

TOCQUEVILLE'S DISCOVERY OF AMERICA

Leo Damrosch

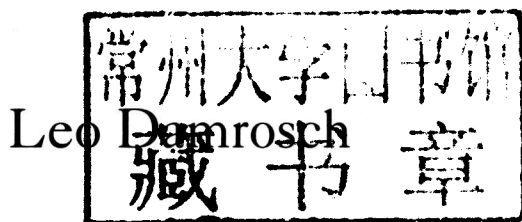
"Endlessly fascinating . . . [Damrosch] reveals the man behind the sage."

—David S. Reynolds, *The New York Times Book Review*

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AMERICA



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TOCQUEVILLE'S DISCOVERY OF AMERICA

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- 30 The Toilette. Illustration by A. Hervieu in Frances Trollope, *Domestic Manners of the Americans* (London: Whittaker, Treacher & Co., 1832), vol. 2, call number WKR 20.1.15. By permission of the Houghton Library, Harvard University.
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TOCQUEVILLE AND BEAUMONT IN AMERICA



TIME LINE OF THE AMERICAN JOURNEY

1831

- APRIL 2 depart from Le Havre
- MAY 9 arrive in Newport
11 New York City
30 Sing Sing (to June 8)
- JUNE 9-29 New York City
30 steamboat to Albany
- JULY 1-4 Albany
5-7 Mohawk Valley
8 Oneida Lake (Frenchman's Island)
9-13 Auburn (Elam Lynds)
14-15 travel westward
16-18 Canandaigua (John C. Spencer)
19 Buffalo
20-22 steamboat on Lake Erie
22-23 Detroit
24-30 to Saginaw and back
31 Detroit

xiv *JP* TIME LINE OF THE AMERICAN JOURNEY

- AUG. 1-13 steamboat on Lake Huron (Sault Sainte Marie, Green Bay)
 14 Detroit
 15-16 steamboat on Lake Erie
 17 Buffalo
 18-19 Niagara Falls
 20-23 steamboat to Montreal
 24-25 Montreal
 26-31 Quebec City
- SEPT. 1-2 Montreal
 3 travel south
 4-6 Albany
 7 travel east
 9 Boston
- OCT. 3-8 Hartford
 9-11 New York City
 12-28 Philadelphia
 29 Baltimore and Carrollton (to Nov. 6)
- NOV. 7-20 Philadelphia
 21-25 westward to Pittsburgh
 26 steamboat on the Ohio
 27 steamboat wreck, near Wheeling
 28-30 steamboat on the Ohio
- DEC. 1-4 Cincinnati
 5-8 steamboat on the Ohio
 9 Louisville
 10-11 overland to Nashville
 12-16 overland to Memphis (illness at Sandy Bridge)
 17-24 Memphis
 25-31 steamboat on the Mississippi

1832

- JAN. 1-3 New Orleans
 4 travel through the South
 18 Washington (to Feb. 2)
- FEB. 3 Philadelphia
 4-19 New York City
 20 set sail for France (arrive late March)

PREFACE

In the spring of 1831, Alexis de Tocqueville began a nine-month journey through the United States with his friend Gustave de Beaumont. Tocqueville was twenty-five years old, an apprentice magistrate at Versailles, and fascinated by the American experiment with democracy. Four years later he would publish *Democracy in America*, which was immediately recognized as a classic and continues to be quoted throughout the political spectrum for its insights into American culture. It has been called "certainly the greatest book ever written by anyone about America," and modern writers have constantly resorted to it—for example, David Riesman in *The Lonely Crowd*, Robert Nisbet in *The Quest for Community*, and Robert Bellah in *Habits of the Heart* (a title taken from a phrase of Tocqueville's, "les habitudes du cœur").

Tocqueville met and questioned hundreds of Americans on his journey, some famous—Daniel Webster, John Quincy Adams, Sam Houston—and some obscure; many important ideas in *Democracy in America* were originally suggested by people he talked with. He wrote to his brother after his first few weeks in New York, "Ideas come in, as it were, through our pores, and we learn as much in drawing rooms or taking walks as when we're shut up in our study." He soon discovered

that whereas in Europe it was impolite to ask probing questions, the typical American was “a pitiless questioner” and perfectly willing to answer such questions as well as to ask them. As for Tocqueville, Beaumont said about him, “He had the very rare talent of knowing how to listen well just as much as how to speak well.” Tocqueville also believed that coming from abroad gave him an advantage: “A foreigner often learns important truths at the hearth of his host, who might conceal them from his friends.”

Tocqueville was not just a great listener; he was a man in motion, and it is no accident that he found his way to his masterpiece by traveling. Beaumont especially admired the energy with which his friend pursued his quest. “Repose was contrary to his nature, and even when his body wasn’t moving, his intelligence was always at work . . . The slightest loss of time was unpleasant to him. This way of thinking kept him in continual anxiety; he pressed this passion so far during his journeys that he never arrived at a place without first making sure of his means of getting away, which made one of his friends comment that he was always leaving before he arrived.” He was interested in everything, and tireless in acquiring knowledge. He once told Beaumont, “You are always on fire, but you catch fire for only one thing at a time, with no curiosity or interest for everything else . . . I have an ardent and insatiable curiosity that constantly pulls me off my path to the right or the left.” Sheldon Wolin, in the most impressive modern study of Tocqueville, calls the notebooks he kept during his travels “a registry of unending surprise.”

Tocqueville was a sensitive, ambitious, and at times troubled young man taking in a nonstop barrage of impressions in a strange land. The America he encountered was no abstract embodiment of democracy, but a turbulent, competitive, rapidly changing society. During the 1830s the nation was still young. It had recently elected its first populist president in Andrew Jackson, it was expanding aggressively westward, and it was deeply conscious of class, regional, and racial tensions, forebodingly aware that civil war might one day tear it apart. This book seeks to bring that traveler and that world to life, through Tocqueville’s own highly perceptive observations at the time and through the wealth of comments on Jacksonian America made by a host of contemporaries,

especially other foreign visitors who published book-length accounts. Their perceptions help to build up a panoramic view of America in the 1830s, and they illuminate—often by contrast—the powers of observation and sympathy that made Tocqueville such a superb interpreter of American culture. By accompanying him on his journey, we can share in his personal discovery of America during an era of immense significance in the history of our nation, yet one that has received little attention amid the outpouring of books on the Revolution and the Civil War.

Democracy in America is not a rigidly systematic book, and modern interpreters sometimes complain that its key concepts can be inconsistent or fuzzy. They were bound to be, at a time when the whole basis of society was being reimagined throughout the Western world; it has been well said that Tocqueville's book is "not so much a book of answers as a book of questions." And while he was certainly interested in theory, it was in no abstract or academic way. For him theorizing was a necessary tool for making sense of the enormous social and political changes his generation was living through; as a modern commentator says, "Everything he wrote was intensely practical. His major books were political acts, the acts of a citizen."

What Tocqueville eventually created was not an account of "Americans" as a unique national type, but a structural explanation of some profound reasons why democracy, by its very nature, tends to produce certain characteristics in its citizens. In important ways, as he understood very clearly, the young nation enjoyed unique advantages of history and geography that the Old World could never share. The eighteenth-century founders had inherited a centuries-old tradition of liberty in colonies that had no hereditary aristocracy, and their break with England required no violent revolution such as France had to endure. Millions of acres of land were available for settlement in America, and the absence of powerful neighboring states made it unnecessary to maintain a large army or to impose centralized control. By contrast, in postrevolutionary France the very word "democracy" had a bad name, suggestive of mob rule; there was still a king, a powerful central government, and a huge army; and the number of eligible voters for the legislature was minuscule. When Tocqueville wrote a chapter titled "Of

the Government of Democracy in America," he started by acknowledging how provocative those words would seem to French readers: "I know I am treading on burning coals. Every word in this chapter is bound to offend in some way the various parties that divide my country."

Indeed, it would be hard to exaggerate the differences between the America and the France of that time. A number of Tocqueville's aristocratic relatives had been guillotined in a violent class-based revolution, and his own parents had barely escaped execution. Over the space of forty years France had been a hereditary monarchy, a radical democracy, a dictatorship with imperial ambitions, a monarchy again, and (in the last few months) an uneasy sort of semi-democracy whose future seemed much in doubt. By contrast, America was astonishingly stable, and Tocqueville was determined to learn why.

The goal of *Democracy in America*, then, was to dig down to bedrock in order to locate principles that other nations might incorporate. In his introduction Tocqueville declared, "In America I saw more than America; I sought there an image of democracy itself . . . I have attempted to see, not differently, but further than the political parties do. While they are concerned with the next day, I have wanted to ponder the future." A number of his predictions turned out to be uncannily prophetic—his insights have been called "almost frighteningly prescient"—but that is only incidental to his achievement. The years to come would bring enormous changes that he could not have foreseen, and in any case it was never his intention to be a prophet. "In the picture of the future," he wrote, "chance always creates an area of obscurity that the eye of intelligence has no way of penetrating." The America of the twenty-first century differs in profound ways from the America of the early nineteenth, and if Tocqueville's analysis still resonates, it is because of its uncanny intellectual power.

Throughout their nine-month journey, Tocqueville and Beaumont were true collaborators, constantly comparing notes and working out ideas. They complemented each other socially as well, since the reticent and sometimes melancholic Tocqueville relied on his gregarious friend to break the ice. Beaumont was the more active and athletic of the two, but Tocqueville too showed extraordinary stamina. Early on it

was he who insisted on giving Beaumont swimming lessons in the Hudson, as Beaumont reported to his mother, “with all the determination of a friend who knows how unfortunate my position would be if I should happen to fall into the middle of a great American river.” At one point it looked as if that skill would be required, when a steamboat they were on split against a rock and foundered among ice floes. Altogether they visited seventeen of the then twenty-four states, as well as three regions that would later become states (Michigan, Wisconsin, and West Virginia). In those days Ohio was at the brink of the frontier, and Wisconsin was a trackless forest beyond the pale of civilization.

Theirs was hardly the most exotic journey of the era—in December of the same year, the twenty-two-year-old Charles Darwin set sail in the *Beagle*, at a moment when Tocqueville and Beaumont were relaxing on a Mississippi steamboat—but in the context of French culture and politics it was exotic enough. At a deep level, in fact, there was a real similarity between Tocqueville and Darwin. Unlike superficial travelers, they both wrote compellingly because they were so keenly observant—Darwin of the natural world, with glances at society, and Tocqueville of society, with glances at nature. And if he was discovering America, Tocqueville had the exceptional insight to grasp that the nation itself was engaged in ongoing self-discovery. At one point during the trip he jotted in his notebook, “There is not a country in the world where man takes possession of the future more confidently, or feels with more pride that his intelligence makes him master of the universe, which he can reshape to his liking. It’s a movement of mind that can only be compared to the one that brought about the discovery of the New World three centuries ago. In fact one could say that America is being discovered a second time.” And in *Democracy in America* he declared, “This new society I have sought to depict and want to judge is only just being born. The passage of time hasn’t yet determined its shape; the great revolution that created it is still going on.”

In historical hindsight the 1830s did indeed represent a major turning point. In Sean Wilentz’s words, “A momentous rupture occurred between Thomas Jefferson’s time and Abraham Lincoln’s that created the lineaments of modern democratic politics.” Beyond the world of

politics, unprecedented economic changes were under way; one major history of the period is centered on the “market revolution” and another on the “communications revolution.” Tocqueville and Beaumont had firsthand experience of both. Gordon Wood observes that by contrast with the expectations of the founders, “by the 1820s America had become the most egalitarian, individualistic, and money-making society in western history.” That was exactly what fascinated Tocqueville and inspired his most penetrating insights. And those insights were made possible by his intense engagement, during an event-filled nine months, with America and Americans.

There are brief accounts of Tocqueville’s journey in biographies by André Jardin and Hugh Brogan, which necessarily devote most of their space to his later political career in France. As for a full treatment of his American experience, it has been seventy years since that was last attempted. In his 1938 book, *Tocqueville and Beaumont in America*, George Wilson Pierson provided an invaluable accounting of the more than two hundred people Tocqueville is known to have met, but of course he lacked what a writer today can gratefully draw upon, the work of scores of distinguished historians and political scientists on Jacksonian America and on Tocqueville’s thought.

Like everyone who writes about Tocqueville, I have made use of the great Tocqueville collection in the Beinecke Library at Yale, which contains much that is not yet in print, and I have been helped especially by Eduardo Nolla’s magnificent annotated edition of *De la démocratie en Amérique*, which came out nearly twenty years ago but has been little used by American writers, though that will certainly change when a promised English translation appears. Nolla’s notes are filled with fascinating material from the thousands of pages of drafts that Tocqueville accumulated as he labored on his book, including ones that Tocqueville filed under the English heading of “Rubish,” and at many points these have helped me to tell his story. Nearly all of these, together with the majority of passages I quote from Tocqueville’s and Beaumont’s letters, have never appeared in English before.