



## BOOK REVIEW

# Hess: Tocqueville and Beaumont

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Hess, Andreas. 2018. *Tocqueville and Beaumont: Aristocratic Liberalism in Democratic Times*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan.

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In this concise and very readable intellectual joint biography of the French writers and politicians Alexis de Tocqueville (1805–1859), best known for *Democracy in America* (1835/1840), and Gustave Beaumont (1802–1866), with *Ireland* (1839) as his most famous work, Andreas Hess innovatively presents us with a picture of a research partnership of pathbreaking significance for the history of social and political science. In contrast to earlier individual biographies of both men, this is the first to present their considerable output as the outcome of a life-long collaboration in both intellectual and professional practice. Tocqueville and Beaumont were thinkers who in debates with each other defined and responded to key events and conditions of their time. In Hess's approach, their many and varied topics of analysis gain greater contemporary relevance than is usually the case. This book will appeal to a broad audience of specialist historians of ideas, social science, and politics as well as to students in a wide range of fields. It also serves as a model for revisiting many other partnerships in the history of social science, where mutual collaboration has been put in the shade by falsely aggrandizing searches for individual "greatness."

What Hess describes as a two-man research "machine" was a highly productive partnership of mutual influence that began at law school and continued unabated till Tocqueville's death. Early on they came to understand the methodological importance of comparative research in the quest for a better understanding of democratic modernization processes, and their first joint project centered on what policy lessons could be learned from penal reform in the U.S. Using their long correspondence as a source, Hess shows how their partnership was characterized by collaboration on many fronts, particularly in critical, but supportive, discourse. They shared evidence and sharpened their analysis in letters and conversations in political chambers, on journeys, and over dinner. In particular Tocqueville's better-known *Democracy in America* needs to be understood in the light of his partner Beaumont's more skeptical but equally successful novel, *Marie, or Slavery in the United States* (1835), as an example of their complementarity. Whereas Tocqueville undertook interviews with policy makers and civic dignitaries in the United States, Britain, and elsewhere, thus presenting a

broader vista of change, Beaumont described in empathetically observed detail the social conditions of those excluded from a democratic voice.

The concept of aristocratic liberalism, a concept central to the title of the book and of particular ideological significance during post-revolutionary attempts to restore the monarchy in France, is perhaps a bit harder to get to grips with here than their collaborative thought processes. It broadly signifies the search for a stable constitutional system framed by legal checks and balances and a strong and well-educated civil society to safeguard liberty against the excesses of both radical egalitarianism and conservative religious authoritarianism. As Hess notes, it was a perspective attractive to surviving young aristocrats, like Tocqueville and Beaumont, who welcomed the new democratic trends set in train by the revolution, but also wished to preserve some of the culture and intellectual freedoms of the old regime. At its heart it expressed anxiety about the tensions between the Enlightenment desire for liberty and the growing radical demands for equality from those without voting rights, anxieties aired in some depth in the writings of both these writers. Here, the book well illustrates the need for such a typifying ideological concept to be contextually and fully unpacked to be understood in all its interest group complexity. It is this complexity that continues to have many resonances today, rather than its aristocratic origins.

Finally, it should be noted that there are of course three research partners here: Tocqueville, Beaumont, and Hess himself. As a longstanding writer and commentator on continuing Western debates over the fate of democratic liberalism through seemingly never-ending times of modernization, violent sectional politics, and ideological oppression, Hess is clearly in awe of this pair of thoughtful public intellectuals, neither of them sanctimonious “Weltverbesserer,” both of them valiant but unsuccessful in their attempts to make compromise-enhancing policy reasoning a political platform in its own right. His admiration might explain the lack of attention paid to the contradictory legacy of empire-building Napoleon, who took the reign in the bloody aftermath of the anti-aristocratic revolution and whose imposed codification of French law into a more liberal, egalitarian, and meritocratic system has remained surprisingly durable throughout 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century European history. Like history itself, history writing is never short of unreasonable moral dilemmas.