

Alexis de Tocqueville « *Democracy in America* » Reviews

In 1831, when two young French men, Alexis De Tocqueville and his companion Gustave de Beaumont, traveled from France to the United States of America, they were curious on how people had organized the political system in the “New World”. Disappointed by the course of the events in France and in Europe, they tried their best to investigate in order to explain what they saw as the successful American approach of Democracy. Coming back to France, De Tocqueville published two books. One of them – *Democracy in America* - Volume I, 1835, Volume II, 1840 - is today seen as one of the keystone of modern political science. In this book, Tocqueville reflected on democracy, based on nine months of intense observation and many interviews with bankers, lawyers, political leaders as well as common American settlers. His writing is still quoted on a regular basis by political figures, writers and philosophers. As a French student, I personally feel very close to Alexis De Tocqueville’s eagerness to understand the American way of life and his way to compare the U.S to the one we have in France. The “scientific way” he handled his work was unanimously saluted by editorialists from France as well as from the U.S; however, beyond the first positive reactions, the publication of *Democracy in America* stimulated the contemporaneous thoughts about political and social systems.

First Reactions.

From the first edition, *Democracy in America* was a successful publication; most of the reviews seen it as a fresh and scientific piece about the U.S political system.

In one of the first review published by The New-York Minor dated from March 5, 1836, it is possible to get the early general feeling the book left, “The appearance of the country, the manners of the people, and the influence of their feelings and government, our present condition, and our future prospect, are developed in a singularly eloquent and perspicuous strain”

One of the first conclusion we make doing our review research is De Tocqueville’s thought and writing has been widely quoted since the early publication. We found many examples of this way to quote De Tocqueville in almost every piece of writing whose subject was about the American society and its future. It was in fact a way to elevate the American society by comparing it to the European one. Alexis de Tocqueville, who was widely known as a young French aristocrat, was really impressed by his observations and his positive analysis was a great source to support the idea that the modern U.S political system was in fact the most advanced one in the world. In The Journal of Belles Lettres, Dec 13, 1836, we found a quote that demonstrates well how the author views was used and heavily quoted for positive reinforcement of the U.S system superiority, “M. de Tocqueville says in his admirable book on America, ‘in the United States politics are the end and aim of education; in Europe its powerful object is to fit men for private life” (3).

Although De Tocqueville was widely seen as a supporter of a democratic system and he demonstrates a great motivation to depict how democracy working in the U.S communities he visited, some rare American reviewers were comparing him as an additional aristocrat intellectual that was also opponent to democracy. As every single book and piece of writing, De Tocqueville has been misread and sometimes misunderstood. The Cincinatti Mirror published in July 11, 1835 a rude interpretation of

Democracy in America, “ M. De Tocqueville does not believe in the permanency of our Union... He does not admire universal suffrage, which has the effect of sacrificing intelligence to ignorance” (285). In fact, even if De Tocqueville expresses his fears on what he names “The Tyranny of the Majority”, he definitely see the different levels of American institutions (township/county/state) as an efficient way to balance the democratic and liberalism principles.

After a few years and a deeper analysis of the content of the two first editions, some reviewers started to point out some De Tocqueville’s book errors as well as some translation issues. Previously the book had been published only in Europe (in France and in England). The first American edition, tried to corrected the few misinterpretation of the local laws and habits. In October 6, 1838 George Adlard wrote in *The New-Yorker*, “We occasionally notice the kind of mistakes into which foreigners, though most intelligent and capable, are invariably apt to fall; but these are explained and the whole subject properly elucidated by the I? John C. Spencer, who has supplied a valuable preface and notes” (45). Moreover, according to Spencer himself – the counselor at U.S law that wrote the notes and preface – interviewed in *The North American Review* in the October 1838 issue, these notes were not designed to furnish “comments on the theoretical views of the author” but were “confined, with very a few exceptions, to the correction of what appear to be misapprehensions of the author in regard to some matters of fact, or some principles of law, and to explaining his meaning where the translator has misconceived it” (504).

Deeper American Analysis.

Critics and reviews published between 1835 and 1840 were more detailed generally studying each chapter of De Tocqueville’s work, and enlightening his

observations. One of the most popular comment found in a couple of reviews is the fact that De Tocqueville was the first analyst to figure out how locally was organized the democracy in the United States. In *The North American Review*, published in July 1836, we read, “No English writer on this country has discerned the important fact sustained by our town and county organization in carrying on the government” (182). The theory developed by De Tocqueville tends to explain the failure of the revolution in France by the absence of democratic habits in France people, and the pressure of Parisian’s intellectuals. His observations of the U.S townships and county political system show that Americans were really involved in the political decision on an everyday basis. The reveal of this local power has also widely been discussed as seen in later review published in April 1866 The Error of De Tocqueville, “A favorite notion of M. De Tocqueville was that the State governments, being more immediately connected with the domestic interests and every-day concerns of men, would in time become the great objects of ambition, and would eventually gain the ascendancy over the national Congress” (825). Clearly, the Civil War that was going to erupt demonstrates the power of the federal government and its willingness to keep the country united despite the division among slavery. The balance of power between the federal government and the local organizations – although very a crucial subject to import to France – turned to be one of the most famous De Tocqueville’s misinterpretations about the United States future since he failed to see the coming rivalry between the two level.

De Tocqueville was obsessed with the risk that a central government could become too powerful over individuals, a notion he calls “mild despotism”. As stated in the review The Error of De Tocqueville published in *The North American Review* in 1866, “The nullifiers of the South affirm, on the contrary, that the Americans in forming

the Union, had no intention of consolidating themselves into one and the same people, but they meant only to form a league of independent States; whence it follows that each state, having preserved its complete sovereignty, if not in action, at least in principle, has the right to interpret the laws of Congress, and to suspend, within its own limits, those which it thinks opposed to the Constitution or to justice” (326). In his analysis of the American institution De Tocqueville does not see the fight coming about the U.S multilevel institutional system and does not predict any form of conflict about the south and the north. One explanation we can see, is that he was too preoccupied to compare the U.S federal system to the French government where the state level is not present. In addition, he did not spend a lot of time in the South of the U.S, certainly not enough to see the problem that was growing-up.

Another great risk of democracy seen by De Tocqueville was what he calls “the tyranny of the majority”. In another review published in 1836 also in *The North American Review*, the author writes, “The sixth chapter discusses the topic of the judiciary, the seven that of impeachments, the terrors of which are greatly exaggerated by M. De Tocqueville... We cannot recall half a dozen cases of its successful exercise” (200).

In *The United States Democratic Review*, in an article published in August 1847, the author seems to be nervous about De Tocqueville fears, “His theory of the ruinous tendency of republicanism, will be illustrated by anecdotes of the insolence of a boot-maker, who takes a measure without the slightest indication of awe at the presence in which he finds himself” (116). Even if De Tocqueville was one of the first European to catch the ideology of the division of power (Local/state – Judicial/Executive/Legislative) with his “French based approach” and his memory of the popular French revolution he did not get all the implication of the U.S institutional system.

French Analysis.

In France, the political system was very unstable and the memory of the Revolution, its violence as well as its failure was still in every intellectual head. De Tocqueville analysis was almost unanimously saluted, as in Great Britain by progressists intellectuals. In Le Journal Des Savants review, published in MAI 1840, De Tocqueville is compared to Montesquieu who also wrote a few decades before about the same subject. Greatly appreciated, De la Democratie en Amerique is seen as a too political / institutional approach by this reviewer, “Il est bon que les faits sociaux soient envisagés sous deux aspects, l’un plus exclusivement politique, l’autre humain et général : l’unité des vues de l’écrivains se marquera d’autant mieux dans ces applications diverses et successives” (259). The same French reviewer point out the almost psychological tendency De Tocqueville has to elevate the American ideology when compared to the European one, especially the English one, “Par la même raison, nous n’avons pas très bien compris comment et pourquoi les Américains auraient plus d’aptitude et de goût pour les idées générales que les Anglais, leurs pères auxquels cependant ils sont jusqu’à présent inférieurs dans les lettres, les sciences et les arts... Nous regrettons que M. De Tocqueville, dans ses chapitres si piquants sur l’état des lettres aux Etats-Unis, n’ait pas reconnu que Londres est encore la capitale intellectuelle des Américains” (260).

Moreover, the same author (Le Journal des Savants) point-out the real problem of De Tocqueville analysis that generalize the United States to a unified population, “Le riche planteur de Virginie et le négociant de New-York ont-ils les mêmes habitudes domestiques ? ” (262) With this simple question, in 1840, Le Journal Des Savants while seeing De la Démocratie en Amérique a documented and well argued political analysis, was yet questioning the stability of the United States as a unified country. Optimistic and positive about the Americans and their institutions, De Tocqueville, describes a quasi-idyllic situation that was going to implode soon with the American Civil War. However, his views and observations change certainly the European history and shape a new formal approach of politics as a human science.

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