1989

Tocqueville's Reputation in America

James T. Schleifer
The College of New Rochelle, jschleifer@cnr.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.cnr.edu/facpubs
Part of the History Commons

Recommended Citation

This Book Chapter is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ CNR. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ CNR. For more information, please contact fazzino@cnr.edu.
THE EVOLUTION OF Alexis de Tocqueville's reputation in the United States parallels successive American readings of Democracy in America. His work as a historian of the French Revolution and his other writings have always been of distinctly secondary interest to Americans. Probably the initial attraction of Tocqueville's Democracy for Americans was the author's careful description of essential legal and political institutions and his approval of many aspects of behavior and society in the New World republic. Here at last was a foreign visitor who wrote favorably rather than disparagingly of their country and who not only praised Americans, but who also clearly understood much of their constitutional framework. So perceptive was his grasp of American federalism that throughout the nineteenth century abridged versions of Tocqueville's analysis were reproduced in American schoolbooks.

Despite strongly favorable reactions by the earliest readers in the United States, the first American edition of the Democracy appeared only belatedly in 1838 when John Canfield Spencer introduced and annotated an edition based upon the much flawed, original English translation by Henry Reeve. Since then, other American editors have presented complete texts of Tocqueville's famous book to their countrymen, most notably: Francis Bowen, with a substantial revision of the Reeve text (1862); Daniel Coit Gilman (1898); Phillips Bradley, with a further improvement of the Reeve/Bowen translation (1945); and Max Lerner, as coeditor with J. P. Mayer (1966). In addition, several useful abridged editions have appeared, including the relatively recent volume introduced by Thomas Bender (1981). A brief survey of these editions reveals the key changes during the past 150 years in Tocqueville's reputation among Americans and their evolving interpretations of his classic work.

Several themes readily emerge. Every major American editor has remarked that somehow Tocqueville seems to be speaking to his own time, whether 1838/40, 1862, 1898, 1945, 1966, or 1981. This recurring impression of timeliness—despite the accuracy or inaccuracy of particular parts of the De-
—says much about the value which American readers continue to find in Tocqueville's book and about his enduring reputation in the United States. Although the Democracy has been "contemporary" to each generation, each generation has, to a degree, made a fresh reading of Tocqueville's work. Sometimes what is judged pertinent in one decade is passed over as outmoded in another. Or what is criticized as a mistake in one period is found to be true in another. Changing evaluations and constant rediscovery not only witness to the richness of Tocqueville's thought but also serve as an excellent window on the United States itself, reflecting shifting attitudes, conditions, and concerns in American society.

For most readers in the United States during the nineteenth century, the primary value of the Democracy was as a textbook of American political institutions. Despite errors, usually enumerated as Tocqueville's exaggerations of tyranny of the majority, of the instability of laws and government, and, by 1862, of the weakness of the President in the American system, the Democracy was praised as essential for civic education.

By the end of the century, Tocqueville's reputation and interest in his book entered a period of relative decline in the United States. Editions of the Democracy still appeared, but in 1898 Daniel Coit Gilman in his introduction explained the reason for Tocqueville's temporary eclipse. America—continental in size and marked by urbanization, industrialization, immigration, great cultural and educational institutions, and increasing diversity—had changed enormously since the 1830s, and Tocqueville's account seemed increasingly outmoded. Nonetheless, Gilman still applauded the permanent value of the Democracy as a political textbook for Americans and praised Tocqueville for also posing more fundamental questions about the nature and future of democratic society in America.

The modern American revival of Tocqueville began in the 1930s with publication of George Wilson Pierson's classic study Tocqueville and Beaumont in America (1938) and of two thoughtful essays by Albert Salomon (1935 and 1939), and it was carried forward by the appearance in 1945 of Phillips Bradley's influential edition of the Democracy. The publication of Bradley's work heralded a fundamental shift in the American appreciation of Tocqueville and his book. Since the 1940s American readers have increasingly moved their focus from the 1835 to the 1840 half of Tocqueville's book. In contrast to those during the nineteenth century who were sometimes baffled by the tone and ideas of the 1840 portion, today's readers usually find the second part of the Democracy more profound and thought-provoking. Whereas Spencer, Bowen, and Gilman, for example, commented almost exclusively on the 1835 Democracy, editors since Bradley have primarily discussed the 1840 part.

This reevaluation reflects a deeper change. The emphasis is no longer on Tocqueville as a student of American legal and political institutions. He is now appreciated primarily for his broader social, cultural, and even psychological insights; he is lauded as an analyst of the social psychology, or character, or "habits of the heart" which distinguish Americans. Tocqueville has been transformed from historical or political commentator into psychologist, sociologist, or social philosopher.

Even more broadly, readers in the United States have increasingly real-
ized that the *Democracy* is not only or even primarily about America. The real subject of the *Democracy* is not America but modern democratic society—wherever it happens to flourish—or even democracy as an ideal type. And as the understanding of Tocqueville's true subject matter has expanded, his reputation and the appeal of his book have grown.

The Tocqueville renaissance, now a half-century old and still flourishing, can also be seen in the development of another tradition in the United States: a journalistic fascination with Tocqueville and his book. A thick and growing file of references by present-day journalists, both famous and obscure, could easily be compiled. Tocqueville is often cited and quoted (and too frequently misquoted) as an authority in numerous editorials, columns, or other newspaper articles about the condition and direction of American society. The dominant opinion among American journalists clearly sees Tocqueville's work as a treasure trove of insights and wisdom and recognizes that a pertinent nugget from the *Democracy* gives a needed glow of legitimacy to editorial argument.

Since the mid-1970s still another shift of emphasis in Tocqueville's reputation has occurred. Today Americans from widely divergent political camps are worried about excessive individualism, the decay of shared values, and the decline in public participation and civic spirit. Earlier readings of Tocqueville as "herald of American progress," or "prophet of totalitarianism," or "anatomist of affluence" (or conformity), or analyst of equality are now less compelling ways to consider his message. So American regard for Tocqueville has benefitted from the most recent reappraisal of the *Democracy*, especially by sociologists who have reminded us that he brilliantly diagnosed the risks in democratic society of rampant privatism, of increasing feelings of apathy, isolation, and powerlessness, and ultimately of the collapse of public life.

Contemporary American evaluations of Tocqueville have also highlighted his basic intellectual approach. Despite ready admission that his methods were too deductive, many readers are now noting with appreciation his style of thinking, his fundamental stance of constant questioning and ongoing reconsideration. His use of ideal types or models to discover explanation of social change has also received renewed attention. And the sheer complexity and diversity of Tocqueville's thinking has become newly fascinating, warning us against easy readings and glib efforts to force Tocqueville into particular political pigeonholes. This pluralism goes far to explain the timeless quality of Tocqueville's work.

Finally, today's readers increasingly praise his sensitivity to the moral dimensions of human society. We are reminded that he stressed the central role of mores (*mœurs*) in human affairs, that he recognized the importance of the underlying beliefs, attitudes, values, and behavior which define a given society or people. As he thought and wrote in the 1830s, he examined what intellectual historians in the last half of the twentieth century have come to call *mentalité*.

Beyond this, he raised fundamental moral questions about the direction of modern society. Recent commentators, noting Tocqueville's affinities with Pascal and his "moral seriousness," are repeating the judgments made in the 1930s by Albert Salomon, who portrayed Tocqueville as most essentially a moralist or moral philosopher. And thus since the 1930s the modern American
reputation of Tocqueville has in part gone full cycle. And from the 1830s onward, each generation of Americans has rediscovered the genius of Tocqueville's book.