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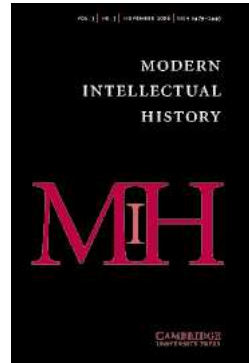
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THE CANVAS AND THE COLOR: TOCQUEVILLE’S “PHILOSOPHICAL HISTORY” AND WHY IT MATTERS NOW

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In December of 1850, exhausted by his role in French politics and recuperating from tuberculosis, Alexis de Tocqueville retreated to the Amalfi coast to think, write, and recover. To his best friend Louis de Kergolay, Tocqueville wrote about completing his memoir on the 1848 revolution and his plans to undertake a comprehensive account of French history that would explain the turmoil of the past century. The appeal was powerful, he explained to Kergolay, but “the difficulties are immense. The one that most troubles my mind comes from the mixture of history properly so called with historical philosophy. I still do not see how to mix these two things,” he conceded, “and yet, they must be mixed, for one could say that the first is the canvas and the second the color, and that it is necessary to have both at the same time in order to do the picture.” Tocqueville feared “that the one is harmful to the other, and that I lack the infinite art that would be necessary in order to choose properly the facts that must, so to speak, support the ideas.”¹

That image, which captures Tocqueville’s conception of the relation between what happened in the past and what it means to us, suggests the reasons why his own ideas continue to attract ardent champions and equally passionate critics.

¹ Alexis de Tocqueville to Louis de Kergolay, 15 December 1850, in Tocqueville, *Selected Letters on Politics and Society*, ed. Roger Boesche, trans. J. Toupin and Roger Boesche (Berkeley, 1985), 252–8, reprinted in *The Tocqueville Reader: A Life in Letters and Politics*, ed. Olivier Zunz and Alan S. Kahan (Oxford, 2002), 255–9. Tocqueville’s writings on the 1848 revolution, never intended for publication, appeared in an incomplete version, entitled *Souvenirs*, in 1893. The entire text was published only in 1942. It is now available in English as *Recollections: The French Revolution of 1848*, ed. J. P. Mayer and A. P. Kerr, trans. George Lawrence (New Brunswick, 1970). The most recent and most complete single-volume selection of Tocqueville’s letters is *Tocqueville. Lettres choisies. Souvenirs. 1814–1859*, ed. Françoise Mélonio and Laurence Guellec (Paris, 2003), which includes notes and introductions to the letters and to Tocqueville’s *Souvenirs*.

Whether examining the emergence of democracy in America, pondering the role of France in Algeria, recounting the upheavals of 1848, or explaining why the old regime of prerevolutionary France fell, Tocqueville infused bare chronicle with bold interpretation in a way that persuaded many of his contemporaries, outraged others, and continues to engage his millions of readers around the world.

When the distinguished intellectual historian Frank Manuel was asked why, in the 1990s, he was turning his attention to Marx, he replied dryly, “the books are all in the library.” Not so those of Tocqueville. Since 1989 the end of communism has meant a resurgence of interest in non-Marxist accounts of history and society. The century of Hegel, Marx, Emerson, and Freud has turned into the century of Tocqueville, Mill, Weber, and James, thinkers who understood the dynamics of ideas, class, and psychology, and who puzzled over our urgent questions concerning gender, race, and empire, without presuming to explain all human interaction with a single key. Just as Mill, Weber, and James have been lionized, demonized, and caricatured by those who would enlist them in struggles they never experienced or conceptual frameworks they never envisioned, so Tocqueville has been transformed from the tortured, ambivalent, multidimensional thinker so apparent from his published writings, journals, and correspondence into a symbol for combatants who claim simplified versions of his legacy or denounce cartoons of his ideas. When Bernard Henri-Lévy and George W. Bush vie to assume the mantle of Tocqueville; when conferences devoted to his thought are being held not only in France and America but in nations ranging from Poland to Japan; when his works, long standard on reading lists in history and political science, have become required texts for French students of literature and philosophy as well, his already lofty status has ascended to a higher level. We are witnessing the apotheosis of Tocqueville.²

Editions of Tocqueville’s writings, in French and in English, proliferate. The Gallimard edition of his *Oeuvres complètes* continues to be augmented; the three-volume Pléiade edition is now complete. A splendid critical edition of *The Old Regime and the French Revolution* in English translation was published on this side of the Atlantic before the French edition hit the shelves of bookstores in France. No fewer than four new English translations of *Democracy in America*

² Cf. Bernard Henri-Lévy, *American Vertigo: Traveling America in the Footsteps of Tocqueville*, trans. Charlotte Mendel (New York, 2005); Elizabeth Bumiller, “Bush Finds Affirmation in a Frenchman’s Words,” *New York Times* (14 March 2005), A-17; and Garrison Keillor’s gentle deflation, “On the Road avec M. Lévy,” *New York Times Book Review* (29 January 2006), 1, 9. In recent years Tocqueville has been added to the examination lists for French students concentrating not only in the social sciences but in literature and philosophy.

have appeared since 2003.³ In American social science, Tocqueville is ubiquitous.⁴ The scholar most recently elevated to a chair at the Collège de France, the pinnacle of the French university system, Pierre Rosanvallon, practices a version of “philosophical history” that can be traced to Tocqueville’s own. The premier Tocqueville scholar of her generation, Françoise Mélonio, is currently head of the oldest and most prestigious of France’s *Grandes écoles*, the Ecole normale supérieure.⁵ Tocqueville is hot. That heat warms the hearts of Tocqueville’s many admirers and inflames the sensibilities of his critics, who denounce him as an aristocrat, a fraud, an apologist for hierarchy and tradition. Given the number of scholars who have written about Tocqueville recently, and given the range of perspectives from which they have analyzed and evaluated his work, providing a comprehensive account of recent scholarship has become almost impossible.⁶

This essay has three more modest goals. I will first outline the very different forms the Tocqueville revival has taken among social scientists in the United States and France, where his writings have long had distinct resonances among scholars of political science, sociology, and political philosophy. I will then

³ The edition of Tocqueville’s writings long used in France was *Oeuvres complètes d’Alexis de Tocqueville*, ed. Gustave Beaumont, 9 vols. (Paris, 1864–6); the more recent editions include the most comprehensive Tocqueville, *Oeuvres, papiers et correspondances*, ed. J. P. Mayer, André Jardin and Françoise Mélonio (Paris, 1951–), conventionally referred to as *Oeuvres complètes*; and the now complete Pléiade edition of Tocqueville, *Oeuvres*, 3 vols., ed. François Furet and Françoise Mélonio (Paris, 1991–2004). In English there is now a critical edition of Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the French Revolution*, trans. Alan Kahan, ed. François Furet and Françoise Mélonio (Chicago, 1998); and four recent, rival editions of the *Democracy: Democracy in America*, trans. Gerald Bevan, ed. Isaac Kramnick and Jeff Seliger (New York, 2003); *Democracy in America*, ed. and trans. Harvey Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago, 2002); *Democracy in America*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer, ed. Olivier Zunz (New York, 2004); and a critical edition augmented with Tocqueville’s drafts and notes, *Democracy in America*, ed. Eduardo Nolla, trans. James Schleifer (Indianapolis, 2006); as well as a fine collection that includes excerpts from Tocqueville’s published writings, his correspondence, and his notebooks, *The Tocqueville Reader: A Life in Letters and Politics*, ed. Olivier Zunz and Alan Kahan (Oxford, 2002).

⁴ To cite just one example, the Department of Government at Harvard University includes at least eight political scientists—Jennifer Hochschild, Stanley Hoffmann, Harvey Mansfield, Robert Putnam, Nancy Rosenblum, Michael Sandel, Theda Skocpol, and Dennis Thompson—whose work has drawn heavily on Tocqueville’s ideas.

⁵ See Pierre Rosanvallon, *Democracy Past and Future*, ed. Samuel Moyn (New York, 2006); and Françoise Mélonio, *Tocqueville and the French*, trans. Beth G. Raps (Charlottesville, 1998 [first published in French in 1993]).

⁶ Especially valuable are the Introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Tocqueville*, ed. Cheryl B. Welch (Cambridge, 2006), 1–20; and the bicentennial issue of the *Tocqueville Review/La Revue Tocqueville* 26, 1 (2005), with selected articles published in that bilingual journal since 1977.

focus on the ways in which intellectual historians, through the detailed study of Tocqueville's writings, have illuminated the issues and complicated the arguments of many scholars who have written about him in the last two decades, a period during which debates over civil society have raged in America and, according to *L'Express*, "the whole of France has become Tocquevillean."⁷ After a generation of historians has devoted extraordinary attention to examining the process whereby Tocqueville's texts took shape and the rapidly changing contexts within which he worked, a picture is gradually emerging that reveals a much more nuanced and multidimensional thinker than the Tocqueville who first returned to prominence on both sides of the Atlantic after World War II. Finally, I will reflect briefly on the reasons why Tocqueville's writings will no doubt continue to spark controversy even if the various cartoon versions of "Tocqueville" are swept away.

Tocqueville's writings figured prominently in American and French debates about politics and history from the publication of the first volume of *Democracy in America* in 1835 until the closing years of the nineteenth century. At that point Tocqueville vanished, replaced on both sides of the Atlantic by analysts who focused less on the relations between politics, society, and culture than on the dynamics of class struggle in France and class, race, and ethnicity in the United States. When Tocqueville reemerged in the aftermath of World War II, he was put to work explaining how and why Europe had fallen under the spell of totalitarianism—and how and why the US had escaped that fate. Social scientists such as David Riesman, Seymour Martin Lipset, Daniel Bell, Robert Dahl, and Louis Hartz in the United States—and, through them, Raymond Aron in France—all invoked Tocqueville's writings to explain the fractures that split open European polities and the institutional and cultural resources that kept America together.⁸ But such accounts almost immediately came under fire in the

⁷ That phrase from J. C. Casanova, "Tocqueville dans ses oeuvres," *L'Express*, (20–6 February 1987), 102, shows that French news magazines are as prone to hyperbolic trend-spotting as their American counterparts. In the US, Tocqueville was declared "theorist of the decade" in Rob Edwards, Michael W. Foley, and Mario Diani, eds., *Beyond Tocqueville: Civil Society and the Social Capital Debate in Comparative Perspective* (Hanover, NH, 2001). A more recent illustration of Tocqueville's pervasiveness is Michael Kazin and Joseph A. McCartin, eds., *Americanism: New Perspectives on the History of an Ideal* (Chapel Hill, 2006). Despite Tocqueville's undeniable importance, his ideas do not resonate where categories of analysis differ entirely from his. Such domains include analytic political philosophy, rational-choice theory, and, perhaps oddly, nineteenth-century American history, where his perspective, shaped by elite informants, renders him untrustworthy. I discuss this dynamic in "Tocqueville, Mill, and the American Gentry," *Tocqueville Review/La Revue Tocqueville*, forthcoming.

⁸ See Stanley Hoffmann, "Aron et Tocqueville," in *idem, Raymond Aron, 1905–1983: Histoire et politique* (Paris, 1985), 200–12; and Françoise Mélonio, *Tocqueville and the French, 194–9*.

late 1960s, exposing yet again persistent divisions in French culture and revealing that the so-called consensus of postwar American culture was only a veneer masking deep disagreements.⁹

This social scientific urge to invoke the timeless insights of Tocqueville has several sources, but among the most important is Tocqueville's own occasionally stated aspiration to provide just such wisdom for the ages. In the 1850 letter to Kergolay already quoted, Tocqueville denied that he was content to compile mere details of "historical curiosities." He aimed instead to find the larger significance of the "things of our time," which, he confessed, are all "that interest the public and really interest me."¹⁰ In a speech he delivered before the Academy of Moral and Political Science in Paris in 1852, Tocqueville distinguished between studying the art of politics, with its focus on the daily battles and the vivid personalities of political tussles, and the science of politics, which aims to identify the universal laws of government by penetrating beneath the surface to the unchanging nature of man.¹¹ This was not the first time he had expressed that desire: "A world that is totally new," he wrote almost two decades earlier, in the Introduction to the first volume of *Democracy in America*, in which he laid out his ambitions, "demands a new political science."¹² If social scientists have been trying for fifty years to identify and use the pure, unchanging "message" or "meaning" of Tocqueville, an effort that most intellectual historians resist, they are continuing a tradition that began with Tocqueville himself, at least at some moments. As I will point out, the Norman sage sometimes despaired of his ability—or anyone else's—to discern truth or dispense wisdom, but his occasional expressions of a desire to transcend historical analysis have invited the efforts of those who prefer to use him for their own purposes instead of examining him in his own context.¹³

⁹ For more detailed discussions of this dynamic see James T. Kloppenberg, "Life Everlasting: Tocqueville in America," in *idem*, *The Virtues of Liberalism* (Oxford, 1998), 71–82; and James T. Kloppenberg, "From Hartz to Tocqueville: Shifting the Focus from Liberalism to Democracy in America," in Meg Jacobs, William J. Novak, and Julian Zelizer, eds., *The Democratic Experiment: New Directions in American Political History* (Princeton, 2003), NN–NN.

¹⁰ Tocqueville to Kergolay, 15 December 1850, in Tocqueville, *Selected Letters*, 254.

¹¹ Tocqueville, *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 16, *Mélanges*, ed. Françoise Mélonio (Paris, 1989), 230. See also the fine discussion of these issues in Aurelian Craiutu, "Tocqueville's Paradoxical Moderation," *Review of Politics* 67, 4 (Fall 2005): 599–629.

¹² Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Goldhammer trans., 7.

¹³ Tocqueville's oscillation between the particular and the general, the timely and the timeless, places him in the grand tradition of French moralists and explains why neither historians nor social scientists can claim him exclusively as their own. On this issue see the wide-ranging study by Jean-Louis Benoit, *Tocqueville moraliste* (Paris, 2004).

The Tocqueville most often resurrected by American social scientists since the 1960s has been the author of *Democracy in America*, who has been used for several distinctly different purposes. Radicals on the left have used Tocqueville as a club to pound home the message that the United States is, in Herbert Marcuse's phrase, a "one-dimensional" society in which an obsessive consumerism has deflected all authentically democratic political impulses. Whereas some leftists have seen Tocqueville as a kindred spirit sympathetic to equality, or a like-minded prophet disturbed by the prospect that the people might be dulled by plenty into a depoliticized stupor, others have indicted Tocqueville for crimes against democracy. The current leader in this vitriol sweepstakes is no doubt Sheldon Wolin, whose monumental *Tocqueville between Two Worlds* vibrates with rage. As a long-time fan of Wolin's *Politics and Vision* and one of those who subscribed to—in both senses of the term—the journal Wolin edited and animated in the early 1980s, *democracy*, I admire his steadfast commitment to the principles of participation and equality. Launching the journal at the most inauspicious of moments, in January 1981, Wolin contributed to the inaugural issue an editorial entitled "Why Democracy?" There he observed that "most historical analysis tends to be untheoretical; most theoretical analysis tends to be unhistorical; and most of the analyses that boast of being pragmatic, tough-minded, and practical are neither historical nor theoretical." He aimed for *democracy* to "encourage the development of an historical and theoretical understanding around the concrete problems of the present."¹⁴

That aspiration likewise animates Wolin's passionate study of Tocqueville, a difficult book that demands at least brief discussion here. Wolin aims to uncover the reasons why both popular participation and economic equality have disappeared from twenty-first-century American "postdemocracy." He laments the contemporary condition of "postmodern despotism" that "consists of the collapse of politics into economics and the emergence of a new form, the economic polity," which is, "as Tocqueville suggested, benign," with "power transmuted into solicitude, popular sovereignty into consumerism," and "the democracy of citizens into shareholder democracy." The original ideals of popular sovereignty and civic engagement have mutated into "consumer sovereignty." The market, according to its champions, accurately registers the preferences of citizen-customers, who vote with their purchases and whose economic calculations are said to result from "rational choice." With Wolin's diagnosis of our current condition I have no quarrel.

As a study of Tocqueville's life and writings, however, *Tocqueville Between Two Worlds* will strike readers either as lively and engaging or, despite its

¹⁴ Sheldon Wolin, "Why Democracy?" *democracy* 1 (January 1981), 3–5.

undeniable erudition, as cantankerous and one-sided in its single-minded focus on Tocqueville's hankering for a mythic past. "Thematically," Wolin contends, "the most important element" in Tocqueville's analysis was "the archaic," which "gave a distinctive cast to his thinking." Wolin treats all of Tocqueville's writings as a sustained attempt to recover the glorious culture of pre-revolutionary, pre-democratic France, which Wolin designates "*ancienneté*." Wolin aims to show how Tocqueville's writings—despite Tocqueville's own frequently stated intentions to the contrary—served to undermine what Wolin, following Hannah Arendt, dubs "the political" and thus served to legitimate systems that have excluded the people and propped up privilege. According to Wolin, the features of American democracy that impressed Tocqueville—self-governing New England towns, religious fervor, local associations, a lively press—were those that reminded him of old-regime France, with its local *communes*, its Catholicism, its feudal corporate bodies, and its independent aristocrats. When Tocqueville entered politics as an elected member of the Chamber of Deputies he reacted in horror to the threats of socialism and democracy. His terrified response to the 1848 revolution in his *Recollections* reveals to Wolin not the trauma induced by seeing that an enlarged French electorate could endorse a two-bit dictator like Louis Napoleon but instead only the depth of Tocqueville's anxiety. *The Old Regime*, Wolin contends, is best understood as an unsteady mixture of history and myth in which the irresistible and intoxicating lure of *ancienneté* prevented Tocqueville from seeing the class dynamics and political upheavals that drove the revolution and its aftermath. Unlike modern empiricists (inspired by the scientific procedures embraced by Descartes and Bacon) who take seriously the need to marshal evidence to support their conclusions, Tocqueville's nostalgia (derived from Pascal's premodern religious sensibility) blurred his vision and colored the portraits of both America and France that he bequeathed to his readers.¹⁵

In his conclusion Wolin broadens his indictment to include not only Tocqueville himself but the generations of interpreters who have conspired to mask his deep and poisonous aristocratic loyalties. He concedes that the name "Tocqueville" serves to designate as a single person a deeply divided and disoriented self, a conflicted being who not only invites but "courts" a postmodern reading that deconstructs texts and their authors into unstable and multivalent parts.¹⁶ This observation seems consistent with Wolin's earlier admission that

¹⁵ Sheldon S. Wolin, *Tocqueville Between Two Worlds: The Making of a Political and Theoretical Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 565–71. For an assault from a different angle see Garry Wills, "Did Tocqueville 'Get' America?" *New York Review of Books* (29 April 2004), 52–6.

¹⁶ Wolin, *Tocqueville Between Two Worlds*, 561–8. Other self-consciously postmodern readings of Tocqueville include Dominick LaCapra, *History and Reading: Tocqueville*,

Tocqueville began in hope, then recoiled in anxiety after 1848, and only toward the end of his life retreated into nostalgia. That narrative arc incorporates the multiple roles Tocqueville played: lawyer, politician, parliamentarian, aristocrat, political hero *manqué*, minister of foreign affairs, theorist, and, finally, object of generations of scholarly analysis. Although the question of whether Wolin's dogged insistence on the importance of "the archaic" in all of Tocqueville's writings is consistent with his own final embrace of postmodern indeterminacy will be for readers to decide for themselves. Later in this essay I will indicate why I think intellectual historians should resist both the unity of Wolin's *anciennteté* and the indeterminacy of his multiple Tocquevilles in favor of another option.¹⁷

Whereas Wolin rejects Tocqueville's claims to embrace neither the feudal world into which he was born nor the world of individualism and materialism in which he was fated to live, more conservative interpreters of Tocqueville's writings in the United States have credited him with accurately identifying many of the dangers of the modern age. From Russell Kirk and Friedrich Hayek to Robert Nisbet and contemporary followers of Leo Strauss such as Harvey Mansfield, right-leaning writers have been drawn to Tocqueville's indictment of money-grubbing egoists responsible for the modern loss of self-restraint and respect for tradition, community, and authority. Tocqueville understood that the rise of democracy meant the decline of aristocratic grandeur and feared that it might mean also the end of national glory. Indeed, this conservative portrait of Tocqueville as Cassandra, which might be considered as one-sided as Wolin's, might help explain the motivation behind Wolin's own project. Precisely the dimensions of Tocqueville's writings that enrage Wolin enchant his

Foucault, French Studies (Toronto, 2000), 73–121, in which LaCapra characteristically laments most interpreters' tendency to "flatten" Tocqueville's multiple dimensions and, refreshingly and uncharacteristically, uses Tocqueville's critique of the penchant of Enlightenment *philosophes* for overly abstract analysis as leverage against Tocqueville's own inattention to the socioeconomic context of the French Revolution. See also Frank Ankersmit, "Tocqueville and the Sublimity of Democracy," *Tocqueville Review/La Revue Tocqueville* 15, 1 (1994), 193–215; and Mark Reinhardt, *The Art of Being Free: Taking Liberties with Tocqueville, Marx, and Arendt* (Ithaca, 1997).

¹⁷ Critical discussion of Wolin's *Tocqueville Between Two Worlds* includes Daniel T. Rodgers, "Theorizing America," *Modern Intellectual History* 1 (2004): 111–21; Alan Ryan, "Visions of Politics," *New York Review of Books* (27 June 2002), 35–8; Melvin Richter, "The Deposition of Alexis de Tocqueville," *Tocqueville Review/La Revue Tocqueville* 23, 2 (2002), 173–99; and Seymour Drescher, "Who Needs Anciennteté? Tocqueville on Aristocracy and Modernity," paper in my possession. For reflections on Wolin's oeuvre prior to the publication of his *Tocqueville* that illuminate the continuities from his landmark *Politics and Vision: Continuity and Innovation in Western Political Thought* (Princeton, 1960), see Aryeh Botwinick and William F. Connolly, eds., *Democracy and Vision: Sheldon Wolin and the Vicissitudes of the Political* (Princeton, 2001).

more conservative American commentators, who now have not only their own interpretations of Tocqueville's meaning but their very own version of *Democracy in America*, edited and translated (and explained) by Harvey Mansfield and Delba Winthrop, to cite in their scholarship and assign to their students.¹⁸

Far more numerous than the conservative interpreters of Tocqueville are those American sociologists and political scientists who have mined his writings for insights into civil society, a prominent issue in American social science in recent decades. From Robert Bellah's *Habits of the Heart*, perhaps the most widely discussed book of the 1980s, to Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone*, a candidate for that designation for the past decade, words and concepts taken from Tocqueville have been pervasive. Although this literature is too large, too rapidly growing, and too diverse to allow easy summary, some commentators have argued that it can be divided into two rough categories. On the one hand are writers who believe that participation in voluntary associations (a motley category including everything from bowling leagues and church choirs to self-help groups) inculcates a civic sensibility and an ethic of reciprocity, inoculates individuals against alienation and inwardness, and propels them into political activity. On the other hand are those writers who emphasize the positive role played by government in facilitating such activities; in the absence of a vibrant public sphere—the town meetings, library associations, public schools, juries, political parties, and reform societies that Tocqueville encountered in America—civil society withers. Writers leaning right might seem likely to cluster in the former camp and those on the left in the latter, but things are not that simple. The question of civil society has attracted the attention of theorists, empiricists, and activists with diverse political affiliations ranging from participatory democrats to communitarians to conservatives to libertarians. In all of this literature Tocqueville is credited with having identified a distinctive feature of American culture, but that is where agreement ends. Some commentators claim he considered association an automatic reflex spontaneously generated on the frontier; others attribute to him a focus on specifically political forms of group activity. Still others stress that only local and altogether voluntary associations would meet Tocqueville's criteria, thereby ruling out both national

¹⁸ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. Mansfield and Winthrop; see the critical discussions of this translation by Arthur Goldhammer, Seymour Drescher, Cheryl Welch, and Melvin Richter, and the response of Mansfield and Winthrop, in *French Politics, Culture and Society* 21, 1 (Spring 2003). Other studies that resonate with American conservatives include Peter Lawler, *The Restless Mind: Alexis de Tocqueville on the Origins and Perpetuation of Human Liberty* (Lanham, MD, 1993); the essays by William Kristol, Jean Behtke Elshain, Peter Lawler, and Ralph C. Hancock in Ken Masugi, ed., *Interpreting Tocqueville's "Democracy in America"* (Lanham, MD, 1995); and Peter Lawler and Joseph Alulis, eds., *Tocqueville's Defense of Human Liberty: Current Essays* (New York, 1993).

organizations and those made possible by government rather than emerging from private initiatives. In the debates over civil society in American social science, Tocqueville is everywhere.¹⁹

Things are different in France. There the relevant text is not *Democracy in America* but *The Old Regime and the French Revolution*, and for that reason Tocqueville is cast in another role. His return to prominence in French social science coincided with the publication of Alexandr Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago, 1918–1956*. When *Gulag* became available in French (and English) translation in late 1973 and early 1974, it intensified the already lively debates in France about communism, totalitarianism, and the French traditions of anti-individualist statism on the communist left and the Gaullist right. These traditions, rooted in the universalistic aspirations of the republican tradition, descended not only from the French Revolution but from the monarchical tradition it overthrew.²⁰ Because Tocqueville's arguments concerning civil society in American democracy—with important roles ascribed to various intermediate associations, civil and religious, local and voluntaristic—did not resonate anywhere on the political spectrum of republican France, *Democracy in America* was rarely read after the proclamation of the Third Republic in 1870.

The Old Regime, by contrast, became the central text in the campaign launched by a generation of French scholars to unseat the orthodox Marxist interpretation of the Revolution in particular and to resurrect an alternative understanding of French history, society, and politics more generally. In place of class dynamics, those who embraced Tocqueville emphasized an alternative analytical framework. Invoking Tocqueville in the 1970s was a provocative act. The Tocqueville who had lingered around the edges of interwar French intellectual life remained, despite Aron's efforts, a shadowy reactionary. Known primarily through *Comme disait M. de Tocqueville*, a biography written in 1925 by Antoine Rédier, a member of the extreme-right Action française, Tocqueville was known as an aristocrat whose *Democracy* was but a youthful folly and whose profound realization that popular government devolves into anarchy or terror found expression in *The Old Regime*. As was true before and after World War II, a French republic with its eyes fixed on the question of how to overcome a rigid tradition of state religion and restore national glory found little guidance in Tocqueville.²¹

¹⁹ A representative sampling of scholars who have recently addressed the question of civil society with explicit reference to Tocqueville might include Robert N. Bellah, Robert D. Putnam, Benjamin Barber, Jean L. Cohen and Andrew Arato, Theda Skocpol, Nancy Rosenblum, William A. Galston, Donald L. Gelpi, Bernard Murchland, and E. J. Dionne.

²⁰ For a detailed analysis of these issues see Michael Scott Christofferson, *French Intellectuals against the Left: The Anti-totalitarian Moment of the 1970s* (New York, 2004).

²¹ Like everyone else interested in this question, I am indebted to Françoise Mélonio, *Tocqueville and the French*, a comprehensive study of Tocqueville's standing in France

In the wake of the debates of the 1970s, however, French intellectuals from various backgrounds began to coalesce in their dissatisfaction with Marx and their interest in recovering alternative traditions. From anthropology, political theory, sociology, and history, Louis Dumont, Claude Lefort, Michel Crozier, and François Furet turned away from the traditions of Marxism and positivism still dominant in French academic life and turned toward Tocqueville. They were searching for ways to make sense of equality, individual liberty, the dynamics of institutional life, and the curious French obsession with statism that neither Marx nor Durkheim could explain. Furet became convinced that the standard Marxist reading of the Revolution both failed to explain the political dynamics of the late eighteenth century and transformed violence into emancipation. By interpreting (and celebrating) Jacobin terror as a necessary step toward universal liberation, French Marxists had inadvertently provided a rationale for totalitarianism. If Tocqueville served awkwardly as Rédier's voice of aristocracy, he was better suited to the roles scripted for him by Dumont, Lefort, Crozier, and especially Furet, as the anti-Durkheim or the anti-Marx. Furet argued that Tocqueville's account of the old regime, with its obsessive centralization and its obliteration of local authority and independent political activity, could explain better than historians drawing on Marx why French revolutionaries felt compelled to unify authority, why they could not abide dissent, and why they yearned for a degree of unanimity—modeled on Rousseau's general will—that distinguished the republican revolution in France from its analogues in England and America.²²

Three unrelated developments also contributed to returning Tocqueville to a more prominent place in French intellectual life than he had occupied since his death. First, the French Socialist Party, under the leadership of François Mitterrand, was separating itself from French communism and emerging as a more moderate party of social democracy, a party invoking the spirit of Jean Jaurès and Léon Blum and emphasizing individual rights along with equality and fraternity. Simultaneously, the Soviet Union and its client states in Eastern Europe

that will serve as a model for the scholar who undertakes a similar account of Tocqueville's reception in the United States. See also the fine account in Cheryl Welch, *De Tocqueville* (Oxford, 2001), 217–62.

²² On Furet's path from the *Annales* historians, with their emphasis on material conditions, to Tocqueville see François Furet, "Beyond the *Annales*," *Journal of Modern History* 55 (September 1983), 389–410. The seminal study by François Furet, *Penser la Révolution française* (Paris, 1978), has been published in English with the less evocative title *Interpreting the French Revolution*, trans. Elborg Forster (Cambridge, 1981). See also Christofferson, *French Intellectuals against the Left*; Mélonio, *Tocqueville and the French*; and Welch, *De Tocqueville* (2001), especially 289–335. For a balanced account of the Jacobins and how they have been interpreted see Patrice Higonnet, *Goodness beyond Virtue: Jacobins during the French Revolution* (Cambridge, 2000), especially 289–335.

were dissolving, and the discussions of Tocqueville and democracy that had been held in Eastern Europe in the 1980s assumed a new significance in the conferences held after 1989. Finally, the bicentennial celebrations of the French Revolution provided an opportune moment for codifying Furet's new understanding of the French Revolution and French intellectuals' related rediscovery of the individual, the voluntary association, and democracy.

Yet just as Tocqueville himself, master analyst of democracy in America, perceptive historian of the French Revolution, and elected member of the Chamber of Deputies throughout the 1840s, worried that the political conflicts of his day might spin out of control, so many contemporary French intellectuals remain skeptical about democracy because they fear that it leads necessarily toward either the untutored reign of the masses or the uncontrolled tyranny of the market. The lure of unified, orderly authority, exercised by an elite meritocracy (of the right or the left) safely insulated from the whims of the uneducated masses, remains strong. The very pronounced preference of French theorists for the seemingly innocuous term "republican" over "liberal" or "democrat" testifies to the persistence of French anxieties: either a rank individualism or a murderous anarchy will be the consequence if either liberalism or democracy is permitted to rule. Acknowledging even the theoretical legitimacy of persistent, ineradicable conflict in democracy, accepting the messiness of individual rights that pull away, in multiple directions, from unitary authority, remains a problem for many French intellectuals on the left and on the right.²³

Even those most powerfully attracted to Tocqueville share his concern that liberal democracy, rudderless and unmastered, is unsatisfyingly indeterminate. Pierre Rosanvallon, among the most sophisticated of contemporary French scholars, betrays this characteristic French perplexity in his recurrent observation that French history careens between a Rousseauist voluntaristic fusion, to be achieved by a totalitarian regime of the right or the left, and a technocratic rationalism imposed by elites, again of the right or the left. The idea that something vital might lie between those poles, something Tocqueville witnessed in the United States and England and sought to help create in France through his political activity and his writing, remains unattractive (or perhaps even incoherent or incomprehensible) to many French thinkers, evidently including Rosanvallon.

²³ French political theorists who have focused attention on Tocqueville include Claude Lefort, many of whose essays are available in Claude Lefort, *Democracy and Political Theory*, trans. David Macey (Oxford, 1988); Pierre Manent, *Tocqueville and the Nature of Democracy*, trans. John Waggoner (Lanham, MD, 1996); *idem*, *An Intellectual History of Liberalism*, trans. Rebecca Balinski (Princeton, 1994); and Marcel Gauchet and Bernard Manin, whose essays on Tocqueville and democracy, along with essays by Manent, are included in Mark Lilla, ed., *New French Thought: Political Philosophy* (Princeton, 1994).

Notwithstanding that apparent aversion to the cultural project of liberal democracy, Rosanvallon has embraced, as did Lefort and Tocqueville before him, the idea of “philosophical history” that all of them inherited from Montesquieu. Readers of this journal will find Rosanvallon’s account of what such a philosophical history involves both fascinating and uncannily familiar. Although Rosanvallon works hard to distinguish his method from the practice of mere intellectual history, the striking similarities point toward the conclusion I will draw at the end of this essay.²⁴

Rosanvallon urges us to broaden the study of ideas to include the study of culture and of “the political.” By “political” he means something distinct from Arendt or Wolin, the integration of socioeconomic and institutional analysis with careful consideration of historical actors’ perceptions. Rosanvallon’s goal, in his words, “is to identify the *historical nodes* around which new political and social rationalities organize themselves and representations of public life undergo change, in relation to the transformation of institutions and forms of regulation and connection. It is a *philosophical* history because it is through concepts that organized society’s self-representations”—ideas such as equality, sovereignty, and democracy—become “intelligible.” This project requires the study not only of texts but also of other forms of cultural expression. Philosophical historians must put together “all those materials drawn upon, each in separate ways, by historians of ideas, of mentalities, of institutions, and of events.” This is an attractive approach for studying a thinker such as Tocqueville or a theory and practice such as democracy, because individual theorists and democratic cultures take shape over time. Rosanvallon observes that such a historical approach is, more fundamentally, “a condition” of the study of democracy, because “democracy *is* a history. It has been a work irreducibly involving exploration and experimentation, in its attempt to understand and elaborate itself.” Rosanvallon acknowledges that his effort to treat democracy in that way places him in the tradition of nineteenth-century thinkers such as Edgar Quinet, François Guizot, and, of course, Tocqueville.²⁵

That understanding of democracy and that conception of historical study are particularly useful for the study of Tocqueville and his ideas, which can be understood only within the frameworks of his life, his turbulent times, and his own conviction that concepts such as liberty and equality make sense not

²⁴ Pierre Rosanvallon, *Democracy Past and Future*, includes a wide range of Rosanvallon’s writings, including his 2002 inaugural lecture at the Collège de France, and Moyn’s informative introduction, which may be supplemented by Andrew Jainchill and Samuel Moyn, “French Democracy between Totalitarianism and Solidarity: Pierre Rosanvallon and Revisionist Historiography,” *Journal of Modern History* 76 (March 2004), 107–54.

²⁵ Rosanvallon, *Democracy Past and Future*, 38, 62–4; original emphases.

in the abstract but only within particular sociocultural and historical contexts. In the remainder of this essay I will attempt to show, by deploying the work of a generation of scholars who have dramatically improved our knowledge of Tocqueville through the sophisticated and detailed study of his texts and their contexts, how historical analysis can clarify, supplement, and—unavoidably—complicate the understandings of Tocqueville and his ideas in contemporary American and French social and political thought. I will proceed by discussing, in admittedly too little detail, central issues in several stages of Tocqueville's career and writings, suggesting and pointing to, rather than demonstrating, what specialists have found through painstaking historical scholarship. Emerging from recent historical scholarship is a portrait of a man not only caught between two worlds but caught throughout his career between contending and shifting political and cultural forces. The notion of a stable, consistent "Tocqueville," with stable, consistent ideas, let alone a single consistent "message" concerning either "the archaic" or "individual freedom," disappears. What takes its place, however, is not the indeterminate textuality of Wolin's conclusion but a particular historical actor whose ideas, as a result both of his own painful experiences and of the remarkably unstable period in which he lived, changed over time in precise ways that can be—and have been—specified. The Tocqueville we have now, two hundred years after his birth, is complex, but he is no enigma.

"Wanna get away?" That plaintive question is posed by a current television advertisement offering viewers low air fares enabling them to escape particularly difficult or embarrassing situations. Americans who are not specialists in French history have trouble understanding why Tocqueville found himself in such predicaments—repeatedly. Descended on both paternal and maternal sides from prominent (but no longer especially rich) families of the old regime, Tocqueville was committing a kind of treason to his Bourbon heritage when he—alone among the members of his family—took an oath of loyalty to the new, bourgeois, Orleanist monarchy of Louis-Philippe that replaced the last Bourbon king, Charles X, in July of 1830. Distrusted by the new regime because of his family ties and by his family because of his ties to the new regime, the twenty-five-year-old Tocqueville eagerly accepted an invitation to study the American prison system with his friend Gustave de Beaumont. From the beginning, Tocqueville stood on the margins of the July Monarchy, an awkward position that gave him both an enviable distance and a persistent uneasiness. During his life (1805–59) Tocqueville traveled not only the United States and Canada but throughout Europe and to Algeria. In his native France he witnessed two republics, two monarchies, and two empires. In none of them did he feel at home.²⁶

²⁶ Tocqueville's liminal status has been a central theme of most biographical studies written in recent decades, including André Jardin's masterful *Tocqueville: A Biography*, trans. Lydia

What do we know about Tocqueville's life and education during the years before he embarked on the trip to America? We know enough to rule out both Wolin's claim that he was a "premodern" thinker for whom evidence had little value and Furet's claim that he already had in mind the ideas about democracy and revolution that made him famous. The most important figures in his early years were Pascal, Montesquieu, Rousseau, Chateaubriand, and Guizot, who taught him about institutions and regimes, about states of nature and natural sensibilities, and about the history of local life and government in France. When Furet first uncovered Tocqueville's extensive notes on the lectures by Guizot that Tocqueville attended at the Sorbonne in the late 1820s, in which Guizot argued that medieval French *communes* had been more or less self-governing before the absolute monarchies of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries systematically subjected them to royal authority, Furet thought he had found the key to Tocqueville's accounts of both American democracy and the French Revolution.

But Furet overstated his case. Whereas Guizot had praised the monarchy for quelling local upheavals, achieving national unification, and facilitating the orderly government of France, a process that also made possible the rise of a productive and apolitical bourgeoisie, Tocqueville's notes indicate his dissatisfaction with Guizot's characterizations of the self-governing *communes* as "ferocious" and his celebrations of the monarchy and the bourgeoisie. Tocqueville was wondering already whether the "excessively timid" bourgeoisie had exchanged the vitality of self-government for the "calm of servitude" and "equality under a master."²⁷ Distinct from Guizot, and convinced that centralization breeds atomistic individualism, were early nineteenth-century legitimists such as Joseph Fiévée, Joseph de Villèle, Ferdinand Béchard, and the writers clustering around the Catholic journal *L'Avenir* and Kergolay's *La Revue provinciale*. Although these writers helped focus attention on the

Davis and Robert Hemenway (1984; New York, 1988); Jean-Claude Lamberti, *Tocqueville and the Two Democracies*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, 1989 [first published 1983]); Roger Boesche, *The Strange Liberalism of Alexis de Tocqueville* (Ithaca, 1987); Alan Kahan, *Aristocratic Liberalism: The Social and Political Thought of Jacob Burkhardt, John Stuart Mill, and Alexis de Tocqueville* (Oxford, 1992); Welch, *De Tocqueville* (2001); and Jean-Louis Benoit, *Tocqueville: Un Destin paradoxal* (Paris, 2005).

²⁷ The most recent telling of this complex tale is Robert T. Gannett, Jr., "Bowling Ninepins in Tocqueville's Township," *American Political Science Review* 97, 1 (February 2003), 1–16; my quotations from Tocqueville's notes are taken from his brilliant article. For fuller versions see Robert T. Gannett, Jr., *Tocqueville Unveiled: The Historian and His Sources for "The Old Regime and the Revolution"* (Chicago, 2003); François Furet, "The Conceptual System of Democracy in America," in *idem*, *In the Workshop of History*, trans. Jonathan Mandelbaum (Chicago, 1984); and *idem*, "The Intellectual Origins of Tocqueville's Thought," *Tocqueville Review/La Revue Tocqueville* 7 (1985–6): 117–29.

advantages of decentralization, their legitimism distinguished their perspectives from Tocqueville's.²⁸

When Tocqueville arrived in America, therefore, he was already alert to the issues of self-government, centralized authority, and the problematic relationship between social and economic development and political institutions. But what he learned in America changed his thinking decisively. The work of the Yale School of Tocquevilleans, launched in 1938 by George Wilson Pierson's monumental *Tocqueville and Beaumont in America* and continuing with the equally Herculean labors of James T. Schleifer, has demonstrated just how carefully Tocqueville observed, how thoroughly he reexamined, and how completely he revised his perception of democracy. His thinking changed while he was in the New World and after he returned home to write the first volume of *Democracy in America*, which was published to immediate acclaim in 1835. Tocqueville's own understanding of democracy went through multiple stages. He was influenced most powerfully by his New England informants, including Jared Sparks, John Quincy Adams, and Francis Calley Gray; by his careful study of Joseph Story's *Commentaries on the Constitution*, of Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia*, and of *The Federalist*; by his readings on English and Swiss local government; and perhaps just as profoundly by his concerns about the continuing centralization of French government under the July Monarchy and its consequences for public life in France. Tocqueville learned to appreciate how crucial was the interaction between the social and the political, but (unlike some more recent commentators on civil society) he never lost sight of the essential role of government in associational life or democratic culture.²⁹

A brief outline of what Tocqueville learned in America demonstrates how substantially his previous ideas were transformed by his travels and his reflections on them. The thoroughgoing equality of conditions—at least among whites—extended from property-holding (achieved in part by abolishing entail and primogeniture) and political rights to the relative absence of social hierarchies,

²⁸ On these legitimists see Annelien de Dijn, "Aristocratic Liberalism in Post-revolutionary France," *Historical Journal* 48 (2005): 661–81; and her work in progress on the intellectual origins of Tocqueville's analysis of the French Revolution.

²⁹ George Wilson Pierson's landmark 1938 study, still the most detailed account of Tocqueville and Beaumont's trip, has been reissued as *Tocqueville in America* (Baltimore, 1996). Cf. James T. Schleifer, *The Making of Tocqueville's "Democracy in America"*, 2nd enlarged edition (Indianapolis, 2000 [first published 1980]), in which Schleifer points out that Tocqueville worked with as many as nineteen different meanings of democracy (325–39); and the critical edition of *Democracy in America*, ed. Eduardo Nolla and trans. James T. Schleifer (Indianapolis, 2006). I discuss Tocqueville's informants from New England and England in "Tocqueville, Mill, and the New England Gentry," *Tocqueville Review/La Revue Tocqueville*, forthcoming.

deferential behavior, and diversity of thought. Change, both more rapid and more incessant than Tocqueville anticipated, included both what was done and where it was done; Americans prized innovation and mobility. Much of what Tocqueville saw surprised him: the stupefying cruelty of slavery and the severity of prisons, the degradation of America's "noble savages," the importance of literacy for the ubiquitous newspapers and the vitality of what we now call "the public sphere," the novelty of American federalism—particularly judicial review, the balance of powers, and the decentralization of authority—and the Americans' habit of associating in groups devoted to diverse political, social, religious, and moral causes. Those experiences manifested themselves in the arguments he advanced in Volume One.³⁰

After Tocqueville returned from America he made two trips to Britain, in 1833 and 1835, and those journeys too altered his thinking. Whereas he had seen in the United States the dramatic difference between France, with its centralized authority and its legacy of aristocratic culture, and the democracy of the United States, in England he encountered a different world. There decentralized representative government operated alongside ancient aristocracy in an economic environment marked by emerging industrialization and an ominous commercial spirit in which money was becoming the measure of all things, a prospect that disgusted Tocqueville's sensibilities. As he wrote to John Stuart Mill in June of 1835, "I love liberty by taste, equality by instinct and reason." His travels made the challenge of uniting those competing "passions" even more difficult. England enabled Tocqueville to triangulate between the French and American cases, and the result was both a different and a more complex account in Volume Two of *Democracy*. Tocqueville's second trip to Britain heightened his awareness of industrial poverty and the danger of a new plutocracy. In a speech he delivered in 1835 he lamented that poor relief rendered its recipients indolent and condemned them to a life of dependence, but two years later he was predicting that labor conflicts might lead to the education of workers, the formation of unions, and the promising readjustment of workers' status in industrial economies.³¹

³⁰ See James T. Schleifer, "Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* Reconsidered," in *Cambridge Companion to Tocqueville*, ed. Welch, 121–38.

³¹ Tocqueville's fascinating June 1835 letter to Mill, who had written a glowing review of the first volume of *Democracy* in the *London and Westminster Review*, appears in Tocqueville, *Selected Letters*, ed. Boesche, 100–2. See also Tocqueville, *Journeys to England and Ireland*, ed. J.-P. Mayer, trans. George Lawrence (New Haven, 1958); and *Alexis de Tocqueville's Journey in Ireland July–August 1835*, ed. Emmet Larkin (Washington, DC, 1990). Still the best sources on Tocqueville's travels in England are Seymour Drescher, *Tocqueville and England* (Cambridge, 1964); and *idem, Dilemmas of Democracy: Tocqueville and Modernization* (Pittsburgh, 1968). See also *idem, ed., Tocqueville and Beaumont on Social Reform* (New York, 1968); Kahan, *Aristocratic Liberalism*, on Tocqueville and Mill;

The effects of Tocqueville's British experience and the effects of the July Monarchy's policies of censorship combined to give the second volume of *Democracy in America*, published in 1840, a very different tone from the first. The striking discrepancies between the two volumes make clear why all straightforward claims about what Tocqueville said or meant in *Democracy in America* are problematical. In Volume One Tocqueville worried that the majority might stifle dissent, in Volume Two that there would be no dissent to stifle. Volume One raises the specter of passionate masses careening toward anarchy; Volume Two raises the specter of drones incapable of acting. In Volume One industry is missing; in Volume Two it has become an ominous threat. And so on. Tocqueville himself emphasized the continuities between the volumes; surely such continuities exist. But he acknowledged that readers could discern a change. In a letter to his friend John Stuart Mill, the only reviewer whom he credited with seeing what he was trying to do, he admitted that Volume Two lost "the ordinary reader" by trying to "depict the general features of democratic societies" rather than adding details to his earlier portrait of American democracy. Volume Two moved from concrete particularities to the abstract and conceptual; only fifteen names of individuals appear, and not one is an American. As he wrote to Mill, Volume Two pleased only readers "very accustomed to looking for general and speculative truths."³²

In Volume Two Tocqueville undertook to resolve the most striking paradoxes he observed during his journey to America, those concerning religion and civic virtue. Having experienced a crisis of religious faith himself at the age of sixteen, and acutely aware of the havoc caused in France by the wars of religion that Catholics fought with Protestants during the Reformation and with Revolutionaries after 1789, Tocqueville was puzzled by both the presence in America of fervent religious faith and the absence of religious conflict. By separating church and state, Americans had removed a potential source of tension and provided an anchor that tethered a democratic culture otherwise at risk of drifting into chaos.³³ Moreover, the particular form of religiosity that Tocqueville judged the most influential, Puritanism, both provided a template for the

and the selection of Tocqueville's published and unpublished writings on England and industrialization in *The Tocqueville Reader*, 141–50.

³² Tocqueville's letter to Mill, 30 December 1840, is in *The Tocqueville Reader*, 213–14.

³³ On Tocqueville's loss of conventional religious faith see his letter to Mme Swetchine, 26 February 1857, in *The Tocqueville Reader*, 334–6; and cf. the discussion of his idiosyncratic religiosity in Jardin, *Tocqueville*, 493–504. See also the discussions of this issue in Agnès Antoine, *L'Impensé de la démocratie: Tocqueville, la citoyenneté, et la religion* (Paris, 2003); Joshua Mitchell, *The Fragility of Freedom: Tocqueville on Religion, Democracy, and the American Future* (Chicago, 1995); and Larry Siedentop, *Tocqueville* (Oxford, 1994).

all-important institution of self-government, the New England town, and valorized the forms of behavior that Tocqueville designated “l’intérêt bien entendu,” or “self-interest properly understood.” His education and experience had acquainted Tocqueville only with Christian or classical civic virtue, understood as either self-abnegation or self-sacrifice, on the one hand, and with the sin of egoism or the vice of unremitting self-centeredness, on the other. In America he encountered something new, a disposition that he thought rooted in Puritanism but manifested now in various forms of religiosity, including Catholicism, and especially in the multiple forms of association that bred Americans’ willingness to internalize an ethic of reciprocity. From their many experiences of associated life, Americans inclined toward benevolent activity whether they were motivated by civic or Christian virtue or not. This disposition prevented ambitions from becoming vicious and softened the edges of competition.³⁴

Tocqueville’s account of American women and family life in Volume Two shows the centrality of this democratic sensibility to his broader analysis. American girls, he argued, “are less restricted than they are anywhere else,” and “wives submit to stricter obligations.” As both a “puritanical nation and a commercial people,” Americans “require of women a degree of self-denial and constant sacrifice” not demanded in Europe. In his portrait of family life, Tocqueville captured what we have learned to call the separate sphere of domesticity and the ideal of companionate marriage, both of which he contrasted sharply with the situation of aristocratic and non-aristocratic families in France.³⁵ Historians have dismissed Tocqueville’s sentimental observations concerning the “genius” of American women as stereotypes and demonstrated his blindness to the inequality of gender relations in American democracy.³⁶

But our understandable emphasis on the costs of inequality and our acute awareness of the burdens imposed on women (and African Americans) by white men—and justified by the ideology of self-sacrifice—have obscured Tocqueville’s point. He sought to identify a capacity he associated not only with American women but with democratic men as well, the capacity to control (or, as Foucault and his disciples have instructed us to say, to discipline) one’s own inclinations and to marshal one’s energies for purposes other than self-promotion. Tocqueville clarified this point in later chapters by contrasting democratic with aristocratic culture. Just as male aristocrats prized their lordly disdain of others, so their

³⁴ I discuss this issue in detail in “Tocqueville, Mill, and the American Gentry.”

³⁵ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Goldhammer, 695–7.

³⁶ To cite just one prominent example, see Linda Kerber, “Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman’s Place: The Rhetoric of Women’s History,” *Journal of American History* 75, 1 (June 1988), 9–39, reprinted in *idem*, *Toward an Intellectual History of Women* (Chapel Hill, 1997), 159–99.

elite female counterparts in the old regime cynically engaged in intrigues to manipulate power indirectly. Tocqueville offered the male ethic of reciprocity and the female embrace of domestic obligations as the democratic alternatives to such corrupt forms of self-aggrandizement. Just as he was using his reflections on “democracy” to suggest ways in which moribund public life in France might be awakened by invigorating public debate, local government, and the intermediate associations long distrusted in France, so Tocqueville’s portrait of democratic wives provided a veiled endorsement of the newly religious, newly domestic elite women seeking to find a satisfactory place for themselves in the July Monarchy. But like most males of his generation on both sides of the Atlantic, Tocqueville cordoned off family life from public life and confined women to that separate sphere.³⁷

Like gender, the question of imperialism in Tocqueville’s writings has been attracting increasing attention in recent decades. Here too it is tempting to quote a particular passage as “Tocqueville’s view of empire,” but understanding Tocqueville historically requires seeing how his ideas—different from ours as many of them are—changed over time in response to developments in France, in Algeria, and in Tocqueville’s own thinking about European colonialism. From 1839 until 1848 Tocqueville served in the French Chamber of Deputies. Despite his family background, he chose to sit on the left. He thought of himself as a reformer who opposed Louis-Philippe’s “hard-right” repressive regime. But as he explained to Pierre Royer-Collard in 1841, he was a man without a movement: “The liberal but not revolutionary party, which alone suits me, does not exist, and certainly it is not given to me to create it.” He described himself as “a wheel that goes around very quickly, but which, having missed its gear, does nothing and is useful for nothing.” His anxiety was balanced by his conviction that he could better serve the nation by preserving his “moral force” as a critic than by playing a more active role in the government. That dissatisfaction, his desire to contribute to a cause rather than remaining a “sterile” outsider, seems to have propelled Tocqueville to become involved with Algeria.³⁸

In 1837 Tocqueville published two letters on Algeria, which the July Monarchy had inherited as a French possession after a dispute over loan payments escalated

³⁷ This interpretation of Tocqueville’s discussion of American women derives from the discussion in Cheryl Welch, *De Tocqueville* (2001), 190–207. For an entirely different view see Delba Winthrop, “Tocqueville’s American Woman and ‘The True Conception of Democratic Progress,’” *Political Theory* 14 (1986), 239–61; for a psychoanalytic reading see Laura Janara, *Democracy Growing Up: Authority, Autonomy, and Passion in Tocqueville’s Democracy in America* (Albany, 2002).

³⁸ Tocqueville’s 27 September 1841 letter to Pierre Royer-Collard is in *The Tocqueville Reader*, 155–7.

under Charles X between 1828 and 1830. In his early writings on Algeria Tocqueville romanticized the Berber Kabyle tribe as “natural men,” a people “almost as free as the isolated individual who enjoys his savage independence in the heart of the wood; men who are neither rich nor poor, neither servants nor masters; who name their own leaders, and hardly notice that they have leaders, who are content with their state and preserve it.” These simple people, Rousseau’s noble savages sprung to life, Tocqueville contrasted with the Arabs who ruled Algeria as the agents of the Ottoman Empire. Whereas the French were relying on violence that would end only by driving together these separate populations, Tocqueville at first urged a policy that seems to us almost pluralist. He cautioned against the French taste for “uniformity,” which might blind policy-makers to the differences between the Kabyle and Arab populations, and against demonizing Islamic law, which he suggested might be used instead as an effective instrument for governing Algeria.

But like so many European colonialists before him, Tocqueville soon abandoned the call for moderation and urged all-out war. He traveled to Algeria with his brother Hippolyte and his friend Beaumont in 1841, and his letters home suggest the lure of the exotic: “Never in my life have I seen anything more bizarre than the first sight of Algiers. It is a tale out of the *Thousand and One Nights*.” But whereas he had been moved by the pathos of America’s extermination of its indigenous peoples, in Algeria he warmed to the challenge of conquest, a task that might enable France to restore its grandeur and rival the achievements—and the profits—of the British in India. The “Essay on Algeria” that he wrote in October of 1841, although not intended for publication, reveals the extent to which his romantic vision had morphed into a rationale for brutal violence justified by the need to stabilize and energize the slumbering French nation. By 1846, when Tocqueville returned to Algeria as an official representative of the parliamentary commission charged with making decisions about military expenditures, the reports he wrote showed his growing realization that France’s conquest had turned an already “backward and imperfect” society into one “more miserable, more disordered, more ignorant, and more barbarous than it had been before knowing us.”³⁹

³⁹ Examining Tocqueville’s changing ideas about Algeria has become easier for English readers with the publication of his *Writings on Empire and Slavery*, ed. and trans. Jennifer Pitts (Baltimore, 2001), which locates Tocqueville’s ideas in the contexts of French politics and European imperialism. See 5–26 for the 1837 letters on Algeria; 59–116 for Tocqueville’s 1841 “Essay on Algeria”; 129–98 for his 1847 reports; and cf. Melvin Richter, “Tocqueville on Algeria,” *Review of Politics* 25 (July 1963), 362–98; and Harry Liebersohn, “Discovering Indigenous Nobility: Tocqueville, Chamisso, and Romantic Travel Writing,” *American Historical Review* 99, 3 (1994), 746–66.

Do those second thoughts complicate our attitude toward Tocqueville's role in legitimating French imperialism or merely indicate the bad faith of a smug colonial official viewing the fruits of his labors? A similar question emerges from the study of Tocqueville's participation in the French campaign to end slavery. Having lamented race slavery in America, Tocqueville joined the French Society for the Abolition of Slavery as early as 1835. The report of the committee charged by the Chamber of Deputies to study the issue, which Tocqueville himself filed, defies easy summary. On the one hand the committee did call for fixing a date to end slavery in all French colonies and for educating those emancipated. But slave-owners were to be indemnified, and that cost was to be paid by a tax imposed on the labor of former slaves. The Chamber of Deputies never acted on the report.

In 1843 Tocqueville wrote a series of articles on abolition. He pointed out that slavery contradicted the universalist claims of the French Revolution concerning the rights of man, and he worried too that former slaves from British colonies might forcibly emancipate French slaves before they could be set free without violence. Debates over slavery continued ineffectually until 1848, when governments in the French Caribbean islands, faced with the imminent threat of slave revolts precipitated by the uprising of 22–4 February, unilaterally freed their slave populations. As he did in his late reports on Algeria, Tocqueville penned a powerful critique of slavery—after emancipation was accomplished. In 1855, in a letter published in 1860 by the American Anti-Slavery Society in *Letters on American Slavery*, Tocqueville wrote complaining that slavery “pained and astonished” him and expressing his hope that it would end in America too one day. But his anguish, like Jefferson's in *Notes on the State of Virginia*, rings hollow when we consider that many of Tocqueville's contemporaries, like Jefferson's, were not only calling for someone, somewhere, someday, to do something to end slavery, but insisting on its immediate abolition.⁴⁰

Tocqueville's account of the revolution of 1848—and his role in it—has prompted fierce debates ever since his *Recollections* appeared in French in 1893 and in English three years later. Not intended for publication, Tocqueville's candid memoir constitutes a fascinating meditation on the revolution, on his part in the ambitious effort to write a constitution for a new republic that would endure, and on the reasons why the revolution collapsed into the Second Empire of Louis Napoleon. By turns arrogant, brilliant, incisive, infuriating, shrewd, and self-deprecating, the *Recollections* contain something to offend French readers of all political persuasions. Tocqueville reprinted the perspicacious speech he

⁴⁰ Tocqueville's 1843 report, “The Emancipation of Slaves,” is in Tocqueville, *Writings on Empire and Slavery*, 199–226; see Pitts's discussion of these issues in her introduction, xxix–xxxv.

delivered in the Chamber of Deputies on 29 January 1848, in which he proclaimed, “Gentlemen, my profound conviction is that we are lulling ourselves to sleep over a volcano.” He pointed out why the logic of democracy might lead inexorably to a revolution of the propertyless against the propertied, and he portrayed the chaos leading up to the lava flow of the June Days with a dramatic immediacy rivalling Dickens or Stendhal. Perhaps most cruelly of all, he compared the Constituent Assembly unflatteringly to the founders of the American republic, and he claimed he knew then that the republic would fail: “Whichever way I looked, I could see nothing either solid or durable amid the general malaise affecting the nation; everybody wanted to get rid of the Constitution, some through socialism, others by monarchy.” As for Louis Napoleon, a most ordinary man who was elected president and who was to become emperor, Tocqueville wrote that his fellow members of the government, who “wanted to make the republic live,” offered him only a ministry “when he needed accomplices.” Why, ultimately, did the republic vanish and the empire appear? “We had lost our taste for monarchy but had preserved the spirit of it.”⁴¹

For more than a century radicals have disputed Tocqueville’s claim that moderates like him, elected by the broadest suffrage in French history, spoke for the people in rejecting the socialists who made the Revolution. Tocqueville confessed that his election in 1848 gave him “a sense of happiness I have never known before,” because it convinced him that he was for once “moving with the current of a majority in the only direction that my tastes, reason, and conscience could approve.” Of course that happiness did not last. By 1851, after Louis Napoleon’s coup landed Tocqueville briefly in jail, he was again isolated politically, as he remained for the rest of his life.⁴² But radicals reading his *Recollections* see red. They have disputed Tocqueville’s account of the relation between class struggle and the personal ambition of revolutionaries, and they have used his dismissive comments about the workers’ envy and greed to portray him as a reactionary. There is ammunition in the *Recollections* to sustain that reading. Yet as the romance of proletarian revolution fades and revulsion against the unrestrained bloodletting of sectarian and ethnic warfare mounts, Tocqueville’s tale may take on a different resonance. Will a post-Marxist left inherit Marx’s reading of 1848 as democracy’s defeat or Tocqueville’s account of it as the left’s self-immolation? Can any single voice be thought to have spoken for the deeply divided French people?

⁴¹ Tocqueville, *Recollections*, 14, 191–2, 177.

⁴² Tocqueville, *Recollections*, 105. Cf. the discussions of 1848 in Wolin, *Tocqueville Between Two Worlds*, 409–97; and Drescher, “Who Needs Anciennté?” For a more temperate and detailed account of Tocqueville during the 1848 Revolution and its aftermath see Jardin, *Tocqueville*, 407–80.

If reactions to Tocqueville's *Recollections* have reflected the fissures of French political and academic life since the 1890s, so too have debates over *The Old Regime and the French Revolution*. Although accounts that follow Furet's reassessment of the reasons for the Revolution and the reasons that it failed have now largely supplanted the earlier Marxist interpretations, Tocqueville's analysis still rankles. Wolin saves some of his most potent venom for Tocqueville's final work. He writes that the book "breaks off on the eve of the French Revolution, as though its author found it too painful to confront, even in his imagination, a revolution waged against an authority that no longer existed." That judgment, along with Wolin's larger contention that *The Old Regime* demonstrates Tocqueville's abiding nostalgia for *ancienneté*, shows how conviction can impede judgment. Tocqueville insisted, in the Preface to *The Old Regime*, that democracy's destruction of aristocracy, not just in France but everywhere, had become inevitable. Robert R. Palmer used a passage from *The Old Regime* succinctly conveying that message as the epigraph at the beginning of his still-valuable landmark study *The Age of Democratic Revolutions* (1959). Tocqueville began the historical section (Part Two) of *The Old Regime* by explaining "Why Feudalism Was Hated by the People in France More than Anywhere Else." The analytic engine driving Tocqueville's account was the centralizing monarchy that demolished crucial medieval institutions of local self-government. As Furet and Mélonio write in the Introduction to *The Old Regime*, Tocqueville "was not captured by the poetic charms of the Middle Ages"; "a disinterested taste for the past seemed frivolous to one who saw democracy running at flood tide."⁴³ Finally, Tocqueville did not stop writing about the Revolution because he found its outcome, in Wolin's words, "too painful to confront." He stopped writing because he died.

Just as it is hard for a historian to imagine writing about *Democracy in America* now without paying close attention to Tocqueville's notes on Guizot's lectures, Sparks's essay on the New England town, or Schleifer's *The Making of Tocqueville's "Democracy in America"*, so it is hard to imagine interpreting *The Old Regime* without first examining the scrupulous and illuminating work by Robert T. Gannett, Jr., *Tocqueville Unveiled: The Historian and His Sources for "The Old Regime and the Revolution."*⁴⁴ Gannett has examined more carefully than anyone else the materials Tocqueville used and the choices he made in the process of constructing his account of the French Revolution. As a result we now understand much better what Tocqueville was consciously trying to do. I noted at the outset that a generation of scholars—including Gannett—has given us rich insights into

⁴³ Cf. Wolin, *Tocqueville Between Two Worlds*, 562; Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the French Revolution*, trans. Kahan, 88–92, 111–17; Furet and Mélonio's Introduction, 1–74; and Richter, "The Deposition of Tocqueville," 173–98.

⁴⁴ Gannett, *Tocqueville Unveiled*.

Tocqueville's life and his writing, from *Democracy in America* through *The Old Regime*. Of course their work does not answer all the questions we will continue to ask about his work, but they have narrowed the range of interpretations that historians are likely to find persuasive.

Ideas derive their meaning from the cultural frameworks in which they emerge and within which they are interpreted. No texts exist independent of culture, and no cultures exist independent of history. Tocqueville shared those insights with Hegel and Marx. Whereas they believed they knew the trajectory of history, however, Tocqueville admitted that he did not, and could not, because he thought the future held only continuing and unpredictable struggles between an old world of hierarchical privilege and the indeterminate cultures of democracy, always in process and subject to revision at the next set of debates and casting of ballots. Tocqueville also shared with Hegel and Marx an understanding that individuals are embedded in families, classes, and other groups of all sorts, but he understood that relation in a particular way. Although he valued individual freedom, he saw that we exercise our freedom in relation to the freedom of others and the duties imposed by our multiple memberships and dependencies. Obligations complicate liberty. Dreams of pure reason, pure freedom, pure equality, or the pure "political" must contend with the stubborn realities of inherited customs, aspirations, and resentments that descend from history and provide the horizons within which individuals act. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries Tocqueville saw all of those customs, aspirations, and resentments in perpetual motion; he saw one world struggling to survive and another struggling to be born, slowly and painfully. His assessment of that process lacked the majesty of some of the philosophical systems constructed by his contemporaries, but the tentativeness and provisionality characteristic of his thought, which long kept him out of the pantheon of great European thinkers, now qualify him for reconsideration.⁴⁵

To commemorate the bicentennial, in 2005, of his birth, American and French Tocqueville specialists convened in Normandy to discuss his work. One day was reserved for visits to his home, the Chateau de Tocqueville, still occupied by one of his descendants, and to the two larger and grander estates of his two brothers. One memorable dinner was held at the breathtaking chateau still in Kergolay's family. Those visits made it easy to see why Tocqueville might have detested democracy and harder to see why he associated it with God's will. As several participants in the conference pointed out, Tocqueville's aristocratic prejudices came naturally;

⁴⁵ For a brilliant analysis of how these ideas developed in nineteenth-century thought see Robert Pippin, "Bourgeois Philosophy? On the Problem of Leading a Free Life," The Ryerson Lecture of 2004, copy in the possession of the author.

it was his capacity to see the attractiveness—perhaps even the inevitability—of democracy that puzzles us. His writings about women, blacks, and the peoples of North Africa remind us of the gulf separating his time and his sensibility from ours. Equally arresting, though, are his claims that deliberating with others can open eyes and the experience of resolving disagreements can—not must, but can—broaden perspectives and change minds. That awareness, which developed as a result of Tocqueville’s travels and his encounters with people and books that challenged his inherited ideas, distinguished Tocqueville from many of his contemporaries as dramatically as some of his ideas distinguish him from us. It is anachronistic to see his blinkers yet deny his insight.

Tocqueville was born into a world of aristocratic privilege, lived in a world struggling to dismantle those privileges, and anticipated—always with a mixture of optimism and pessimism, blended in varying proportions—a world of democratic equality the shape and scope of which remained obscure. His writings were complicated and enriched by his awareness of those changes and of the singularity of each of the cultures experiencing them. The shifting significance of his writings likewise has reflected that diversity and the continuing struggles to balance freedom and equality in distinctive democratic cultures. Historians interpreting his ideas should be as alert to those myriad changes as he was: “I am tempted to believe,” Tocqueville wrote in a passage that reverberates two centuries after his birth, “that what are called necessary institutions are only institutions to which one is accustomed, and that when the question is how societies may be organized, the range of possibilities is far greater than is imagined by those living within any society now in existence.”⁴⁶

That historicist sensibility is among the most valuable features of Tocqueville’s writings—even if he did not always manifest it in his judgments. At his most historically sophisticated, though, he displayed the reflexivity associated with the approach I call pragmatic hermeneutics.⁴⁷ Less than a year before his death, working diligently on the comprehensive history of the long French Revolution that he did not live to complete, Tocqueville wrote a letter to his friend Kergolay that conjures up the image he used in the earlier letter with which this essay

⁴⁶ This rendering of the passage from Tocqueville’s *Recollections* follows the translation by Melvin Richter in *Tocqueville Review/La Revue Tocqueville* 26, 2 (2005), 253. For an interpretation of its significance in Tocqueville’s writings that is at odds with mine see Welch, *De Tocqueville* (2001), 185–210.

⁴⁷ I attach the designation “pragmatic” to this version of hermeneutics for reasons I have explained in several articles, including “Objectivity and Historicism: A Century of American Historical Writing,” *American Historical Review* 94 (1989): 1011–30; and “Pragmatism and the Practice of History,” in Richard Shusterman, ed., *The Range of Pragmatism and the Limits of Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 197–221.

began. His words identify the distinguishing feature of intellectual history as a discipline. “You know that it is less the facts that I am looking for,” he began, “than the traces of the movement of ideas and sentiments. It is that above all that I want to paint.” His canvas now extended across the entire period stretching from his time to the old regime. Covering it with the appropriate shapes and colors demanded all his energy. He wanted to capture, he told Kergolay, “the successive changes that were made in the social state, in the institutions, in the mind and in the mores of the French as the Revolution progressed.” That, he put it bluntly, “is my subject. For seeing it well, I have up to now found only one way”—the method we now designate hermeneutics: “that is to live, in some manner, each moment of the Revolution with the contemporaries by reading, not what has been said of them or what they said of themselves since, but what they themselves were saying then, and, as much as possible, by discovering what they were really thinking.” For “reaching that goal,” Tocqueville continued, minor writings and private correspondence may be “even more effective” than published works or public debates in assemblies. “By taking the route I am taking, I am reaching the goal I am setting for myself, which is to place myself successively in the midst of the time.” Only through multiple stages—first the painstaking study of texts and the meticulous reconstruction of contexts, then the systematic effort to relate the multiple meanings of the former to the multiple layers of the latter, and finally the self-conscious attempt to connect historical analysis to the aspirations of one’s own time—is it possible to produce philosophical history of the sort Tocqueville sought to write. As the endless struggles over Tocqueville illustrate, at best such texts will generate conflicts among those who approach them with an acolyte’s reverence, a vulture’s hunger, or a historian’s insatiable desire to understand more clearly phenomena that will never be understood completely. As Tocqueville concludes his letter to Kergolay, one can almost hear him sigh: “the process is so slow that I often despair of it. Yet, is there any other?”⁴⁸ For those of us who share Tocqueville’s desire to write philosophical history, there is none.

⁴⁸ Tocqueville to Kergolay, 16 May 1858, in *Selected Letters*, 372–3.