

13 February 2006

Tocqueville in a conservative world

D.N. Byrne, The University of Sydney

Alexis de Tocqueville *The Tocqueville Reader: A Life in Letters and Politics*, edited by Olivier Zunz and Alan S. Kahan, Blackwell Publishing, 2002 (358 pp). ISBN 0-63121-546-8 (paperback) RRP \$69.30.

The end of the Cold War between the capitalist West and the communist Soviet bloc left the United States as the sole global superpower. Its new found position of global political and economic dominance has not, however, gone unchallenged. France, not for the first time, mobilised its extensive political and diplomatic resources to orchestrate opposition to American ‘hyperpower’, a term popularised by former French Foreign Minister, M. Hubert Védrine in the 1990s. Such has been the intensity of acrimony between the two nations about such matters as the Kyoto climate change treaty and the third Gulf War that France has been singled out as being particularly anti-American, (Meunier 2005). American pundits talk of the ‘French betrayal of America’ (Timmerman 2004), while French pundits speak of ‘*L’effroyable imposture*’ (Meysan 2002).

Yet the recent disclosure of extensive co-operation between the United States and France through their ‘Alliance Base’ project in the War on Terror (Priest & Tate 2005) reminds us that the relationship between France and the United States is one of the most enduring in world politics. Former French Foreign Minister M. Michel Barnier observed, on the re-election of President George W. Bush, that ‘We are America’s oldest ally’ (Hartcher 2004). The recent animus between the two powers simply interrupts the longstanding special relationship between these two powers at all levels of politics, culture, and society. French interest in North America spans nearly five centuries, and the relationship acquired a more formal basis as men of the calibre of Benjamin Franklin, (from 1776–85), Thomas Jefferson (from 1784–89) and John Adams (many visits) negotiated political, economic, and diplomatic matters with the French *ancien régime*. In France these leading American lights were feted in the progressive salons of Paris, so keen were Parisians to sate their curiosity about living specimens of the new man of the fabled New World, to admire them, and ultimately to learn.

A combination of economics, science, and politics stimulated France’s initial interest in North America. France sought new commercial opportunities and hoped to threaten British interests, and French scholars sought to investigate the utopian vision of America (Commager & Giordanetti 1967). But besides the Canadian province of Quebec little remains of French imperial North America—the hopefully resurrected febrile culture of the French Quarter of New Orleans comes to mind, as do relics of near forgotten settler/invasor communities such as the Arcadians, now remembered for their distinctive ‘Cajun’ food, music, and dialect. Guizot’s *Letters From an American Farmer* (1792) served to remind his French

colonial period. As the winds of political progress led to regime change in both North America and Europe, politics became the focus of contact between the two peoples. The French regime saw the strategic gains to be made in assisting the American Revolutionaries against the British, and in being the first nation to recognise the infant republic. Meanwhile, individuals such as the redoubtable serial revolutionist General de Lafayette assisted more for reasons of idealism. Military engineer and designer Pierre Charles L’Enfant left a more enduring contribution to American political life with his design of the new capital, named after his friend and the first president. A century later, the Statue of Liberty (1886) became an eternal celebration to the republican and democratic political values that underpinned the relationship of France

and the United States.

It was the power of an idea, however, which bound the youthful United States and France in their special relationship. This was the idea of a democratic republic, the free government of all citizens over themselves. With the fading of monarchical feudalism, this republican ideal came to be seen as the only political order consistent with human freedom. The idea of a democratic republic, so intrinsic to the independent, pioneering, Puritan, and republican culture of the New World, was strenuously contested in the Old World. There aristocratic norms, intrinsically hostile to any form of popular government, deeply permeated the political cultures of all the *anciens régimes*. A popular revolution had served notice to the old order that the masses and their middling leaders were not entirely convinced of the merits of servile deference and the leadership enhancing capacities of blue blood. But the forces of conservative reaction replied that they were only too willing to sacrifice more blue blood to avenge that of the royal family and their most loyal servants, blood which had been spilled most cruelly. The conservatives carried the day.

The *ancien régime* was restored at the Congress of Vienna in 1815, and the spirit of *liberté, égalité et fraternité* came to look like an antiquarian literary pastime for some ageing, greying and bitterly disappointed radical intellectuals. These embittered radicals were unable to come to terms with a revived and reviled traditionalism that was now a fully articulated conservatism—conservatism with its roots in the upper strata of society, but which now spoke to sections of the dislocated middle and lower orders as well. Nevertheless popular demands for political change became increasingly strident over time.

With the gradual fading of the memories of the horrors of the French Revolution, the Terror, and the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, the need for political change was increasingly felt in France. New needs and new challenges were imposed on the restored monarchy, new conditions which many felt that it was no longer meeting satisfactorily. The desire for popular government was reinvigorated. For one aristocrat, Alexis de Tocqueville, a man of deep liberal instincts and a desire to find a way out of this potentially catastrophic impasse, the solution was not to be found in re-examining a spiritually compromised—even spiritually pernicious—revolution. Rather, the solution was to be found in an accurate understanding and interpretation of the consequences of a more distant revolution that had taken place against an enemy of long standing, and which had already been the object of much interest and practical assistance.

Tocqueville believed that the conservative European political situation was untenable in the long run. Yet, democracy from the time of Plato had been synonymous with anarchy and mob rule, the suppression of minorities, and the exploitation and expropriation of the rich. To throw greater light on the nature of democratic society Tocqueville and a companion, Gustave de Beaumont, set sail in 1831 for the New World in search of a new understanding of the democratic citizen in a democratic political culture. They travelled widely across the United States and Canada, ostensibly to gather information on the US penal system. They found nothing resembling the executive detention and secret military commissions without right of appeal that one might find on such a fact finding mission today. Inevitably, their journey revealed much more about American politics, society, and culture than they had initially sought. The report on the penal system of the United States was eventually written by Beaumont and published in 1833.

The secondary motive of Tocqueville's and Beaumont's study of American society became the focus of Tocqueville's theoretical activity, and of his later renown. Tocqueville published his observations in two volumes, the first in 1835 and the second in 1840. They were an instant success in France. He went on to pursue a long career in politics, including tenure as Foreign Minister in 1849. His practical work never shone the way his literary work has—his lack of the popular touch hindered his activities outside a liberal, aristocratic milieu. Later in life, Tocqueville would turn his attention from the new world to the old. In his *The Old Regime and the Revolution* (1856) he sought to interpret the events and circumstances that led to the infusion of democracy in his own nation, though with far different results.

Tocqueville's literary efforts, however, went much further than these two works of political theory. He was an active and engaging correspondent, and an active, reform-minded politician, who sought to institute changes to the political life of his nation with his pen. Minor writings such as letters can be highly instructive about a thinker's beliefs and intentions, even if relatively flawed in comparison with major published works. The decline of Tocqueville's health towards the end of his life meant that a return to the archives would provide the necessary outlet for his eternal restlessness. He and his wife continued to travel, as much to preserve his health as for anything else. On 16 April 1859, Tocqueville passed away.

A new reader contains copious and comprehensive extracts from both *Democracy in America* and *The Old Regime and the Revolution*, as well as a wide range of his correspondence and essays. It has been compiled by Olivier Zunz, Commonwealth Professor of History at the University of Virginia and president of the Tocqueville Society, and Alan S. Kahan, Associate Professor of History at Florida State University, and noted for his translation of the University of Chicago Press edition of *The Old Regime and the Revolution*. From *Democracy in America*, the editors have extracted chapters on, among other things, the origins and social conditions of the Americans, conditions of majority rule, equality, individualism and religion. From *The Old Regime and the Revolution* they have extracted chapters that explore his interpretation of the nature and causes of the French Revolution.

Complete translations of *Democracy in America* and *The Old Regime and the Revolution* are readily available, so the major points of interest in the reader are new translations of some of Tocqueville's correspondence and minor writings on a wide variety of topics over 27 years. These translations provide much additional insight into Tocqueville, the man, as well as Tocqueville, the political theorist and the politician.

The extracts from *Democracy in America* are introduced by some letters illustrating Tocqueville's early impressions of North America. There are also excerpts from the notebooks he kept during his journey across the United States and Canada. Reproduced are famous passages from *Democracy in America* that consider the problems of tyranny of the majority and the effect that the absence of centralised administration has on this power. Tocqueville observed, for example, that were a democracy to develop a centralised administration, 'that in such a republic a more insufferable despotism would prevail than in any of the absolute monarchies of Europe' (p. 110). The reader also finds passages emphasising the role of mediating institutions in society (pp. 177–91). Between the extracts from Volumes One and Two of *Democracy in America*, (in Parts I and II of the reader) we find observations on England, as well as two brief essays on pauperism and poverty (pp. 142–48, 150). There are also a letter to his future wife, the English Marie Mottley (pp. 151–52), some letters explicating other facets of his liberalism (pp. 218–26), and later in the reader, letters on the problems of government in the French colony of Algeria (pp. 226–29).

Following Parts I and II of the reader in which *Democracy in America* is the focus, Part III contains many of the most interesting letters and essays. Here we find Tocqueville's opinions on quite a variety of topics, many relating to France and French political life, its colonies, ethnicity, and to the 1848 Revolution. Written from the point of view of the active, though somewhat dissenting insider, we find illuminating descriptions of Louis Napoleon and the revolutionaries.

Tocqueville had neither the head, nor the heart, nor the stomach, for revolution:

I do not think that in France there is a man who is less revolutionary than I, nor one who has a more profound hatred for what is called the revolutionary spirit (a spirit which, parenthetically, is very easily combined with the love of an absolute government) (p. 156).

The masses might well revolt, but for Tocqueville, there was little expectation that revolution would increase freedom. His feelings for the bourgeoisie were hardly more sympathetic. They, too easily, would sell their liberty for a crust. They, too, lacked the vision and the *grandeur* he believed was necessary to

elevate political life from the quotidian to that which touched the nobility in all.

The reader brings together in a convenient, relevant, and contemporary form a variety of Tocqueville's writings, some of which can only be found in difficult to locate and out of print sources. Perhaps the most noticeable omission is a translation of Tocqueville's essay written for J.S. Mill's *London and Westminster Review*, 'État social et politiques de la France avant et depuis 1789' (Mill 1861), a work which presaged many of the ideas and arguments of *The Old Regime and the Revolution*.

Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* continues to have a life of its own. It remains very influential in the United States, in other new world countries such as Australia in the thought of Manning Clark, and in places where democratic habits and institutions are still matters of discussion rather than intrinsic to the political life. In the United States, both the Left and Right claim *Democracy in America* as a source of moral inspiration, together with the Constitution, Locke's *Second Treatise on Government*, and the *Federalist Papers*. It remains a common touchstone by which political commentators seek to assess developments in American political and social life, though usually more cited than read. Its moral force is accentuated by the fact that Tocqueville was never blind to the many deficiencies he found in the United States, such as his concerns about majority despotism, race relations and the potential of wealth to corrupt politics.

Among contemporary American political commentators few identify so plainly with Tocqueville's political thought, or at least his representation of American democracy, as do the neoconservatives. Their hostility to so many of the complexities of contemporary American cultural and political life creates a barely concealed nostalgia for a time when religious values strongly dominated the minds of both the ordinary people and the elite. They are also nostalgic for a time when producing units were smaller, consumption patterns were simpler, and when a still vigorous pioneering ethos signified that personal responsibility actually meant something. For example, Tocqueville's belief that public charity, that is, welfare, encourages idleness (Zunz & Kahan 2002, pp. 142–48) finds a loud echo within neoconservatism. Their use of his thought, however, is largely derivative and superficial, and it appears that they have few doubts that Tocqueville's representation of the United States was the actuality. Irving Kristol (1995), for example, often draws on Tocqueville to make a point.

Tocqueville's message of the reconciliation of democracy and freedom is a highpoint in the political expression of modernity. He observes, for example, that 'The free institutions which the inhabitants of the United States possess, and the political rights of which they make so much use, remind every citizen, in a thousand ways, that he lives in society' (p. 180). He delivered his message when the values of democracy were still embryonic and contested. The values of liberal democracy have since become established in the West and have evolved differently in diverse political cultures. Not least, *Democracy in America* has contributed to the United States' growing sense of self-recognition and of its central place in world history.

After the September 11 attacks, *Le Monde* carries the headline 'We are all Americans' (Colombani 2001), to stress their implications for the West as a whole. The headline communicates the stresses that mature liberal democracies are experiencing in the current global political scene. This institutional stress is also evident in conservative French President Jacques Chirac's popularity among progressives and in conservative US President Bush's attempts at radical restructuring and rebuilding of foreign regimes while running a very large government deficit. Tocquevillean liberalism seems all but forgotten in a world of reactive conservatism.

Yet two political questions of enduring significance—how democracy and liberty are to be reconciled, and what causes revolutions—are cornerstones of the political thought of Alexis de Tocqueville. By adding an untested national security state to the already somewhat dysfunctional welfare state, are Western elites institutionalising that petty despotism to which Tocqueville believed modern democracies are susceptible? Tocqueville argued 'It would seem that if despotism were to be established among the democratic nations

of our days, it might assume a different character; it would be more extensive and more mild; it would degrade men without tormenting them' (p. 206). Petty it might be, yet it remains that freedom is lost. In a letter to Beaumont (27 February 1858) just before his death, Tocqueville observes 'how difficult it is to solidly establish freedom among peoples who have lost its use and even the very notion! What is more powerless than institutions, when ideas and mores do not nourish them at all!' (p. 340).

REFERENCES

- Barnier, M. 2004, 'A letter to America', *Wall Street Journal—Eastern Edition*, 8 November.
- Colombani, J-M. 2001, 'Nous sommes tous Américains', *Le Monde*, 13 Septembre.
- Commager, H. S. & Giordanetti, E. 1967, *Was America a Mistake? An Eighteenth-Century Controversy*, Harper & Row, New York.
- Hartcher, P. 2004, 'America's empire', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 6 November.
- Kristol, I. 1995, 'An autobiographical memoir', in *Neo-Conservatism: Selected Essays 1949–1995*, The Free Press, New York.
- Meunier, S. 2005, 'Anti-Americanisms in France', *French Politics, Culture & Society*, vol. 23, pp. 126–41.
- Meyssan, T. 2002, *L'Effroyable Imposture*, Editions Carnot, Paris, trans. into English as *9/11 The Big Lie: The Pentagon Plane Crash That Never Happened*, Carnot, New York.
- Priest, D. & Tate, J. 2005, 'Help from France key in covert operations: Paris's 'Alliance Base' targets terrorists', *Washington Post*, 3 July.
- St. John de Crèvecoeur, J. H. 1997 (1782), *Letters From an American Farmer*, ed. S. Manning, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Timmerman, K. R. 2004, *The French Betrayal of America*, Crown Forum, New York.
- D.N. Byrne* has completed a doctoral thesis on the political thought of G.W.F. Hegel and Friedrich von Schlegel at the *Discipline of Government and International Relations*, The University of Sydney.