



Review essay

**A Third 'Democracy in America'?
Tocqueville on America after 1840: Letters and Other Writings,
A. Craiutu, J. Jennings (Eds.), Cambridge University Press (2009).**

Tocqueville's letters are immensely enjoyable to read. Contrary to some of his contemporaries, such as Auguste Comte or Victor Cousin, Tocqueville was a gifted writer, and his correspondence offers abundant examples of his skills as a stylist. His letters also allow us to glimpse other sides of his personality than the stern moralist we are familiar with from his published works. Tocqueville's correspondence reveals a man with a talent for forming and maintaining friendships spanning many years and even continents, a man who was warm and solicitous with his intimates and unfailingly courteous to acquaintances. For students of his thought, Tocqueville's letters offer invaluable insights into the historical context in which his ideas took shape. All of these are excellent reasons for the recent publication in English by Cambridge University Press of a selection of Tocqueville's correspondence. *Tocqueville on America after 1840*, translated and edited by Aurelian Craiutu and Jeremy Jennings, brings together all the letters exchanged between Tocqueville and his American friends between 1840 and 1859, making many of Tocqueville's letters for the first time accessible to an English-language audience, and some of his friends' letters in any language.

Yet, the volume published by Craiutu and Jennings has a far more ambitious goal as well. The letters exchanged between Tocqueville and his American friends after 1840, the editors argue, do not merely help us to better understand the man behind the books, or to contextualize Tocqueville's published writings. More importantly, they hint at a work that might have been, a 'third Democracy', in which Tocqueville might have modified many of the opinions he had expressed in his two published volumes on *Democracy in America*. In order to further support this claim, the editors have also included a selection of letters written on the subject of America to French friends, as well as Tocqueville's parliamentary speeches, journal articles and diplomatic papers published after 1840 and touching upon American matters.

Tocqueville on America after 1840 is therefore not just a welcome addition to Roger Boesche's *Selected Letters on Politics and Society*.¹ With the publication of this volume, Craiutu and Jennings intervene in a long-ranging and often heated debate about Tocqueville's views on American democracy, and more specifically about the extent to which these views evolved over time. This debate was started by Seymour Drescher in 1964 with a now-classic article 'Tocqueville's Two *Démocraties*'. Tocqueville's second *Democracy*, published in 1840, so Drescher argued, was not merely

a sequel to the first volume published five years earlier. Despite his own claims to the contrary, Tocqueville in 1840 made at least five substantive revisions to arguments he had developed in 1835. Most importantly, whereas in 1835 Tocqueville had worried about discontinuity of government and administrative inefficiency in democratic states, in 1840, he had come to think of bureaucratic centralization as the greatest danger for democratic peoples. This shift in emphasis, Drescher argued, was due to important changes in French political life, and more particularly to the decreasing danger of revolution and the increasing grip of government over French politics after 1835.²

Drescher's arguments have been disputed, by, among others, James Schleifer, who has argued for the essential unity between the two volumes of the *Democracy* and of Tocqueville's work in general, thus creating an ongoing debate between so-called 'lumpers' and 'splitters'.³ With their publication of Tocqueville's post-1840 letters on America, Craiutu and Jennings hope to steer this debate into a new direction, as they make clear in the excellent introduction to the volume.⁴ Tocqueville, Craiutu and Jennings claim, did radically change his views on democracy, but these changes happened mostly after the publication of the second volume of the *Democracy* in 1840. According to the editors, in volume two of *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville had offered the image of a 'relatively solid and stable democratic regime' that was not fundamentally different from the views he had expressed in 1835.⁵ Throughout the 1840s, Tocqueville remained optimistic about American mores and institutions. In the early 1850s, however, an important shift occurred in his thinking, in his letters and other writings on America, resulting in a more critical and pessimistic evaluation of American democracy.⁶

Craiutu and Jennings also disagree with Drescher as to the causes of this shift in Tocqueville's thinking. Whereas the latter had argued that Tocqueville's changing views could be attributed to political developments in France, Craiutu and Jennings claim that shifts in American politics triggered Tocqueville's growing pessimism. The reappraisal of American democracy noticeable in Tocqueville's correspondence after 1840 depended not on a

² Seymour Drescher, 'Tocqueville's Two *Démocraties*', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 25 (1964), 201–16.

³ James T. Schleifer, *The Making of Tocqueville's Democracy in America*, 2nd expanded edition (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2000). For an excellent overview of this debate, see: Matthew J. Mancini, *Alexis de Tocqueville and American Intellectuals: from his times to ours* (Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006), chapter 7.

⁴ Craiutu and Jennings, 'Interpretative Essay. The Third Democracy: Tocqueville's Views of America after 1840' in: *Tocqueville on America after 1840: Letters and Other Writings*, ed. and trans. Aurelian Craiutu and Jeremy Jennings (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 1–39. Many of the arguments made in the introduction can also be found in an earlier article by Craiutu and Jennings: 'The Third Democracy: Tocqueville's Views of America After 1840', *American Political Science Review*, 98 (2004), 391–404.

⁵ Craiutu and Jennings, 'Interpretative Essay', p. 18 and p. 35.

⁶ Craiutu and Jennings, 'Interpretative Essay', p. 5.

¹ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Selected Letters on Politics and Society*, ed. Roger Boesche, trans. James Toupin and Roger Boesche (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985). More recently, Frederick Brown edited and translated Tocqueville's *Letters from America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).

re-reading of his earlier evidence, but upon 'a close observation of contemporary political and social developments in America that postdated the publication of his earlier account.'⁷ A growing concern about developments such as the acrimonious debate over slavery and the break-neck expansion of the United States to the West led Tocqueville to the 'stark conclusion' that 'America no longer held out hope for the friends of liberty around the world.'⁸ Tocqueville's letters and the continued development of his thinking about the United States therefore suggest that the traditional view of Tocqueville as a relatively superficial observer of the American scene needs to be corrected. What he actually knew to be happening in America, based on the information he received from correspondents, helped to shape his theoretical assessments in an important way.⁹

With their publication of Tocqueville's post-1840 letters, Craiutu and Jennings also contribute, albeit less explicitly so, to another debate among Tocqueville scholars, a debate set in motion with the publication of Sheldon Wolin's intellectual biography *Tocqueville Between Two Worlds*. Published in 2001, Wolin's highly controversial study argues that Tocqueville's views about democracy grew increasingly pessimistic over the course of a lifetime, so much so that Tocqueville ended up renouncing his youthful belief in political democracy in favor of a nostalgic idealization of the feudal past.¹⁰ This position has been fiercely rejected by the majority of Tocqueville scholars, whether 'lumpers' or 'splitters'. Drescher, for instance, points out in an angry review of Wolin's book that despite the major changes between the two volumes of the *Democracy*, Tocqueville never ceased to emphasize his belief in the compatibility of political democracy and liberty.¹¹

Is there any reason to think that a third *Democracy* would have been less sanguine in this respect? To what extent did the new and more critical view on American democracy which emerges from the letters after 1840 inspire a more wholesale pessimism regarding reconcilability of democracy and freedom? Craiutu and Jennings' introduction is somewhat equivocal when it comes to this all-important question. They suggest at one point that, in combination with Tocqueville's growing pessimism concerning France, his increasing dissatisfaction with the American political system might have led him to doubt democracy itself, not just its concrete manifestation in the United States.¹² Later on, however, they come to the conclusion that Tocqueville, despite his mounting criticism, did not go as far as to completely repudiate his belief in the capacity of democracy to overcome its internal crises.¹³

What do the letters themselves suggest? Let me start by saying that Tocqueville's personal correspondence dispels any notion that his engagement with America was limited or superficial. No reader of this volume will be able to deny that Tocqueville took a lifelong, sustained and eager interest in the United States in general and in American politics in particular. To a certain extent this interest was driven by material considerations. Tocqueville had invested in American railway bonds and frequently worried about political or economic instability in the United States. (Remember that his correspondence was conducted before the advent of the telegraph and the establishment of reliable and frequent communications between both continents. Also, Tocqueville did not trust the

American press). But it is abundantly clear that his interest was also to a large extent purely intellectual. Referring to himself on frequent occasions as 'half an American citizen' or 'half Yankee',¹⁴ Tocqueville never ceased to interrogate his American correspondents about the state of affairs in the United States and to share his own reflections on political developments on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean.

Second, Tocqueville's letters offer clear evidence for the claim that his views on America grew increasingly pessimistic after 1850. In a letter of 1856 to his German-American friend Francis Lieber, Tocqueville penned down the following searing condemnation of American democracy: 'I have passionately wished to see a free Europe and I realize that the cause of liberty is more compromised now than it was at the moment of my birth. . . . Your America itself, to which once turned the dreams of all those who lacked the reality of liberty, has, in my view, given little satisfaction to the friends of liberty for some time. One would say that the despots of the old world have entrusted you with performing the same role that the Spartans bid the helots play in front of their children, and that through the follies and vulgarities that liberty gives rise to, they want to cure them of their desire ever to be free.'¹⁵

What had caused this degeneration of American political life? This issue was debated at length by Tocqueville and a number of his American correspondents, in particular N.W. Beckwith, who wrote Tocqueville a number of long, thoughtful letters in 1857–58.¹⁶ Beckwith argued forcefully that the irregularities of American political life did not stem 'from democratic institutions, nor from the largest liberty', but 'from the corrupting and enormous influence of slavery.'¹⁷ First and foremost, the political arithmetic which had led slaves to be included in population counts, even if only as 3/5 of a white person, had given the planter oligarchy of the South a disproportionate weight in the political system. Thus, the minority had come to rule the majority, subverting basic democratic principles. More subtly, slavery engendered habits of violence and a lack of concern for human life and happiness in the political classes of the South, who had then imported these attitudes into the capital from whence they had infected the entire political system.¹⁸

Like Beckwith, Tocqueville was greatly concerned with the issue of slavery, which he identified in 1853 as 'the most formidable problem' confronting the American nation.¹⁹ While not an outright abolitionist (he believed that any attempt to eradicate slavery in states where it already existed would create more problems than it would solve), Tocqueville consistently emphasized that he considered slavery to be a 'horrible evil'. Its extension to new states would be 'one of the greatest crimes that human beings could commit against the general cause of humanity.'²⁰ Indeed, both in his letters and in public statements, Tocqueville spoke out clearly and directly against slavery. In an open letter to *The Liberty Bell*, published in 1856, for instance, he described himself as 'pained and astonished' by the continued existence of slavery in the United States – 'by the fact that the freest

¹⁴ For instance: *Tocqueville on America after 1840*, p. 136, p. 139, p. 190.

¹⁵ *Tocqueville on America after 1840*, p. 184.

¹⁶ In her review of *Tocqueville on America after 1840*, Jennifer Pitts has argued that in identifying Tocqueville's correspondent as N.W. Beckwith, a man about whom 'we have surprisingly little information', the editors are following a paleographical or editing error by the Beinecke Library. Beckwith was in fact N.M. Beckwith, 'a wealthy New York businessman who lived in France and Germany in the early 1850s.' See: *H-France Review* Vol. 10 (2010), no. 16.

¹⁷ *Tocqueville on America after 1840*, p. 315–16. Another correspondent of Tocqueville's, Charles Sumner, likewise tried to convince him that slavery was at the bottom of American problems, even in states where slavery did not exist. *Tocqueville on America after 1840*, p. 289.

¹⁸ *Tocqueville on America after 1840*, p. 270–78; and p. 309–17.

¹⁹ *Tocqueville on America after 1840*, p. 145.

²⁰ *Tocqueville on America after 1840*, p. 195. Other instances of Tocqueville's abhorrence of slavery: p. 224, 226.

⁷ Craiutu and Jennings, 'Interpretative Essay'.

⁸ Craiutu and Jennings, 'Interpretative Essay', p. 6.

⁹ Craiutu and Jennings, 'Interpretative Essay', p. 33.

¹⁰ Sheldon Wolin, *Tocqueville between two worlds: The making of a political and theoretical life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

¹¹ Seymour Drescher, 'Who Needs Anciennoté? Tocqueville on Aristocracy and Modernity', *History of Political Thought*, 24 (2003), 624–46.

¹² As the editors put it: 'In 1852, Tocqueville realized much better than he had in 1835 or 1840 that it was in the very nature of democracy, even in the most advanced democratic regime in the world, to transgress its limits and to subvert its own foundations.' Craiutu and Jennings, 'Interpretative Essay', p. 28.

¹³ Craiutu and Jennings, 'Interpretative Essay', p. 36.

people in the world is, at the present time, almost the only one among civilized and Christian nations which yet maintains personal servitude'.²¹

Nevertheless, Tocqueville's letters make clear that, unlike Beckwith, he did not consider slavery to be the sole root of the problems which increasingly confronted the American political system after 1850. He frequently expressed concern about the 'spirit of conquest' which led Americans to expand ever more westwards and which threatened to make American territory so large as to be ungovernable.²² Even more worrying was the increasing flood of German immigrants. Tocqueville's research on German history and culture, conducted in the 1850s for *The Old Regime and the Revolution*, had confirmed him in his opinion that Germans were little fit for public life. In a letter to Beaumont of 1854 he admitted to being very disturbed by the increasing German immigration to the United States, which was leading to a dilution of the English customs and habits on which American freedom was built. 'The rapid introduction of foreigners into the United States,' he reflected, 'and thus into the English race is the greatest danger faced by America and what makes the final success of democratic institutions still an unresolved issue.'²³

All this seems to point to a growing disillusionment of Tocqueville with American political life more generally speaking and not just with the problem of slavery, a disillusionment which might explain, as Craiutu and Jennings suggest, why in his final published work, *The Old Regime and the Revolution* (1856), it was England rather than the United States which functioned as the model of a free polity against which France was compared (and found lacking).²⁴ One might therefore be tempted to conclude that Tocqueville's final writings, both published and unpublished, do seem to point at an important shift in his thinking, a shift away from the democratic, turbulent American model and towards a greater appreciation of the more traditional English example.

But looked at from another perspective, Tocqueville's post-1850 concerns over American democracy, and in particular his worries over German immigration into the United States, point to a remarkable consistency in his message over the course of his intellectual career. In both of his published volumes on American democracy, Tocqueville had insisted that liberty depended not solely or even primarily on a country's democratic laws and institutions, but on far more intangible things such as a people's customs and manners – on its political culture, in short. This was also the message of his last major work, *The Old Regime and the Revolution*, where Tocqueville used the English example to highlight the importance of local self-government and other customs and habits in stimulating free mores.²⁵ Similarly, Tocqueville's fears about the future of American democracy seem to have been fanned by the deterioration of American political culture rather than by any doubts about the feasibility of the democratic enterprise itself.

Tocqueville's letters, like his published work, therefore seem to support different and possibly conflicting interpretations. Nevertheless, it will have become clear by now that *Tocqueville on America after 1840* raises crucial questions about the evolution of Tocqueville's views on democracy in the latter half of his life, both in the thought-provoking introduction to the volume as by means of the selection and presentation of the material itself. The letters between Tocqueville and his friends are elegantly translated and the short biographical notices identifying Tocqueville's correspondences are particularly useful. In sum, with *Tocqueville on America after 1840*, Craiutu and Jennings have made a major contribution to Tocqueville studies.

Annellen de Dijn

Notre Dame Institute for Advanced Study, Notre Dame, United States
E-mail address: annellen_dd@yahoo.com

²¹ *Tocqueville on America after 1840*, p. 169.

²² See: *Tocqueville on America after 1840*, p. 136, p. 145, p. 146.

²³ *Tocqueville on America after 1840*, p. 331. Other instances of Tocqueville's concern over German immigration: p. 158, p. 161, p. 183, p. 188.

²⁴ *Tocqueville on America after 1840*, p. 341.

²⁵ As Tocqueville put it: 'Rien n'est plus superficiel que d'attribuer la grandeur et la puissance d'un peuple au seul mécanisme de ses lois; car, en cette matière, c'est moins la perfection de l'instrument que la force des moteurs qui fait le produit. Voyez l'Angleterre: combien aujourd'hui encore ses lois administratives paraissent-elles plus compliquées, plus diverses, plus irrégulières que les nôtres! Y a-t-il pourtant un seul pays en Europe où la fortune publique soit plus grande, la propriété particulière plus étendue, plus sûre et plus variée, la société plus solide et plus riche? Cela ne vient pas de la bonté de telles lois en particulier, mais de l'esprit qui anime la législation anglaise tout entière.' Alexis de Tocqueville, *L'ancien régime et la révolution*, ed. J. P. Mayer (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), p. 275–76, reproduced in full-text digital form on ARTFL.