

Ewa Atanassow

Democracy's Dilemmas:
sovereignty, nationalism, globalization

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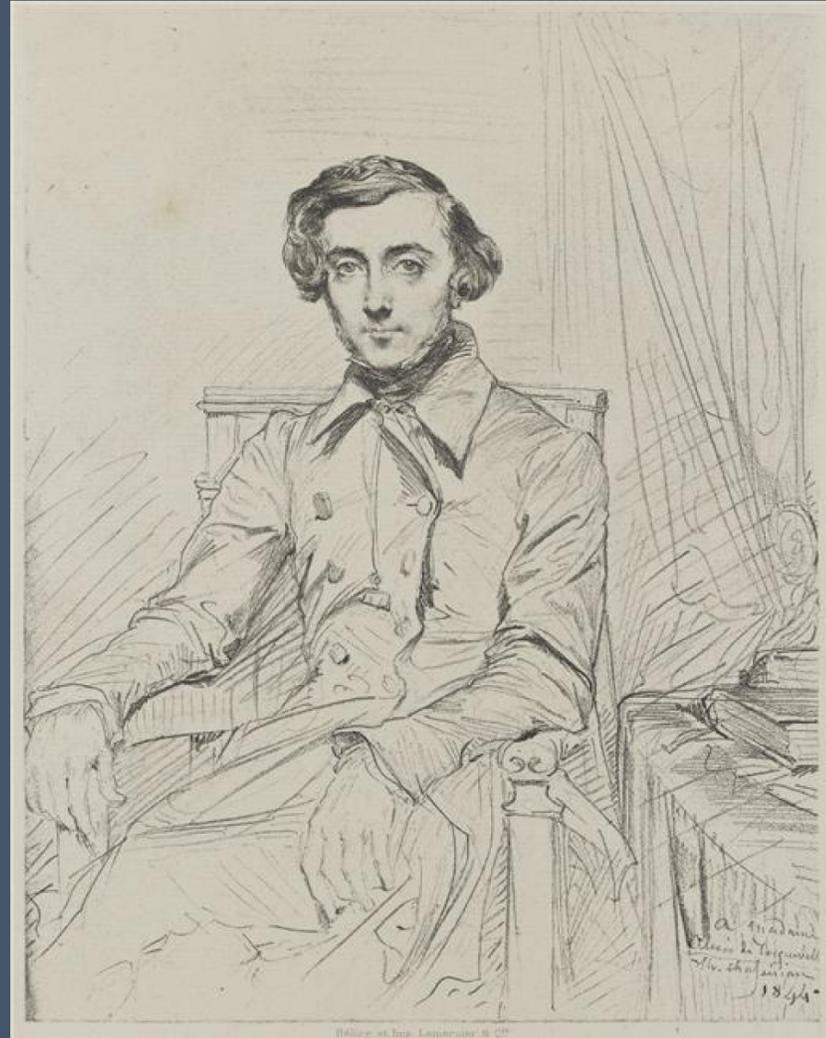
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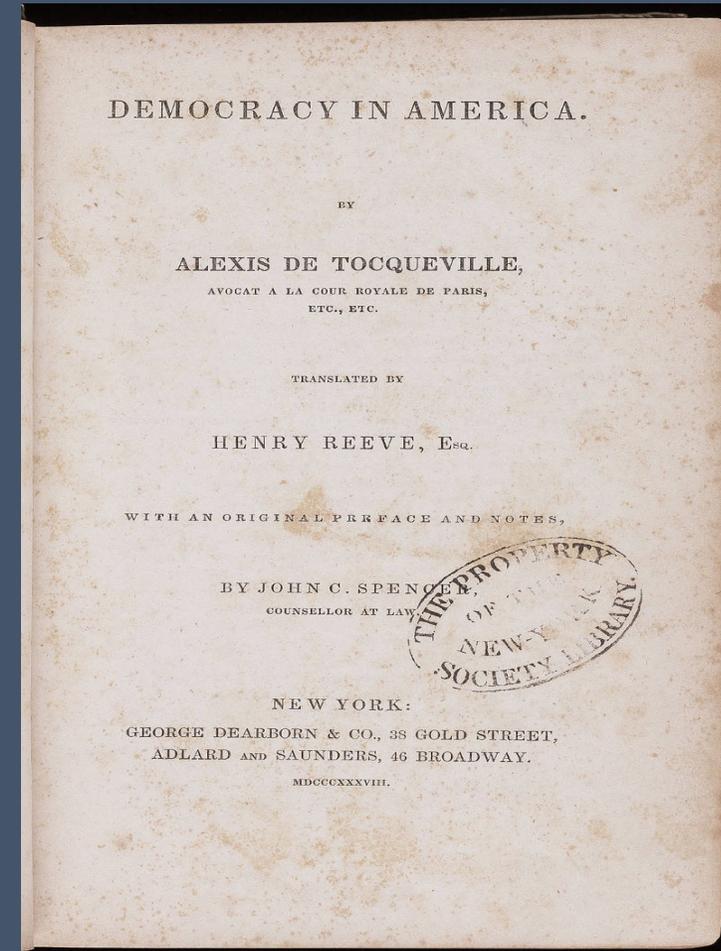
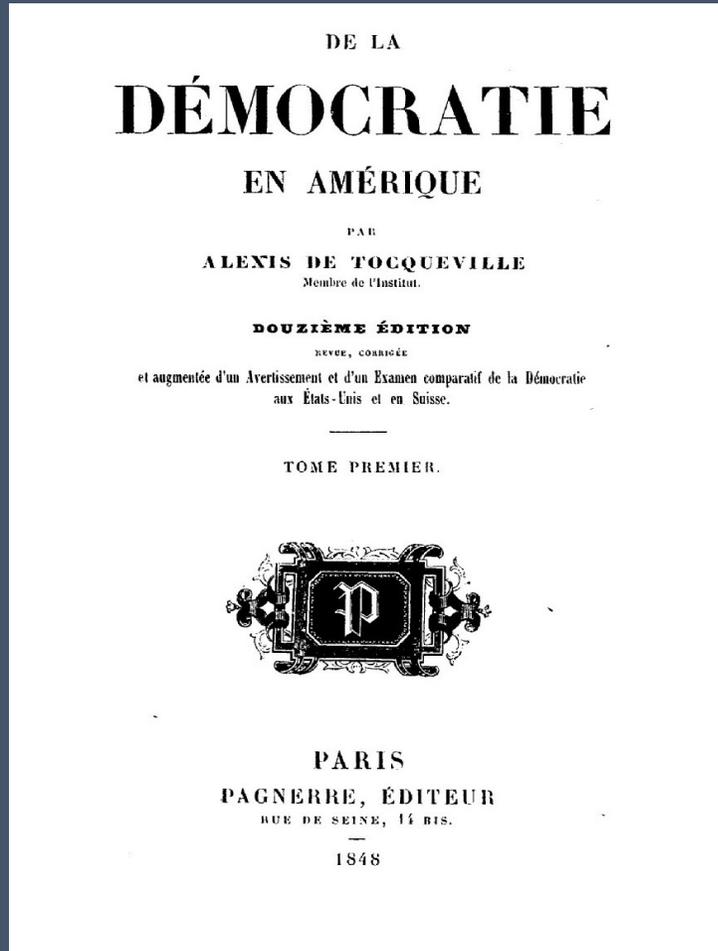
and Ours

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Alexis de Tocqueville (1805-1859)

Democracy in America (1835-40)



Why Tocqueville matters?

1. How he understands democracy
2. How he analyzes modern society
3. Sovereignty, nationalism, and globalization as constitutive dilemmas of modern politics.

1. What is democracy? Equality and popular sovereignty

“Among the new objects that attracted my attention during my stay in the United States, none struck me more vividly than the **equality of conditions**. ...

Soon I recognized that this same fact extends its influence far beyond political mores and **laws**...: it creates **opinions**, gives birth to **sentiments**, suggests **customs** and modifies all that it does not produce.

Therefore, as I studied American society, I saw more and more, in equality of conditions, the **generating fact** from which each particular fact seemed to derive, and I rediscovered it constantly before me as a central point where all of my observations came together.”

1.1. Equality

“Now I know only two ways to have equality rule in the political world: rights must either be given to each citizen or given to no one ...

We must not hide from the fact that the social state I have just described lends itself almost as easily to the one as to the other of these two consequences.” DA 1.1.3, 89

“Equality produces, in fact, two tendencies: one leads men directly to independence and can push them suddenly as far as anarchy; the other leads them by a longer, more secret, but surer road toward servitude.”

DA 2.4.1, 1193

1.2. Popular Sovereignty

“The first to be subjected to this fearful **alternative** that I have just described, the Anglo-Americans have been fortunate enough to escape absolute power. Circumstances, origin, enlightenment, and above all, mores have allowed them to establish and to maintain the **sovereignty of the people.**” DA 1.1.3, 90

“The principle of the sovereignty of the people... is one of those terms abused most widely by schemers of all times and despots of all ages. Some have seen it expressed in votes bought from the brokers of power; others in the votes of an interested or fearful minority.” DA 1.1.4, 91

2. How to analyze modern society? Tensions and dilemmas

Modern democracy rests on two principles – universal equality and popular self-rule – that, while mutually constitutive, are in tension.

The tensions between modern democracy's two core principles—equality and self-rule—give rise to recurring dilemmas.

How democracies institutionalize these principles, and navigate the dilemmas to which they give rise, conditions the character of the political order, and whether or not it is liberal.

3. (Popular) sovereignty, nationalism, and globalization

By virtue of their democratic nature, all modern societies have to grapple with questions such as:

3.1. How to construe and institutionalize the principle of popular sovereignty that legitimizes all modern regimes?

3.2. How to define peoplehood and mobilize the civic allegiance that popular sovereignty relies on?

3.3. How to negotiate the processes of globalization that are often at odds with democratic legitimacy?

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3.1 (Popular) Sovereignty and Constitutionalism

“Today in the United States the principle of the sovereignty of the people has attained all the practical developments that imagination can conceive. It has been freed from all the fictions that have been carefully placed around it elsewhere; it is seen successively clothed in all forms according to the necessity of the case.

Sometimes the people as a body make the laws as at Athens; sometimes the deputies created by universal suffrage represent the people and act in their name under their almost immediate supervision.” DA 1.1.4, 96

Why It Can Be Strictly Said that In the United States It Is the People Who Govern DA 1.2.1, 278

Tocqueville on centralization

“For my part, I cannot imagine that a nation could live or, above all, prosper without strong governmental centralization.” DA 1.1.5, 146

“But I think that administrative centralization is suitable only to enervate the peoples who submit to it, because it constantly tends to diminish the spirit of citizenship in them.” DA 1.1.5, 147

“It is at once necessary and desirable that the central power that directs a democratic people be active and powerful,”

DA 2.4.7, 667.

3.2. Nationalism and Democracy

Sovereignty and its bearer the people need not imply a monolithic entity or homogenous institutional arrangement. It may well be articulated, as Tocqueville insisted it should be, into a great variety of different constitutional forms, applied “according to the necessity of the case,” and adapted to a society’s specific historical and cultural conditions.

While advocating a diversity of forms and robust constitutionalism, Tocqueville makes clear that to be operative, legal norms and constitutional mechanisms depend on the people’s willing compliance with the constitutional process.

Although institutions are crucially important, their power stems from shared opinion and trust. For institutions to be strong and stable, the opinions that support them must be integrated into the common practices and self-understandings – i.e., the identity – of the people. (*Tocqueville’s Dilemmas and Ours*, p. 59)

Tocqueville on nationalism

Nationhood as the moral bond that holds society together is a perennial phenomenon. Nationalism, by contrast, which is an ideology or doctrine that makes the nation into the primary object of civic allegiance is distinctively democratic and modern.

(Tocqueville's Dilemmas and Ours, p. 63)

Tocqueville on national pride

Tocqueville agrees with Mill that national pride, especially when wounded, can turn pathological, but he argues that it must be educated and managed, rather than suppressed. By fostering—and pluralizing—the sense of belonging, local institutions and participatory associations are an integral part of this education that brings home the know-how of democratic self-rule. Yet they are not sufficient. (*Tocqueville's Dilemmas and Ours*, p. 104)

3.3. Whither Globalization?

“If France were governed as she ought to be she would sense that her principal interest, her permanent interest, is to make liberal institutions triumph in the world, not only out of love for these institutions, but even out of care for her force and for her grandeur The great interest of France is to substitute everywhere despotic institutions with liberal ones; this, I dare say, is France’s capital interest.” OC 3.2, 426

Tocqueville on Algeria

“I am under no illusions about the nature and the value of the sort of domination that France can found over the Arabs. I know that even if we handle it in the best possible way, we shall never create anything but an often troubled and generally onerous government there.”

(Tocqueville on Empire and Slavery, 65)

Tocqueville on the dialectics of globalization

Tocqueville balanced his support for colonization with a clear-sighted assessment of its probable future. Charging France with the responsibility to disseminate liberal democratic principles abroad in the interest of sustaining them at home, he confronted in colonial practice the difficulties of this dissemination, and its enormous moral and material costs. He also anticipated its likely denouement: rather than crush or assimilate subject peoples, Tocqueville expected European powers to mobilize their sense of cultural distinctness, and hand them the means of successful resistance.

In Conclusion

Just as strong government and individual freedom can and must be harmonized, so too there is no necessary contradiction between liberal universalism, or open society, and the need for nations.

THANK YOU!