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# Tocqueville's Paradoxical Moderation

*Aurelian Craiutu*

This essay examines in detail Tocqueville's paradoxical moderation by focusing on his rich correspondence and notes for *Democracy in America*. As Tocqueville's critique of the politics of the July Monarchy shows, he was a political moderate and an immoderate mind, and this uncommon combination explains the ambiguities and contradictions in his view of democracy. After exploring Tocqueville's views on moderating democracy, the essay examines the main elements of his new science of politics at the heart of which lies the idea of a wise balancing of various social elements, principles, and ideas. The final section comments on Tocqueville's elusive moderation and his search for greatness in modern politics.

"Je suis sans cesse pour moi un problème insoluble."  
—Tocqueville

*Habent sua fata libelli!* Widely acclaimed at the time of its publication, *Democracy in America* eventually lost its appeal and slipped into oblivion a decade after Tocqueville's death. A century ago, it had surprisingly few readers and was not generally considered a classic work in political philosophy. It is telling that Antoine Redier, who published the first posthumous biography of Tocqueville in 1925, dedicated his book to all those who had neglected Tocqueville's works.<sup>1</sup> At that time, there was no complete edition of *Democracy in America* in print in France. Today, Tocqueville's masterpiece is one of the most frequently discussed books in political theory and is also read by the general public. Some have even suggested that he risks suffering from an excess of glory.

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1. Antoine Redier, *Comme disait Monsieur de Tocqueville ...* (Paris: Perrin, 1925). For a comprehensive account of the reception of Tocqueville's works, see Françoise Mélonio, *Tocqueville and the French* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1998).

The recent success of Tocqueville's works confirms his growing and solid reputation. Four new English translations of *Democracy in America* have appeared in the last five years, the latest one in the prestigious The Library of America collection. A fifth translation (scheduled to be published by Liberty Fund in 2007) will make available the monumental critical edition, containing all of Tocqueville's notes from the archives at Beinecke Library. Compiled by Eduardo Nolla and translated by James T. Schleifer, this bilingual edition will undoubtedly be the fundamental reference for any Tocqueville scholar. A new and much improved translation of the two volumes of Tocqueville's *The Old Regime and the Revolution* has also been published in the last years. Volume Two (never before translated in its entirety) contains many important notes and fragments on the Thermidor and Napoleon.

Moreover, a significant number of new and provocative interpretations of Tocqueville's works have recently been published in both French and English, shedding fresh light on lesser known facets of Tocqueville's persona: the philosopher, the moralist, the writer, the defender of the French colonization of Algeria.<sup>2</sup> The publication of *The Tocqueville Reader*, the forthcoming *Cambridge Companion to Tocqueville* along with the third Pléiade volume of his works and the Library of America edition of *Democracy* add new dimensions to the canonization of Tocqueville. Finally, the bicentenary of his birth has been widely celebrated this year on three continents (Europe, North America, Asia), thus proving that

2. Here is a list with some of the most important new interpretations of Tocqueville: Jean-Louis Benoît, *Tocqueville moraliste* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2004); Laurence Guellec, *Tocqueville et les langages de la démocratie* (Paris, 2004); Serge Audier, *Tocqueville retrouvé. Genèse et enjeux du renouveau toquevillien français* (Paris: EHESS/Vrin, 2004); Agnès Antoine, *L'impensé de la démocratie: Tocqueville, la citoyenneté, et la religion* (Paris: Fayard, 2003); Michael Drolet, *Tocqueville, Democracy, and Social Reform* (Hampshire and New York: Palgrave, 2003); Robert T. Gannett, *Tocqueville Unveiled: The Historian and His Sources for the Old Regime and the Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); Sheldon Wolin, *Tocqueville Between Two Worlds: The Making of a Political and Theoretical Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); Cheryl Welch, *De Tocqueville* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Pierre Manent, "Tocqueville philosophe politique," *Commentaire*, No. 107, Autumn 2004, pp. 581-87; Aurelian Craiutu and Jeremy Jennings, "The Third Democracy: Tocqueville's Views of America after 1840," *American Political Science Review*, 98/3 (2004): 391-404. I would like to point out the recent publication of a rich selection from Tocqueville's correspondence, *Lettres choisies. Souvenirs*, eds. Françoise Mélonio and Laurence Guellec (Paris: Gallimard, 2003). Also worth mentioning are *The Tocqueville Reader*, eds. Oliver Zunz and Alan S. Kahan (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002) and Alexis de Tocqueville, *Writings on Empire and Slavery*, ed. and trans. Jennifer Pitts (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000).

Tocqueville's works have achieved a truly universal appeal that transcends national boundaries.

### An Unclassifiable Thinker

If there is, indeed, a Tocquevillian moment (and fashion), it is fair to argue that his fame is well deserved. Although written more than a century and a half ago, Tocqueville's works have greater explanatory and normative power than those of his (and, I should add, our) contemporaries. More than any other political thinker, his insights into the complex nature of modern democracy and the democratic soul remain highly relevant to our time and continue to provoke us intellectually. But what is particularly striking is that Tocqueville speaks convincingly to both the Left and the Right without offering a rigid doctrine. As Robert Nisbet once pointed out, "it is in a way a high tribute to Tocqueville that at no time has there been, or is there likely to be, anything called Tocquevilleism."<sup>3</sup>

On the Left, he is admired for his theory of democratic citizenship, equality, and civic engagement, for his illuminating discussion of the art of association, his strictures against materialism as well as his repeated warnings against the appearance in democracy of a new form of manufacturing aristocracy, "one of the hardest that has appeared on earth."<sup>4</sup> In his recent book, *Tocqueville Between Two Worlds*, Sheldon Wolin confirmed Tocqueville's classical status and claimed that "to reflect on present day American politics invites reflections on *Democracy in America* and vice versa."<sup>5</sup> On the Right, Tocqueville is appreciated for his passionate defense of freedom against equality, his critique of centralized government and mass society, his prescient description of soft despotism, and his defense of administrative decentralization. "*Democracy in America*," argued Harvey Mansfield and Delba Winthrop, "is at once the best book ever written on democracy and the best book ever written on America."<sup>6</sup> Was then Tocqueville a man of the Right or a man of the Left? Was he a conservative liberal, an aristocratic liberal, or a liberal conservative? Did he really judge democracy, as Guizot once claimed, as a vanquished and resigned aristocrat convinced that his opponent

3. Robert Nisbet, "Many Tocquevilles," *The American Scholar*, Winter (1976-1977): 65. Also see François Bourricaud, "Les «convictions» de M. de Tocqueville," *The Tocqueville Review/La revue Tocqueville*, 7 (1985-1986): 105-115.

4. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2000), p. 532.

5. Wolin, *Tocqueville Between Two Worlds*, p. 3.

6. Mansfield and Winthrop, "Editors' Introduction," p. xvii.

was right or did he really believe that democracy was the most just regime on earth?<sup>7</sup> Was he perhaps a man of the center who searched for the *juste milieu* between extremes? And if so, what kind of moderate was he?

The truth is that there are *many* Tocquevilles who speak different languages and address various constituencies, and that significant parts of Tocqueville's works such as his letters and notes are often ignored by political theorists. What is really strange is that, although it is commonly believed that Tocqueville was a sort of moderate, his political moderation has not been properly studied thus far (with a few exceptions).<sup>8</sup> As a concept, moderation does not even appear in the indices of major exegeses of Tocqueville's works such as those by Roger Boesche and Sheldon Wolin. There are several reasons for this strange oversight and some of them have to do with Tocqueville's writing style. As various interpreters pointed out, *Democracy in America* is a composite of genius containing many conflicting views that are not always systematized and are often mixed with sweeping generalizations and aphoristic remarks in the old tradition of the French moralists.<sup>9</sup> It is not a mere coincidence that Tocqueville refused to give a single definition of democracy and worked with no less than *nineteen* meanings of democracy.<sup>10</sup> The lack of consensus on this point among his most prominent interpreters is telling. George Wilson Pierson thought that Tocqueville's inexact and confusing use of the word democracy was an unconscious lack of precision on his part, while James Schleifer and Sheldon Wolin argued that, far from being a flaw in Tocqueville's argument, the many meanings of democracy in his writings indicate his intention to offer a broad definition of democracy as a multi-faceted phenomenon that eludes narrow definitions and is not confined to its American version.<sup>11</sup>

The modern fight for Tocqueville's allegiance, as Roger Boesche once suggested, would have probably amused Tocqueville

7. For an excellent discussion on this topic, I recommend Eduardo Nolla, *Autour de l'autre démocratie* (Napoli: Istituto Suor Osola Benincasa, 1994), pp. 9-31.

8. Peter A. Lawler, "Tocqueville's Elusive Moderation," *Polity* 22/1 (1989): 181-89.

9. See Benoît, *Tocqueville moraliste*, pp. 445-540.

10. For more detail on this issue, see chapter 19 in James Schleifer, *The Making of Tocqueville's Democracy in America*, 2nd edition (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2000), pp. 325-39.

11. See George Wilson Pierson, *Tocqueville in America*, 2nd edition (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), pp. 158-59, fn. 2; Schleifer, *The Making of Tocqueville's Democracy in America*, pp. 325-39; Wolin, *Tocqueville Between Two Worlds*, pp. 125-29.

as much as it would have irritated him.<sup>12</sup> As his rich correspondence amply demonstrates, Tocqueville was fully aware of the ambiguous nature of his work as well as of the various reactions to his writings. In a letter to his friend Eugène Stoffels from 1835, Tocqueville candidly remarked: "I please many persons of conflicting opinions, not because they understand me, but because they find in my work, by considering it only from a single side, arguments favorable to their passion of the moment."<sup>13</sup> Tocqueville disliked political categories and declared himself a "liberal of a new kind" who followed no group and had no party behind him. Not surprisingly, in a letter to his mentor, Pierre-Paul Royer-Collard, written in 1841, Tocqueville wrote, not without a mixture of pride and sadness: "The liberal but not revolutionary party, which alone suits me, does not exist."<sup>14</sup> Nine years later, he made the same point in another letter to Louis de Kergorlay in which he described himself again as a man without party or cause "other than that of liberty and human dignity."<sup>15</sup> Tocqueville defied black-and-white classifications and straddled them by embracing ideas found in almost all political traditions. His musings about democracy and his constant search for certainty explain why it is impossible to point to any passage from his works that would allegedly represent his definitive political outlook.<sup>16</sup> As we come to know better his rich correspondence with his friends, editors, and family, we realize the complexity of Tocqueville's political outlook as well as the difficulty of adequately describing it in a few words. Hence the irresistible temptation to search for representative passages in Tocqueville's published works and correspondence in the hope of achieving a better understanding of his true political allegiance and figuring out what he *really* believed.<sup>17</sup>

12. Roger Boesche, *The Strange Liberalism of Alexis de Tocqueville* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), pp. 15-18.

13. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Selected Letters on Politics and Society*, ed. Roger Boesche (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), pp. 99-100.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 156.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 257.

16. The same idea can be found in Boesche, *The Strange Liberalism*, p. 17.

17. A caveat is in order here. In this essay, I treat notes and publications as being of comparable weight and examine Tocqueville's thought as so many independent interjections that constitute (more or less) equally significant aspects of a corpus of writings. While I am well aware that some might simply be momentary musings, I would like to stress again the seminal importance that, in my view, Tocqueville's letters (and notes) have for any interpreters

Witness, for example, the following three key passages in which Tocqueville sought to give an overview of his political ideas and which might lead interpreters to reach somewhat different conclusions about his political philosophy. These texts are drawn from different writings of Tocqueville from 1837 to 1841. The first one is a note accidentally found and published for the first time by his biographer, Redier, in 1925 (it did not figure among the papers published by Gustave de Beaumont). The second one is from Tocqueville's preparatory notes for *Democracy in America*, while the third one is from a letter to his English translator, Henry Reeve. At first sight, the three statements seem to have a lot in common insofar as they persuasively show that Tocqueville was a man of conviction and had an independent mind. But a more in-depth reading reveals a few significant differences in tone and content among these statements. In the first of these texts, entitled "My instincts, my opinions" (*circa* 1841), Tocqueville described his political beliefs as follows:

I have an instinctual preference for democratic institutions, but I am aristocratic by instinct, that is I despise and fear the crowd. I passionately love freedom, legality, the respect for rights *but not democracy*. This is the base of my soul. I hate demagoguery, the disorderly action of the masses, their violent and uneducated participation in affairs, the lower classes' envious passions, the irreligious tendencies. ... I belong neither to the revolutionary party nor the conservative party. But in the end I *hold more to the latter than to the former*. For I differ from the second more by the means than by the end, while I differ from the former by both means and end. Freedom is the first of my passions. This is what is true.<sup>18</sup>

This stunning confession shows a conservative and aristocratic spirit that feared the crowd and despised the disorderly action of the masses and their uneducated participation in political affairs. While the idea that freedom was his first passion appeared in other texts as well,

of his ideas. An extensive use of Tocqueville's rich correspondence (fifteen volumes in the series of his *Complete Works* at Gallimard!) is subject to the possible criticism that the views expressed in his private letters were not definitive, that they were sometimes tailored to suit his correspondents' tastes and so forth. This is partly right. Nonetheless it is important to emphasize that Tocqueville devoted a lot of time to writing letters, a skill that he perfectly mastered in the old French tradition. Moreover he asked his friends to keep his letters in the hope that he might use them later for his own works. For a good analysis of the importance of Tocqueville's letters, see François Furet, "The Passions of Tocqueville," *The New York Review of Books* (June 27, 1985): 23-27; Françoise Mélonio, "Tocqueville entre la révolution et la démocratie," in Tocqueville, *Lettres choisies. Souvenirs*, pp. 11-33; Roger Boesche, "Introduction," in Tocqueville, *Selected Letters*, pp. 1-20.

18. *The Tocqueville Reader*, pp. 219-220; all emphases added.

Tocqueville's preference for the "conservative" party broadly defined might strike us as novel and original, given the fact that at the time of the writing of this piece (1841), he was careful to distance himself from François Guizot and his supporters in Parliament.<sup>19</sup>

If we turn now to our second fragment extracted from Tocqueville's rich notes (to be found in the Nolla critical edition), we shall discover that in 1837-38, as Tocqueville was writing Volume Two of *Democracy in America*, he preferred to describe his tendencies as *democratic*. "You see," wrote Tocqueville, "that my tendencies are always democratic. I am a partisan of democracy without entertaining any illusions about its flaws and without ignoring its dangers. I am an even greater partisan [of democracy] since I believe that I see more clearly than others, because I am profoundly convinced that there is no means of stopping its triumph, and that it is possible to diminish the evils it brings and to produce the good it promises only by working with it and guiding it as much as possible."<sup>20</sup> As a lucid "partisan" of democracy, Tocqueville was convinced that its progress could not be stopped and believed that its triumph might be right and beneficial for mankind if democracy was to be properly educated and moderated.

Finally, in a letter to Henry Reeve from 1837, Tocqueville presented himself as an impartial observer placed at the center, in a perfect equilibrium between the past and the future, between aristocracy and democracy. He took to task not only those who tried to give different features to his works, according to their own political passions, but also those who wanted to make him a party man and alternately gave him democratic or aristocratic prejudices. "I perhaps would have had one set of prejudices or the other," remarked Tocqueville, "if I had been born in another century and in another country. But the chance of birth has made me very comfortable defending both."<sup>21</sup> Having come into the world at the end of a long Revolution, which, after having destroyed the old state, had created nothing durable, Tocqueville felt that he belonged neither to aristocracy nor to democracy and argued that, based solely on his instincts,

19. It might be argued that Tocqueville never entirely gave his allegiance to the "conservative party" broadly defined. In the passage I quote from, he only said that he was closer to it than to the revolutionary party. Tocqueville also claimed that he disagreed with its means, although he agreed with its ends.

20. Tocqueville, *De la démocratie en Amérique*, ed. Eduardo Nolla, vol. II (Paris: Vrin, 1990) p. 186, fn. m. All translations of Tocqueville's notes are mine. It is worth pointing out that the opposition between conservative (party) and revolutionary (party) is different from that between aristocracy and democracy.

21. Tocqueville, *Selected Letters*, pp. 115.



he could not favor one over the other. He claimed not to have had any natural love or hatred toward democracy or aristocracy. "In a word," he concluded, "I was so thoroughly in equilibrium between the past and the future that I felt naturally and instinctively attracted toward neither the one nor the other, I did not need to make great efforts to cast calm glances on both sides."<sup>22</sup>

The question remains: why did Tocqueville choose to describe his political ideas in such different ways? What were his "true" convictions? Would it be enough to describe him, in Furet's words, as "a democrat by intellect, but an aristocrat at heart"?<sup>23</sup> Was he, perhaps, an aristocratic liberal, as Alan Kahan once claimed?<sup>24</sup> And lastly, do all these words really matter after all, when it comes to reading and understanding Tocqueville's political beliefs? These labels suggest that the greatness of Tocqueville does not lie in any single doctrine that he may have espoused or promoted but in the ambivalent—or critical—ways in which he analyzed the multiple facets of the emerging democracy at a point in time when its principles were not yet universally acknowledged. He was a politically moderate spirit allied to an immoderate heart and mind, who experienced contradictory longings and never managed to achieve happiness or contentment. This uncommon combination, a coincidence of opposites so to speak, had a lot to do with Tocqueville's personality (he was often critical of everything and everyone!), but it might also have been fostered to some extent by the peculiar age in which he lived.

### Living in an Age of Transition

When interpreting Tocqueville's writings, it is important to remember that he lived in an age of *transition* and belonged to a generation whose main mission was to bring the French Revolution to a peaceful end. He came of age during the Bourbon Restoration, which was the ground of a fierce battle for power between those "prophets of the past" who were nostalgic after the political institutions of the Old Regime, and the forward-looking liberal spirits, who defended the liberties enshrined in the Charter of 1814 granted by Louis XVIII.<sup>25</sup> It was this

22. *Ibid.*, pp. 115-16.

23. Furet, "The Passions of Tocqueville," p. 23.

24. Alan S. Kahan, *Aristocratic Liberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

25. I comment on the importance of the Bourbon Restoration in Aurelian Craiutu, *Liberalism under Siege: The Political Thought of the French Doctrinaires* (Lanham: Lexington Books, Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), pp. 19-26. For a presentation of the new generation that came of age during the Bourbon Restoration, see Alan B. Spitzer, *The French Generation of 1820* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987).

complex political and social situation that created a unique and rich cultural environment as manifested by an exceptional revival of arts and sciences. The enthusiasm and energy of the new generation that came of age in the 1820s knew no bounds, as new political and cultural outlets opened for its seemingly inexhaustible creative energies.

Not surprisingly, the feeling of living in a time of great change after two decades of political stagnation was conveyed by many writings and memoirs of that period. In his correspondence with Royer-Collard from the 1830s, Tocqueville himself called the Restoration a time of great issues and great parties; he also envied his mentor for having played a key political role at such an important juncture in time. Seized by a blind impatience to live and an intoxication of reawakened thought, young and restless minds were drawn to the study of the past in order to understand better the principles of constitutional government. They crowded the lecture halls at the Sorbonne and the Collège de France where famous professors such as Guizot, Victor Cousin and Abel Villemain, the "sacred trinity," lectured on representative government and the history of philosophy.

The magnitude of the political changes facing the country was daunting. How to create a representative government that would successfully combine freedom and order, respect for the past and new rights and liberties? What could be done to alleviate the painful legacy of the Terror of 1793-94 and of Napoleon's dictatorship? All these challenges made everyone aware of living in an unprecedented age of transition. Louis de Bonald, for example, argued that there was a greater change in the political and moral state of France during the first half of the Bourbon Restoration than there had been between 1789 and 1814. His only slightly hyperbolic remark (that was shared by many of his contemporaries) highlighted a new phenomenon that became visible during this period, viz. the sudden acceleration of social and political change.

On many occasions, Tocqueville himself anxiously commented on the irresistible force behind the progress of democracy that he contemplated with a mixture of religious awe and terror. Finding himself situated between past and future, he felt that his entire age was carried away by overwhelming forces that no individual could defy or control. Tocqueville shared the prevalent obsession with the alleged insignificance of individual actors unable to shape political events or to create anything durable. His was an age when firm beliefs were dissolved to make way for a universal and relentless questioning of all dogmas, principles and authorities. Surprisingly, this skepticism was accompanied by faith in the possibility of a new doctrine. In a famous essay, *How Dogmas Come to an End?* (1823),

Théodore Jouffroy described the metaphysical and political anxieties of the new generation born in the bosom of skepticism. "The old dogma has no authority with it," claimed Jouffroy; "in its view, skepticism is right in its quarrel with the dogma, but wrong in itself; after it has accomplished the work of destruction there is nothing of it left. Already these children have got beyond their fathers and feel the poverty of their doctrines. They obtain a presentiment of a new and better faith, they fix their eye on this inspiring prospect with enthusiasm, with conviction, with resolution."<sup>26</sup> In the midst of this general effervescence, nothing could be taken for granted any longer apart from the irresistible progress of democracy. "A moving democracy," claimed Charles de Rémusat, who belonged to the same generation as Tocqueville and Jouffroy, "escapes all efforts to contain it."<sup>27</sup> The whole social fabric was undergoing major transformations and the greater interest in the private sphere was seen as having corrosive effects on social bonds.

In spite of all these momentous changes (or perhaps because of them), the pervasive anxiety and restlessness of the epoch seemed contagious. Not only did the young minds feel the importance of their mission and understood the character of their age. They were also seized by metaphysical anguish and began complaining about the pace of change as well as the unbearable emptiness and boredom of life. They denounced the cheapening of culture and mores along with the general moral decay of society, marked by growing cupidity, egotism, and incurable anarchy. But it was above all the petty ambitions of the people exclusively preoccupied with getting rich that drew the ire of social critics and writers such as Stendahl, who spared no energy criticizing the disappearance of great passions and their replacement by mediocre commercial and industrial interests. France risked becoming a nation of dwarfs, one of these critics warned, a place in which it was impossible for anyone to pursue truly great things and ideas any longer.

It should be no surprise that these complaints resonated with Tocqueville. He was fully aware of living in an age of transition in which nothing was fixed or stable and compared himself to a tired wanderer in a new world without a good compass, engaged in an adventurous voyage at sea. "I cannot tell," confessed Tocqueville, "and do not know when this long voyage will end; I am tired of

26. Théodore Jouffroy, *How Dogmas Come to an End*, in *Philosophical Miscellanies of Cousin, Jouffroy, and B. Constant*, trans. and ed. George Ripley, vol. II (Boston: Hilliard, Gray, and Company, 1838), p. 135.

27. *La pensée politique doctrinaire sous la Restauration--Charles de Rémusat. Textes choisis*, ed. Darío Roldán (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2003), p. 175.

mistaking deceptive mists for the bank. And I so often wonder whether that solid land we have sought for so long actually exists, and whether it is not our fate to rove the seas forever!"<sup>28</sup> In another writing, he commented melancholically, not without a hint of sadness and powerlessness: "When I watch everything around me, I see a spectacle unique in history; I see on all sides ancient institutions shaken; societies tremble on their foundations; not only political laws, but all that has been considered up to now as the foundation of society itself. ... The ground of European civilization trembles. ... all is shaken, not only political institutions, but civil institutions, social institutions, and the old society that we know."<sup>29</sup> To be sure, Tocqueville partly shared the uneasiness of many of his conservative colleagues about the rise of the middle class to political power. He feared that the advent of the new mechanical age might bring new forms of servitude that would pose serious threats to freedom. Beginning with the early 1830s, he uttered harsh words regarding the commercial spirit of the July Monarchy that he feared might stifle the creative energies of the country. We'll examine next his critique of this period in the hope of getting to the core of his "true" political beliefs.

### A Modern Don Quixote

As a young lawyer at Versailles, Tocqueville was asked to swear allegiance to the new regime after the new king, Louis-Philippe of Orléans, took power in the summer of 1830. Tocqueville took the oath, not without hesitation, a few months later, much to the chagrin of some members of his family and other Legitimist friends who remained loyal to the Bourbon family. Although he parted company with them, Tocqueville never became enthusiastic about the new regime which brought to power the middle class and openly fostered a universal obsession with material wealth that enthroned self-interest and egoism as reigning principles.

In his *Recollections*, looking back at that period, Tocqueville chastised the government of the middle class for being without virtue and greatness and derided those who eulogized *le bourgeois* for his hard work, rational principles, common sense, and sound judgment. Instead, Tocqueville described the spirit of the bourgeoisie

28. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Recollections*, eds. J. P. Mayer and A. P. Kerr (New Brunswick: Transactions, 1997), p. 66.

29. Tocqueville as quoted in Boesche, *The Strange Liberalism*, pp. 33-34. The original text can be found in Tocqueville, *Œuvres complètes d'Alexis de Tocqueville*, ed. Gustave de Beaumont, vol. 9 (Paris: Michel-Lévy, 1864), p. 570.

as "active and industrious, often dishonest, generally orderly, but sometimes rash, because of vanity and selfishness, timid by temperament, moderate in all things, except a taste for well-being, and mediocre."<sup>30</sup> Tocqueville's words clearly indicate his dissatisfaction with the ethos of the new age memorably captured by Guizot's appeal "*Enrichissez-vous*."<sup>31</sup> Tocqueville felt trapped in a labyrinth of petty incidents and ideas that led to a "universal shrinkage"<sup>32</sup> of all passions that risked transforming the country into a nation of "Lilliputians," as it was argued in *La Gazette de France*.<sup>33</sup>

Tocqueville conveyed his discontent in March 1841 in a letter to J. S. Mill in which he warned against the all-consuming obsession with money, the increasing commercialization of life, and the general abasement of mind and taste brought forth by the rise of the middle class. "The greatest malady that threatens a people organized as we are," wrote Tocqueville, "is the gradual softening of mores, the abasement of the mind, the mediocrity of tastes; that is where the great dangers of the future lie. ... One cannot let this nation take up easily the habit of sacrificing what it believes to be its grandeur to its repose, great matters to petty ones."<sup>34</sup> In Tocqueville's eyes, the new discoveries of steam or the electric telegraph could neither supplant the loss of genuine passions nor justify the dullness of modern society; technological progress was an insufficient replacement of greatness. In another letter to Gustave de Beaumont from August 1840, Tocqueville conveyed his longing for a type of greatness that was made impossible by the spirit of the epoch: "You know what a taste I have for great events and how tired I am of our little democratic and bourgeois pot of soup."<sup>35</sup> To his old mentor, Royer-Collard, who, after having supported the July Monarchy, eventually came to distance himself from the politics of the regime, he was even more forceful and critical and could hardly contain his disdain. "The true nightmare of our period," wrote Tocqueville in September 1841, "is not perceiving before oneself anything either to love or to hate, but only to despise."<sup>36</sup> He refused to associate himself in a permanent manner

30. Tocqueville, *Recollections*, p. 5.

31. Guizot's words were often misquoted and misinterpreted. Here is what Guizot said actually: "Éclairez-vous, enrichissez-vous, améliorez la condition morale et matérielle de notre France: voilà les vras innovations" (as quoted in Craiutu, *Liberalism under Siege*, p. 41).

32. Tocqueville, *Recollections*, p. 5.

33. See Boesche, *The Strange Liberalism*, p. 55.

34. Tocqueville, *Selected Letters*, p. 151.

35. *Ibid.*, p. 143.

36. *Ibid.*, p. 155.

with any of the political men of that time, especially Alphonse Thiers and Guizot, who were "fundamentally antipathetical"<sup>37</sup> to his way of feeling and thinking. Tocqueville displayed the same uneasiness vis-à-vis the dominant parties and groups that divided the country: "I do not see a single one to which I would want to be tied. I do not find in any of them, I do not say *everything* that I would want to see in political associates, but even the principal things for which I would willingly give up the lesser."<sup>38</sup>

Tocqueville's recurrent lamentations about the universal pettiness of his age only increased his sense of isolation and powerlessness. He had few reasons for feeling at home in a world in which everything was for sale and was supposed to be judged only in terms of profit and utility, the new reigning values. It would be inaccurate, however, to believe that Tocqueville had no appreciation whatsoever for the new rising class; his political moderation separated him from the thoroughly antibourgeois radicals and ultras of his time. As Tocqueville acknowledged in his *Recollections*, if the spirit of the middle class were to be combined with that of the aristocracy and of the people, it "could create wonders."<sup>39</sup> But left to its own devices and unaided by democratic and aristocratic elements, it is unable to produce anything great or virtuous and could become excessively greedy and vulgar.

As a political animal, Tocqueville longed to engage in common with other politically concerned individuals, but he was isolated and unable to have a significant impact upon parliamentary debates. His frustration was fueled by the political scene which was characterized by superficial passions, a constant state of agitation, and vain quarrels over words and petty interests. To his friends, Tocqueville complained that no serious discussion took place in Parliament, an institution that, in his view, was dominated by corruption, languor, boredom, and stagnation. He felt condemned to immobility and powerlessness. "What is politics without action?" he asked Royer-Collard. "To live in a public assembly and not to work effectively for public concerns, not to act and not to join with those who have the power to act, is that not manifestly absurd?"<sup>40</sup> By becoming subservient to industrial interests, politics had changed its end, being demoted to the ancillary status of the administration of economic questions and a dispute over purely commercial interests.

37. *Ibid.*, p. 154.

38. *Ibid.*, pp. 155-56.

39. Tocqueville, *Recollections*, p. 5.

40. Tocqueville, *Selected Letters*, p. 154.

It is characteristic of Tocqueville's political nature that he never completely lost faith, hope, and interest in politics. This point must be emphasized in order to nuance the argument put forward by those who claim that Tocqueville "did change his estimate of the value of politics and, especially, of its possibilities for significant action."<sup>41</sup> This statement does not fully capture Tocqueville's complex political nature. While he was not a great political actor (he felt uneasy when addressing a large audience, was aloof, and, as his wife once joked, did not have the stomach of a statesman), Tocqueville remained a political man to the very end, despite his recurrent doubts that he would live long enough to see freedom established in his own country.

A surprising confession he made in *Recollections* shows his state of mind in the midst of the turbulent revolution of 1848, when he suddenly discovered a new and eclectic political world that took him by surprise. Elected to the Constituent Assembly, Tocqueville observed the scene with a mixture of curiosity, dismay, and skepticism triggered by the new configuration of power and interests. Yet in spite of the presence of agitated revolutionaries whose behavior made him uncomfortable and with whom he had little in common, Tocqueville experienced a curious sense of well-being that was new to him. "I felt at once," he wrote, "that the atmosphere of this Assembly suited me and in spite of the seriousness of the situation, I had a sense of happiness I had never known before. For this was the first time since I entered public life that I felt myself moving with the current of a majority in the only direction that my tastes, reason, and conscience could approve."<sup>42</sup> He cherished this new and delightful sensation because he felt called to serve a noble cause, saving liberty and conquering demagoguery by democracy.

His *Recollections* and parliamentary speeches also suggest that for Tocqueville, political action was much more than a Pascalian *divertissement* or an escape from isolation and skepticism. Even in his dark moments, he continued to believe that politics could serve as an effective means for countervailing the predominant influence of the taste for material well-being. Politics, Tocqueville argued, might counterbalance the growing privatization of society and enlarge the imagination and ideas of the people. It could give individuals the taste for great enterprises and the determination to undertake them. More importantly, it is politics properly pursued that could force all citizens to see each other on a regular basis,

41. Wolin, *Tocqueville Between Two Worlds*, p. 294.

42. Tocqueville, *Recollections*, p. 105; all emphases added.

overcome their isolation, and enlighten themselves by taking care of public affairs.<sup>43</sup> In a free nation, Tocqueville argued, individuals must define themselves by a grand purpose that can be given only by noble political passions.

What Tocqueville understood by *noble* passions can be surmised by examining the words of praise he lavished (in both volumes of *The Old Regime and the Revolution*) upon those who took part in the events of the summer of 1789. "People had real convictions," Tocqueville nostalgically wrote. "Everybody followed his own convictions boldly, passionately."<sup>44</sup> Those individuals, he argued, were concerned with lofty and ambitious goals and were animated by sincere and generous emotions. Their youthful enthusiasm was combined with true independence of mind and passionate faith in themselves and in a noble cause (*viz.* to correct the mistakes of the past). They were sincerely interested in public affairs, forgetful of their individual interests and absorbed in the contemplation of a great plan. Tocqueville admired their determination to risk everything they held most dear in their lives and was impressed by their desire "to lift themselves above the petty passions of their hearts."<sup>45</sup>

Typical of his views was his choice of words to describe the initial moments of the French Revolution in 1789. Tocqueville's superlatives should be read as an indirect condemnation of the politics of the July Monarchy: "I have never met," he wrote in the *Old Regime*, "with a revolution where one could see at the start, in so many men, a more sincere patriotism, more disinterest, more true greatness. ... This is 1789, a time of inexperience doubtless, but of generosity, of enthusiasm, of virility, and of greatness, a time of immortal memory."<sup>46</sup> By expressing his admiration for those independently-minded men of the eighteenth century who did not know the consuming, tenacious and spineless passion for material well-being that characterized his contemporaries, Tocqueville obliquely criticized the latter for having succumbed to the love of wealth, "the mother of servitude."<sup>47</sup> He admired his predecessors because they pursued higher and nobler passions than the desire for material well-being and money.

43. Tocqueville clarifies his position on this issue in a preparatory note for *Democracy in America*, ed. Nolla, vol. II, p. 126, fn. c.

44. Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the Revolution*, vol. II, trans. Alan S. Kahan (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), p. 237.

45. *Ibid.*, p. 68.

46. Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the Revolution*, trans. Alan S. Kahan, vol. I (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), pp. 208, 244.

47. *Ibid.*, p. 178.



Thus Guizot's *juste milieu* that legitimized the domination of the middle class could satisfy him no more than the philosophical eclecticism of Cousin and Théodore Jouffroy, who did not pass his famous test of liberty and were, in his opinion, nothing else than docile apostles of the bourgeoisie. Tocqueville aimed higher than that. He always placed the true life of action and the genuine exchange of opinions and thoughts above the mere pursuit of economic interests. It is no accident that he strongly admired Plutarch's heroes because they were great actors and performed memorable deeds, unlike most politicians of his day.<sup>48</sup> Consequently, Tocqueville was unwilling to let his intellectual horizon shrink to the point of becoming a middling mind in the manner of Guizot or Cousin who believed that the end of history coincided with the definitive rise of the middle class to political power. Their brand of political moderation which allegedly gave preference to security over liberty did not fulfill Tocqueville's innermost longings that were bound to make him eternally restless and dissatisfied. At times, he felt like a Don Quixote lost in the labyrinth of the petty bourgeois world. "There are moments," Tocqueville confessed to Beaumont in March 1838, "when I fear becoming mad in the manner of Don Quixote. My mind is completely crammed with a heroism that is hardly of our time, and I fall flat when I come out of these dreams and find myself face to face with reality."<sup>49</sup> Our modern Don Quixote had a natural inclination for adventure, and all he was allowed to do was to confront and live surrounded by mediocre politicians searching for material and personal gain. The touch of danger that, according to Tocqueville,<sup>50</sup> lends spice and poetry to most of life's actions was missing from his bourgeois world.

Was there any outlet left for Tocqueville's mind and soul, crammed with a heroism that was stifled by the ethos of the July Monarchy? Was there anything that could allay his internal restlessness and give him the "bodily and mental excitement" along with the "strong emotions"<sup>51</sup> that he needed? Tocqueville, who had always searched for certainty, could rely only on one single irrefutable truth: democracy was in full

48. See Wolin, *Tocqueville Between Two Worlds*, pp. 300-4. For Tocqueville's dislike of *juste milieu*, see Bourricaud, "Les «convictions» de M. de Tocqueville," pp. 109-12.

49. Tocqueville, *Selected Letters*, p. 125.

50. "I have a natural inclination for adventure. ... I have always found that a touch of danger lends spice to most of life's actions" (*Recollections*, p. 106).

51. See, for example, the following revealing confession of Tocqueville: "When I return to regular habits, the monotony is fatal to me; I am possessed by an internal restlessness. I must have bodily or mental excitement, even at the risk of my life. The desire for strong emotions becomes irresistible" (quoted in Boesche, *The Strange Liberalism*, p. 214). Also see Tocqueville's seminal letter to Madame de Swetchine from February 26, 1857 (*The Tocqueville Reader*, pp. 334-37) in which he wrote about his loss of faith and need for greatness.

spate, its progress irresistible and inevitable, as if willed by God. He realized that to oppose democracy was both absurd and foolish. After all, Tocqueville was a political moderate unlikely to succumb to childish political nostalgia. But democracy, he understood early on, was an impure river, that needed dikes to contain and regulate its impetuous flow. Democracy had to be educated, tamed, "purified," and moderated in order to show its true advantages. Might then the task of educating and moderating democracy give Tocqueville those adventures that he had always longer for?

### Democracy or "Les Eaux du Déluge"

Tocqueville's peculiar intellectual constitution made him uniquely suited to this task. He was tempted to transfer greatness from action to theory. While his political instincts were moderate and made him immune to any form of political radicalism, his philosophical inclinations and ruminations made him a restless and immoderate mind, always in search of certainty and never fully satisfied with the half-truths of the democratic world.<sup>52</sup> It is this unique combination that made Tocqueville a modern Don Quixote in his own way. Fortunately, as André Jardin once noted, there was a counterbalance to his restlessness: a sound dose of good sense which always led him back to what was possible. "If his imagination was vivid," remarked Jardin, "Tocqueville's reason remained realistic and prudent."<sup>53</sup>

Tocqueville found the task of moderating democracy intellectually and politically challenging and applied himself to it with passion and determination. He clearly stated his goals not only in the carefully crafted introduction to *Democracy in America* but also in the equally important preface to volume one of *The Old Regime and the Revolution*. "Today," wrote Tocqueville, "humanity is driven by an unknown force which we can hope to moderate, but not to defeat."<sup>54</sup> This force posed a number of significant threats to freedom including an excessive preoccupation with private interests, narrow individualism, isolation, all of which made possible the appearance

52. It must be pointed out that Tocqueville was not a simple-minded Cartesian spirit obsessed with achieving certainty. He was a complicated spirit (à la Montesquieu) who hated doubt as much as simplistic ideas (such as the unicausal theories of political change which he criticized in his *Recollections*). I would like to thank Alan Kahan for calling my attention to this point.

53. André Jardin, *Tocqueville: A Biography*, trans. Lydia Davis and Robert Hemenway (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1988), p. 374.

54. Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the Revolution*, vol. 1 p. 87; emphasis added.

of a new form of soft, democratic despotism. Hence, Tocqueville argued, the primary task of those who were called to govern modern society was "to *instruct* democracy, if possible to reanimate its beliefs, to *purify* its mores, to *regulate* its movements, to substitute little by little the science of affairs for its inexperience, and knowledge of its true interests for its blind instincts; to adapt its government to time and place; to modify it according to circumstances and men."<sup>55</sup>

Nonetheless the impure and ever changing world of democracy was never able to quench Tocqueville's thirst for certainty. As he wrote in a letter to Charles Stoffels from October 1831, when he first began to reflect on the surrounding world, he believed that the world was full of demonstrable truths. But when examining things closely, Tocqueville perceived nothing but inextricable doubts. He could only compare himself to "a man who, seized by dizziness, believes that he feels the floor tremble under his feet and sees the walls that surround him move." He ultimately convinced himself, much to his chagrin, that the search for absolute truth was a futile effort leading to no tangible results: "Concerning the immense majority of points that it is important for us to know, we have only probabilities, almos. To despair of being so is to despair of being a man."<sup>56</sup> Tocqueville was frustrated by the impossibility of getting to the bottom of things and was afraid of living in a "*demi-jour perpétuel*,"<sup>57</sup> like the majority of his countrymen. Plagued by doubt which he considered to be one of the greatest miseries of human nature (along with death and sickness), he resigned himself to an endless search for light in a world that could offer him only probabilities and approximations.

In its details, the task of moderating democracy proved to be a difficult one. France was not a happy example; at times, it seemed that the fate of the country was to oscillate constantly between license and despotism, between greedy desires and false theories. The whirlwind of party politics created an uneasy spectacle for

55. Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 7; all emphases added.

56. Tocqueville, *Selected Letters*, pp. 63-64. Tocqueville's Pascalian side is explored in Peter Lawler, *The Restless Mind* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1993), especially pp. 73-88, 109-58.

57. In a note for *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville wrote: "Plus j'examine ce pays-ci et toutes choses, plus je vis et je suis effrayé en voyant le peu de certitudes que l'homme est état d'acquérir en ce monde. Il n'est pas de sujet qui ne s'élargisse à mesure qu'on y entre, pas de fait ni d'observation au fond de laquelle on ne découvre un doute. ... Il y a des gens qui se plaisent à vivre dans ce demi-jour perpétuel; pour moi, il me fatigue et me désespère. Je voudrais tenir les vérités politiques et morales comme je tiens ma plume et le doute m'assiège" (*Democracy in America*, ed. Nolla, vol. II, p. 77, fn. v).

Tocqueville's eyes who perceived how the world was moved in opposite directions from the intentions of political actors. A short fragment (rarely quoted and never published by Tocqueville), which can be found among the notes for *Democracy in America*, reveals Tocqueville's state of mind when contemplating the irresistible progress of democracy: "Democracy! Don't you notice that these are the waters of the deluge? Don't you see them advancing by a slow and irresistible effort? ... If you retreat, the flow continues its march. If you run away, it flows behind you. ... Instead of seeking to erect powerless dikes, let us try rather to build the sacred ark which must carry the humankind on this shoreless ocean."<sup>58</sup> How strange that Tocqueville would compare democracy to the waters of the deluge! What is particularly striking in this passage is Tocqueville's Biblical reference to the building of the "sacred ark" which could save modern man from the fury of the natural force called "Democracy." The task was urgent and had its own promise of greatness that appealed to the Frenchman, the modern Don Quixote, who was thirsting for great adventures spiced up with a touch of danger. His new political science was supposed to offer the blueprint for building this sacred ark and the Biblical overtones of the fragment quoted above reveal Tocqueville's belief in his soteriological calling and mission.

In Tocqueville's view, democracy had to be moderated and purified because it contained in itself contradictory tendencies and deep-seated antinomies that risked transforming it into an enemy of freedom and civilization. As he wrote to Sacy who had published a review of volume two of *Democracy in America* in *Le Journal des Débats*, the new social democratic state which produced great goods also gave birth to a number of dangerous tendencies that had to be countervailed through wise institutional crafting. "These seeds, if left to grow unchecked, would produce, it seemed to me, a steady lowering of the intellectual level of society with no conceivable limit, and this would bring in its train the materialism of mores, and finally, universal slavery. I thought I saw that mankind was moving in this direction, and I viewed the prospect with terror. It was essential, I thought, for all men of good will to join in exerting the strongest possible pressure in the opposite direction."<sup>59</sup>

Tocqueville believed that democracy is inherently unstable and dangerous not so much because it is predicated on a constant ten-

58. *Ibid.*, p. 7, fn. r. Also see the slightly different version of Tocqueville's note in *Œuvres*, vol. II, eds. Jean-Claude Lamberti and James T. Schleifer (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1992), pp. 937-38.

59. Letter to Sacy as quoted in Jardin, *Tocqueville*, p. 273. Tocqueville was irritated by Sacy's review. A draft of Tocqueville's letter can be found in the family's archives. For more information, see p. 260.

sion between equality and liberty but because most people would seek to solve this tension in favor of equality by abandoning liberty. As Tocqueville perceptively remarked, there are two ways of being equal that have widely different consequences. Everyone can have the same rights in freedom or everyone can be equally deprived of rights in despotism.<sup>60</sup> The natural instincts of democracy "are to subordinate the individual to the state and to crush the former under the weight of the masses."<sup>61</sup> In a democratic regime that is unable to moderate its natural instincts, the very idea of right is extinguished as democracy tends to disregard and trample individual rights under its feet while simultaneously extending the influence of society and strengthening centralization.<sup>62</sup>

In another unpublished note for volume two of *Democracy*, Tocqueville reiterated this point in unambiguous terms: "The great danger of democratic ages, you can be certain of that, is the destruction or excessive weakening of the parts of the social body for the sake of the whole."<sup>63</sup> He added that, if left to its natural tendencies, democracy threatens freedom of thought and fosters the tyranny of the majority.<sup>64</sup> Not surprisingly, the ambiguity of equality was a theme which loomed large in Tocqueville's works and letters. In any democratic regime, he argued, there are two distinctive and contrary tendencies. One leads people directly to independence and, unchecked and unregulated, might even push them into anarchy, while the other surreptitiously leads them to servitude by various ways that few can foresee. In other words, "one leads people to new and general ideas, the other might reduce them, so to speak, to not thinking at all."<sup>65</sup>

Unfortunately, warned Tocqueville, the corrosive effects of equality do not stop here. Taken individually, those who live in a democracy tend to be weak and ready to withdraw within the narrow sphere of their private interests. New social bonds are slow to emerge and civic apathy becomes a social disease that threatens the survival of society in the long-term. Tocqueville also perceived other equally strong reasons that would call for moderating and purifying democracy. As we have already seen, his attitude toward materialism was colored by his aristocratic leanings that made him long for deep-seated convictions, disinterestedness, and noble passions. Left to its inclinations, democracy does not cultivate these

60. Tocqueville, *De la démocratie en Amérique*, ed. Nolla, vol. I, (Paris: Vrin, 1990), p. 7, fn. r.

61. *Ibid.*, II: 272, fn. h.

62. *Ibid.*, p. 275, fn. t.

63. *Ibid.*, p. 22, fn. m.

64. *Ibid.*, p. 24, fn. r.

65. *Ibid.*, p. 24, fn. r

passions and sometimes even stifles them. Tocqueville understood that the constant instability of the democratic social state has long-lasting effects on how people feel, think, and connect with each other. It shrinks their mental horizon by making them prisoners of the here and now, engulfed in the pursuit of material pleasures, without any concern for larger vistas. Living the "tumultuous and constantly vexed life" which equality gives to men, they all contract the habits of the industrial and commercial classes. Their minds, notes Tocqueville, take a "serious, calculating, and positive turn" which makes them pragmatic to the point of forgetting that there is more to life than getting rich. He attributed this turn to equality which "does not destroy imagination in this way, but limits it and permits it to fly only while skimming the earth."<sup>66</sup>

On many pages in volume two of *Democracy* Tocqueville expressed serious concerns about the cultural and intellectual effects of unchecked and uneducated democracy. His warnings are generally well-known and it might be superfluous to restate them again in full detail. Yet it is worth remembering that Tocqueville was an unorthodox type of liberal who was concerned with the quality of the human soul as much as with political institutions. Raised in the old tradition of the French moralists, he was interested in manners and noticed that "in democratic countries, manners ordinarily have little grandeur because private life there is very petty"<sup>67</sup> and vulgar, and thought has few occasions to raise itself above preoccupation with mundane domestic interests. Furthermore Tocqueville could not gloss over the fact that democracy fosters homogeneity and monotony. Democratic individuals, he remarked, tend to be all alike and do similar things. Consumed by the desire to improve their well-being and having the opportunity to do so, they have many passions and goals, but they all end in love of wealth. Hence the following paradox: while everything changes constantly, the aspect of society is monotonous and boring to the eyes of the spectator looking for noble passions and great adventures.

The highest price to pay is the homogenization of society. "Variety is disappearing from within the human species," Tocqueville commented, "the same manner of acting, thinking, and feeling is found in all the corners of the world."<sup>68</sup> Democracy diminishes people's ambitions and transforms their souls by surreptitiously stifling great ambition and noble enterprises. Tocqueville's voice reminds

66. Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 571.

67. *Ibid.*, p. 579.

68. *Ibid.*, p. 588.

one of Flaubert's diatribes against the mediocrity and values of the bourgeois. A note for volume two of *Democracy* reveals the depth of Tocqueville's disenchantment with democracy. His tone here is arguably harsher than the carefully chosen words of the published text. Referring to the effects of the democratic social state on individuals' lives, he wrote: "Ambition is not more moderate, but effeminate. It is not ambition that is small, courage is. Ambition is rather vulgar than small. *Vulgar*, this is the true word of my chapter."<sup>69</sup> But can a "vulgar" democracy advancing with the menacing speed of a natural force be controlled and purified? What are the means of educating and moderating its instincts? And finally, would the work of one man be enough to build the "holy ark" capable of saving mankind from the fury of untamed democracy?

### Tocqueville's New Science of Politics and the Means of Moderating Democracy

It is somewhat ironical that Tocqueville, a restless mind who despaired of ever being able to get to the bottom of things, never really despaired of the possibility of moderating democracy, a daunting task in itself. In this respect, he harbored a striking confidence in the power of his new science of politics that was supposed to explain how democracy could and ought to be moderated and educated. As Tocqueville famously stated in the Introduction to volume one of *Democracy*, "a new political science is needed for a world altogether new."<sup>70</sup> Yet he never became a political scientist in the usual sense of the word. As Sheldon Wolin pointed out, Tocqueville's model was "not that of the scientist but that of the painter" and his theoretical method might be described as a form of "political impressionism"<sup>71</sup> based on ideal types, strong impressions, vast panoramas, and powerful insights.

Be that as it may, Tocqueville was *not* an impressionist when it came to politics. In both his *Recollections* and *The Old Regime*, he criticized in unambiguous terms the "literary" style of politics of his predecessors who looked for what was ingenuous and new rather than what was appropriate to their particular situation.

69. Tocqueville, *De la démocratie en Amérique*, ed. Nolla, vol. II, p. 205, fn. j; emphasis added.

70. Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. p. 7.

71. Wolin, *Tocqueville Between Two Worlds*, p. 140. On Tocqueville's new science of politics, see *ibid.*, pp. 184-97; Saguiv A. Hadari, *Theory in Practice: Tocqueville's New Science of Politics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989).

Taking the political game as a play, they paid special attention to "good acting and fine speaking without reference to the play's result" and preferred to judge "by impressions rather than reasons."<sup>72</sup> The best expression of Tocqueville's views of political science can be found, however, in an important (and often overlooked) speech he gave in April 1852. Addressing the members of the Academy of Moral and Political Science in Paris, he drew a seminal distinction between the *art* of government and the *science* of government. The first closely follows the ever-changing flux of political phenomena and constantly fights quotidian challenges. As such, it varies according to the diversity of events and seeks to meet the ephemeral needs of changing political circumstances.<sup>73</sup> The true science of government, argued Tocqueville, differs from the art of government in many important ways. It covers the immense space between philosophy, sociology, and law and uncovers the natural rights that belong to individuals, the laws appropriate to different societies, and the virtues and limitations of various forms of government. It is grounded in "the nature of man, his interests, faculties, and needs and teaches what are the laws most appropriate to the general and permanent condition of man."<sup>74</sup> Yet, it does not reduce politics to a mere question of arithmetic or logic nor does it attempt to build an imaginary society in which everything is simple, orderly, uniform, and in accord with reason. The science of government, concluded Tocqueville, is a powerful science that forms around each society an intellectual atmosphere in which everyone breathes and from which both citizens and their representatives derive their principles of behavior.

The two volumes of *Democracy in America* illustrate Tocqueville's confidence in the power of his new *science* of politics to offer timely and valuable guidelines for taming, moderating, and educating democracy. In an important letter to his friend Eugène Stoffels in February 1835, Tocqueville explained his goals and method as follows:

To those who have worked out an ideal democracy, a glowing dream, that they believe can easily be realized, I undertook to show that they covered the picture with false colors; that the democratic government they advocate ... does not have the elevated characteristics that their imagination gives it.

72. Tocqueville, *Recollections*, p. 67.

73. Tocqueville, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. XVI: *Mélanges*, ed. Françoise Mélonio (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), p. 230.

74. *Ibid.*, p. 230. Also see pp. 231-32.



... To men for whom the word democracy is synonymous with upheaval, anarchy, spoliation, murders, I tried to show that democracy could manage to govern society while respecting fortunes, recognizing rights, securing liberty, honoring beliefs; that if democratic government developed less than some other governments certain beautiful faculties of the human soul, it had beautiful and grand sides; and that perhaps, after all, the will of God was to diffuse a mediocre happiness on the totality of men, and not to concentrate a large amount of felicity on some... I intended to demonstrate to them that, whatever their opinion might be in this regard, there was no longer time to deliberate; that society was every day proceeding and dragging them along with it toward equality of conditions. ... I wanted to diminish the ardor of the former, and without discouraging them, show them the only road to take. I sought to diminish the terrors of the latter and to bend their will to the idea of an inevitable future.<sup>75</sup>

As such, Tocqueville's new science of politics appears as an essentially moderating device in the name of liberty. On the one hand, he sought to temper the ardor of the enemies of democracy by pointing out to them its positive aspects; on the other hand, Tocqueville attempted to moderate the excessive zeal for democracy of its most radical supporters by stressing the dangers of democracy and the challenges it poses to humanity. The new democratic social state, he observed, gives to human thought and to social and political institutions certain tendencies that must be regulated and purified. The ensuing dangers can be averted only if they are properly anticipated and understood. Hence the main goal of Tocqueville's science of politics was to highlight and minimize these dangers while maximizing the advantages that people could derive from the new democratic social state. It was also supposed to suggest the means that could be used to this effect.<sup>76</sup> The aforementioned letter to Stoffels clearly reveals that Tocqueville's ambition was to

75. Tocqueville, *Selected Letters*, pp. 98-99. On numerous occasions, Tocqueville criticized the anachronism of those who wanted to reestablish the institutions of the Old Regime. His notes for *Democracy in America* contain numerous references to this point. See *De la démocratie en Amérique*, ed. Nolla, vol. II, p. 8, fn. f; p. 271, fn. c.

76. Also see the following important letter to Corcelle: "I have sought, it is true, to uncover the natural tendencies a democratic social state gives to human thought and institutions. I have highlighted the dangers awaiting humanity on the way to democracy. But I have not suggested that one cannot fight against these dangers and combat them if diagnosed in time. One can avert them if they are properly anticipated. I am under the impression that Democrats nowadays do not see clearly either the advantages or the dangers of the social and political state towards which they are trying to direct society. Therefore they are likely to be mistaken as to the means they should use to maximize the former and minimize the latter. ... I would like to see society aware of the dangers of democracy like a strong man who knows that perils exist and that he has to confront them to reach his goal" (*The Tocqueville Reader*, pp. 136-37).

educate and purify democracy through his writings and thus to establish a new political science whose very aim was to promote political moderation.

Tocqueville's nuanced discussion of these means shows that he was persuaded that moderating democracy was both a science and an art. Once again, his position was not devoid of a certain ambiguity which, far from being a flaw in his argument, is a testimony to his political moderation. Tocqueville realized that if any one set of interests at work in society were ever allowed to reign absolutely over its rivals, the competition between them would come to an end and society would be deprived of one of its leading principles of social improvement. If democratic or aristocratic elements and principles were allowed to dominate society unchallenged, social and moral progress would become impossible, because society would lack the necessary *pluralism* that makes political freedom possible.<sup>77</sup> Tocqueville reached a similar conclusion with regard to the spirit of commercialism: if left unchecked, it might bring society to ruin. That is why he searched for countervailing forces to the dominant (commercial) spirit of modern age and claimed that in order to survive and flourish, democratic societies must cultivate a systematic antagonism by creating the necessary conditions for a free competition for power between rival ideas, principles, forces, modes of life, and interests. According to this view, it is essential to keep the exclusive tendencies of the commercial spirit in equipoise by an opposite order of sentiments, ideas, modes of thought, and principles of action. The account Tocqueville offered suggests that in modern democratic societies, the rising influence of the commercial spirit and the modes of thought that it promotes must be countervailed by a rich cultural life that, in turn, requires that special attention be paid to education, arts, and sciences in order to counterbalance the predominant influence of materialism, industrialism, and commercialism. This argument can be stretched even further to claim that it is not only the absolute uncontrolled domination of the commercial spirit, but of *any* power or interest, that is formidable and threatening. Not surprisingly, in making his case for educating and purifying democracy, Tocqueville suggested that there is no spirit or power in society which might not become mischievous as soon as it reigns unchecked and no longer faces the competition of

77. Tocqueville's debt to Guizot's theory of pluralism has not received sufficient attention. I commented on this topic in Aurelian Craiutu, "Tocqueville and the Political Thought of the French Doctrinaires (Guizot, Royer-Collard, Rémusat)," *History of Political Thought* 20/3 (1999): 456-94.

its opponents. In other words, there is no spirit or power that does not need correctives and counteractives that have opposite qualities and characteristics.

This interpretation might help explain Tocqueville's ambiguity on the issue of moderating democracy as well as his misgivings about democracy that have attracted the attention of his interpreters and often puzzled them. On the one hand, Tocqueville believed that if democracy were to survive and prosper, it would need to draw on *aristocratic* elements and "persons" to countervail the predominant influence of democratic ideas, sentiments, and mores. "What I understand by aristocratic persons," he explained in a note, "are permanent and legal associations such as townships, counties, or voluntary and temporary associations. ... These would have a part of the advantages of aristocracy properly speaking without its disadvantages."<sup>78</sup> They encourage individuals to pursue great projects and to become independent while also bringing them in contact with each other. Among these aristocratic elements Tocqueville also included constitutional and judicial *forms* for which democratic peoples must have "an enlightened and reflective worship."<sup>79</sup> These forms, he remarked, are essential to the preservation of liberty since men who live in democratic centuries do not always fully comprehend their utility and often look at them with scorn and even hatred.<sup>80</sup> Their temperament disposes them against the forms that moderate their impulses and restrain their desires and behavior. The principal merit of these forms, however, is to serve as "a barrier between the strong and weak, he who governs and he who is governed, to slow down the one and to give the other time to recollect himself."<sup>81</sup>

Would it be accurate then to conclude that Tocqueville recommended using only—or mostly—aristocratic elements and "persons" to moderate democracy? What makes Tocqueville's work so interesting and timely is that he applied his unorthodox moderation even to the issue of moderating and purifying democracy.

78. *De la démocratie en Amérique*, ed. Nolla, vol. II, p. 273, fn. o. On Tocqueville's notion and use of the concept of aristocracy, see Alan S. Kahan, "De l'aristocratie en Tocqueville/ Aristocracy in Tocqueville," forthcoming in *The Tocqueville Review/ La revue Tocqueville*; Seymour Drescher, "Who Needs *Ancienneté*? Tocqueville on Aristocracy and Modernity," *History of Political Thought* 24/4 (2003): 624-46; Pierre Manent, *Tocqueville and the Nature of Modern Democracy*, trans. John Waggoner (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1996).

79. *Democracy in America*, p. 669.

80. *Ibid.*, p. 660. On the utility of forms in a democratic regime, also see pp. 55, 65, 71-72, 79, 101, 220, 262, 295.

81. *Ibid.*, p. 669.

For, after elaborating on the aristocratic "persons" needed to countervail the predominance of democracy, he went on to emphasize that the best way of moderating democracy was by working with *democratic* elements. A short fragment buried among the many notes for volume two of *Democracy* shows the complex alchemy that makes possible the task of purifying democracy: "*Use Democracy to moderate Democracy*. It is the only path to salvation that is open to us. To discern the feelings, the ideas, the laws which, without being hostile to the principles of Democracy, without having a natural incompatibility with democracy, can nevertheless correct its troublesome tendencies and will blend with it while modifying it."<sup>82</sup> The firm tone of this fragment suggests that this was not a temporary concession on the part of a resigned aristocrat convinced that his conqueror is right. On numerous other occasions, Tocqueville reiterated his belief in the possibility of moderating democracy by working with democracy.<sup>83</sup> In another note, he wrote: "There is *nothing but democracy* (by this word I understand *self-government*) that can diminish and render supportable the inevitable evils of the democratic social state."<sup>84</sup>

Among the effective democratic remedies to democracy's ills Tocqueville listed education, freedom of the press, religion, decentralization, local liberties and institutions, and election (of functionaries). Religion, he argued, is supposed to purify and regulate the love of wealth and materialism predominant in democratic societies. Democratic legislators, Tocqueville wrote, must constantly strive to elevate souls and cultivate "a taste for the infinite, a sentiment of greatness, and a love of immaterial pleasures."<sup>85</sup> In turn, local institutions are expected to promote the spirit of liberty that alone can effectively combat the natural vices of these societies. Only freedom can "tear people from the worship of Mammon and the petty daily concerns of their personal affairs and teach them to always see and feel the nation above and beside them."<sup>86</sup>

82. *De la démocratie en Amérique*, ed. Nolla, vol. II, pp. 278-79, fn. b. I use here the English translation that can be found in Schleifer, *The Making of Democracy in America*, p. 234; all emphases added (Schleifer's quote does not include the last sentence). Eduardo Nolla pointed out that Tocqueville's unpublished notes highlight his democratic side (Nolla, "Autour de l'autre démocratie," pp. 14-17).

83. "Je suis profondément convaincu que la démocratie peut être réglée et organisée, ce n'est pas une chose facile, mais c'est une chose faisable, et j'ajoute que c'est la seule qui reste à faire" (*De la démocratie en Amérique*, ed. Nolla, vol. II, p. 282, fn. m; all emphases added). Also see *ibid.*, p. 271, fn. b; p. 273, fn. j; p. 277, fn. y.

84. *Ibid.*, p. 280, fn. h; all emphases added.

85. Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 519.

86. Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the Revolution*, vol. I p. 88.

All these remedies were essential elements of Tocqueville's new science of politics whose main goal was, as we have already seen, to moderate, instruct, and purify democracy. At the heart of his project was the idea of a wise balancing of various ideas and elements that would prevent any one principle of social organization from reigning absolutely. Summing up the recipe for moderating democracy, Tocqueville concluded: "Do not adopt one single social principle however good it appears to be. Do not use one single form of government."<sup>87</sup> But how was his new science of politics going to effect these changes in society? Did he really hope that legislators and politicians were going to read his books and reflect on their message?

Tocqueville seemed surprisingly confident in this regard; he believed that his new political science could suggest valuable ways of moderating and purifying democracy. The key principle was preventing any one set of interests and ideas from rising to absolute domination in society. As a politician, he was guided by this idea in theory, but in practice he was less successful than he had hoped for. His dream of becoming the thinker of the moral opposition was expressed in a seminal letter to Odilon Barrot in September 1842. "I know," Tocqueville wrote, "that it is a very difficult undertaking to transform most of our men of the left into moderate, reasonable, and liberal men."<sup>88</sup> He wanted to see a moral, honest, and enlightened opposition capable of giving new life to the French nation without any revolutionary upheaval. His hopes were eventually dashed as the Left remained more revolutionary than liberal and the government became more corrupt and intransigent.

### Tocqueville's Unconventional Middle

If Tocqueville was a *political* moderate whose strategy for moderating democracy sought to preserve the pluralism necessary for the survival of liberty in democratic societies, his moderation was *unorthodox* as was almost anything else in his restless personality. He despised a certain type of moderation which he memorably described in a note for the Introduction to volume one of *Democracy*. Imagining the profile of the new democratic society, he feared that its citizens would be nothing else than a

Mass floating in the middle, inert, egotistic, without energy, without patriotism, sensual, sybaritic, that has only instincts, that lives from day to day, that becomes in turn the plaything of all the others. Moderation

87. *De la démocratie en Amérique*, ed. Nolla, vol. II, p. 273, fn. j.

88. *The Tocqueville Reader*, p. 219. The whole letter can be found in Tocqueville, *Lettres choisies. Souvenirs*, pp. 499-505.

without virtue nor courage; moderation that is born from cowardice of the heart and not from virtue, from exhaustion, from fear, from egoism; tranquility that does not come about because you are well-off, but because you do not have the courage and the energy necessary to seek something better. Debasement of souls. The passions of old men that end in impotence."<sup>89</sup>

Tocqueville's political moderation had little to do with all that and was not a passion suitable for old and debased souls, too tired to dream of anything great. His own version of moderation did not lack virtue and courage, nor was it born out of cowardice of heart, fear, or egoism. It differed from the *juste milieu* and the eclecticism of Guizot and Cousin. It has been pointed out the political ideal of Tocqueville was not the usual type of mixed government in the classical sense of a mixed political form.<sup>90</sup> He did not believe it possible to preserve liberty by mixing several principles within the same government. Yet Tocqueville never abandoned his search for his own type of *middle*, which he took great care to dissociate from that of his contemporaries. In another note for *Democracy*, he explicitly referred to the need for retrieving the old and noble meaning of the middle: "One must find somewhere in the book ... the idea of the middle that has been so much dishonored during these days. To make feel that there is a firm, clear, and voluntary manner of seeing and perceiving the truth between two extremes. To conceive and to say that the truth does not lie in any absolute system."<sup>91</sup> He immediately added that he did not refer to the middle between greatness and baseness, or between courage and fear, vice and virtue, but to the middle between two contrary excesses.

Tocqueville's careful choice of words and his caveat show that his philosophy remained to the very end influenced by his own contradictions and ambivalence, unable to have full confidence in democracy, yet convinced that the only reasonable solution was to work with democracy to moderate democracy. As Boesche argued,<sup>92</sup> Tocqueville understood *avant la lettre* one of the main lessons advanced by the present day proponents of pluralism: a harmonious synthesis of all the good things of our world is impossible and incoherent. He ended volume two of *Democracy in America* on a melancholic tone contemplating with mixed feeling the new world

89. *De la démocratie en Amérique*, ed. Nolla, vol. I, p. 11, fn. e.

90. Nolla, "Autour de l'autre démocratie," p. 29; Wolin, *Tocqueville Between Two Worlds*, p. 188; Kahan, "De l'aristocratie en Tocqueville/Aristocracy in Tocqueville," forthcoming.

91. *De la démocratie en Amérique*, ed. Nolla, vol. II, p. 280, fn. e.

92. Boesche, *The Strange Liberalism*, p. 261.

in which "almost all extremes become milder and softer [and] almost all prominent points are worn down to make a place for something middling that is at once less high and less low, less brilliant and less obscure than what used to be seen in the world."<sup>93</sup> Although this spectacle of universal uniformity saddened and chilled him, he refused to endorse a philosophy of fatalism or resignation and never abandoned his hope in human freedom and the possibility of human beings to live decent lives in free societies.

Tocqueville's political moderation was married, as we have already seen, to an immoderate heart that longed for unforgettable adventures and greatness in the midst of a society that only wanted to become more tranquil and prosperous. As Peter Lawler once noted, Tocqueville was "too political to be simply a literary figure, but too literary or too detached to be simply a political one."<sup>94</sup> His imagination easily climbed to the summit of human grandeur and gave him romantic *élans*, without however being able to offer him anything that pleased or seized him completely. As Tocqueville put it in a letter to Madame de Swetchine, "vague restlessness and an incoherent agitation of desires have always been a chronic malady with me."<sup>95</sup> While his mind was cold, prudent, and calculating, his passions were ardent and violent. As such, he was, "a repressed romantic,"<sup>96</sup> perpetually aware of the distance between the real and the ideal, a spirit prone to melancholy and yet surprisingly tenacious and combative as his political ambitions demonstrate. A cyclothymic oscillating between exaltation and depression, at the same time confident and timid, restless and passionate, Tocqueville

93. Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 674.

94. Lawler, "Tocqueville's elusive moderation," p. 189.

95. Tocqueville, *Selected Letters*, p. 348. The importance of Tocqueville's letters to Madame de Swetchine (published in Tocqueville, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 15, Part II, ed. Pierre Gibert [Paris: Gallimard, 1983]) can hardly be exaggerated. They provide one of the best angles for understanding his deepest religious and philosophical convictions. On Tocqueville's Pascalian side, also see Lawler, *The Restless Mind*, pp. 73-158.

96. I borrow the expression from Françoise Mélonio, "Tocqueville entre la révolution et la démocratie," in Tocqueville, *Lettres choisies. Souvenirs*, p. 27. Also see the following confession of Tocqueville: "J'ai la tête très froide, et l'esprit raisonneur, calculateur même; et, à côté de cela, se trouvent des passions ardentes qui m'entraînent sans me convaincre, domptant ma volonté en laissant libre ma raison" (Tocqueville, *Lettres choisies. Souvenirs*, p. 238). It is not generally known that Tocqueville had a tempestuous sexual temperament and committed a number of marital infidelities without being able to change his behavior. As Furet once put it, "Tocqueville has a Tolstoyan side that is not generally known" ("The Passions of Tocqueville," p. 24). A revealing confession of Tocqueville can be found in a letter to Kergorlay on September 27, 1843 (republished in *Lettres choisies. Souvenirs*, pp. 521-23).

was plagued by anxiety and doubt as well as by an acute sense of the passing of time. He passionately wanted to reach the bottom of things and was frustrated for not being able to do so.<sup>97</sup> At times, he wanted to reconcile the irreconcilable only to realize soon the futility of such an attempt. As he confessed to Édouard de Tocqueville, he lacked "peace of mind and moderation of desire."<sup>98</sup> Fortunately, he was endowed with a surprising strength that allowed him to maintain his equipoise even in the midst of deep crises.<sup>99</sup> Yet combining political moderation with his desire for greatness created an almost insurmountable tension between Tocqueville's calculating mind and his ardent ambitions. He was destined to remain to the very end *un promeneur solitaire*.

Tocqueville the man and the writer continues to challenge and surprise us. His elusive moderation along with his hesitations, ambiguities, and contradictions make him our contemporary to the point that some of us recognize ourselves in this enlightened soul who lived in doubt and hoped at the same time that his remedies for the ills of democracy would be effective. Tocqueville incarnates the ideal of *homo viator*, who lives with the painful awareness of his imperfection and can never quench his insatiable thirst for certainty and truth. He represents the man who is aware that he might never see the *terra firma* that he had always longed for but does not give up the search. "I am constantly for myself an insolvable enigma," Tocqueville once wrote to a friend. Why should we then try to solve the mystery of Tocqueville's personality by making him the thinker that we want him to be? Two centuries after his birth, he remains for us an enigma, a modern Don Quixote, who defies our black-and-white political categories.

97. "Ce que j'ai appelé le fond que je ne peux pas toucher, c'est le pourquoi du monde. ... C'est là le fond ou plutôt les fonds que l'ambition de mon esprit voulait toucher, mais qui resteront toujours infiniment par-delà mes moyens de connaître la vérité" (*ibid.*, p. 1279).

98. Tocqueville, *Selected Letters*, pp. 148-49.

99. "Je suis tout à la fois l'homme le plus impressionnable dans mes actions de tous les jours, le plus entraînable à droite et à gauche du chemin dans lequel je marche et à la fois le plus obstiné dans mes visées. J'oscille sans cesse et ne perds jamais entièrement mon équilibre. ... Il y a quelque chose d'incroyablement inflexible au milieu de cette nature agitée et inflammable" (*Lettres choisies. Souvenirs*, p. 531).