

A broad aim of this volume, then, is to use Tocqueville's ideas as (con)texts for reflecting upon the passage of liberal society from early to late modernity. There is an important sense in which Tocqueville was engaged in a lifelong task of retrieving a receding aristocratic past in order to counteract the new forms of despotism. One possible task for today's theorist is to ponder his example and to undertake the task of retrieving a receding democratic present in order to counteract even more novel forms of despotism.