Tocqueville's Voyages

Tocqueville's Voyages

The Evolution of His Ideas and Their Journey Beyond His Time

Edited and with an introduction by

CHRISTINE DUNN HENDERSON

Liberty Fund
Indianapolis

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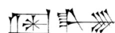

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Printed in the United States of America

P 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Tocqueville’s voyages: the evolution of his ideas and their journey beyond his time/edited and with an introduction by Christine Dunn Henderson.
pages cm
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-0-86597-870-6 (paperback: alkaline paper)
1. Tocqueville, Alexis de, 1805–1859—Travel. 2. Tocqueville, Alexis de, 1805–1859—Political and social views. 3. Tocqueville, Alexis de, 1805–1859—Influence. 4. Voyages and travels—History—19th century. 5. Democracy—History—19th century. I. Henderson, Christine Dunn, 1967–
DC36.98.T63T63 2014
306.2092—dc23 2014022561

LIBERTY FUND, INC.
8335 Allison Pointe Trail, Suite 300
Indianapolis, Indiana 46250-1684

Contents

Note on the Contributors vii

Introduction 1
CHRISTINE DUNN HENDERSON

PART I: TOCQUEVILLE AS VOYAGER

1 *Hidden from View: Tocqueville's Secrets* 1
EDUARDO NOLLA

2 *Tocqueville's Voyages: To and from America?* 29
S. J. D. GREEN

3 *Democratic Dangers, Democratic Remedies, and the Democratic Character* 56
JAMES T. SCHLEIFER

4 *Tocqueville's Journey into America* 79
JEREMY JENNINGS

5 *Alexis de Tocqueville and the Two-Founding Thesis* 111
JAMES W. CEASER

6 *Tocqueville's "New Political Science"* 142
CATHERINE H. ZUCKERT

7 *Democratic Grandeur: How Tocqueville Constructed His New Moral Science in America* 177
ALAN S. KAHAN

8 *Intimations of Philosophy in Tocqueville's* Democracy in America 202
HARVEY C. MANSFIELD

9 *An Undertow of Race Prejudice in the Current of Democratic Transformation: Tocqueville on the "Three Races" of North America* 242
BARBARA ALLEN

10 *Tocqueville's Reflections on a Democratic Paradox* 276
JEAN-LOUIS BENOÎT

11 *Out of Africa: Tocqueville's Imperial Voyages* 304
CHERYL B. WELCH

PART II: TOCQUEVILLIAN VOYAGES

12 *Tocqueville's Voyage of Discovery from Sicily to America* 337
FILIPPO SABETTI

13 *Tocqueville, Argentina, and the Search for a Point of Departure* 365
ENRIQUE AGUILAR

14 *Tocqueville and Eastern Europe* 390
AURELIAN CRAIUTU

15 *Tocqueville and "Democracy in Japan"* 425
REIJI MATSUMOTO

Index 457

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Introduction

No man ever steps in the same river twice, for it is not the same river, and he is not the same man.
—Attributed to Heraclitus

For while traveling, one is never the absolute master of one's movements. One often does something other than one would have imagined.
—Tocqueville to Nassau Senior, November 15, 1857

I do not need to travel across heaven and earth to find a marvelous subject full of contrast, of grandeur and infinite pettiness, of profound obscurities and singular clarity, capable at the same time of giving birth to pity, admiration, contempt, terror. I have only to consider myself.
—Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*

Voyages are about change. We change as we journey and encounter new places, ideas, and people; the place to which we journey changes as it moves from an abstraction to a reality and as we explore, understand, and live within it; upon our return, we find our homeland changed, for we perceive that homeland through changed eyes. Nothing is the same.

Voyages and the changes they bring are the theme of the present volume.

On April 2, 1831, twenty-six-year-old Alexis de Tocqueville set sail for America, accompanied by his friend Gustave de Beaumont. The official purpose of their voyage, which lasted nine months, was to undertake a comparative study of the U.S. penitentiary system; although the penitentiary report was published in 1833, Tocqueville confessed in an 1835 letter to his friend Louis de Kergorlay that it had merely been "a

pretext" for their journey.[1] The political situation in France had made it expedient for the two magistrates to remove themselves from the country, and they were also interested in studying the American republic, quickly forming—somewhere in the journey's early phases—plans to write a book together about the United States. With this project in mind, Tocqueville kept notebooks of his observations and thoughts, as well as notes about his various conversations and interviews with Americans. His letters to his friends and family in France also contain his reflections on his voyage and on the various aspects of American life—point of departure, religion, equality of condition, tyranny of the majority, etc.—which would emerge eventually as key themes of *Democracy in America.*

Having traveled throughout much of the United States in nine months, the two Frenchmen returned to France in March 1832. Soon after, Tocqueville settled into an apartment in Paris and began first working on the penitentiary report with Beaumont. Although that report was published with both American voyagers listed as authors, the idea of a larger, joint project on America was eventually abandoned; *Democracy in America* was written by Tocqueville, while Beaumont penned a novel about American mores entitled *Marie.* Following the publication of the penitentiary report and after a brief trip to England in the late summer and early autumn of 1833, Tocqueville began outlining and eventually writing the first two volumes of *Democracy in America.* By early 1834, his outlines had become a full draft, which he felt comfortable sending to select family and friends, to get their comments and criticisms. He took their oral and written feedback into consideration, editing, changing, and redrafting—sometimes extensively—portions of the text. By the autumn of 1834, Tocqueville had completed the final

1. Tocqueville writes, "The penitentiary system was a pretext; I took it only as a passport that would let me enter thoroughly into the United States. In that country, in which I encountered a thousand things beyond my expectation, I perceived several things about questions that I had often put to myself. I discovered facts that seemed useful to know. I did not go there with the idea of writing a book, but the idea for a book came to me there." Letter to Louis de Kergorlay, January 1835, in Tocqueville, *Selected Letters on Politics and Society,* ed. Roger Boesche, trans. James Toupin and Roger Boesche (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 95.

versions of those two volumes, which would be published in January 1835. The last two volumes followed a similar process of outlines, drafts, redrafts, criticisms, and final drafting before their 1840 publication.

The recently translated historical-critical edition of *Democracy in America* is, in part, an effort to shed light on Tocqueville's process in composing *Democracy in America.* In creating the historical-critical edition, Eduardo Nolla painstakingly worked through the major French editions, comparing them to each other and to the manuscript. He then selected among Tocqueville's textual fragments—Tocqueville's notes and queries to himself, as well as passages and ideas he contemplated including in the final version but ultimately rejected—and incorporated these into the main text. Finally, Nolla added a series of notes to this enlarged text, consisting primarily of marginalia, draft variants, selections from Tocqueville's travel notes, as well as criticisms from the family members and friends who read the draft manuscript.

The historical-critical edition thus gives the reader unprecedented access to the development of Tocqueville's thought. We witness the text emerging out of his voyage to the United States, and we discover the many things he learned by direct observation of democracy as enacted in nineteenth-century America. The essays in the first part of this volume particularly explore the "voyage" of writing and how Tocqueville's distinctive ideas developed and found expression during the composition of *Democracy in America,* while the essays in the second part explore the "voyage" of Tocquevillian ideas beyond a nineteenth-century Franco-American context.

Early chapters by James Schleifer and Jeremy Jennings particularly touch on the question of what Tocqueville learned in the United States. Jennings reminds us that the travel notebooks and drafts allow readers to glimpse, for the first time, how Tocqueville distilled the sundry impressions of his American voyage into the key themes of *Democracy in America,* especially the significance and extent of equality of conditions; the unceasing movement and rapid pace of change throughout American society; the importance of mores, self-interest, and religion; and the various mechanisms and "habits" for moderating democracy and preserving liberty in an age of equality. Jennings also uses the new material presented in the historical-critical edition to rebut the charge that Tocqueville had made up his mind about America before

he arrived, arguing that "a reading of Tocqueville's diaries, notebooks and letters reveals a mind, not closed to new experiences, but overwhelmed by the novelty and importance of what he was seeing."[2]

Schleifer's chapter, too, helps us see how the journey itself shaped Tocqueville's thought and how Tocqueville's ideas took form during his sojourn in the United States and during the process of drafting *Democracy in America.* Schleifer particularly focuses on the development of Tocqueville's thought about what he considered the greatest dangers to democracy: materialism, individualism, and above all, consolidation of power and the "chilling new form" of soft despotism accompanying administrative centralization. Schleifer also analyzes the various arts and institutions of liberty, as well as the habits and mores that Tocqueville believed supportive to a free society, and he develops the idea that part of Tocqueville's distinctiveness lies in his use of specifically democratic remedies for the problems unique to democratic times.

Through the historical-critical edition, we also learn of Tocqueville's care in drafting *Democracy in America* and of the multiple layers behind the printed text. Many of the essays in this volume touch on this topic, showing how various aspects of the final text were modified in the process of writing. Eduardo Nolla's chapter, for example, offers evidence of Tocqueville's assiduousness in crafting a message that would be palatable to his audience, showing us how the manuscript's more democratic message is moderated with an eye to its intended French audience. S. J. D. Green, too, reminds us of *Democracy in America*'s meticulous craftsmanship, noting that "[t]ime and again, careful perusal of the Nolla edition establishes how concepts, even case studies, apparently new to the second volume actually appear half and even fully formulated in the notes and drafts deployed for the earlier study."[3]

The historical-critical edition thus allows us to see also a more figurative sense of voyage, an intellectual one, as Tocqueville's ideas begin to take shape and the text emerges on the page. The present volume explores the idea of voyage in this sense as well, with chapters investigating Tocqueville's complex relationship to his primary intellectual

2. Jennings, XX, in this volume.
3. Green, XX, in this volume.

influences—particularly Montesquieu, Blaise Pascal, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and to a certain extent, François Guizot—and the development of Tocqueville's own independent ideas from this intellectual formation and from his American journey. Essays by Nolla, James Ceaser, Catherine Zuckert, and Alan Kahan confront this question of influences perhaps most directly. Ceaser particularly finds Montesquieuian roots to Tocqueville's thought, most notably in Tocqueville's deployment of a "Customary History," which allows philosophic ideas to enter indirectly into political life. Zuckert, too, cites the influences especially of Montesquieu and Rousseau, but her essay focuses on how Tocqueville's political science modifies his forerunners' philosophies in several important ways. Kahan's chapter asserts that Tocqueville sought new sources of moral greatness for the new democratic age, and he contends that in Tocqueville's treatment of religion broadly understood, we find a major source of greatness in democratic eras, as well as significant modifications of his Pascalian sources. By contrast, Nolla finds more direct indebtedness to—and less modification of—Pascal in Tocqueville's tone and his teaching.

Filippo Sabetti's essay, found in the second part of the present volume, also touches on these themes of influences and beginnings, but Sabetti highlights a pre-American voyage—Tocqueville's 1827 voyage to Sicily—as the beginning of the Frenchman's intellectual journey. In his notes from that voyage, which Sabetti explores, we see the birth of Tocqueville's hallmark comparative analytic perspective, as well as his awareness of the significance of situational particularities, and many other traits associated with Tocqueville's mode of proceeding in *Democracy in America*. Not only does Sabetti remind us of the importance of Tocqueville's youthful Sicilian journey to his mature thought, but he also draws attention to the influence of Tocqueville and his method in nineteenth-century Italy and to the continued relevance of Tocquevillian modes and ideas in contemporary social science.

Having a textual window into the development of Tocqueville's thought through the historical-critical edition also invites us to a fresh consideration of *Democracy in America*. Among the many things we discover from the historical-critical edition is that the work's original opening was "The work that you are about to read is not a travelogue, <the reader can rest easy>." The passage continues, "You will also not

find in this book a complete summary of all the institutions of the United States; but I flatter myself that in it, the public will find some new documentation and, from it, will gain useful knowledge about a subject that is more important for us than the fate of America and no less worthy of holding our attention."[4] What kind of a work, then, is *Democracy in America*? More broadly, what is its purpose, and what kind of useful—and new—knowledge did Tocqueville believe he was presenting?

Many of the essays collected in this volume offer responses to the question of what type of work is *Democracy in America*. For Green, Tocqueville is the philosopher of liberalism, who understood the American experiment's innovation in tempering nature with art or in combining equality of conditions with the principles of ordered liberty. At the heart of Tocqueville's famously "new political science,"[5] suggests Green, is the recognition that the principle of equality is not merely confined to the political realm, as popular sovereignty, but that it orders or shapes the world beyond politics. Moreover, one of Tocqueville's key discoveries was that equality was both the potential problem and the best hope for a solution. As Nolla observes at the end of his essay, this is a quintessentially Tocquevillian mode, of applying more of the problematic principle to remedy the problem itself.

Harvey Mansfield follows Green in casting Tocqueville as a philosopher, yet Mansfield finds Tocqueville's philosophy a "modest" one, designed not to make the world new but to adjust to the new age of democracy and to shape that new world of equality in a way supportive of liberty rather than destructive of it. According to Mansfield, Tocqueville felt the need to hide the philosophic teaching of *Democracy in America,* but that teaching is a philosophy that is a moderation of liberal foundationalism in the name of liberty itself. Ceaser as well seems to cast Tocqueville as a philosopher, and he gives us an account focusing on Tocqueville's development of a Customary History that recognizes and responds to the fixity of the human, social, and political

4. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America: Historical-Critical Edition of "De la démocratie en Amérique,"* ed. Eduardo Nolla, trans. James T. Schleifer, 4 vols. (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2010), 3–4. This edition is hereafter cited as *DA*.

5. *DA,* 16.

material and that serves as a "counterdoctrine to modern philosophy." Despite its opposition to modern philosophy, however, the act of composing a customary history is a philosophic endeavor in that it constitutes a deliberate effort to school democratic society; thus, Tocqueville's own political-philosophic art consists in shaping and guiding democracy so that it can avoid falling into "one form or other of democratic despotism."[6]

By contrast with these accounts of Tocqueville explicitly as a philosopher, Zuckert and Kahan, respectively, characterize him as a political scientist and a *moraliste*. Zuckert's chapter suggests that Tocqueville's voyage to America was undertaken to learn what laws, habits, mores, and ideas could preserve liberty in an age of equality, particularly against the danger of soft despotism. *Democracy in America* details those protections; its political science is an analysis of the social state resulting from equality of conditions and an attempt to isolate and analyze the factors (geography, laws, and above all, mores) determining whether the political results of this social state would be free or despotic. Kahan characterizes Tocqueville's project less in political terms than in moral ones, and he proposes that Tocqueville's primary concern was to ensure that human greatness, rather than human degradation, was "the outcome of democracy."[7] Among the sources of greatness in democratic times Tocqueville discovered and sought to encourage were religion and spirituality broadly understood, poetry, and associative life. Kahan emphasizes the utility of religion or, more broadly, spirituality as a source of democratic grandeur, capable of doing for the majority of humans what aristocracy had only been able to do for a few.

Yet perhaps there is ultimately less opposition between these accounts of Tocqueville and the characterizations of him explicitly as a philosopher, for Mansfield, Zuckert, and Kahan all emphasize a philosophic dimension to Tocqueville, perhaps most especially in the role of knowledge and art to shape nature and to create in an age of equality societies that would be conducive to political and individual liberty.

Tocqueville concluded the 1835 edition of *Democracy in America* with a long chapter on "Some Considerations on the Present State

6. Ceaser, XX, in this volume.
7. Kahan, XX, in this volume.

and Probable Future of the Three Races That Inhabit the Territory of the United States." This chapter stands somewhat apart from the rest of the 1835 work, not merely because it far exceeds the other chapters in length, but because it treats rather exceptional topics, which Tocqueville notes in the chapter's opening pages "are American without being democratic."[8] The chapter is also remarkable for, as Nolla reminds us, it seems to have been rapidly composed and was not part of the material critically read by Tocqueville's family or his friends Beaumont and Kergorlay. Thus, the chapter gives us, in Jennings's words, Tocqueville in his "most unmediated form."[9] Three essays in the first half of this volume focus on this exceptional chapter and are, in their own way, a distinctive subsection to it.

Barbara Allen examines Tocqueville's treatment of the three races within the context of his greater narrative of the universalization of equality of conditions, noting that both slavery and the plight of the Native Americans invite us to reconsider the inexorability of equality's march as well as the extent to which the democratic ideal "buffers the counter-current of prejudice."[10] She notes that, on the one hand, Tocqueville's writings on race offer rich insights into the advance of democracy's equality of conditions as well as the problems of adaptation and transculturation, but on the other hand, Tocqueville's own analytic framework limited his analysis and blinded him to the potential of individuals to transcend contexts of imperialism and enslavement.

Jean-Louis Benoît's chapter focuses on the Native Americans and on the paradox of the denial of their right to self-determination within the greatest modern democracy. He sees Tocqueville's chapter on them in two lights: as a lawyerly brief of carefully documented facts, assembled by Tocqueville to denounce the Americans' injustice to the Native Americans; and as an effort to convince the French aristocracy that it must adapt to the inevitably increasing political and social democratization of the world. Like both Allen and Cheryl Welch, Benoît also emphasizes the international dimension to Tocqueville's chapter on the three races, by showing Tocqueville's application of the lessons learned

8. *DA,* 516.
9. Jennings, XX, in this volume.
10. Allen, XX, in this volume.

from the plight of the Native Americans to the French engagement in Algeria.

The lessons beyond France and America are indeed Welch's primary focus, and her essay allows us to see how Tocqueville's voyage to America remained with him after publication of *Democracy in America* and how the ideas developed during his American voyage and during the crafting of *Democracy in America* shaped his thinking about French involvement in Algeria. Welch's analysis of Tocqueville's writings and speeches on Algeria invites us to consider the limits within which Tocqueville endorsed imperialism and, thus, the possible limits of his own liberalism, particularly when confronted with the realities of the French political landscape of his day.

Each of the essays on the "Three Races" reminds us of how the ideas Tocqueville developed in *Democracy in America* continued to influence his thought and writings after his American experience. Situated at the division on the cusp of the first and second parts of this volume, these three chapters serve something of a transitional purpose between the first part's exploration of Tocqueville as a literal and intellectual voyager, and the second part's investigations of the "voyage" or application of Tocquevillian ideas beyond their immediate context of nineteenth-century America and France. If the essays in the first part of this volume touch on the development of Tocqueville's thought and on his indebtedness to a variety of intellectual sources, those in the second part of this volume focus on how we are indebted to him today, or the contemporary legacy of Tocquevillian ideas as they have been disseminated throughout the world.

The chapters composing part two of this volume—those by Enrique Aguilar, Aurelian Craiutu, Reiji Matsumoto, and Filippo Sabetti—thus explore Tocqueville's voyage beyond the United States and France, by investigating the application of Tocquevillian modes and concepts to contexts in Latin America, Europe, and Asia.

Aguilar takes his point of departure from Tocqueville's well-known awareness of the importance of mores to sustain political institutions and laws. Articulated with statements like "I am persuaded that the most fortunate situation and the best laws cannot maintain a constitution in spite of mores, while the latter still turn to good account the most unfavorable positions and the worst laws," the importance of mores is

a crucial aspect of Tocqueville's thought. Yet the historical-critical edition reminds us of the reciprocal influence laws and mores exert upon each other, for in a fragment that was not included in Tocqueville's final text, he observes, "Laws, however, work toward producing the spirit, the mores and the character of the people," then musing, "But in what proportion? There is the great problem that we cannot think too much about."[11] Working within this context of reciprocity between laws and mores, Aguilar considers whether Argentina's present disorders are primarily due to national mores, or to political leaders' abuses. He argues that the more political signs of disorder, such as the corruption of governmental officials, are but one manifestation of widespread societal movements. Moreover, he notes parallels between Tocqueville's soft despotism and the tutelary state that has arisen in contemporary Argentina, and he suggests that any reforms that hope to find success in Argentina must engage on both legal and extra-legal levels, and that they must seek above all to generate "consensus and habits related to free institutions."[12]

Craiutu's chapter also emphasizes the importance of mores for a postcommunist Eastern Europe, because, as he observes, Tocqueville invites us to explore whether democracy can first be implanted into the political sphere, then "transplanted" into society's mores. He finds Tocqueville a particularly apt guide for understanding contemporary Eastern Europe, because of the similarities between that region's present and those faced by Tocqueville's France after the end of the Old Regime: in particular, both the France about which Tocqueville wrote and the countries of present-day Eastern Europe are societies struggling with the legacy of an "old regime" as they transition to democracy and attempt to create and strengthen institutions and culture supportive of a free society. In addition to offering Tocquevillian warnings about possible dangers—including soft despotism springing from citizens' senses of isolation and atomization—Craiutu offers a range of prescriptions for that region's countries, stressing particularly Tocquevillian concepts such as civil society, social capital, the art of association, local government, and intermediary bodies.

11. *DA,* 499 and *n*m.
12. Aguilar, XX, in this volume.