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Tocqueville, Beaumont, *Democracy in America*, and (Lower) Canada

Tocqueville, Beaumont, *De la démocratie en Amérique*,
et le (Bas)-Canada

Don Sparling

Abstract

Though published more than 180 years ago, Alexis de Tocqueville's multifaceted analysis of the concept of democracy in *Democracy in America* continues to attract readers. This article examines some of Tocqueville's main conclusions, looking in particular at the positive/negative dichotomy that runs through the work, and places them in two wider contexts, that of the work of his companion on the visit to America, Gustave de Beaumont, as well as of (Lower) Canada, where Tocqueville and Beaumont spent a brief but significant part of their stay in North America.

Keywords: Alexis de Tocqueville's, *Democracy in America*, Gustave de Beaumont, Lower Canada

Resumé

Bien qu'ayant été publiée il y a plus de 180 ans, l'analyse à multiples facettes du concept de démocratie que propose Alexis de Tocqueville dans *De la démocratie en Amérique* continue à attirer les lecteurs. Le présent article examine quelques-unes des conclusions du philosophe français, plus spécialement la dichotomie positive / négative qui traverse l'œuvre ainsi que la place de cette dernière dans deux contextes plus larges : d'une part, le travail de son ami Gustave de Beaumont sur son séjour en Amérique et, d'autre part, le Bas-Canada, où Tocqueville et Beaumont ont passé des instants brefs mais cruciaux pour eux lors de leur voyage en Amérique du Nord.

Mots-clés : Alexis de Tocqueville's, *De la démocratie en Amérique*, le Bas-Canada



In the course of a dramatic three days in the summer of 1830, France experienced its “July Revolution,” ousting the Bourbons and ushering in a new royal house in the person of Louis Phillippe, Duc d’Orléans. For two young French aristocrats, Alexis de Tocqueville and his close friend Gustave de Beaumont, this presented a problem. As magistrates, they were employees of the state. Though known for their liberal views, they also came from distinguished aristocratic families. Tocqueville’s great-grandfather, the eminent statesman Guillaume-Chrétien de Lamoignon de *Malesherbes*, had been guillotined in the wake of his defending Louis XVI, and his parents were only saved from the same fate by the fall of Robespierre and the end of the Terror. Many members of Beaumont’s family, too, had experienced complicated times during the previous forty years; his uncle Marc Antoine Bonnin de La Bonninière de Beaumont, who had begun his military career under Louis XVI (for whom he had served as a page), barely escaped death at the time of the Terror, went on to become a Count of the Empire under Napoleon, and finally was named a Peer of France by the ultra-reactionary Louis XVIII after the Restoration. But the new bourgeois regime under Louis Phillippe, the “Citizen King,” was “suspicious of aristocratic employees who might be covertly disaffected” (Damrosch, 11), and the two young men felt it might well be in their best interests to avoid being caught between the various political camps by absenting themselves from France for some time until the situation settled down and it was clear which way the wind was blowing. They came up with what today would seem the least plausible of ideas – going to the United States to investigate American prisons. At the time, however, these were considered the most humane and progressive in the world. So, having gained official approval for their proposal to draw up a report on the American penal system, the two men set off for the New World in April 1831.

Both were very young – Tocqueville 25, de Beaumont 27 – and they knew virtually nothing about the United States. Even their knowledge of English was at best mediocre. But in the course of the just over nine months they spent in America on their travels, they spoke at some length with hundreds of Americans and casually to thousands more, and visited 17 of the country’s then 24 states, with a brief side trip to Lower Canada thrown in for good measure. They were very diligent in pursuing their official task, which was to result in their two-volume publication *On the Penitentiary System in the United States and its Application in France (Du système pénitentiaire aux Etats-Unis, et de son application en France)*, published in 1833, a year after their return to France. But Tocqueville’s real agenda lay elsewhere, in something he was deeply interested in personally – the concept of democracy, and particularly democracy as manifested in the United States.

It would be inaccurate to claim that Tocqueville was a fan of democracy, let alone any radical theory of democracy. He was too much a product of his aristocratic background for this. Rather, he was a realist: he believed that democracy was here to stay, that it



was clearly the form of government towards which societies everywhere were moving. He was also a pragmatist: if this was the case, then the task was to examine the concept itself and explore its nature – what principles it was based on, what benefits it could bring, what drawbacks it might entail, what trends could be anticipated, what factors would influence its development. And what better place to do this than the United States, the state where the democratic idea had advanced furthest, a country that could be considered a laboratory of democracy? What Tocqueville was engaged in was, to use a contemporary term, a SWOT analysis of the concept of democracy, conducted on the basis of what he saw round him in America, aimed at uncovering democracy’s strengths and weaknesses, the opportunities open to it, the threats it faced. All of these aspects can be found in his magnum opus, *Democracy in America*, which he subsequently published in two volumes in 1835 and 1840.

This article will deal with only a few of the main features of democracy as delineated by Tocqueville – in particular features he saw most pronounced in the United States – and examine what he felt were its potential negative effects. In addition, Tocqueville’s relation to Canada will also be examined. It is true that Tocqueville made only a brief eleven-day stop in Lower Canada, and that he did not deal with it in *Democracy in America* (though he made many notes during and after his visit there, and wrote about the colony in letters to members of his family). But he viewed North America as one space, and more than once he speculates on aspects of the future development of “Anglo-American” culture/democracy as a whole; as he states in a letter to his father, “Today the die is cast, all of North American will speak English” (Tocqueville 1973, 93). This was not an unreasonable assumption: huge numbers of English-speaking British settlers were moving into Canada, and they helped fuel the movement for greater democracy – a concern that had been present since the arrival of the Loyalists in the future Canada following the end of the War of Independence, one of whose first demands had been for representative, elected assemblies. In this they did not differ one whit from the rebellious kin they had left behind.

What then were the main features of democracy as defined by de Tocqueville? This is by no means easy to state briefly or definitively. First of all, this is a Big Book. The two volumes of *Democracy in America*, in the (admittedly heavily annotated) 2010 translation by James T. Schleifer, amount to just under 1300 pages. Second, though *Democracy in America* has been well received ever since its publication almost 180 years ago, the reasons for its appeal have differed over time and, in particular, from reader to reader: in other words, not everyone would agree on the relative importance of the various elements in the book. Third, Tocqueville was a lawyer, and his writing betrays this in many ways: he frequently lays out in great detail the case both for and against a particular feature, and it is not always clear what his final position is. There is a strong and paradoxical ambiguity to many of his pronouncements, almost



a sense of anxiety; in places he jumps in the course of a paragraph or two from high praise for a particular democratic feature to strong criticism of its possible negative implications. And finally, he was also writing within a long tradition of French prose, and the book is filled with grand-sounding generalizations. For example, the title of one of his chapters, “Why Democratic Peoples Naturally Want Peace and Democratic Armies Naturally Desire War” (Vol. IV, 1153), is certainly arresting in its aphoristic brevity, but not everyone will be convinced by Tocqueville’s subsequent elaboration of the theme. *Democracy in America*, then, is a slippery text to deal with; in some ways it resembles the Bible, in that readers tend to find there what they are looking for. It comes as no surprise, for example, to learn that in Britain the first volume was hailed by the great proponent of liberalism John Stuart Mill as “the first philosophical book ever written on Democracy as it manifests itself in modern society” and viewed by him as a profound analysis of its progressive nature, whereas the Conservative leader Sir Robert Peel sought to rally his party, in disarray in the wake of the expansion of the franchise brought about by the Reform Act of 1832, by pointing to Tocqueville and his warnings about “the tyranny of the majority” (Renshaw, xi).

Tocqueville’s starting point for understanding democracy, however, is clear, and comes in the very first sentence of the book. “Among the new objects that attracted my attention during my stay in the United States, none struck me more vividly than the equality of conditions” (Vol. I, 4). “Equality,” with all its ramifications and implications, lies at the centre of de Tocqueville’s concern, a concept he keeps coming back to again and again as being at the root of the phenomena he observes – features of the political system, economic issues, culture, religion. And he stresses his difference from other authors on the subject by claiming to be looking “farther” than them: “while they are concerned with the next day, I wanted to think about the future” (Vol. I, 34).

What is in fact striking in the work is the disparity between Tocqueville’s description of democracy now and his speculation about democracy in the future. American democracy in the present is described in both positive and negative terms. He is astonished at its dynamism; approves its concern for the welfare of the majority; asserts that “The laws of democracy tend, in general, toward the good of the greatest number” and “the purpose of democracy, in its legislation, is more useful to humanity” than that of an aristocracy (Vol II, 378); notes the benefits of decentralization; praises the manifold activities of citizens in civic “associations” (Vol III, 895–904) and at every level of public life; notes its ability, through elections, to correct bad decisions, and so on. At the same time, he points out what he sees as its shortcomings: its concern with the moment and lack of any “clear perception of the future” (Vol II, 363); the omnipresence of “politics” in public life; the heightened governmental instability that is endemic to a democratic order (Vol II, 407–9). Tocqueville’s genius is to show how these are two sides of the same coin, the balance between them being what drives the



society forward. When he turns to the future, however, his view is darker, less sanguine; his speculations on the implications of the logical development of “equality” in the country are often very negative. It is as though he fears the current balance will be lost, that he hopes these developments he describes will not occur but that he would not be prepared to wager on this; instead, the *égalité* at the heart of the American experience will blunt and dilute the *liberté* and *fraternité*. And the reason for this is that “equality” in a democracy – or at least in American democracy, in Tocqueville’s view – is rooted in “individualism” (Vol II, chapters 2 and 3 *passim*), a product “of democratic origin” (Vol III, 883). For Tocqueville, this is a very ambiguous virtue: yes, as individuals people have virtually unlimited free choice, but this has a dark side. It can turn into sheer selfishness, and become something that “at first dries up only the source of public virtues, but, in the long run, it attacks and destroys all the others” (Vol III, 882). Its levelling force hinders the creation of stable institutions, whether political, religious or others, with the rather paradoxical result that this leads to what is perhaps his most famous characterization of the life of democratic America: the tyranny of the majority. His analysis of this concept is brutal, leading him to the damning conclusion that “I know of no country where, in general, there reigns less independence of mind and true freedom of discussion than in America” (Vol II, 417). The “omnipotence” of the majority means that minorities and minority views have little chance of gaining favour, and every chance of being crushed. In this respect, as in so many others, Tocqueville’s future scenarios tend to be troubled and bleak.

So every reader sees something different in de Tocqueville; what is perhaps most striking to the reader today is this dark side of his vision of the future. And this for two reasons. First, when one reads Tocqueville, and then looks at the current state of the United States, it takes very little effort or imagination to see a great many negative phenomena named and anticipated by Tocqueville that are alive and well today. The unconscionable pursuit of riches? “I do not even know of a country where the love of money holds a greater place in the human heart” (Vol I, 85). American exceptionalism? “For fifty years it has not ceased to be repeated to the inhabitants of the United States that they form the only religious, enlightened and free people ... so they have an immense opinion of themselves, and they are not far from believing that they form a species apart from the human race” (Vol II, 600–01). America first? “You see [the American’s] national pride resort to all the artifices and descend to all the puerilities of individual vanity. There is nothing more annoying in the experience of life than this irritable patriotism of the Americans” (Vol II, 388). The dangers of populism? “Charlatans of all types know very well the secret of pleasing the people, while their true friends most often fail” (Vol II, 316). The steady retreat from talent in government? “Upon my arrival in the United States, I was struck with surprise to find out how common merit was among the governed and how uncommon it was among



those governing. Today ... we are forced to recognize that this [decreasing participation in public life by “outstanding men”] has occurred as democracy has gone beyond its former limits” (Vol II, 314–15). Quality of leadership? “The natural instincts of democracy lead the people to keep distinguished men away from power” (Vol II, 317). Mistrust of government? “In the eyes of the democracy, government is not a good, but a necessary evil” (Vol II, 324). Foreign policy? “Foreign policy requires the use of almost none of the qualities that belong to democracy” (Vol II, 370). Punitive justice? “In America, [the criminal] is an enemy of the human species, and he has all humanity against him” (Vol. I, 161). Whacky religious groups? “From time to time bizarre sects arise there that try hard to open extraordinary paths to eternal happiness. Religious madness is very common there” (Vol III, 940). The list could continue at length. The second reason that Tocqueville’s dark vision seems so pertinent today is that it inevitably – at least for a Canadian reader – leads to comparisons between the United States and Canada. Canada is an American country in the broad sense of the term, and much of what Tocqueville extols could apply equally well to Canada. And it is also an American country in the narrower sense of America as the USA: right from the beginning Canada has steadily absorbed much from its southern neighbour – people, institutions, religions, customs. Most recently, in 1982, there was the patriation of the Canadian Constitution, with its Charter of Rights and Freedoms, which radically rerouted Canadian democracy along American lines. Yet many, perhaps most, would argue that the many dystopian aspects of American democracy that have emerged in the United States in recent years, particularly in the social and political spheres, are, by and large, absent in Canada. In other words, today Canada can be seen as being closer to Tocqueville’s ideal democratic America than is America itself.

Democracy in America is a major achievement, and one can argue endlessly as to the degree to which Tocqueville “got it right.” One thing he did get spectacularly wrong, however, was his conviction that “if one portion of the Union wanted seriously to separate from the other, not only would you not be able to prevent it from doing so, but you would not even be tempted to try” (Vol II, 593). And in any case, in view of what he considered the uniformity of the “Anglo-Americans” and the mutual benefits of the interdependence of the North, the South and the West, he saw no logical reason for them to separate (Vol II, 582–596). The elephant in the room here is slavery or, more specifically, race, which is arguably the single most defining feature of American society. Of course Tocqueville condemned slavery unequivocally, and *Democracy in America* includes a chapter in which he writes movingly about its evils (as well as the pitiable state of the “Indians”). Yet his views on the Blacks as such are very much of his time:

If he [the “Negro”] becomes free, independence often then seems to him to be a heavier chain than slavery itself; for in the course of his existence he has learned to submit to



everything, except to reason; and when reason becomes his sole guide, he cannot recognize its voice ... So he has reached this depth of misery in which servitude brutalizes him and liberty destroys him. (Vol II, 518)

For Tocqueville, the inequality between the Blacks and Whites “seems to have its immutable foundations in nature itself” (Vol II, 552), and “those who hope that one day the Europeans will blend with the Negroes seem to me to entertain a chimera ... Wherever Negroes have been the strongest, they have destroyed whites; it is the only accounting that might ever be possible between the two races” (Vol II, 553). Given these views, which he states so firmly that one must assume he believed they were universal truths, it is understandable that he saw no “logical” reason for the Union to dissolve.

It might be argued that one could excuse Tocqueville as merely reflecting the attitudes of his time and class. However, this is to forget that Tocqueville’s travelling companion and close friend Gustave de Beaumont also produced a remarkable work originating from his experience in America, *Marie, or Slavery in the United States* (*Marie ou l’esclavage aux États-Unis. Tableau de mœurs américaines*). Appearing in the same year as Tocqueville’s *Democracy*, it had a mixed reaction and has only begun to attract serious attention relatively recently. This is partly because it challenges the usual genres: a social commentary, it takes the form of an essay on race intertwined with a prose narrative, a story dealing with the love between a young Frenchman and an American woman who appears to be White but turns out to have African ancestry. Beaumont himself realized what an odd hybrid this was:

I am well aware that in offering truth under the veil of fiction I run the risk of pleasing no one. Will the serious public not reject my book at the sight of its title alone? And will not the light-minded reader, drawn by its insubstantial appearance, give up in the face of its deep seriousness? I do not know. All that I can say is that my primary aim was to present a set of serious observations; that the core of the matter is true and only the characters are fictitious; that in fact I essayed to furnish my work with a less sombre surface in order to attract that part of the public that seeks in a book at once ideas for the mind and emotions for the heart. (Beaumont, II-III)

A kind of postmodernist text 150 years before the fact, it deals not with slavery as such, but – and this is utterly original for the time – with racial prejudice as social evil. Clearly an abolitionist work, it predates by seventeen years Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. It is curious that two such close friends, travelling together and having the same experiences, should produce such utterly different works, and with such utterly different views on race and the nature and the potential of democracy.



But to return to Tocqueville, in the course of their stay in America, he and Beaumont made a brief stop in Lower Canada, visiting Montréal, Québec and a few small communities along the shores of the St Lawrence. The notes he made of his experiences there (which were not published in his lifetime) shed a surprising light on him and his views of democracy. Rather unexpectedly, it seems that Tocqueville was even less informed about Lower Canada than he had been about the United States: “not even six months ago, I believed, like everyone else, that Canada had become thoroughly English” (Tocqueville 1973, 87). So he was astonished to find a completely functioning Francophone society. “They are still French to the core; not only the elderly, but all of them, even the little toddler who spins his top” (Tocqueville 1973, 88). Because of this, there is immediate identification: “Like us [that is, the French in France], they are lively, quick, intelligent, sardonic, hot-headed, big talkers and very difficult to control once their passions have been set alight. They are fighters *par excellence* and love noise and bustle more than money” (Tocqueville 1973, 88). Elsewhere he characterizes them by such terms as “merry,” “eminently sociable,” “open,” “talkative,” “obliging.” These virtues of the French Canadians are even more striking when they are compared to the Americans. “[The peasant’s] welcome has the frank cordiality which the American lacks; he is polite without servility, and receives you on a footing of equality, but with kind consideration. We were struck by a certain distinguished quality in the manners of those we visited” (Tocqueville 1973, 79). Tocqueville does admit that the *Canadien* “race” appears inferior in learning than the Americans, but on the other hand claims it is “superior when it comes to the qualities of the heart” (Tocqueville 1973, 79). In any case, however, French Canadians can boast physical superiority: “The population seems happy and well-off. The race [*Le sang*] is notably more beautiful than in the United States. The race there is strong, and the women do not have that delicate, sickly look that characterizes most American women” (Tocqueville 1973, 71).

In writing about French Canada, Tocqueville also exhibits a curious Arcadian nostalgia. “In general the people are more moral, more hospitable, more religious than in France” (Tocqueville 1973, 84):

We felt at home, and everywhere we were welcomed as compatriots, children of *old France*, as they called it. In my opinion, this epithet is inappropriate. Old France is in Canada, new France back home. We discovered there, especially in villages at some distance from the towns, the ancient customs, the ancient mores, of France. (Tocqueville 1973, 87)

And even the traces of feudalism that still do exist – the rent for land that was originally granted by the seigneur, the legal requirement to have grain ground at the seigneur’s mill, the duty to hand over a portion of the purchase price to the seigneur



when the land is sold – are presented as being “so slight they are almost unnoticed” (Tocqueville quoting John Neilson, in Tocqueville 1973, 76). Social harmony reigns supreme.

An important aspect of this idealizing historicism relates to the Church. Tocqueville praises the central role of religion in the community and the learning and piety of the priests. “All those [priests] we saw were educated, polite, well behaved. They speak a pure French. In general they are more distinguished than most of the curates of France” (Tocqueville 1973, 84). “I met with several of these priests, and I remain firmly convinced that they are in fact the most distinguished people in the country” (Tocqueville 1973, 88).

However, not all is quite so perfect as these quotations might suggest. Tocqueville returns time and again to the theme of how the survival of the Canadians (that is, the French-speaking *Canadiens*) is threatened by “the English,” who are arriving in increasingly large numbers, own most of the wealth and dominate the public space. The French “live, as it were, as strangers in their own country” (Tocqueville 1973, 93). And one of the main reasons for this is the wavering commitment of the Francophone intelligentsia to the cause: “The instincts of the people are against the English, but many [French] Canadians of the enlightened classes did not seem as eager as we would have thought to preserve intact some part of their origins, and to become a distinct people. To us, it seemed many were not far from letting themselves be willingly assimilated by the English” (Tocqueville 1973, 83). The threat is clear:

We are reaching a moment of crisis. If the Canadians do not emerge from their apathy within two decades, there will no longer be time to do so. Everything proclaims the awakening of this people to be approaching. But if the middling and higher classes of the Canadian population abandon the lower classes in this endeavour, and allow themselves to be swept up in the English wave, the French race in America is lost. (Tocqueville 1973, 80).

Nevertheless, Tocqueville expresses a kind of quixotic optimism:

I cannot believe that [the English and the *Canadiens*] will ever merge, nor that an indissoluble union between them can exist. I still hope the French, despite the conquest, will one day succeed in creating on their own a beautiful empire in the New World, themselves perhaps more enlightened, more moral and happier than their forefathers. (Tocqueville 1973, 70)

Several things are surprising here. First, granted these are not elaborated texts meant for publication, they are nevertheless remarkably crude, very black-and-white. The subtle nuances of the arguments in *Democracy in America* are utterly lacking. Second, the highly Romantic image of Lower Canada that he presents is extremely



conservative, perhaps even reactionary, something unexpected from an author who viewed himself (and is usually regarded) as a liberal. The idealized picture he presents of the colony's inhabitants is very much in a "happy peasants (before the Revolution)" vein. And third, though he is aware that Lower Canada is also a democracy, having been granted a Legislative Assembly more than forty years earlier, and that Francophones play a strong role there – he notes that in the Assembly of 84 members, 64 are "French" and 20 "English" (Tocqueville 1973, 83) – he does not follow this up. It is as though the situation in Lower Canada has no relation whatsoever to "democracy in America." This is doubly ironic in that the original expectations in 1791, at least among the British legislators, had been that English would be the language of debate. However, at the very first session an important item on the agenda was – deciding on the language of debate. And it was agreed, by the Anglophone and Francophone members, that both were acceptable.

Despite his many shrewd observations, then, some very important things escaped Tocqueville's notice, among them the central role of slavery in the United States and the complexities of the Anglophone–Francophone relationship in Lower Canada. There is a curious parallel here to another visitor who turned up in North America only seven years later, Lord Durham. Sent out, like Tocqueville, to make an official report on a particular issue, he spent much less time on his mission (barely more than five months, from May to November of 1838); the report that resulted from his visit was made public some two months after his return to Britain. Alongside many desirable proposals, however, it included his famous characterization of the situation in Lower Canada: "I expected to find a contest between a government and a people: I found two nations warring in the bosom of a single state: I found a struggle, not of principles, but of races" (*DCB*) – an assessment proved utterly mistaken by the subsequent cooperation between the Canadian Francophones and Anglophones, working together on shared principles, that led only ten years later to the implementation of the very responsible government that Durham had recommended. Like Tocqueville in America, Durham had somehow got a basic fact of the Canadian scene wrong.

Can any moral be drawn from this failure? One is perhaps that "fact-finding" missions, even of nine months' duration, may well miss the wood for the trees. Another is that one's conclusions are inevitably skewed by the people one meets – in Tocqueville's case, to a great extent, types like judges, diplomats, lawyers, "the rich and locally famous" (Damrosch, 19); in Lord Durham's, a preponderance of Anglophones and opponents of the Patriotes. A third is that one carries one's prejudices with one. Yet a fourth might be that something essential about democratic American societies tends to escape the notice of European aristocrats. The list could undoubtedly be extended.



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