



Harvey C. Mansfield

TOCQUEVILLE

A Very Short Introduction

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Tocqueville: A Very Short Introduction

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Introduction: a new kind of liberal

What sort of man was Alexis de Tocqueville? A writer, certainly, and with great style, but a writer of nonfiction conveying fact and truth in compelling terms with brilliant formulations. A social scientist, but without the cumbersome methodology, the hands-off neutrality, the pretended objectivity of today's version. Tocqueville was a defender and reformer of politics, scientific in some ways but never permitting science to obstruct those goals. A historian? Yes, because he wrote of democracy in America, then and now its principal abode, and of the old regime in France, where according to him democracy—surprisingly, in the form of rational administration by a monarchy—began. He did not write like a theorist, as if he were abstracted from time and place. Yet he was a seeker of causes, not a plain narrator, and he chose to write about the most important events, the “first causes,” he went so far as to say. A philosopher? A difficult question, to which many who identify philosophy with system say no. I say yes, more of a philosopher than he appears to be. We can settle on “thinker,” a less ambitious word for a man who had his doubts about philosophy.

A great man? For certain. A great man for his insight, but also because he undertook to explain greatness in a democratic age when it was under attack or simply overlooked. A great man who associated democracy and liberty with greatness.



1. Alexis de Tocqueville in 1850. When Tocqueville was born, his father took one look at his extraordinarily expressive face and said that he was sure to be a great man.

“A new kind of liberal”: that is Tocqueville’s own description of himself. Today Tocqueville is not known as a liberal, as is his friend John Stuart Mill, who wrote *On Liberty* to explain and advocate liberal principles. Tocqueville seems to be more descriptive and analytical, like a sociologist, except that he writes so well. Although his books sparkle with insights, his thoughts arise from observation of facts rather than appearing in the sequence of argument, arranged systematically. But I shall try to rescue his own label for himself and show that he deserves the highest rank among liberals *just because* he is not as theoretical as liberals normally want to be.

If Tocqueville is a new kind of liberal, this means that liberalism is not itself something new. It is true that the word “liberal” came into use only in Tocqueville’s time, but before this liberalism was given its basis in the doctrine of modern political theorists in the seventeenth century, particularly Thomas Hobbes, Baruch Spinoza, and John Locke, who made it their first premise that man was naturally free. They meant that prior to any social or political character men might have, man must be supposed to be in an abstract condition (the “state of nature”) in which he was free to consent to the society he might join and to its politics. Tocqueville did not agree that men began in this way “perfectly free,” as Locke said, or that freedom has its origin prior to politics. Tocqueville seems rather to agree with Aristotle, the pre-modern philosopher opposed by these modern theorists, who said that “man is by nature a political animal,” meaning that human freedom has to be found in politics, not in an original state of nature prior to politics.

Tocqueville does not say he agrees with Aristotle. He does not agree with him that philosophy is the highest way of life. He does not argue with philosophers and rarely refers to them; when he does, it is usually to disparage them. In *Democracy in America*, the Americans he praises for the practice of freedom are said to be “less occupied with philosophy” than any other civilized people. In

The Old Regime and the Revolution he decries the *philosophes* or “men of letters” of the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century for pronouncing on politics as theorists, without experience in the practice of politics. In neither work does he mention the liberal state of nature, and in his book on America he omits any discussion of the liberal American principles stated in the Declaration of Independence. Tocqueville is obviously aware of the old liberalism, but he deals with it by ignoring it.

Instead, he moves to his new liberalism in which freedom is the friend of religion and infused with pride as well as impelled by self-interest. The new liberalism needs a “new political science... for a world that is altogether new,” not set forth in a system of principles by Tocqueville, comparable to the system of seventeenth-century liberalism. Nor is it the political science of Montesquieu, the more modern political scientist of the eighteenth century, authoritative for fellow liberals in Tocqueville’s time such as Benjamin Constant and François Guizot, and earlier for the American authors of *The Federalist*. Montesquieu’s new political science was written for the world before the coming of modern democracy that made a world “altogether new,” before the United States came to be.

Tocqueville’s political science is shown in his depiction of freedom as practiced in America, an actual society, rather than in principles that precede practice. That is why his writing fascinates and convinces his readers with evidence, observation, and examples. Yet his analysis, often apparently spontaneous, even disorderly, does not wander from one point to another; every discussion has its place in a whole that is gradually revealed. In this book I discuss five aspects of his new liberalism. All are somehow concerned with democracy, for democracy is the new world in which liberty must be made to survive and prosper.

First is the democratic politics in Tocqueville’s own life, for he was a would-be statesman as well as a writer, and a liberal as well as an

aristocrat. Then come his thoughts on democratic self-government in America, where in his time and still in ours democracy has its headquarters. His fears for democracy come next, found especially in the second volume of *Democracy in America*. There he exposes the risks arising from democratic theories that both exasperate and enervate democratic majorities. Then, moving to *The Old Regime*, we find Tocqueville's depiction of the rational administrative control by which the French monarchy dismantled feudal aristocracy. He reveals the connection between two things that seem some distance apart: democracy (rule of the people) and rational administration (rule of a bureaucracy). Last is the greatness Tocqueville desires from democracy, such as it can be. For democracy is given to mediocrity that is both stagnant and restive, passive yet dissatisfied, and Tocqueville must teach us how to rescue it from its faults. For him the "true friends" of liberty are also friends of "human greatness."

Why does Tocqueville matter today? First, there is general agreement that he matters. It is hard to think of any analyst of American politics and society with a higher or broader reputation today. During his own life and then through the nineteenth century and most of the twentieth, his liberalism seemed humdrum and ineffective, and he was eclipsed by radical critics on both left and right. But after the radical right was defeated in World War II and the radical left lost its appeal in the nastiness of communist tyranny, moderate liberals came to the fore, above all Tocqueville. In France the revival was led by the philosopher Raymond Aron and the historian François Furet; in the United States, having always been celebrated for his book, Tocqueville returned to favor as Americans reconsidered their intellectual dependence on Marx and Nietzsche and began again to discuss the nature of "American exceptionalism," by which America might be a model for all humanity. He has been quoted by every American president from Eisenhower on (not always accurately!), cited widely in academic circles by social scientists and historians, and used to enliven and give authority to many books by popular

historians and journalists. *Democracy in America* also appeals broadly to both left and right, each side having its favorite passages and eager to claim the blessing of his authority.

Tocqueville has not received his due for the quality of his thought, however. One reason is his very brilliance, which makes him seem merely eloquent, and his sense of the future, which makes him seem uncanny. It is as if anyone who writes so well on the surface must be superficial, and anyone who predicts so well must be a seer. The beauty of his writing can be somewhat distracting to careful analysis of what he says, as for example when he compares a presidential election in America to the passing of a storm. Another reason for the underestimation of his wisdom is the power of abstraction in democratic societies, a power Tocqueville tries to oppose. American democrats like to generalize, or universalize, or equalize, so as to be inclusive, tolerant, and appreciative. America's intellectuals, cooperating with the democrats, like to theorize, so as to be universal, exact, and free of the past. Even our historians want to start history anew. Tocqueville's liberalism forces us to consider what we actually do in the practice of self-government, rather than arguing endlessly in the abstract about what we are, and are not, entitled to. For all his reputation, we do not learn enough from him.

Chapter 1

Tocqueville's democratic providence

Born not long after the French Revolution into an old aristocratic family of Normandy, Alexis de Tocqueville lived from July 29, 1805, until April 16, 1859. He was bound to the ancien régime, the Old Regime, by his family and to the new one by his belief in liberty. He lived through the coming of democracy to France and foresaw that it would eventually spread to all the world. His



2. Château de Tocqueville in Normandy. Tocqueville lived at the family chateau but did not leave an heir to inherit it.

family name was Clérel, and one of the Clérels had fought with William the Conqueror at the battle of Hastings in 1066. By stages the family acquired the fief of Tocqueville in Normandy and in 1661 took that name. The chateau still exists and is inhabited by descendants of his brother.

Tocqueville



3. Mary ("Marie") Mottley, Tocqueville's wife, ca. 1830. English, Protestant, and middle-class, she was an unusual choice of wife for a French aristocrat, but Tocqueville wrote to her that "you are without exception the only person in the world who knows the bottom of my soul."

Alexis kept his title and lived in his beloved chateau, but although he spent much time and money caring for it, he did not produce an heir to inherit it. It was an accident he did not regret, and he once said that he had “no very keen desire to draw from the great lottery of paternity.” This view of paternity reveals a mixture of aristocratic disdain for the common man, democratic unconcern for the future of one’s family, and philosophic equanimity. His marriage, however, was more simply democratic. He married beneath himself, as he acknowledged, to an Englishwoman not of the nobility (and on whom he insisted, despite the wishes of some in his family).

Tocqueville the statesman

Tocqueville refused to use the title of Count, but he did not reject all the advantages of aristocratic birth. He made them serve a democratic end in what he called the “new world” of democracy. Although he lived his life as an aristocrat, he took the part of democracy and to do so, he entered the practice of politics. In aristocracy as it should have been in the Old Regime in France, he would have claimed power by feudal inheritance. Entering politics, Tocqueville believed, was in its nature aristocratic for the simple reason that governing requires taking responsibility for others, thus being superior to them. His first experience in politics under the Restoration monarchy came from a touch of privilege, for Tocqueville’s father, Hervé, had been a prefect and active in local government. Through his advice and influence, Alexis became an unpaid apprentice judge in 1827. After that he had to run for office in—somewhat—democratic elections. Here we see two of his principles at work: the democratization of politics that is essentially and originally aristocratic; and learning politics by doing politics, which was the particular virtue he found in American democracy. The two principles converge, because politics can be democratized only if democrats make a virtue of competing for the offices that would have belonged to the nobles of an aristocracy without effort. One of Tocqueville’s greatest

insights was to see that this virtue, necessary to democracy, cannot be taken for granted in a democracy and may actually be threatened there.

Entering politics in Tocqueville's time was a daunting task. After the French Revolution, government in France was transformed by a series of spastic lurches from the Bourbon monarchy before 1789, the "Old Regime," to the constitutional republic; then to the Jacobin republic of terror; to the Thermidor reaction against the Jacobins; to Napoleon's empire; to the Bourbon monarchy restored; to the bourgeois monarchy of Louis-Philippe; to the Second Republic, which was subverted and overthrown by Louis Napoleon, who established a second empire. Such turbulence promised risk for any ambitious person who might have wanted to enter politics and anguish for any concerned observer. For a writer and thinker like Tocqueville, it would have readily excused the renunciation of politics for the sake of relief and refuge in private life, providing leisure for thinking and for indulging his superb talent for writing. But Tocqueville, who felt anguish for France all his life, took up every opportunity for political activity even when doing so interfered with his writing, as in 1837 when he could have been working on the second volume of *Democracy in America* and instead ran for office in the Chamber of Deputies in the regime of Louis-Philippe. Though he was defeated the first time, despite being a noble running in his own locality, he tried again in 1839—manfully and with democratic resolve—and succeeded, then was reelected twice more. After the fall of Louis-Philippe's monarchy in 1848, Tocqueville was elected to the Constituent Assembly that was intended to establish the Second Republic, helping to prepare its constitution. Then he was elected to the new assembly under that constitution and served as Minister of Foreign Affairs for five months, until the cabinet of which he was a member was dismissed by the new president, Louis Napoleon. In December 1851, Louis Napoleon put an end to the republic with a coup d'état, and Tocqueville left politics for

Tocqueville

good, having stayed with it as long as his principles required and permitted. His last political experience was being jailed for two days as a protesting deputy by Louis Napoleon.

What was it that made this born writer enter democratic politics where he himself doubted he could succeed? For Tocqueville the freedom to write and publish was incomplete without political freedom. He wanted to feel that freedom for himself by holding office rather than merely observe from outside. It was not enough to understand things with calm detachment, as a theorist would. He believed that the satisfaction and serenity of soul, said in the philosophic tradition to reward the activity of contemplation, do not exist. He thought the human soul, and especially his own, to be “restive and insatiable.” He despised “all the goods of this world,” yet to escape the “grievous numbness” that comes over the soul when it tries to contemplate itself, he sought those goods. The principal good was of course honor, the “natural taste” he had for “great actions and great virtues”; all the others were subordinate, merely means to honor. Consciously, deliberately, purposefully, Tocqueville wished and acted to distinguish himself in life, at the same time disdaining honor and reaching for it.

Tocqueville's democratic providence

Tocqueville seemed to understand the love of distinction as essentially political—the activity of ruling—rather than literary in the sense of displaying talent and intelligence for the sake of popular esteem. Yet he thought he was “more worthy in thought than in action,” and he was surely right about that. As a politician he lacked the common touch, and he knew it. He confessed (privately, in his *Recollections* [*Souvenirs*]) that he could hardly remember the names and faces of the mediocre men in the National Assembly with whom he had to deal: “they bore me profoundly.” He also said that writing was a kind of action, a way of engaging in politics. It seems that political freedom for Tocqueville has two branches—holding office and writing—and that they converge in greatness.

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