Alexis de Tocqueville—200 Years

This issue of *The Review of Politics* is dedicated to a celebration of the bicentenary of Alexis de Tocqueville's birth. As the essays in this issue show, Tocqueville continues to speak to our central political concerns in the twenty-first century.

Although *Democracy in America* received a great deal of attention at the time it was published, Aurelian Craiutu points out in the first essay, interest in Tocqueville's work waned in the century following his death. In the context of two world wars and the emergence of totalitarian politics, Tocqueville's worries about the emergence of a new form of "soft despotism" seemed misplaced. As the "Cold War" developed, however, Tocqueville's 1835 prediction that America and Russia would become the two dominant world powers seemed almost preternaturally prescient. And further experience with the spread and difficulties of the welfare state made his worries about "soft despotism" seem all too pertinent in the late twentieth century. Tocqueville did not merely point to our problems, moreover. He also suggested possible means of responding to them. As Robert Gannett emphasizes, Tocqueville not only showed the benefits to be gained by establishing and maintaining decentralized political institutions. He also stressed the importance of religion, both as a threat to, and a possible source of support for, political liberty.

Indeed, Aristide Tessitore maintains, Tocqueville saw Christianity as the revolutionary force in Western history that had altered all our ideas concerning duties and rights. It elevated the milder virtues while it demoted pride and superior strength to vices. Most fundamentally, it "put in grand evidence the equality, the unity, the fraternity of all men." It also lifted the ultimate aim of human life out of the polis, nation or empire into a realm beyond history. "The Christian revolution had effected, in Friedrich Nietzsche's famous phrase, a 'transvaluation of values,'" that had "profound political consequences—for both good and ill."

Dana Villa's essay concerns those political consequences. There is a certain, rather surprising commonality between Tocqueville and Hegel, Villa points out, but not in their respective accounts of

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the development and history of "the West." Tocqueville and Hegel shared an understanding of the true character and advantages of modern "individualism" better than either of the parties to the contemporary liberal/communitarian debates. "While both saw individualism (or 'atomism') as premised on a faulty idea of freedom as independence," Villa emphasizes, "Hegel and Tocqueville upheld individual rights as the basis of a distinctively 'modern' form of liberty." Yet "both Hegel and Tocqueville valued public life, public norms, and public freedom as much as they valued individual rights." The adequacy of the specific forms of mediation these thinkers suggested between individual liberty and public life can and should be questioned, because they fail to take account of the moral pluralism characteristic of contemporary liberal democracies. Nevertheless, Hegel and Tocqueville show us, individual liberty and public freedom are not and should not be simply opposed.

Recognizing that neither decentralized political institutions nor the public spirited interpretation of "self-interest, rightly understood" would be sufficient to preserve individual liberty under democratic social conditions, Brian Danoff argues, Tocqueville also insisted on the importance of political leadership. But Tocqueville had an imperfect understanding of the distinctive character leadership in a modern democracy had to take. Although the words and deeds of Abraham Lincoln "confirm the wisdom of Tocqueville's ideas on the role of leadership in a democracy," Lincoln's thought also "exposes the weaknesses and limitations of Tocqueville's understanding." Lincoln not only saw the need, but was also able to show the people that he shared their feelings and experience in a way the aristocratic French intellectual could not.

Whereas Danoff emphasizes the need for leadership in a modern democracy, especially in the articulation of something like a civil religion, Gannett stresses the importance of institutional design. In the face of the current attempt of the United States government to establish democratic governments throughout the world, Gannett urges, it is important to recapture Tocqueville's more sophisticated analysis of the essential underpinnings of democracy. Elections and popular participation are not enough. It is necessary to balance central and local authorities and to have suitable religious and cultural conditions.

Also concerned about the application of Tocquevillian principles and analyses in contemporary American foreign policy, Roger

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Boesche wonders whether Americans want to follow Tocqueville's lead in all respects. In particular, he finds the French aristocrat's advocacy of war and imperial expansion in Algeria troubling. Like Craiutu, Boesche reminds us that Tocqueville did not simply prefer democracy to aristocracy. Tocqueville may have thought that democratic peoples were apt to be more pacific than aristocrats, but Tocqueville praised war for elevating the concerns of citizens above and beyond the narrow and ultimately demeaning boundaries of their own private interests. He suggested, moreover, that imperial conquests would be necessary to maintain the greatness of any modern democratic nation. Tocqueville recognized that the effects of European conquest were often destructive of local industry as well as of religion and morality. Like Karl Marx, however, Tocqueville thought that imperial conquest was a necessary prerequisite for future progress, even though that progress would and could be achieved only gradually through local political and administrative reforms. In his notes on Algeria, Bosche concludes, Tocqueville makes another of his great predictions: European nations will not be able to transform traditional societies by military force and decrees from above, but they can and will seize such nations by means of their love of Western consumer goods.

Christine Henderson finds the same ambiguous stance towards commerce in *Democracy in America* that Boesche discovers in Tocqueville's notes on Algeria. On the one hand, Henderson points out, Tocqueville thought that American commerce fostered a spirit of enterprise and innovation that might even be called heroic. It could perhaps counter some of the enervating effects of egalitarian social conditions. Like Boesche and Villa, however, Henderson also shows that Tocqueville thought the taste for material well-being that fostered commercial ventures might sap the attachment democratic peoples have to individual liberty.

As these essays show, Tocqueville remains the great prognosticator of both the progress and the problems of modern democracy. In this issue we seek not merely to honor his achievement but to benefit from his insights and analysis.

—Catherine Zuckert

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