

Tocqueville: Is He Relevant Today?

Serge Audier

The bicentennial of the birth of Alexis de Tocqueville (1805-1858) affords us an opportunity to rediscover one of the most complex works of his time, and also to contemplate how it can help us better understand present-day democracies. Is Tocqueville really relevant? Does his writing still offer fresh perspectives?

If today Tocqueville is a “classic,” he wasn’t always so; his rediscovery, in the second half of the 20th century, put an end to a period of partial eclipse. Yet Tocqueville was one of the most well-known French specialists of “public rights.” The popular success of the first volume of *Democracy in America*, which appeared in 1835, can be attributed to his desire to introduce an uninformed audience to American society and institutions, and also to his political goals. Before Tocqueville, “doctrinarians” like Guizot, who had supported the Kingdom of France, defined democracy as a *social and legal* state, but not a *political* one. On the contrary, Tocqueville presents democracy as a society dominated not only by the equality of conditions, but also by the *sovereignty of the people*.

In asserting that America presaged the future of Europe, Tocqueville encouraged his more conservative peers not to fear the democratic state. Americans had found adequate responses to the dangers of this new political and social state. But Tocqueville was far from contented with an idealistic picture, and as early as 1835 – and even more in 1840, in the second volume – he emphasized the new perils of this democratic society, which was haunted by a passion for equality and “well-being” which could destroy political freedom. In particular, he pointed to the risk of a new phenomenon, *individualism* (that is to say, the tendency of individuals to fall back on their private sphere), while revealing antidotes to these evils, in particular the “forensic spirit,” civic engagement at the local and societal levels, and finally religion – the only way to divert man from his quest for well-being.

American democracy according to Tocqueville: a necessary critical review

After this initial success, Tocqueville’s ideas sank bit by bit into relative oblivion, before returning to the center of French intellectual life in the 1950’s, starting with specific problems that were neither those of 1835, nor those of the beginning of the 20th century. Raymond Aron played an important role in this renaissance by enthroning Tocqueville among the “founding fathers” of sociology, and even among the most pertinent thinkers for understanding present-day concerns. During the period of economic prosperity called “Thirty Glorious Years” (1945-1975), the Marxist prophesy of the inevitable self-destruction of capitalism seemed to be refuted. Quite the opposite, analyses of *Democracy in America*, which centered on the egalitarian process, seemed to account more for these changes than for “class struggle.” And yet, far from underestimating the permanence of numerous inequalities, Aron went as far as contemplating the possibility that Marx would once again become the key thinker of the end of the 20th century, with the hypothesis that new and deep inequalities would surface. Finally and above all, he said, rereading Tocqueville allows us to see the basic alternative between the two antagonistic political regimes of “democracy” and “totalitarianism.” A thinker of the “religion of politics”, Tocqueville demonstrated that if all

modern societies tended toward an “egalitarian” social state, they would become either “free,” or else “despotic:” isn’t this choice exactly what was offered again to individuals of the 20th century?

Close to a half-century after these analyses, now that the fall of the Berlin Wall has marked the end of communism, and “Thirty Glorious Years” has been replaced by a new kind of capitalism in a radically new international framework, what is left in Tocqueville’s work that could raise him to the status of a relevant great thinker? The inescapable nature of the egalitarian dynamic demonstrated in *Democracy in America* has been blocked, giving rise to forms of poverty, instability and unemployment that had long been inconceivable. The fact that new inequities have surfaced – and to follow Aron’s reasoning, Tocqueville didn’t even suspect the extent to which they might, even though, as a lucid observer of “pauperism,” he was well aware of the highly inequitable consequences of capitalism – is perhaps not sufficient cause to declare his work irrelevant.

As for the rest, many authors – without so much denying its exceptional interest – pointed out the shortcomings of *Democracy in America* early on. Since the 1880’s, the masterpiece of the Britain James Bryce (1838-1822), *The American Commonwealth* (1888), which was for many years one of the most consulted studies of the United States (including by Max Weber), reproached Tocqueville for a tableau that was too abstract, hiding the inequities and the weight of the political parties. Aron himself emphasized the insufficient “realism” of toquevillian predictions of inequities and hierarchies. At the start of the 20th century, the gap between what the United States had become and the toquevillian tableau seemed wider than ever, even if institutional and political structures endured, owing to significant changes. Today, Tocqueville is in danger of being even more misleading in that his name evokes an idealized image of the American nation and that “neoconservative” intellectuals who favor President Bush sometimes readily refer to it. With the distance of time, Tocqueville’s America sometimes looks like an engulfed continent; it had the traits of a largely agrarian society, perhaps more egalitarian than any other, in which massive industrialization hadn’t yet exerted its inegalitarian effects.

Tocqueville himself was surely susceptible to some kinds of idealization; for example, hiding the power of money in political life and overestimating social mobility. Today, the “civil society” that Tocqueville described with such enthusiasm, invigorated by a dense associative network and by the “virtue” of interdependent citizens, seems weakened, and his principal of popular sovereignty doesn’t seem to have kept its promise with regard to the enormous electoral abstention and the weak direct political participation of the citizens, not to mention the decisive influence of *lobbies* on public life. Besides, according to the prominent sociologist Ralf Dahrendorf, “Tocqueville’s world, the world of the authors of the *Federalist*, seems about to collapse,” because “the new theme is that of the *disuniting of America*, along with fear, violence and various forms of fundamentalism.” Leaning on the pessimistic analyses of Arthur Schlesinger, he emphasizes that “toquevillian virtues,” which are indispensable to participation in local and religious communities, are disappearing because “civil society is falling into pieces, separating into rather uncivil groups”. Certainly, the cohesion of “civil society” belongs to the past: the “glue has dried” and “Americans are no longer Americans, but rather Italian-Americans, Afro-Americans, Hispanic-Americans.” As for the picture of France that Tocqueville developed in *Old Regime and Revolution*, once again he leaves modern researchers sceptical. Thus, according to Pierre Rosanvallon’s last book on the French republican model, Tocqueville painted a portrait of “Jacobinism” that was

too schematic: today, the “tocquevillian caricature” is in danger of perpetuating the stereotypes of “centralism” that has certainly changed after more than a century and a half.

All these analyses therefore cause us to be wary of ideological uses of Tocqueville and to resist the illusion that his writing would presciently hold the answers to all our questions. However, his perspective on the United States and his attempt to define the key characteristics of democratic societies still provide a precious source of ideas and even inspiration for the social sciences and political philosophy.

Tocqueville and democratic individualism

One of the themes that continues to feed sociological thought is that of *individualism*, which Tocqueville distinguished from *egotism*: whereas the former is a characteristic of democratic societies, the latter describes a universal psychological tendency. To be “individualistic” means to fall back on private life with one’s family and friends, leaving “great society,” where one accomplishes one’s responsibilities as a citizen. For Tocqueville, the great danger lay in this general withdrawal into the private sphere, in the abandonment of associative and political participation, opening a gap in which threatened to swallow up the “tutelary” power of the State. Freely interpreted, this theme is still rich with ideas to explore modern problems of civic participation. Such are the stakes in the classic book by Richard Sennet published in 1974, *The Fall of Public Man*, which opens with a quote by Tocqueville on individualism that separates men from their peers to the point of making them forget their shared membership in society. In keeping with such concerns, Sennet laments the weakening of public-spiritedness, where the main symptom would be the “end of public culture” under the growing pressure of a culture based on the privacy of the individual. Didn’t Tocqueville emphasize that democratic men generally do not like “manners” and ceremonies ? Taking a new perspective on this idea, Sennet laments the decline of the rules of “civility,” that is to say, certain “codes” that maintained a “distance” between individuals, which was indispensable to social life. Democratic societies would forever be invaded by “incivility,” that is to say “putting the full weight of one’s personality on others.” This change would have grave consequences for politics, as the change in communication techniques of party leaders would attest, always more preoccupied by their “image”, which results in the tendency of their constituents to judge them more on their “personality” than their actions. According to Sennet, this tendency is in danger of preserving “ structures of domination” and weakening the sense of common good that all dynamic political communities require. Because what Sennet fears, after Tocqueville, is “the collapse of the *res publica*”.

The importance of these analyses in clarifying the transformations of contemporary democratic societies is remarkable; the tendency that Sennet noted became obvious in Europe as well, where the invasion of public life by private life seems to progress inevitably. In France, recent changes in political communication, where that which rises from the people is no longer a category reserved for actors and singers, confirm the relevance of these ideas. And all the more because they are sustained by an attachment to the values of public life according to a tocquevillian idea. For the richness of Tocqueville’s ideas is due to the fact that they are not content to reveal modern pathologies: his intention is also to expose the remedies to these tendencies, notably local and associative participation, a theme that continues to inspire today’s researchers about the role of “civil society” in contemporary democracies.

Civil society and associations : the toquevillian legacy

In the United States, “neo-tocquevillism” indicates a political sociology that describes the importance of associative bonds to nourish a community founded on mutual trust. Such is the goal of Robert D. Putnam’s research. The purpose of his book, *Making Democracy Work* (1993), is to show that the global success of different regions of Italy is correlated to the density of civic bonds, which were formed through municipal life and free associations. In this book, Putnam presents Tocqueville’s ideas as the basis of his research. *Democracy in America* would have in fact shown the link between a society’s “manners” and political practice; civic associations reinforce “sentimental habits” that are indispensable to life in a democracy. Bringing back the republicanism of the Renaissance, Tocqueville would convincingly show that only active participation in free associations guaranteed the deployment of an authentic citizenship supported by a sense of cooperation, solidarity and social co-responsibility.

But it is above all in his studies of the United States that Putnam refers to Tocqueville, presented as the “patron saint” of sociologists of “social capital.” By “social capital,” Putnam means the entirety of networks, formal and informal, linking men to one another in cooperative relationships founded on mutual trust. Tocqueville would therefore have seen the decisive trait of American civic culture: *associationism*, which introduces individuals to the heart of a wide variety of communities as a function of various objectives, from scholastic mutual assistance to musical practice. Furthermore, Tocqueville would have taken the role of religious communities in the practical teaching of public-spiritedness. His “genius” would also have been to understand, with his theory of “self-interest well-understood,” which Putnam calls “norm of generalized reciprocity:” individuals in American society devote themselves all the more willingly to collective causes that they expect will ultimately be advantageous to themselves.

So, far from sending Tocqueville back to an idealistic period of the 19th century, Putnam thinks his vision was corroborated by the 20th century, at least until the 1960s, when Americans spent much of their time on their associative lives. However, America distanced itself from a “tocquevillian tableau” starting in the 1970s, characterized by a low number of participants in associations. The reasons were complex: changes in work life, long commutes, family crises, the increasing presence of the media, etc. All the same, taking on a “tocquevillian” position, Putnam concluded his analysis not with a lament, but with an appeal to those in charge to lay the groundwork for a revitalization of associative life, which implies a revival of active civic education, public transportation and work hours that leave more time for associative engagement, a “great religious reawakening” (about which Putnam nonetheless points out the dangers: so he must be “pluralistic” and “tolerant”), new forms of electronic communication (Internet more than solitary television), an increase in group celebrations and finally, a greater investment by all citizens in political life in the traditional sense (elections, etc.).

Current interest in Tocqueville is therefore based on his tableau of the positive effects of American “civil society.” To avoid any confusion, we must define this concept once again. Such is the basis of the work of the philosopher Benjamin Barber – who was at one time an advisor to Hillary Clinton – in his plea for a “strong democracy,” first published in 1984, which borrows from Tocqueville. Barber warns against the abusive use of the idea of “civil society” lamenting that it has become “trendy slogan.” He offers a useful classification of

different meanings of this concept. The first, that of “liberals” and especially “neoliberals,” often reduces it to the idea of the market. The second is that of the “the community-minded:” “civil society” becomes “a synonym for community,” with the resulting ambiguities when it leads to legitimizing all kinds of closed communities, and even forms of “corporatism.”

So we must adopt yet another perspective, this time “strongly democratic:” “civil society” as “the key to rehabilitate republicanism.” Thus, Barber’s plea for a “strong democracy,” one that is nourished by active participation and keeps citizens at the heart of “civil society,” evokes Tocqueville to emphasize that a free political community depends on a “dynamic civil society:” “Alexis de Tocqueville celebrated the *local* character of American freedom, and he believed that democracy could only be sustained by vigorous civic activity, inspired by the model that was characteristic of President Jackson. It would pain him to see America today, where our alternatives are reduced to either gigantism and the greed of the market (according to the liberal model), or the idea of misunderstanding identity (according to the community-minded model).” At a distance from any “bargaining” democracy, strong in the rivalry of the chosen political elite, Tocqueville appears as the great thinker of “civic education” brought about by the active participation of all citizens at municipal and associative levels.

Reformulating tocquevillian proposals: “deliberative democracy”

The difficulty with these updates lies in their insufficient realism: how can we revive the public-spiritedness that Tocqueville admired, given the modern economic, social and technological changes that make a simple revival of the associative citizenship of 1830 impossible? Such questions are posed by today’s theorists of “deliberative democracy” like James S. Fishkin and Bruce Ackerman, who both borrow from Tocqueville. “Deliberative democracy,” is a concept that does not reduce democracy to the simple elective model where the political elite present themselves to the voters. “Deliberative democracy” implies a *debate* between the citizens themselves, comparing their points of view; at the end of this dialogue, they can come to renounce their initial preferences and integrate the points of view of their adversaries.

And yet, this model based on dialogue, which tries to be faithful to the tocquevillian description of municipal meetings, is threatened by the increasing influence of polls, which simply “take a snap-shot” different opinions without letting them to truly confront one another. This could give rise to a political crisis, with politicians and citizens acting under the influence of alleged “public opinion” revealed by these polls, which are, in fact, nothing more than fleeting, heterogenous and manipulated preferences.

According to Fishkin, active participation in the local meetings and associations described by Tocqueville is still an excellent model of collective deliberation, but only at the local level. Changes in *media* actually imply the reconsideration of concrete modes of public-spiritedness on a larger scale. What *Democracy in America* says about newspapers is revealing on this point: They are presented as being linked to parties or specific associations in view of accompanying civic participation. All the same, observes Fishkin, these newspapers were soon replaced by mass dailies that were more “informative,” forsaking the civic role so admired by Tocqueville. It is within this renewed framework that polls appeared, claiming to reflect public opinion, whereas the “snap-shot” of an opinion will never replace its elaboration by actual dialogue. Thus arose the proposal, that tried to be faithful to the

toquevillian spirit, to institute *deliberative polls*: a “panel” would be chosen, representing a variety of opinions, and they would meet and *actually debate* for a day or two, with the support of specialists and of impartial documentation on the issue under review. According to Fishkin’s experiments, these “deliberative polls” ended with a number of people changing their minds at the end of the discussion: this time, the poll recorded the result of a *true deliberation*. For Fishkin and Ackerman, this invention ties in with Tocqueville’s spirit of associationism by making it happen in the era of mass media. A self-proclaimed “neo-tocquevillian,” Fishkin emphasizes that if Tocqueville had been interested in “institutions capable of favoring verbal confrontation among people”, we can no longer, today, focus so much on associations; similarly, Ackerman, also believing himself to be “neo-tocquevillian,” recognizes that his vision is “less idyllic” than that of Tocqueville : “We can no longer think that civil society develops in a vacuum,” because we need to help in its development, notably by “deliberative polls,” in order to reach a vast public on a national scale.

If the idea of a “deliberative poll,” in spite of its seductive character, can of course leave one skeptical – one might think it unrealistic, or one might think that it doesn’t solve all the problems associated with the influence of polls –, it testifies to the vitality of the toquevillian legacy in contemporary thought. Furthermore, analyses of the democratization of Europe can find in Tocqueville a source to rethink the ideal of “deliberative democracy” thanks to a continued public debate in civil society, where associations have their role to play without necessarily being privileged speakers for the authorities. Whatever else it may be, “deliberative democracy” is linked, more in its spirit than in its actual wording, with two great themes that were dear to Tocqueville and that are still relevant today: the warning against the dangers of individualism and the quest for the means to give citizens who are engaged in collective research the solutions to the problems of their political community. In this sense, although democratic societies have changed profoundly since the publication of *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville’s work still opens promising pathways for political thought.

Serge Audier

Maître de conférences en philosophie morale et politique.

Université Paris IV-Sorbonne

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Traducteurs:

Anglais: Deborah Levy
Arabe: Béchir Sébai
Chinois: Yan Suwei
Espagnol: Ofelia Arruti
Russe: Alla Beliak

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