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How Many Democracies?

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At least since the appearance in 1964 of Seymour Drescher’s brilliant article, “Tocqueville’s Two Démocraties,” scholars have debated how many Democracies Tocqueville wrote during the 1830s. Are the 1835 and 1840 halves of the Democracy essentially two parts of a single work or two quite distinct books which happen to share the same title? Note that this is not the same issue which has been so well raised by Robert Nisbet and others about the many changing perceptions or interpretations of the Democracy since its appearance over one hundred and fifty years ago. Of interpretations, there are many, especially when we recall the sustained international appreciation of Tocqueville’s book over the years. But of judgments about the unity or disunity of the Democracy, there are essentially only two, what Seymour Drescher has recently labeled the “lumpers” and the “splitters.” Each group has perhaps as many individual variations as there are serious readers. But the basic approach remains bipolar: one Democracy or two?

The question is not a trivial dispute or empty intellectual game. It concerns the identification and continuity or disjuncture of basic themes in Tocqueville’s work and involves answers to when and how some of his fundamental ideas emerged and developed.

All Tocqueville’s scholars and major interpretative works devoted to the Democracy recognize, of course, both common features and significant differences between the two parts of Tocqueville’s book. There are no absolutists in this debate. Divisions of opinion arise from distinctive answers to “which unities?” and “which diversities?” and from contending perceptions about why the Democracy changed between the early 1830s and 1840. How was Tocqueville’s book reshaped by new experiences after 1835: travels, readings, friendships, political involvements, innovations in methodology, additional time for reflection and reconsideration, or the emergence of different issues in contemporary France? Most essentially, the two groups divide on the matter of emphasis. Are the 1835 and 1840 Democracies more alike or more distinct?

Of the two basic approaches, the first, identified particularly with what Jean-Claude Lamberti called the “Yale School,” focuses on basic themes or concepts by tracing each from the late 1820s to 1840. This path to analysis recognizes Tocqueville’s background, readings, friendships and other intellectual influences, travel experiences, political involvements, his habits of thinking and writing, then follows the genesis and elaboration, the twisting and turning, of Tocqueville’s ideas, and ends by emphasizing the unity of the two halves of the Democracy, despite obvious attention to significant changes between 1835 and 1840.

The second approach also recounts the development of fundamental concepts. Its special strengths, however, are examination of Tocqueville’s broadening experiences after 1835 (especially lessons learned from England and from French political life) and careful comparison of the 1835 and 1840 Democracies. The two portions are set side-by-side to see what differences emerge in the author’s tone, methodology, ideas, emphases, and underlying concerns. This path ends by proposing a definitive shift between the halves of the Democracy despite the recognition that some fundamental threads are present throughout Tocqueville’s book.


In his most recent formulation of this approach, Drescher carefully lists some of the major themes which link the 1835 and 1840 Democracies: the inevitability of democracy, the value placed on political liberty, and the effort to define the nature and future of democracy. And he notes that the same comparative methodology characterizes both the 1835 and 1840 portions.

But his essential point is that we should recognize two separate works. A sharp break occurred after 1835, first, because of a fundamental change in Tocqueville’s frame of reference, particularly “his extra-American experiences,” that is, his English journeys and French political involvements, and second, because of a drastic reversal in his expectations about the democratic future. Just as France eclipsed America as the leading example in Tocqueville’s writing, so too did doubt and pessimism replace hope and optimism.

Drescher then examines two concepts to demonstrate his approach: centralization and individualism. According to his argument, not until after the publication of the 1835 work did Tocqueville realize that democracy lead to centralization and that democracy and centralization were dangerously and inextricably linked in the modern world. In 1835, he writes, Tocqueville showed a lack of concern about administrative centralization totally at variance from his profound worries in 1840. By then, centralization had, for Tocqueville, come “close to achieving full parity with democracy” as a fact for his and our times.

The second example concerns the pattern of behavior which Tocqueville associated with democracy. In 1835 he focused on what Drescher calls the “‘benign’ egoism of the participatory citizen,” or enlightened self-interest, modeled on the American example. By 1840 his attention had shifted to the “pathological egoism of retreat,” or individualism, exemplified by the narrow behavior of his own countrymen. Both the word and most of the content of the individualism of 1840 are missing earlier. This change again reflects both Tocqueville’s movement from America to France and the reversal of his prognosis for the democratic future. Drescher believes that there are “latent or overt contradictions” between the 1835 and the 1840 books and concludes that we have a “Tocqueville problem [which] lies within the

7. Ibid., 88-89, 90.
8. Ibid., 84-85.
9. Ibid., 85-88.
10. Idem.
confines of a single title”. In the end, he refers to “Tocqueville’s separate but equally perceptive studies,” the two Democracies.

Despite heavy methodological debts to the Yale School, Lamberti, in his wonderful book, Tocqueville and the Two “Democracies,” also joins the splitters. He concludes his long study by asserting that Tocqueville’s book divides into two parts, but his version of the two Democracies is strikingly different from Drescher’s. For Lamberti, the first Democracy includes the 1835 portion and the first three books of the 1840; the second Democracy consists of the last book from 1840 which looks ahead to the Souvenirs and the Ancien Régime. He sees 1838, when Tocqueville discovered the significance of the revolutionary spirit and undertook a major revision of his manuscript, as the critical moment or shift. The first Democracy (1835 and most of 1840) attempts (without success) to distinguish between democracy and revolution (Democracy or Revolution, as Lamberti labels it); the second (the last quarter of 1840) recognizes that the revolutionary spirit has survived revolution, that it encourages centralization and will coexist with advancing democracy (Democracy and Revolution).

This rupture, Lamberti contends, is more significant than that noticed by Drescher. His two Democracies are, therefore, not the same pair which Drescher earlier identified. Yet Lamberti still parallels Drescher by making the idea of centralization a principal player in disjuncture; he asserts that only after 1838 did Tocqueville see centralization as “characteristic of democracy itself”.

So we have the “lumpers,” emphasizing unity (amidst change), and the “splitters,” stressing division (amidst underlying ties). Perhaps a third basic approach, typified especially by the work of François Furet, should be added to our list. A key part of the more recent effort on the part of French scholars to recapture Tocqueville from the Americans and to remind us that Tocqueville was, after all, a French thinker who reflected the context of his own country, is Furet’s essay entitled “Naissance d’un paradigme”. There,

12. Ibid., 92-93.
15. Ibid., 307.

Two other recent interpretations by French Tocqueville specialists present carefully balanced responses to the issue of How Many Democracies? See André Jardin’s
we are told that before Tocqueville set foot in America or put pen to page, the essential elements of his doctrine were in place, including: the concept of advancing democracy as a triumphant force in the modern world; the effort to explore the consequences of democracy and to develop a theory of democratic society; the concern for the preservation of liberty; the separation of the ideas of democracy and revolution; and the use of an on-going tripartite comparison, France, England and America.

This conceptual framework was shaped largely in response to the intellectual atmosphere in France during the 1820s. To earlier studies of Tocqueville’s American travels (1831-1832) and of his “second voyage” (the long process of the making of the Democracy, 1832-1840), Furet adds a third critical period: Tocqueville’s intellectual journey between 1828 and 1831. On the one hand, this approach supports the emphasis of the Yale School on the unity of the 1835 and 1840 Democracies, for if Tocqueville’s doctrine was set by 1831, surely the differences between the first and second halves of Tocqueville’s book pale in significance. On the other hand, this perspective of Furet and others entirely transcends the debate about unity or disjunction. Both the divisions between 1835 and 1840, highlighted by Drescher and Lamberti, and the evolutionary development—the twists, turns and variations which so fascinate the Yale School—recede into the background. What captures our attention is the marvel of a work derived from a conceptual framework already in place by 1831.

As we have noted, the three most significant themes cited by Drescher and Lamberti as fault lines between the 1835 and 1840 halves of the Democracy involve centralization, individualism and revolution. Both men argue that Tocqueville did not perceive the intimate link between democracy and centralization until he was writing the 1840 portion of his work.17

In the 1835 text, however, while presenting the distinction between governmental and administrative centralization, Tocqueville declared:

I am also convinced that democratic nations are most likely to fall beneath the yoke of centralized administration, for several reasons, among which is the following. The constant tendency of these nations is to concentrate all the strength of the government in the hands of the only power that directly represents the people; because beyond the people nothing is to be perceived but a mass of equal individuals. But when the same power already has all the attributes of

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government, it can scarcely refrain from penetrating into the details of the administration.\textsuperscript{18} 

An earlier version in Tocqueville’s working manuscript added here the telling sentence: “So we often see democratic nations establish at the same time liberty and the instruments of despotism [that is, a centralized administration]”.\textsuperscript{19}

Tocqueville, let us not forget, clearly recognized by 1835 that the concentration of power constituted one of the great threats to liberty in democratic nations. His 1835 volumes catalogue the dangerous places where excessive power might be gathered, including the legislature, the majority, the hands of a tyrant, and a centralized administration.\textsuperscript{20} By 1840, it is true, power centralized in a pervasive and intrusive administration moved to the center of his anxieties. But in 1835 he had already perceived and written about the connection between advancing democracy and increasing administrative centralization as one focus of the consolidation of power. As he emphatically declared in a draft: “Moreover we must not be mistaken. It is democratic governments which arrive most rapidly at administrative centralization while losing their political liberty”.\textsuperscript{21} And as we shall see in a moment, he also offered in 1835 early sketches of his famous 1840 portrait of the soft, but suffocating despotism of the bureaucratic state.

The drafts of the 1835 Democracy even described the relentless European increase in administrative centralization which would become a significant theme in the final section of the 1840 volumes.

Among most of the states on the continent of Europe the central government is not only charged with acting in the name of the entire nation, but also with regulating all matters which are general in nature. So therefore, in Europe we see that governments, instead of limiting their actions to this immense sphere, constantly move beyond [these limits] to encroach more and more on the rights of localities and tend to seize control of the direction of all affairs.\textsuperscript{22}

A closer examination of Tocqueville’s concept of individualism (what we might call privatism) and of his increasing fear of apathy and the decay of civic spirit also does not support the idea of disjunction between 1835 and 1840. Although the word “individualism” does not appear in the 1835

\textsuperscript{18} DA [B], I, 99-100; cf. I, 158-162.
\textsuperscript{19} YTC, CVIa, 1, for the section entitled “Political Effects of Decentralized Administration in the United States,” DA [B], I, 89-101. See DA [N], I, 79.
\textsuperscript{20} For elaboration, consult Schleifer, Making, especially part IV.
\textsuperscript{21} YTC, CVh, 2, 82-84.
\textsuperscript{22} YTC, CVh, 2, 82-84.
Democracy, in both parts of his book Tocqueville was troubled by the possible collapse of public life.

At least two passages from the 1835 Democracy foreshadow Tocqueville’s 1840 discussions of individualism and of the type of despotism which democratic nations have to fear.²³

[A central government when united to centralized administration] accustoms men to set their own will habitually and completely aside; to submit, not only for once, or upon one point, but in every respect, and at all times.... It affects their ordinary habits; it isolates them and then influences each separately.²⁴

And in the middle of a discussion about the political advantages of decentralization, he wrote:

It profits me but little, after all, that a vigilant authority always protects the tranquillity of my pleasure and constantly averts all dangers from my path, without my care or concern, if this same authority is the absolute master of my liberty and my life, and if it so monopolizes movement and life that when it languishes, everything languishes around it, that when it sleeps, everything must sleep.²⁵

In a draft he noted more succinctly that administrative centralization “brings about despotism and destroys civic spirit. People get used to living as strangers, as settlers in their own country, to saying: that doesn’t concern me. Let the government worry about it.”²⁶

And in yet another draft, he declared:

For my part, what I most reproach despotism for are not its rigors. I would pardon it for tormenting men if only it didn’t corrupt them. Despotism creates in the soul of those who are submitted to it a blind passion for tranquillity, a type of depraved self-contempt, which ends by making them indifferent to their interests and enemies of their own rights. They are falsely persuaded that by losing all the privileges of a civilized man they have escaped from all his burdens and cast off all his duties. They then feel free and stand in society like a lackey in the house of his master, and think they have only to eat the bread given to them without worrying about the need to harvest. When a man has reached this point, I will call him, if you want, a peaceful inhabitant, an honest settler, a good family man. I am ready for anything, provided that you don’t force me to give him the name citizen.²⁷

All of these portrayals of the dangers of administrative centralization and of the growing threat of selfishness and withdrawal from public participation date from 1833 to 1835 during the making of the first part of the Democracy.

²³. For the 1840 discussions, see especially DA [B], II, 104-113, 334-339.
²⁴. Ibid., I, 90.
²⁵. Ibid., I, 96.
²⁶. YTC, CVb, 1-2 (DA [N], I, 76).
²⁷. YTC, CVh, 1, 2-4 (DA [N], I, 185).
Moreover, in both halves of his book, Tocqueville not only linked this
danger of apathy and the death of public life with administrative central-
ization, but also offered his readers the same proposed solution: enlightened
self-interest or self-interest properly understood, which he presented as an
American contribution to social and political theory. He named and
explained the concept in his travel diaries and early drafts, devoted a small
sub-section to the notion in the 1835 Democracy, and expanded his discus-
sion significantly in several chapters in 1840.28

It must be conceded, however, that in 1835 Tocqueville identified the
major cause of the civic diseases of selfishness and apathy as excessive ad-
ministrative centralization. By 1840 he realized much more clearly that they
were also democratic illnesses. No bureaucratic intermediary was needed for
infection. Here Drescher’s sense of shift is correct.

Finally, the idea of revolution also fails to provide a persuasive example
of a sharp rupture between the two Democracies as divided by Lamberti.
Starting with the 1835 preface, Tocqueville combined the images of ad-
vancing democracy and revolution by describing the great social revolution
underway in Europe for centuries. Elsewhere in the 1835 text, he recognized
that democracy and revolution were occurring simultaneously and struggled
to distinguish their effects.29

Furet notes that one of Tocqueville’s great originalities was precisely his
recognition that democracy and revolution were separate phenomena too
easily confused by his contemporaries.30 They were two forces, distinct yet
loose together in the world, both separate and conjoined. Most important,
they each had consequences which needed to be recognized and reckoned
with. Throughout the making of the Democracy, Tocqueville wrestled with
both Democracy or Revolution and Democracy and Revolution, trying at the
same time to identify the distinctive features of these two great currents and
to understand their intimate interconnections.

Even if these three major examples, proposed to illustrate disjuncture, do
not work, we must recognize that, as clusters of ideas, the concepts of
centralization, revolution, and individualism (and the collapse of civic spirit)
do undergo important changes for Tocqueville between 1835 and 1840. By
1840, administrative centralization became the concentration of power
which most troubled Tocqueville; by then, he named as the most distinctive

28. For the drafts, see, for example, YTC, CVh, 2, 78-79 (DA [N], I, 286); and CVe,
66-67 (DA [N], I, 243). For the Democracy, see DA [B], I, 250-253, 408-410; II,
29. DA [B], I, 1, 7-8, 11-12, 14-15, 206.
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(democratic) despotism, the centralization of the bureaucratic state, rather than the brutal excesses of a tyrant in the Roman model or tyranny of the majority. The 1840 portion contains Tocqueville’s discussion of “revolutionary spirit” and his more conscious effort to separate what was democratic from what was revolutionary. And only in the 1840 half did Tocqueville use the word “individualism” and declare that it was specifically a democratic phenomenon and danger; earlier sketches of withdrawal from public life were always linked to excessive administrative centralization.

Nonetheless, excerpts cited above from Tocqueville’s drafts or text illustrate a characteristic of the Democracy which contradicts efforts to identify some fundamental disjuncture, wherever located. To a striking degree, phrases, sentences or paragraphs in the 1835 portion anticipate pages or even chapters in the 1840 Democracy. The germs of ideas often appear early in drafts or text and mature, over time and from constant reconsideration, into fully developed concepts. This is not to deny novelty, the appearance of new insights, unusual twists or reversals of opinion, or even the unexpected shrinking and disappearance of certain ideas. Yet Tocqueville’s thinking and writing during the 1830s do reveal a strong evolutionary feature.

An especially fascinating example of this process of growth and maturation involves Tocqueville’s understanding of the psychology, character or mentality of homo democraticus americanus. Here in particular, in the manuscripts and text of the 1835 Democracy, he scatters seeds of chapters which would appear five years later in 1840. In a draft about the future of American society, he mused:

Bonds of American society. Find out what ideas are common to Americans. Ideas of the future. Faith in human perfectibility, faith in civilization which they judge favorable in all its aspects. Faith in liberty! This is universal. Faith in the ultimate good sense and reason of the people. This is general, but not universal.... Philosophical and general ideas. That enlightened self-interest is sufficient for leading men to do the right thing. That each man has the faculty to govern himself. Good is relative and that there is continuous progress in society; that nothing is or should be finished forever. More specialized ideas, advantages of equality. Omnipotence, ultimate reason of the majority. Necessity of religion. Truth, utility and sublime nature of Christianity.31

For many of the sentences in this description, a corresponding chapter appears in 1840.32

Other examples from the 1835 drafts or text include: the democratic desire for material well-being; the American dislike of general ideas and

31. YTC, CVh, 2, 78-79 (DA [N], I, 286).
32. See especially the chapters in the first and second books (on intellect and feelings) of the 1840 portion.
preference for practical rather than theoretical knowledge; the restlessness, envy and anxiety fostered by equality; the existence in America of small private circles which served the wealthy as retreats from a relentless social equality; and even references to manufacturing aristocracy and to the ability (or inability) of democratic nations to conduct foreign policy and wage war. Each of these germs would also flower in the 1840 Democracy.\(^3\)

Two other illustrations of particular interest should also be cited, for they are among Tocqueville’s most original insights. In an early draft of the introduction to the 1835 Democracy, Tocqueville declared: “I see that by a strange quirk of our nature the passion for equality, which should grow with the inequality of conditions, increases instead as conditions become more equal.”\(^3\) The desire for equality, Tocqueville realized, would not be satisfied; as the goal of equality came closer, even the smallest inequality became unbearable. The passion for equality was doomed to frustration.\(^3\)

Very early, he also realized that among democratic nations the desire for equality surpassed the love of liberty. “The love of liberty is much greater and more complete feeling than the love of equality,” he wrote in a draft for the 1835 Democracy, then noted with regret: “Democracy more favorable to the spirit of equality than that of liberty”.\(^3\) Once again, in separate chapters of the 1840 Democracy, Tocqueville would elaborate these insights and explore how in democratic societies the passion for equality became both all-consuming and unquenchable.\(^3\)

If one measure of the unity of the Democracy is the evolution of certain central ideas, another indication which deserves notice is the similarity of remedies to democratic dangers which Tocqueville offered in the 1835 and 1840 halves of his work. Even if, over time, Tocqueville modified his evaluation of which democratic dangers threatened most acutely, the political program of safeguards which he presented to his readers in both 1835 and 1840 remained largely unchanged. In 1840, his answers to the underlying democratic dilemma—how to preserve liberty in the face of advancing equality—mirrored those of 1835: decentralization (or local liberties); associations; respect for individual rights; freedom of the press; broader rights

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34. YTC, CVh, 3, 27-32 (DA [N] I, 7).
35. For 1835, see DA [B], I, 208. For 1840, see ibid., II, 144-147.
36. YTC, CVh, 4, 36-37.
37. DA [B], II, 99-103, 144-147. For 1835, see ibid., I, 208.
of political participation; and reawakened religion. The *Democracy* presents no disjunction in solutions.

The last item—religion—bears emphasis. Throughout the *Democracy* Tocqueville tried to link the spirit of liberty and the spirit of religion. He believed that religion provided some of the moral and philosophical underpinnings which were essential to freedom in democratic ages. His role as a moral philosopher serves as another of the sustaining bonds between the two parts of his book.38

Even if several of the usual thematic examples of disjunction between the 1835 and 1840 *Democracies* do not work, there is at least one difference—again brought to our attention especially by Drescher—which remains indisputable. The most compelling contrast between the halves of the *Democracy* is mood or sense of the future.39 The 1840 portion is somber, worried, full of foreboding about the democratic future—in sharp contrast to the more enthusiastic and hopeful tone of 1835. During the late 1830s, Tocqueville’s new involvements in the political arena as he wrote the 1840 *Democracy* profoundly influenced his thinking and writing. As Drescher points out, Tocqueville’s extra-American experiences, along with his wider readings and the longer period of reflection, led to a profound shift in perspective. The *Democracy* became less and less American. His book moved from the New World to France and to democratic nations in general. And as Tocqueville’s perspective changed, his confidence about the future faltered. As readers, we sense the disunity of tone.

In a draft of his 1840 Preface, Tocqueville wrote:

> Point out—to myself as well—that I was led in the second work to take up once again some subjects already touched upon in the first, or to modify some opinions expressed there. Necessary result of so large a work done in two parts.40

Here Tocqueville bows in the direction of both “lumpers” and “splitters.” His reference to taking up once again subjects already touched upon supports the sense of evolution from germs of ideas—from phrases or sentences in 1835—into more fully matured concepts—in paragraphs or chapters in 1840. His recognition of modified opinions, on the other hand, supports the


40. YTC, CVk, 1, 50.
stress on a break between the 1835 and 1840 *Democracies*. That both these perspectives remain viable, fruitful and defensible indicates something about the character and complexity of Tocqueville’s book. We as readers are able to pursue, over one hundred and fifty years later, the on-going re-examination which characterized the making of Tocqueville’s work in the first place. And as we revolve the many facets of the *Democracy*, we repeatedly notice its striking unities and disunities.

Perhaps we should recall Tocqueville’s own debate about the title of his book. By the fall of 1839 he was ready to publish the second part of the *Democracy* under a separate name: “On the Influence of Equality on the Ideas and Sentiments of Men.” Why he considered this change, we do not know. Realization that issues of intellect, morals and values had replaced political and institutional concerns? Admission of his distance from America? Recognition that the very definition of democracy was changing? In any case, the last half of his work finally appeared as *Democracy in America*, volumes three and four. 41

In a conversation some years ago about the various titles of the *Democracy* and the relationship between the 1835 and 1840 portions, George Pierson quipped that perhaps the 1840 *Democracy* was captive to the triumph of the 1835 work and was published under the same title for two simple reasons. Everyone expected a sequel, and the success of the earlier *Democracy* would guarantee a good reception for another work bearing the same name.

With this thought in mind, we should also note that for us as readers the 1835 part is captive to the 1840. This happens in two ways. First, we notice insights which Tocqueville touches on and slides over in sentences of the 1835 volumes and which we know will assume great importance in the 1840 volumes. We read knowing what will become of certain concepts, aware in advance of the fate of Tocqueville’s ideas. This influences our perspective and our reading. Tocqueville’s first readers didn’t have this difficulty or advantage. Second, this reading with the second half of the *Democracy* in mind, as a background, becomes more problematic as the reputation and significance of the 1840 portion grows. The 1835 volumes can begin to fade from view; they can become almost irrelevant, too American, too specific, not “grand” enough in depth and sweep as the 1840 part assumes greater prestige as a study of modern society. We are presented with the irony of a reversal of a different sort. At the end of the twentieth century we tend to

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read and judge the two halves of Tocqueville’s book precisely opposite to how they were read and judged in the nineteenth century.

Probably all readers recognize that the 1835 and 1840 Democracies are somehow profoundly different, most acutely in mood. Whether two parts of the same book or two nearly separate works, the Democracy was written by a man fascinated over time by the same set of ideas and questions. The book remains the personal reflection of someone who attempted to come to grips with fundamental issues which he believed faced his society and times.

Many scholars have attempted to define Tocqueville’s essential thought, doctrine, convictions, fundamental idea, question or ideal type. What are the implications of this on-going search, other than the elusiveness of the quarry? We apparently sense that behind the many uniformities and divisions which mark the Democracy there are certain themes which bind the two halves of Tocqueville’s work irrevocably together.