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## Come and see for yourself

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*Tocqueville: The Aristocratic Sources of Liberty* by Lucien Jaume, translated by Arthur Goldhammer

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On 11 May 1831, a fastidious 25-year-old Norman aristocrat arrived in New York City with an assignment to report on American prisons for the French Ministry of Justice. Over the next nine months he travelled up the East Coast, down the Mississippi and through what was then the wild west of Kentucky, Ohio and Michigan. 'Not every American is pleasant to interact with,' he complained in a letter home. 'A great many smoke, chew tobacco, and spit in front of you.' He nearly drowned in a steamboat accident, and spent one long winter night shuddering with fever in a log cabin where the wind whipped through the walls and water froze in the glass. In Tennessee, he noted that the people had elected to Congress 'an individual called David Crockett, who had received no education, could read only with difficulty, had no property, no fixed dwelling, but spent ... his whole life in the woods'.

Yet Alexis de Tocqueville also found America 'a most interesting and instructive country to visit'. Even before he got there, he had conceived the idea of writing 'a book that gives an accurate notion of the American people, that paints a broad picture of their history' and 'analyses their social state'. Even as he diligently inspected American prisons, he tried to make conversation with everyone from the grandees of Boston high society to half-Indian backwoodsmen, taking copious notes, and often reconstructing long discussions in dialogue form. To one friend back home, he wrote that Americans had a character 'a hundred times happier than our own'. To another, he gushed that 'here,

mankind's freedom acts in all the fullness of its power.' And to a third, he confessed: 'I would wish that all of those who ... dream of a republic for France, could come see for themselves what it is like here.'

The book that Tocqueville eventually wrote, *Democracy in America*, echoed with some of this enthusiasm. It praised the vitality of local government and civic associations, marvelled at the extent of patriotism and respect for the law, and predicted America's rise to global power. To this day, most Americans who have heard of Tocqueville think of him as the country's cheerleader, plain and simple. Eisenhower, Reagan and Clinton all made speeches quoting, and attributing to Tocqueville, a poetic passage that described American pulpits 'flaming with righteousness', and concluded: 'America is great because she is good.' Tocqueville never wrote it. He would never have written something this fulsome.

His pessimistic and sceptical sensibility had roots partly in the Jansenist Catholic tradition, with its bleak view of overpowering human corruption, but it also had a far sharper and more specific origin. Tocqueville's parents had barely escaped the guillotine during the Terror. His father is said to have emerged from prison in October 1794, at the age of 22, with his hair already white. Alexis's great-grandfather Guillaume-Chrétien de Lamoignon de Malesherbes had been beheaded six months earlier, after being forced to watch his daughter and granddaughter mount the scaffold. Tocqueville venerated Malesherbes, who had fought royal despotism under the Ancien Régime but despite this agreed to defend Louis XVI before the revolutionary Convention. A note found in the Tocqueville archives reads: 'It is because I am the grandson of M. de Malesherbes that I have written these things.'

All this, combined with an instinctive belief in social hierarchy, tempered Tocqueville's enthusiasm for the American experiment. But the book still communicated, with astonishing force, a sense of the sheer scale and power of the social change that America embodied. As Tocqueville put it in the introduction: 'This entire book was written in the grip of a kind of religious terror occasioned in the soul of the author by the sight of this irresistible revolution, which for centuries now has surmounted every obstacle and continues to advance amid the ruins it has created.' Tocqueville wanted to create a 'new political science' that would help his fellow countrymen understand this 'irresistible' worldwide change and allow them to educate and restrain the new democratic society taking shape in their midst. To do this, he analysed America. Most Europeans of the period

saw the country, with its wild forests, Indians and newborn republic, as an image of their past. Tocqueville cast it as their future.

At the time, Tocqueville's 'new political science' indeed marked a milestone. Unlike more conventional 19th-century liberals, Tocqueville did not concentrate on the state and the threat it might pose to individual liberty. Instead he sought to analyse the dynamics of American social life, celebrating its vigour but also describing the pathological tendencies that he saw at work within it. At the end of the second volume (published in 1840), he issued a sombre warning about a 'kind of oppression ... unlike any the world has seen before'. Democratic equality of conditions, he claimed, was destroying bonds of mutual obligation among citizens, and fostering the rise of 'an immense tutelary power, which assumes sole responsibility for securing their pleasure and watching over their fate'. Different from conventional forms of tyranny, this 'soft despotism' corroded the soul and reduced adults to a condition of permanent childhood.

Did this mildly dystopian future ever arrive? Does Tocqueville offer any guide to our own social and political conditions, or are his books now just flagstones on a road we once travelled? Many in the recent past have sought to make use of Tocqueville. François Furet invoked him in an attempt to revive the French liberal tradition, in the hope of dismantling what he saw as a suffocating 'Jacobin' statism and guarding against totalitarian temptations. American conservatives – notably the Straussian political scientist Paul Rahe – like to claim that Tocqueville's 'soft despotism' has actually arrived in the form of the modern American welfare state, and the supposed 'socialism' of Obamacare.

But many others worry less about contemporary democracy's inherent excesses than about its frailty, especially in the face of powerful economic interests. As an American, I would love to have the luxury of being able to fret about democratic equality rather than the many worsening forms of inequality in my country. A serious attempt to write a new version of *Democracy in America* would have to take a very different tack from Tocqueville's, and no present-day French author seems equal to the task (in 2006, Bernard-Henri Lévy published *American Vertigo: Travelling America in the Footsteps of Tocqueville*; it was an embarrassment even for him). It would also be wonderful to imagine a latter-day Tocqueville being able to write a book entitled 'Democracy in Russia' or 'Democracy in China', but the occasion seems unlikely to present itself any time soon.

Lucien Jaume at first seems to dismiss the idea of enlisting Tocqueville as a guide to our present circumstances: 'This book will *not* treat Tocqueville as our contemporary,' he

writes. 'It will seek rather to restore the distance between him and us.' Jaume, a student of François Furet, cannot resist occasionally invoking Tocqueville in order to take a swipe at such bugbears as 'the proliferation of identity groups that compete for legitimacy with the traditional state' (read: Muslims, gays, women etc). But at heart, Jaume is more at home in the 19th century than the 21st, and his Tocqueville would make an unlikely recruit for any present-day political party. Jaume puts forward an intriguing argument about how best to make use of Tocqueville today, but it is a subtle and ideologically flexible one.

Unfortunately, not all readers will get this far, because *Tocqueville: The Aristocratic Sources of Liberty* is exhilarating and frustrating in equal measure. It amounts essentially to an extended exercise in the contextualisation of *Democracy in America*, and has very little to say about the rest of Tocqueville's life and work. Jaume, who probably knows Tocqueville's intellectual world better than anyone else alive, has reconstructed his reading in intricate detail, and brilliantly demonstrates the way particular themes and passages in *Democracy in America* relate to it (this is the exhilarating part). In one section he traces a concept to the liberal Catholic thinker Lamennais; in another, an apparently anodyne turn of phrase is linked to La Bruyère. 'This is fairly close to the thinking of Helvétius,' a typical passage reads, 'but expressed in a style ... that derives from Montesquieu.' Jaume conveys Tocqueville's deep affection for Pascal, and the way Pascalian pessimism shaped his thought. And while the book treats Tocqueville in turn as a political thinker, sociologist, moralist and *littéraire*, it is the very 19th-century category of moralist that receives the most sustained attention. This is appropriate, for whatever the historical forces that Tocqueville saw driving phenomena like 'soft despotism' or state centralisation, he ultimately attributed their success to the moral weakness of those who should have known better. In *The Old Regime and the Revolution*, for instance, he blamed 'all the vices and abuses' of the French monarchy not on the kings' ambitions but on the medieval nobility's 'cowardly' submission to them.

This sort of contextualisation has its drawbacks. First, Jaume frequently overwhelms the reader with his erudition, and it doesn't help that he takes for granted both a detailed knowledge of *Democracy in America* and a thorough familiarity with the French thinkers who influenced its author. Those who have never encountered the logician Pierre Nicole, or the jurist Jean Domat, or the reactionary thinker Louis de Bonald, may well find, as they shovel their way through snowdrifts of references, that Jaume *ne vaut pas le voyage*. Given that few people acquire such knowledge without also picking up the ability to read French,

one wonders if a translation of this book was really necessary. At least Princeton had the sense to engage Arthur Goldhammer, who is not only in a position to draw on his own brilliant translation of *Democracy in America* for the passages quoted by Jaume, but has often managed to render Jaume's prose more fluid than the original.

Second, by focusing so intently on Tocqueville's French intellectual universe, Jaume has managed to produce something truly odd: a book on *Democracy in America* that says virtually nothing about America. 'To those with ears to hear,' he explains brazenly, '*Democracy in America* speaks about a country other than the United States ... Tocqueville's America was above all a mirror of France.' Thus justified, Jaume spends little time discussing Tocqueville's observations about the United States, and confesses to having almost entirely neglected both Tocqueville's American sources and the broader context of American intellectual life. Only at rare moments does he acknowledge grudgingly that 'Tocqueville took seriously what some of his American interlocutors told him.' It's true that Tocqueville wrote for his own countrymen, and wanted to draw lessons for them from the American experience. He said so himself on many occasions ('I did not write a page without thinking about France'), but this does not mean that he treated America as a pretext for a purely Gallic enterprise.

If Tocqueville had done this, the genesis of his book would be almost inexplicable, and a study like Jaume's would do nothing to resolve the puzzle. As Jaume himself shows so well, nearly all the elements of *Democracy in America* were, in one sense, forged by French predecessors: the style indebted to LaBruyère and Montesquieu, the temperament inherited from Pascal, the idea of the 'authority of the social' taken from Lamennais, the deep-rooted fear of a resurgent despotism from Malesherbes, the horror of 'levelling' from Tocqueville's relative Chateaubriand, and so on. What could have led a young French aristocrat, raised in a deeply reactionary and pious milieu, to fuse these intellectual elements into a book which, for all its well-tempered pessimism, accepted democratic equality as the future of the human race? Surely nine months of travel and discussion in a society radically different from Tocqueville's own had a decisive effect. If America were a pretext, why would the tired traveller have taken so many hours to reconstruct, in his notebooks, conversations with a Baltimore lawyer about American slavery, or with a Texas politician about Indians? Why would he have devoted any attention at all to Davy Crockett? Without the trip to America, would we have ever have heard of Alexis de Tocqueville? A truly exhaustive contextualisation of *Democracy in America* would pay serious attention to

the American trip and American intellectual life, and to British intellectual life as well (Tocqueville, who married an Englishwoman, studied Britain closely). Jaume has not illuminated the whole of the Tocquevillian canvas.

Nevertheless, he has illuminated the most important part of it, and he uses it to provide a suggestive reading of *Democracy in America*. It begins, as Jaume's subtitle indicates, with Tocqueville's veneration of aristocracy, but it does not end there. After all, Tocqueville's aristocratic sensibility was not exactly hidden. 'I am aristocratic by instinct,' he once wrote, 'which is to say that I despise and fear the crowd.' In *Democracy in America*, he explicitly advocated 'the taste and habits of aristocracy' as a means of restraining 'the revolutionary spirit and the unthinking passions of democracy'. But Jaume goes on to ask whether Tocqueville believed that such aristocratic restraints could actually work. In his account, Tocqueville feared that democracy could all too easily degenerate into 'absolute democracy' or 'soft despotism'. The driving force here was the human desire for equality of conditions (equality, for Tocqueville, was not equivalent to democracy, but its guiding 'principle'). Yet even as Tocqueville dissected this desire, the moralist in him questioned whether it could ever be satisfied. The more equal conditions become, he asserted, the more intolerable even tiny inequalities appear. It is a keen psychological insight, and Jaume concludes darkly: 'Hence there is no solution.' Tocqueville, he argues, saw equality not as a real product of the age of revolutions 'but rather as an imaginary quality, an *illusion* inherent in modernity'.

It is a conclusion that, in one sense, casts Tocqueville in a very conservative light. Whatever his admiration for certain forms of American society, and whatever his conviction that worldwide democratic revolution was 'irresistible', he ultimately thought democracy inherently self-destructive, and the pursuit of equality a form of false consciousness. As democracy progressed, true liberty would inevitably vanish along with the aristocrats who were its best defenders, and only 'soft despotism' would remain, in a society dominated by the pursuit of material gain. This reading makes *Democracy in America* seem as bleak as *The Old Regime and the Revolution*, which Tocqueville wrote in the last years of his life during his internal exile under Napoleon III. 'The oppressor fell,' Tocqueville lamented, 'but his administration lived on, and since then, whenever anyone has tried to topple absolute power, he has merely placed Liberty's head on a servile body.' One wonders if the young author, with his enthusiasm for New England town meetings, and his amazement at the pace and vigour of American life, was really so close in spirit to his

older, exhausted self. Had he already rejected his initial impressions about the way American democracy allowed freedom to act 'in all the fullness of its power'?

Jaume suggests that Tocqueville's ability to pierce veils of illusions places him in very select modern company. The last lines of Jaume's book invoke not the French liberal tradition but Paul Ricoeur's three modern 'masters of suspicion': Marx, Nietzsche and Freud. According to Jaume, in this gallery, 'one portrait has long been missing: that of Alexis de Tocqueville.' Could a 19th-century aristocratic moralist provide a guide to the way modern societies generate their own forms of discontent, with the operations of public opinion directing exaggerated attention to minor problems, and entirely veiling greater ones? It's not such an absurd idea. 'When inequality is the common law of a society,' Tocqueville wrote, 'the greatest inequalities do not call attention to themselves.'