

Tocqueville 21

Book Forum

**The Man Who Understood Democracy: The Life of Alexis de Tocqueville**

Olivier Zunz

Princeton: Princeton University Press (2022)

13 July 2022 | [tocqueville21.com](http://tocqueville21.com)

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## Introduction by Christopher Schaefer (University of Cambridge)

Almost two centuries after his visit to the United States in the early 1830s, Alexis de Tocqueville continues to feature prominently in American political discourse. In the opinion pages of today's small American newspapers—the same publications that Tocqueville considered crucial to public associations, representative of the equality of conditions, and thus integrally tied to democracy—you will still find Tocqueville cited as an authoritative source in [support of any number of arguments](#). Some of his most famous quotes, such as “America is great because she is good, and if America ever ceases to be good, she will cease to be great,” [were never even written by Tocqueville](#). And yet that hasn't stopped presidents of both parties—from Eisenhower to Reagan to Clinton—and countless other political figures from using them. In large parts of the decentralized public sphere that Tocqueville described and vaunted, he has attained an almost sage-like status, and his statements—attested or spurious—carry real rhetorical power.

This popular enthusiasm for Tocqueville obscures at least two things. One, in Tocqueville's nine months of observation in the United States, he did not accurately assess every significant phenomenon. The young French aristocrat got some things wrong, and others right perhaps but for the wrong reasons. Two, Tocqueville played an intriguing role in the democratic development of his own country. Of course, even if these aspects of Tocqueville escape popular awareness, scholars know them well. In recent decades, a relatively small group of academics have done an enormous amount of work to further our understanding of Alexis de Tocqueville's life and thought. Hugh Brogan and André Jardin have contributed two well-written biographies. Countless journal articles have been published, including many at *The Tocqueville Review/La revue Tocqueville*. Most recently, Tocqueville's complete works have been collected, edited and published in 32 volumes in 18 tomes over seven decades in a project that, [under the supervision of Françoise Mélonio, only culminated last year](#).

One of the central figures in this group of scholars centered on *The Tocqueville Review/La revue Tocqueville* is Olivier Zunz. A French-educated emeritus professor of history at the University of Virginia, Zunz has written on [Detroit's urbanization and industrialization](#), the [development of American corporations](#), the [role of elites in the American century](#), and [the history of American philanthropy](#). In parallel with these economic and social investigations in American history, he has also played an important role in Tocqueville studies, editing important volumes. In short, there are few scholars who are better suited to write a biography of Alexis de Tocqueville than Olivier Zunz. He is ideally placed to synthesize the burgeoning scholarship and primary source material, address the relevant French and American contexts, and speak to diverse transatlantic audiences—both French and American, scholarly and popular.

In this *Tocqueville 21* book forum, four scholars review [Zunz's \*The Man Who Understood Democracy: The Life of Alexis de Tocqueville\*](#). In keeping with the bilingual nature of our publication, two reviews are in English and two in French. Providing a useful summary of the different stages of Tocqueville's life that structure Zunz's biography, Baptiste Gauthey notes that the book's originality lies in its use of the notes and preparatory works for Tocqueville's final publications. Jeremy Jennings, another established Tocqueville scholar, declares that “*The Man Who Understood Democracy* must now stand as the authoritative biography of Alexis de Tocqueville, far surpassing the achievements of earlier biographers.” Given Zunz's observations about what Tocqueville

missed or even misunderstood, Jennings wonders to what degree precisely the title is true, that Tocqueville was “the man who understood [American] democracy.” Madeleine Rouot, in turn, focuses on the complex relationship between Tocqueville the critical thinker and Tocqueville the politician. She notes that Zunz’s transatlantic trajectory has made him ideally suited to synthesize the two. She also suggests, however, that Zunz has made Tocqueville into perhaps more of an original thinker than he actually was. In a wonderfully thorough and wide-ranging final review, Cheryl Welch highlights a few main themes raised by Zunz’s biography: the genesis of the theory of associations, the relationship between religious sensibilities and democratic universalism, structural inequality in democracy, the background values of a healthy democracy, and the possibility of individual agency within a dysfunctional and corrupt political system.

Rather than reply directly to the points raised in these reviews, Zunz chooses instead to address them indirectly by charting the genesis of his biography. In tracing the contours of Tocqueville’s life, he notes that his was not a “compartmentalized life.” A synthesis of Tocqueville’s writing and life is not just useful; it is required. Zunz also observes that his engagement with the extant correspondence from Tocqueville’s close friendships forced him to add a certain moral tenor to the biography: his life was devoted to the improvement of the human condition.

Alexis de Tocqueville was a French aristocrat, an acute observer of American democracy, and an important player in French politics at a crucial juncture in its democratic development. The diversity of these experiences encourages a similar diversity of disciplinary approaches to the subjects raised by his life and work. This is all the more true given Tocqueville’s at times incorrect observations as well as the fact that his work fits poorly into modern disciplinary boundaries. As Gauthey notes, although Tocqueville is sometimes claimed as a sociologist, his work would scarcely be considered a work of sociology today. Zunz’s biography shows us that his life and work are instead suggestive—generative even. Aware of this reality, *Tocqueville 21* publishes a wide variety of disciplinary and geographic perspectives, beyond the limits defined by Tocqueville himself. What unites our diverse coverage are three overlapping areas of interest: democracy, liberalism, and comparative studies of different stripes—all essential themes of Tocqueville’s life and work. If nothing else, Zunz’s biography reminds us of that unifying thread and the values that drive our investigations and our writing. For these reasons and many more, we are proud at *Tocqueville 21* to host this book forum on Olivier Zunz’s new biography of our namesake.

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## Review by Baptiste Gauthey (La Sorbonne)

### Voyage dans les arcanes de la pensée Tocquevillienne

Depuis le début de l'année 2022, les passionnés d'histoire du libéralisme français au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle sont gâtés : après les libéraux sous le Second Empire et Benjamin Constant<sup>1</sup>, c'est au tour d'Alexis de Tocqueville, figure éminente de ce courant intellectuel et politique, de faire l'objet d'une (nouvelle) étude. Entreprendre une biographie d'un tel personnage semble à l'abord un défi, tant la littérature sur sa vie et sa pensée est abondante. Néanmoins, nous allons montrer que l'ouvrage de l'historien Olivier Zunz relève ce défi avec succès en apportant un regard nouveau et enrichissant sur l'œuvre de Tocqueville.

L'originalité de la biographie est de nous faire découvrir l'œuvre tocquevillienne non pas à travers l'étude des textes finaux, mais par le biais des notes et archives issues des travaux préparatoires d'Alexis de Tocqueville. L'ouvrage emporte le lecteur dans une histoire de l'homme et de ses idées, mêlant finement récit chronologique et discussion thématique, et restitue ainsi les différentes étapes et modalités de formation des grandes idées de *De la démocratie en Amérique* et de *L'Ancien Régime et la Révolution*. Cette approche possède d'indéniables mérites pédagogiques, puisqu'elle permet au lecteur non-initié d'aborder et de comprendre avec plus de clarté l'ample et complexe pensée d'Alexis de Tocqueville.

Ses idées sont connues et ont été maintes fois étudiées. Nous allons donc nous concentrer sur ce qui, selon nous, caractérise la singularité des apports de cette biographie : l'étude des archives personnelles de Tocqueville afin de décomposer les étapes de sa pensée, et la grande connaissance de l'histoire américaine d'Olivier Zunz qui lui permet de poser un regard critique sur le voyage de Tocqueville aux États-Unis.

L'organisation générale de l'ouvrage fait ressortir différentes « phases » de la vie de Tocqueville : ses jeunes années de formation (chapitre 1), son voyage aux États-Unis et la rédaction de *De la démocratie en Amérique* (chapitres 2-5), sa mutation difficile d'homme de lettres en homme politique (chapitres 6-9) et enfin son retrait de la vie politique qui lui permet de se replonger dans ses réflexions sur l'histoire de la France et de la Révolution (chapitres 10-11). Toutes à leur manière, ces périodes de sa vie mettent en lumière l'évolution du rapport de Tocqueville à la démocratie (d'où le sous-titre « l'homme qui comprit la démocratie »), son progressif détachement avec le modèle de société aristocratique, et la manière dont il a façonné sa conception de l'histoire de la Révolution française. En effet, c'est une des grandes forces du livre que de montrer, à travers un récit chronologique suivant ce fil directeur, l'évolution de l'homme et de ses idées à travers une subtile interaction entre permanences (certains traits de sa personnalité tel sa propension au doute, son embarras face à l'instabilité de sa foi) et transformations (comme sa relation avec la religion et l'aristocratie, son soutien gêné puis son rejet de la monarchie).

Le biographe distingue donc les éléments qui, tout au long du parcours de Tocqueville, déterminent sa pensée. Pour ce faire, il invite à considérer la façon dont des facteurs de diverses

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<sup>1</sup> Citons simplement à titre d'exemple, pour appuyer notre propos : Léonard BURNAND, *Benjamin Constant*, Paris, Perrin, coll. « Biographie », 2022 ; Antoine SCHWARTZ, *Le libéralisme caméléon : les libéraux sous le Second Empire, 1848-1870*, Presses universitaires de Franche-Comté, Besançon, coll. « Les cahiers de la MSHE Ledoux », 2022.

natures interagissent entre eux pour donner naissance aux œuvres et aux concepts que l'on connaît. L'auteur étudie le rôle joué par sa psychologie, son histoire personnelle et familiale, ses discussions avec ses amis les plus proches, ses rencontres lors de ses nombreux voyages, mais aussi plus simplement l'impact du contexte politique et des idées reçues de son époque sur la façon dont Tocqueville comprend et étudie la démocratie. Olivier Zunz insiste par exemple sur son indépendance d'esprit. Celle-ci s'est manifestée dès l'âge de 16 ans, alors que le jeune Alexis fait l'expérience du doute religieux. Cette crise existentielle majeure marque la première étape d'un long cheminement intellectuel qui mènera cet aristocrate à adhérer sincèrement à la démocratie.

Du reste, cette propension au doute est un élément essentiel de la psychologie d'Alexis de Tocqueville puisqu'elle a, à plusieurs occasions, permis au normand de réviser et de perfectionner sa compréhension des phénomènes qu'il étudiait. Ce trait de caractère s'adjoint à une grande tolérance des opinions contraires, qualités fort utiles lorsqu'il s'agit de percevoir le réel tel qu'il est plutôt que tel qu'on voudrait qu'il soit (la fameuse neutralité axiologique chère à Max Weber). Ainsi, malgré ses origines aristocratiques qui le contraignaient pourtant à la loyauté vis-à-vis de la famille royale, la honte qu'il éprouva au moment des Trois Glorieuses face à l'attitude du gouvernement et du Roi a ébranlé ses convictions monarchiques. Ici comme à d'autres occasions, lorsque le doute pénètre son esprit, Tocqueville, incapable de le faire taire, n'a d'autre choix que de l'affronter. Bien que ces confrontations soient la source de bien des troubles, jusqu'à le pousser parfois dans des états quasi-dépressifs, ils sont aussi au fondement de la lucidité qui caractérise son analyse des événements politiques secouant la France du XIXe siècle.

Olivier Zunz met également en lumière, avec une grande précision tant les archives sont profuses, l'importance de la méthodologie dans le travail de Tocqueville. Au cœur de cette méthode se trouve une approche comparative dont on retrouve la trace dans toute son œuvre. Olivier Zunz identifie à chaque fois un procédé similaire : au départ, Tocqueville suit des intuitions, plus ou moins justes et précises, qui trouvent leur source dans ses origines familiales, ses discussions avec ses amis d'enfance, ses observations de la vie politique française ou ses lectures. Puis vient la période de collecte de données empiriques, pendant laquelle ces intuitions sont mises à l'épreuve des faits. Enfin, s'ensuit une période plus ou moins longue et douloureuse de réflexion et de rédaction au cours de laquelle l'auteur tente de donner une cohérence aux idées ainsi éprouvées et étayées.

Ces différentes étapes sont particulièrement visibles dans les chapitres qui traitent des années précédant la publication de *De la démocratie en Amérique*, où le biographe raconte sous cet angle le voyage de Tocqueville aux États-Unis.

Il y démontre l'importance des quelques deux cents rencontres qu'il a faites pendant son voyage. Par exemple, ses échanges avec Jared Sparks vont activement nourrir ses réflexions sur la distinction théorique entre gouvernement et administration. Joel Roberts Poinsett et Edward Livingston vont quant à eux lui permettre d'assister à des séances à la Chambre des représentants et au Sénat, ainsi que de collecter un certain nombre de documents publics. Au-delà des interlocuteurs qui joueront un rôle précieux dans son apprentissage de la démocratie, Olivier Zunz montre que les quelques expériences en dehors des hautes sphères de la société américaine lui permettront de réévaluer certaines de ses opinions. Ainsi, Tocqueville assiste à Baltimore à la

réalité de l'esclavagisme qui le choque profondément. C'est dans ces moments que se rencontrent, si l'on peut dire, l'inné et le culturel, le structurel et le conjoncturel : sa disposition au doute permit à Tocqueville de réviser sa grille de lecture des États-Unis en mettant à distance le prisme de lecture français et ses stéréotypes.

La grande connaissance d'Olivier Zunz de l'histoire américaine<sup>2</sup> apporte une plus-value précieuse à cette biographie. Cette expertise lui permet de poser un regard critique sur son objet en pointant les erreurs d'interprétation de Tocqueville et en analysant la façon dont celles-ci ont pu impacter sa conceptualisation de la démocratie américaine. L'historien parvient alors à mettre au jour, en regard de ce que Tocqueville a effectivement commenté et analysé, ce à côté de quoi il est passé ou n'a su relever. En effet, l'homogénéité sociale de ses interlocuteurs, la force de ses idées reçues sur l'Amérique ou sa mauvaise compréhension du protestantisme américain ont affaibli ses capacités d'observation et d'analyse. Il montre par exemple que Tocqueville n'a pas su déceler l'incroyable dynamisme économique du pays, qu'il a sous-estimé l'importance des divisions politiques et raciales, et qu'il était imprégné d'une vision romantique et fantasmée des terres vierges et des Indiens issues de ses lectures de Rousseau, Chateaubriand ou encore James Fenimore Cooper.

Toutes ces considérations permettent au lecteur de se plonger dans la richesse des réflexions épistémologiques d'Alexis de Tocqueville, sans tomber dans le piège d'une idéalisation et d'une surestimation de son apport à l'histoire des sciences sociales. S'il est effectivement un des précurseurs de la sociologie moderne, Tocqueville ne fait pas œuvre de sociologue tel qu'on l'entend aujourd'hui.

Cette richesse épistémologique se manifeste surtout à travers ses réflexions, plus tardives, sur sa « conception de l'histoire », thème en vogue au XIXe siècle. Déçu par son expérience du pouvoir politique et résolument opposé au régime du Second Empire, Tocqueville s'engage dans un travail monumental : comprendre « la troublante instabilité de la France et l'alternance récurrente entre les régimes républicains et despotiques » (p. 327) en procédant à une « sociologie-politique » de la nation. Il voulait découvrir ce qui avait poussé les Français à soutenir, ou tout du moins à s'accommoder du coup d'État de Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte ; pour ce faire, il fallait d'abord résoudre le mystère de la Révolution de 1789, « entreprise pour la liberté et aboutissant au despotisme » (p. 331).

*L'Ancien Régime et la Révolution* représente la première étape de ce projet historique inachevé, la maladie emportant Tocqueville en avril 1859. Ici encore, Olivier Zunz dresse un récit très détaillé du travail préparatoire de Tocqueville. Il montre notamment l'importance du travail d'archives réalisé dans le but d'accomplir une histoire « analytique », seule à même de déchiffrer l'immense complexité du phénomène révolutionnaire. Tocqueville souhaite, grâce aux archives, montrer que la tyrannie administrative imprégnait déjà le fonctionnement de l'administration royale afin d'expliquer comment « la transformation profonde de la France s'était produite avant plutôt qu'après la Révolution » (p. 345). À nouveau, Olivier Zunz, tout en décrivant avec précision la thèse de Tocqueville, nuance parfois cette compréhension de l'histoire française en mettant en

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<sup>2</sup> Olivier Zunz est spécialiste de l'histoire américaine. Voir par exemple : Olivier ZUNZ, *Le siècle américain : essai sur l'essor d'une grande puissance*, Paris, Fayard, 2000.

lumière une lecture partielle des archives, ne sélectionnant que celles qui allaient dans son sens. Dans les cahiers de doléance, par exemple, Tocqueville mentionnait principalement les témoignages qui dénonçaient la centralisation.

Nous n'avons évidemment pas épuisé tous les objets traités dans la biographie. Nous aurions pu, par exemple, expliquer comment Olivier Zunz mobilise avec pertinence la dynamique entre transformations et permanences lorsqu'il analyse comment Tocqueville, qui voulait participer à la grande transformation démocratique qu'il avait théorisée dans *De la démocratie en Amérique*, s'est difficilement mué en homme politique, son inclination à la nuance se transformant dans le monde politique en handicap. Peut-être pouvons-nous regretter que l'auteur ne situe pas plus clairement sa biographie dans la littérature existant sur le sujet, tant la pensée de Tocqueville a été et est l'objet de débats interprétatifs et d'instrumentalisations<sup>3</sup>. On doit néanmoins reconnaître que ce choix permet d'éviter toute interprétation anachronique et décontextualisée.

Que le lecteur nous autorise néanmoins, en guise de conclusion, de commettre un tel écart en proposant une lecture contemporaine d'une citation de Tocqueville de la fin des années 1830 : « Le parti libéral, mais non révolutionnaire, qui seul me conviendrait, n'existe pas et certes il n'est pas donné de le créer » (p. 225). S'appliquant à la difficile situation de ceux dont le tempérament les pousse à la modération et à la nuance, et qui se retrouvent pris en étau entre l'immobilisme des conservateurs et l'utopisme des révolutionnaires, les propos de l'intellectuel nous paraissent toujours pertinents à l'heure actuelle.

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<sup>3</sup> Voir sur ce sujet : Serge AUDIER, *Tocqueville retrouvé: genèse et enjeux du renouveau tocquevillien français*, Paris, École des hautes études en sciences sociales : Librairie philosophique J. Vrin, coll.« Contextes », 2004.

## Review by Jeremy Jennings (King's College London)

### The Limits of Tocqueville's Understanding

All Tocqueville scholars will be delighted to see the appearance of this book. Olivier Zunz has dedicated a considerable portion of his career to working on Tocqueville, producing numerous essays and several volumes of Tocqueville's writings in translation, all of which have considerably helped the English reader to extend their knowledge of a man who remains frequently misunderstood. Nor will Tocqueville scholars (and hopefully a wider audience) be disappointed by what they read. *The Man Who Understood Democracy* must now stand as the authoritative biography of Alexis de Tocqueville, far surpassing the achievements of earlier biographers such as Hugh Brogan. From start to finish, it is elegantly written, judicious, erudite, and a hugely insightful and informative read. It should be added that Princeton University Press have done Zunz proud, delivering a fine-looking volume with an excellent set of well-chosen illustrations.

As a biography, it is hard to think of anything of significance that Zunz has left out of his account of Tocqueville's life. Tocqueville's earliest years are sketched out in an introductory chapter appropriately entitled "Learning to Doubt", where the importance of Tocqueville's early reading of Guizot and (most interestingly) John Lingard on English history is neatly brought into focus. This of course is followed by an account of Tocqueville's travels to North America (something that is far from easy to summarize) and the writing of both *Democracy in America* and the jointly-authored report on prison reform. England and its aristocracy figure as a counterpoint to American democracy. There then follows a vivid account of Tocqueville's largely unsuccessful attempt to launch himself into the world of the politics of the July Monarchy, an attempt thwarted in part, according to Zunz, by his failure to "figure out how to turn his ideas about democracy into a political program." This bit of the story contains an insight that had never crossed my mind: namely, that Tocqueville's family should not have been surprised by Tocqueville's choice of Mary Mottley as his wife. He had virtually announced it in his admiration for the manner in which Americans respected the marriage bond and their attachment to the ideal of conjugal happiness. It is here that Zunz displays a sure-footed knowledge of the intellectual milieu and complex political environment in which Tocqueville operated. We also witness Tocqueville's efforts to ingratiate himself with the electors of Normandy (something not helped by the fragility of his stomach) and to move towards obtaining the highest honours of French intellectual life.

Already, as Zunz makes clear, Tocqueville had become aware of the fragility of political liberty and of how easily it could be sacrificed to the drive for equality. What Zunz also shows is that Tocqueville resisted broadening the electorate in France, arguing that this was not, as it might appear at first glance, "an inexplicable contradiction" from someone who had envisioned "progressively broader political participation." Tocqueville, Zunz argues, had never endorsed universal male suffrage in the United States, and, in line with this stance, his focus in France was concentrated on the workings of government and ending corruption as a prelude to the inculcation of the habits of political liberty. Without that habit, the French would rush headlong towards their own version of the tyranny of the majority, a tyranny made worse by the absence of the American system of checks and balances. It is in this context that Zunz makes the telling observation that the liberty Tocqueville loved was neither the aristocratic liberty of privilege nor

the negative liberty of rights “but a demanding personal exertion to achieve great things—the positive liberty of effort from which everything else flows.” From this followed a deepening commitment to fostering the improvement of the intellectual and material condition of the lower classes, a commitment, as Zunz shows, rooted in a religiously-grounded social conscience.

Less easily resolved is what Zunz describes as the conflict between Tocqueville the democrat and Tocqueville the advocate of imperial conquest. This is a subject that has received a lot of attention in recent years, much of it designed to disqualify Tocqueville’s thought in its entirety. Here Zunz does not mince words. Tocqueville, he concedes, was an “ardent colonialist.” This, he shows, had many dimensions, mostly driven by Tocqueville’s desire “to see France recover its role as a power broker in world affairs and regain its place as a major colonial presence as it had been in the lost days of the New France.” This, Zunz argues, meant supporting measures to secure the long-term economic viability of French Caribbean possessions, challenging English domination of the seas, seeking to ensure France had a say in international treaties concerning the Middle East (about which, to the dismay of John Stuart Mill, Tocqueville was prepared to contemplate war with the British) and, most importantly, the colonization of Algeria. Where this led Tocqueville is brought out by Zunz in unambiguous terms. With regard to the British Navy’s interference with the French slave trade, for example, Tocqueville was resolute in opposing the right of British ships to search French vessels, thereby proving himself, as Zunz writes, “unwilling to cede even a small fraction of national sovereignty in defense of the universal human freedom he claimed to support.” Tocqueville supported French colonisation of Polynesian islands in the Pacific, American claims to Oregon against those of the British, and, of course, the forced colonisation of Algeria. On the latter, Zunz makes the important point that there was nothing unusual about Tocqueville’s position as it was in line with “a near-complete national consensus ... in heralding colonization as national glory.” Note however that it was not a complete consensus. There were those who opposed French ambitions from the outset. Tocqueville knew of these views and personally knew many of those who voiced them, but he was never convinced by them. Zunz’s explanation is a simple one. Tocqueville, he writes, was “blinded by nationalistic pride” and he could never reconcile his view of France’s national interest with his democratic values. All this is true but there is the possible danger that it downplays the extent to which Tocqueville was deeply critical of French policy in Algeria. What is certain is that Tocqueville was determined to see Algeria with his own eyes and that he was deeply skeptical about the positive picture presented by General Bugeaud and his companions.

Zunz’s account also invites the conclusion that supporting French colonization of Algeria was not the only occasion where Tocqueville’s judgement failed him. Another example is the attribution of the causes of the class war that came to characterize the Second Republic to socialist ideology. For a man with such a developed social conscience Tocqueville showed scant interest in the plight of the Parisian poor. Likewise, Tocqueville completely misjudged the political dynamic that saw the rise to power of Louis Napoléon Bonaparte. Indeed, the constitutional article proposed by Tocqueville to deny the consecutive re-election of the President effectively sealed the Second Republic’s fate. As we read, all that remained for Tocqueville were years of declining health and the unfulfilled attempt to understand and explain the tragedy of French history. If Tocqueville’s final days in Cannes are treated briefly, there is nonetheless an illuminating discussion of his relationship with Madame Swetchine. Both, Zunz

writes, “agreed in advocating for Christianity as a form of individual liberation rather than as blind submission to papal authority.”

There is clearly much to learn from and much to enjoy in Olivier Zunz’s biography. Are there, however, any questions to be asked? One, in particular, strikes me. In his prologue—where, it might be added, the full horror of what befell the extended Tocqueville family during the reign of Terror is fully revealed—Zunz acknowledges that the depth and sincerity of Tocqueville’s support for democracy has often been questioned. But, according to him, “Tocqueville’s deepest belief was that democracy is a powerful, yet demanding, political form,” a conviction that has kept his work “alive, read, and discussed.” In truth, I am inclined to agree, but I am not sure that Zunz’s text makes the case as strongly and as clearly as he might wish. In brief, does he succeed in showing that Tocqueville was “the man who understood democracy”? Part of the problem here simply derives from the narrative form demanded of a biography. The message gets lost in the density of the detail. Content hides the thesis.

But there is perhaps more to the issue. When reading the chapters examining Tocqueville’s travels across the United States, it is striking how many times Zunz points out what Tocqueville did not see and what he failed to understand. He is by no means alone in doing this. *Inter alia*, we are told that Tocqueville developed only a partial understanding of American Protestantism. He failed to grasp the importance of New York as a great maritime centre. The national unity on show on the Fourth of July masked political divisions that Tocqueville failed to divine. Tocqueville paid no attention to local politics. Viewing the United States through “a French lens,” Tocqueville underestimated its economic dynamism, crossing the most vital economic region of the country “without realizing it.” The many forms of religious experience in the United States eluded Tocqueville’s comprehension, his focus largely falling on the Unitarians he had met. Tocqueville overlooked the cotton mills of Lowell. He failed to observe the formation of a new two-party political system. And so on and so on. All of this might be true, although my personal view is that Tocqueville learned far more about America during his visit than is generally acknowledged and that he was a far more assiduous observer than he is often given credit for. Nonetheless, if true, it rather begs the question of how, if Tocqueville misunderstood so much about the primary case of democracy he investigated, he came to understand the character of democracy so well. By what mysterious process were his conclusions arrived at? One well-known response is to suggest that Tocqueville might just as well have stayed at home, that the United States was incidental to the story he wanted to tell. As I indicate above, I am not convinced. Rather we might care to pay more attention to the manner in which Tocqueville reflected upon what he had seen after he had returned from America and, as Zunz correctly observes, to the place of comparison as Tocqueville’s “favourite investigative tool.” It was out of this that came what Tocqueville described to Chateaubriand as the idea that obsessed his mind: “the irresistible march of democracy.” If then I have a criticism of Olivier Zunz’s excellent volume it is that I would have written an epilogue bringing this all-important theme well and truly to the fore and, in doing so, would have left the reader in no doubt about why the life and ideas of Alexis de Tocqueville still matter. Nonetheless: bravo!

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## Review by Madeleine Rouot (University of Cambridge)

### Tocqueville : Penseur et acteur de la démocratie

Alexis de Tocqueville nous apparaît d'abord comme un penseur politique, connu surtout pour ses observations sur la démocratie américaine. Mais il chercha aussi toute sa vie à réconcilier le monde des idées avec l'expérience concrète du pouvoir. Si sa carrière politique, entamée en 1837, s'avéra à bien des égards un échec, elle contribua pour beaucoup à redéfinir ses idées, donnant plus de relief à sa vision de la démocratie.

Saisir la relation complexe entre Tocqueville, penseur critique, et Tocqueville, homme politique, n'est pas chose aisée pour l'historien. Olivier Zunz, dans cette nouvelle biographie, réalise le pari avec succès. En juxtaposant la vie et l'œuvre d'un des plus grands libéraux français, Olivier Zunz donne à voir un homme qui, avant ses contemporains, « *comprit la démocratie* », et essaya sans relâche d'incorporer sa pensée au service des grandes causes de son époque, et ce au prix de douloureuses frustrations. Ce faisant, Olivier Zunz aborde aussi implicitement la question, toujours d'actualité, du rôle des intellectuels en politique.

*Tocqueville : L'homme qui comprit la démocratie* se présente comme l'aboutissement d'une riche vie de recherche. Né en France en 1946, mais ayant fait la grande partie de sa carrière universitaire aux Etats-Unis, Olivier Zunz, tout comme Tocqueville, se situe « entre deux mondes ». Il est donc particulièrement bien placé pour saisir la subtilité de l'analyse du penseur français, réussissant avec justesse à trouver un équilibre entre ce qui, dans ses considérations sur la démocratie, découle de ses observations américaines, et ce qui, au contraire, s'inscrit dans un contexte français particulièrement troublé et en évolution constante.

Olivier Zunz réconcilie ainsi deux approches qui ont longtemps divisé le champ d'études tocquevillien. D'une part, les Français qui ont tendance à minimiser l'apport véritable du voyage de Tocqueville aux Etats-Unis, estimant souvent, selon la citation de Sainte-Beuve, qu'il avait « commencé à penser avant d'avoir rien appris » (392). De l'autre, les commentateurs américains qui se focalisent surtout sur l'acuité des analyses qu'il fit lors de son périple transatlantique. S'aidant de sa grande connaissance de l'histoire américaine ainsi que d'une multitude de discours, lettres et autres écrits secondaires que laissa Tocqueville, Olivier Zunz fait converger les deux approches dans une synthèse élégante qui met en lumière des aspects de l'œuvre du penseur qui n'ont jusqu'ici fait l'objet que d'études sommaires. Cette biographie se présente donc aussi comme l'aboutissement de soixante-dix années de travail qui ont permis de finaliser la composition des trente-et-un volumes des *Œuvres complètes d'Alexis de Tocqueville*, entamés en 1951 par J.P. Mayer.

Les premières pages de la biographie sont consacrées aux impressions du jeune Tocqueville, en prise avec un milieu aristocratique et antilibéral, pour lequel le retour des Bourbons au pouvoir suscite un grand espoir. Lui-même convaincu que l'incertitude constituait l'« une des plus grandes misères de notre nature » après les maladies et la mort, c'est pourtant à la suite d'une intense période de doute que se forgea la conscience politique de Tocqueville. Il s'émancipa d'abord rapidement du milieu familial, de l'influence *ultra* de son père, Hervé de Tocqueville,

pour se tourner vers les doctrinaires – Royer-Collard et Guizot en particulier – qui souhaitaient une politique nationale de réconciliation. Vint ensuite le doute religieux qui le prit à l'âge de seize ans pour ne plus jamais le quitter. Il confia à Mme Swetchine des années plus tard que c'était « avec un sentiment d'horreur » (27) qu'il se rappelait cette époque où il avait perdu sa foi. Enfin, incapable d'adhérer pleinement au principe monarchique au moment des Trois Glorieuses, Tocqueville prit la décision de quitter la vie politique pour se réfugier dans le royaume des idées.

C'est donc l'indépendance d'esprit du penseur français qui ressort des premières pages du livre ; une indépendance qui lui permit certes de se démarquer de ses contemporains en partant aux Etats-Unis à seulement vingt-cinq ans, mais qui sera aussi un réel handicap, plus tard, lors de son entrée en politique. Peut-être Olivier Zunz exagère-t-il un peu trop l'idiosyncrasie du projet de Tocqueville. En effet, même si ses idées sont mises régulièrement en dialogue avec celles de ses contemporains (parmi lesquels Charles de Montalembert, Villeneuve-Bargemont ou encore Jules Michelet), c'est surtout pour insister sur l'originalité de la contribution de Tocqueville. Par exemple, Olivier Zunz estime qu'après une courte période où Tocqueville fut séduit par l'œuvre de François Guizot, il se détourna de lui dès 1832 mesurant, après son arrivée aux Etats-Unis, « la distance qui le séparait désormais » des idées du grand historien (56).

Pourtant, les nombreuses recherches menées depuis les années 1980 auront permis de montrer que la plupart des thèmes à partir desquels Tocqueville travaille circulent déjà dans les écrits historiques de Guizot. Sans doute la biographie aurait-elle bénéficié d'une partie plus développée sur leurs conceptions respectives de la liberté, de sa dimension morale, mais également des considérations méthodologiques sur leurs visions de l'histoire et en quoi celles-ci convergent. Cela aurait permis de montrer, de manière plus explicite, comment certaines positions de Tocqueville durant la monarchie de Juillet remettent en cause la division souvent établie entre Tocqueville et Guizot – le premier considéré comme le théoricien de la société de masse, l'autre opposé au suffrage universel souhaitant le triomphe de la bourgeoisie. Fidèle à ses vues sur la dimension morale de la liberté, Tocqueville, comme Guizot, se refusa tout au long des années 1840 à se positionner en faveur de l'abaissement du cens électoral tant que le processus d'élection était compromis par la corruption. Cette prise de position, qui peut paraître surprenante pour un penseur qu'on associe à la démocratie, fut la sienne jusqu'en 1848.

Sans surprise, Olivier Zunz, comme ses prédécesseurs André Jardin et Hugh Brogan, reconstitue le périple américain de Tocqueville et Gustave de Beaumont aux Etats-Unis. Comme eux, il montre un Tocqueville soucieux de ne pas retomber dans les écueils des philosophes du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle qui avaient accordé une part trop importante à l'abstraction, en faisant reposer sa « nouvelle science politique » sur une observation méticuleuse de « l'état social » américain, de ses mœurs, de ses institutions et de ses habitudes. Mais c'est surtout lorsqu'il s'agit de montrer le décalage entre la réalité du terrain et les notes de Tocqueville et Beaumont qu'affleure l'érudition d'Olivier Zunz. Spécialiste de l'histoire américaine, labourant le sujet depuis de nombreuses années, il pointe les erreurs d'interprétation de Tocqueville, qui, trop souvent, analyse les Etats-Unis à travers un prisme français. Ses considérations sur le poids des associations politiques et civiques aux Etats-Unis sont, en ce sens, révélatrices. Se focalisant principalement sur le rôle salutaire des sociétés de tempérance, Tocqueville fit complètement abstraction de l'influence néfaste que pouvaient avoir les intérêts privés organisés sur les assemblées

démocratiquement élues. Des erreurs de jugement qui, selon Olivier Zunz, parsèment les notes de Tocqueville, touchant aussi bien ses considérations sur la nature du protestantisme américain, que sur l'industrialisation ou l'avenir des partis politiques.

Néanmoins, c'est son entrée en politique qu'Olivier Zunz présente comme le véritable aboutissement de l'œuvre de Tocqueville. C'est là l'originalité de cette biographie. Zunz prend au sérieux les grandes causes qui ont animé Tocqueville durant la monarchie de Juillet, ce qui nous permet de relire certains passages de la *De la démocratie en Amérique* avec un regard neuf. Par exemple, Tocqueville s'est intéressé de près à la question sociale. Pour un penseur qu'on a longtemps accusé d'avoir ignoré l'industrialisation américaine et ses déboires, au profit de la « passion pour l'égalité », Tocqueville fut en fait sensible aux problèmes du paupérisme et des nouvelles formes d'inégalité qui menaçaient de renaître dans l'état social démocratique. A ce titre, ses avertissements contre la résurgence d'une « aristocratie industrielle » au sein de l'état social démocratique prennent une dimension nouvelle à la lueur de ses activités politiques. Si cette crainte n'occupe que peu de place dans les écrits de Tocqueville, Olivier Zunz nous montre qu'elle est en fait devenue petit à petit centrale dans ses projets de réformes, dont le but était de trouver le meilleur moyen de montrer aux riches l'obligation morale qu'ils avaient d'aider les pauvres.

C'est après avoir ainsi levé le voile sur la manière dont Tocqueville chercha inlassablement à synthétiser son action et sa pensée qu'Olivier Zunz fait ressortir son attachement profond pour la démocratie, et ce, jusqu'à la fin de ses jours. En effet, beaucoup ont accusé Tocqueville de ne pas avoir été assez sincère dans son choix pour la démocratie, le faisant par résignation plus que par conviction. D'autres ont estimé qu'il n'avait jamais abandonné une nostalgie pour les valeurs de l'ancienne aristocratie, qui se manifesta surtout vers la fin de sa vie lorsque le coup d'Etat orchestré par Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte vint porter un coup à ses espoirs de voir ressurgir en France la liberté. Certes Tocqueville regretta la disparition des grands hommes, certes il dut accepter que « la science politique et l'art de gouverner étaient finalement deux choses bien différentes » (325), mais derrière cette lucidité, parfois prise pour de l'amertume, Tocqueville ne put jamais se résoudre à accepter l'apathie de ses contemporains face au despotisme. Olivier Zunz brosse finalement le portrait d'un homme qui resta profondément convaincu par les principes de 1789, l'entraînant à reconsidérer jusqu'au bout sa place d'intellectuel et la manière la plus habile d'articuler l'absolu et le quotidien en politique.

A cet égard, l'année 1852 est présentée comme un tournant. C'est désormais en « termes moraux » que Tocqueville envisage son rôle : le penseur, estime-t-il, doit former autour de la société « une sorte d'atmosphère intellectuelle » pour procurer aux gouvernants et aux gouvernés « un cadre de compréhension de la vie politique plus large » (335). Aussi, est-ce précisément le dessein que se donna Tocqueville dans *L'Ancien régime et la révolution*, dans lequel il tenta de comprendre ce qui avait entraîné les Français à abandonner une liberté difficilement acquise lors de la Révolution.

Une fois de plus cependant, il fut loin d'être le seul à s'adonner à cette tâche. En présumant que Tocqueville « n'avait que peu d'auteurs dont il pouvait s'inspirer » (379), Olivier Zunz donne l'impression qu'il a développé une conception de l'histoire et un rejet des philosophes du XVIIIe

siècle qui étaient, pour l'époque, entièrement novateurs en France. Or c'est moins dans l'approche de l'histoire proposée par Tocqueville que dans la nature même du récit historique que se situe la véritable originalité de son dernier ouvrage. En contournant l'enjeu principal pour ne se focaliser que sur des questions méthodologiques, Olivier Zunz cherche une originalité là où il n'y en a pas, et permet difficilement de rendre compte avec assez de force des innovations subtiles de Tocqueville par rapport à celles de ses contemporains. C'est, d'une manière générale, l'une des faiblesses de cette biographie : le lecteur peine souvent à savoir quels enseignements conceptuels en tirer. Un chapitre additionnel aurait ainsi permis de mettre en lumière la pérennité des idées de Tocqueville. Si Olivier Zunz réalise en partie la tâche en montrant comment ses écrits continuèrent à influencer la vie politique américaine, durant la guerre de Sécession, en donnant des armes aux anti-esclavagistes, on peut déplorer qu'il ne fasse pas de même dans le cas français. Insister davantage sur cet aspect aurait permis de clôturer avec plus d'effet les efforts de toute une génération pour exhumer la vie et l'œuvre d'un auteur qui continue, encore aujourd'hui, d'être abondamment cité, à la fois par les hommes politiques et les intellectuels dans la vie politique française.

Cela ne minimise en rien les points forts de cette biographie qui démontre, plus que jamais, l'importance de l'intellectuel dans une société où la démocratie reste toujours en devenir, car nécessitant une exigence morale pour concilier liberté et égalité. C'est parce que Tocqueville comprit le caractère profondément instable de la démocratie tout en acceptant ses principes, et qu'il perçut la dimension morale dans l'exercice de la liberté, qu'il prit au sérieux le rôle salutaire des idées dans la refonte de la culture collective. Il resta persuadé que les idées représentaient des instruments à même d'influencer ses contemporains, afin de leur redonner foi dans les institutions démocratiques.

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## Review by Cheryl Welch (Harvard University)

### The Maimonides of Democracy

I once participated in a memorable conference in Paris focused on comparing French and American views of political freedom, occasioned by the hundredth anniversary of the gift from France to the United States of the Statue of Liberty. But surely the greatest gift from France to America was Alexis de Tocqueville, a thinker who has been explaining Americans to themselves and stimulating Europeans to reflect on democracy and liberty for almost two centuries. So this learned and lively new intellectual biography, written by a French-American historian who straddles the American/European context, is especially welcome: yet another gift from France to America.

I first consider how Olivier Zunz's narration of Tocqueville's life might bear on some of the perennial conundrums of Tocqueville scholarship. Then, following in the footsteps of countless others, I ask whether the gaze of a nineteenth-century aristocrat, however penetrating, can help dispel the miasma clouding our own political anxieties. If Tocqueville was the "man who understood democracy," how might this understanding help us to diagnose our contemporary democratic crises, quite different from those that he faced?

Like Zunz's earlier *Tocqueville Reader* and his critical English edition of the *Recollections*, this biography never loses sight of the richness, diversity, and complexity of Tocqueville's thought. It resists the temptation to paper over conceptual twists and turns in favor of a meticulous reconstruction of the interaction of life and work. And Tocqueville above all wished his work to inform his own political life and those of his contemporaries. His ambition to gain the public eye emerged early and influenced his choice of subject—America as a laboratory incubating a "wholly new" democratic world—and his method—a selective but perceptive narration of facts that would make vivid for Tocqueville's readers the unsuspected benefits as well as the frightening dangers inherent in this new world. It is one of the strengths of Zunz's book that he allows us to see Tocqueville applying his subtle intelligence to this task in real time, as it were. As an historian of nineteenth-century America who also understands the French context, Zunz is well placed to relive the experience of discovering America and thus discovering "democracy" with Tocqueville. We gain a real sense of the interplay among the drivers of Tocqueville's thought: what he took from his American observations and interlocutors, what came from his underlying worries and moral concerns about France, and what came from his own brilliance as a psychologist and theorist able to dissect new connections among people in an imagined democratic universe. We always knew that these three sources—the stimulus of America, anxiety about France, and his own fertile imagination—shaped Tocqueville's writing deeply, allowing him to put his own distinctive stamp on the many ideas he shared with other French liberals of his time. But Zunz's account allows us to see how these sources of Tocquevillian thinking came together in specific cases.

The theory of associations presented in *Democracy in America*, one of Tocqueville's most celebrated contributions to democratic political theory, provides one example. Tocqueville rejected the nearly universal view that social and political groups would destabilize political democracy and undermine its success. Rather he painted a picture of associations as the vital building blocks of a healthy democratic civil society and as bulwarks against an overweening

state. Zunz shows us the genesis of this theoretical innovation. It was based on extremely modest empirical observation, since Tocqueville in fact missed the significance of most of the emerging religious, educational, and charitable associations in Jacksonian America as well as the presence of secret societies like the Masons. Rather he combined sketchy input about associations from a few sources in Boston and Philadelphia with ongoing concerns about the repression of associations in France. But the biggest contribution came from his own hunch that the power of human connection in groups could spill over into political efficacy under the right conditions. From this alchemy of observation and intuition came a protean *idée mère* that influenced his description of America as a source of democratic hope as well as fear.

A steady focus on the evolution of Tocqueville's thought and the complex interaction of his concerns, however, does not mean that Zunz cannot make larger and bolder claims. One of the payoffs of his careful contextualization is to allow him to argue persuasively that the aristocratic Tocqueville decisively cast his lot with a democratic future. Much ink has been spilled over the ways in which Tocqueville's theory is poised between aristocracy and democracy, or secretly smuggles in aristocratic values, or builds aristocratic barricades to the democratic onslaught, or is deeply conflicted and ambivalent about democracy. Without ignoring these hesitations and nuances, Zunz argues that Tocqueville's commitment to democracy was sincere and based on deep conviction, not only because he was resigned to the inevitable, but also because he was in his own distinctive way attracted to the normative power of a democratic vision of universal justice. It is this attraction, Zunz insists, that explains what has inspired subsequent readers, whose circumstances are quite different but who share the ideal of negotiating a more just democratic future. This way of putting things will seem right to many of Tocqueville's interpreters and will need to be considered seriously by those who doubt Tocqueville's democratic *bona fides*.

Tocqueville scholars, then, will find much in Zunz's impressive account of his life and work against which to measure and weigh their own interpretations. But what of Tocqueville's larger role as a writer who provides a perennial "guide to the democratically perplexed"? Does this account of a public figure steeped in specific nineteenth-century challenges make him less useful to those general readers who inhabit a very different social and political landscape? On the contrary, the Tocqueville that emerges in *The Man Who Understood Democracy* continues to suggest new ways to view our own predicaments. Let me mention three: debates over the role of religion in democracy, the issue of deepening economic inequality; and the problem of how to foster change in political cultures that are increasingly polarized, paralyzed, and prone to political violence.

Tocqueville is famous for his analysis of the ways in which democracy in the United States was entwined with religion; its citizens, he wrote, were both energized and politically restrained by shared religious convictions. It is usually the case, however, that commentators focus on the legacy of New England Puritanism, or the influence of a generalized Protestantism, or on the presence in America of a civic religion. These readers will need to reckon with Zunz's claim that Tocqueville got a lot of things wrong about American Protestantism (for example its necessary slide into a kind of anemic Unitarianism or disbelief) and that he completely ignored other aspects crucial to understanding the subsequent role of religion in American democracy (like the Second Great Awakening). But a different question arises if one takes seriously Zunz's account

of Tocqueville’s own religious sensibility: what role does and should a hierarchical and doctrinal religion like Catholicism play in a democratic society?

The extent to which Tocqueville was always attuned to what we might call the Catholic voice, despite his own loss of faith, is a theme of this biography. Zunz decisively cuts through old debates about why Tocqueville agreed to take the sacraments before he died with the very reasonable judgment that—whatever his private thoughts, which, of course, we cannot know—Tocqueville’s attempt to be at peace with his wife and “to affirm the faith to which he aspired” is completely consistent with his private and public life. Zunz argues that Tocqueville’s religious sensibility is one of the most important sources of his sincere commitment to democratic universalism and thus to the normative superiority of democracy over aristocracy. He also shows how Tocqueville always filtered his concerns with social justice through a particular Catholic view of benevolence and charity. Finally, Tocqueville’s dismay at Catholic subservience after Louis Bonaparte’s coup—by clerics and his own brothers—prompts him to bemoan a lost opportunity to draw on a spiritual tradition of speaking truth to power.

The complex confrontations and accommodations between Catholicism and modernity are subjects of increasing interest and innovative historical scholarship.<sup>4</sup> Given its complicated political role in the twentieth century; its prominent place in many contemporary democracies; and its growing, contentious, and polarizing place in American political discourse, the relationship of Catholicism to democracy is an important question. For those with these concerns, Tocqueville’s struggles to show how Catholicism could practically support democracy in regimes that separate church and state, and the ways in which it might be problematic, are worth revisiting.

Another set of worries about the future of politics in the twenty-first century concerns whether democracy, as an ideal and a practice, can survive deepening structural inequality. In this case, Tocqueville stimulates thought more through provocative indirection than through his own emphases. In *The Man Who Understood Democracy*, Zunz argues that Tocqueville missed prominent signs of commercial and industrial development in America, learning about modern poverty only later after his time in England and Ireland. Nevertheless, he integrated that knowledge into his more general speculations in the second volume of the *Democracy*.<sup>5</sup> Tocqueville recognized that if material inequality solidified into cultural and class stratification, isolating elites from responsibility to the general population, a successful political form of democracy would be impossible. However, he did not think this scenario—one might call it aristocratic despotism, in contrast to democratic despotism—would emerge on a society-wide scale. The dynamic workings of democracy itself would inhibit the creation of an unaccountable closed elite.

Tocqueville himself worried less about the possibility of aristocratic injustice than about unruly have-nots who might foment revolution and hasten the dominance of a powerful state, thus ushering in a new form of democratic despotism in which all were equal in their loss of freedom. Nevertheless, the category of aristocratic despotism—a situation in which the dominant group has no responsibilities to the subordinate group, but merely makes use of them—appears

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<sup>4</sup> See, for example the *Tocqueville 21* Book Forum on Sarah Shortall’s *Soldiers of God in a Secular World: Catholic Theology and Twentieth-Century French Politics*, ed. Christopher Schaefer (January 21, 2022).

<sup>5</sup> See Part 2, Chapter 20, of the 1840 *Democracy*, “How an Aristocracy May Be Created by Industry.”

sporadically in his work: in his analysis of America’s racialized democracy, of British rule in Ireland and India, and even of the French dominance over Arabs in French Algeria, which Zunz unflinchingly explores. These cases have generated much interest among scholars who try to reconcile Tocqueville’s complex and conflicted views on structured ethnic or imperial inequality with his larger democratic themes. But it is true that Tocqueville largely ignores the possibility that a closed aristocracy could arise within a democratic society of theoretical equals. Hence those who worry about the emergence of impermeable cultural elites and a solidifying stratum of working poor with little mobility might easily conclude that Tocqueville is irrelevant to their concerns. Here it may be useful to bring Tocqueville’s implicit category of aristocratic despotism more directly into the conversation. His insightful consideration of the dynamics of what he thought were anomalous or temporary cases of racial and colonial tyranny might be instructive models for unjust domination more generally. And it is also worth remembering Tocqueville’s recommended cure for any emerging despotism: elevating and institutionalizing elements that push back against forms of dominance. Today those balancing forces are unlikely to resemble the ones touted in *Democracy in America*, i.e., democratic simulacra of aristocratic restraints on centralized governmental power. The need is rather to create a different kind of balance, to infuse practices and institutions embodying the democratic value of universal justice into a calcifying aristocratic despotism.<sup>6</sup>

Finally, one of the lessons of both *Democracy in America* and *The Old Regime* is that stable political democracy works only when it is supported by values, ideas, and customs that are engrained in a culture: namely, a sense of common citizenship, respect for law, awareness of mutual rights, practical political experience, and a sense that one’s own self-interest is linked to the collective good. These lead in turn to certain political virtues: pragmatism, the ability to cooperate and compromise for some long-term goal, and humility about what is possible. But such values and virtues were precisely what was missing in Tocqueville’s France and what are in short supply in both the United States and Europe today. Despite profound differences from mid-nineteenth-century France and each other, the political cultures of many western liberal democracies share troubling features that Tocqueville would recognize and deplore. Publics exhibit very little trust in political elites and national institutions. Inequality fosters unrest and support for authoritarian populists. Legislative bodies are deeply divided by partisan enmity, mirroring deep social divisions. Mutual tolerance is rare. The habit of painting one’s rivals as enemies or traitors is common. If it ever existed anywhere, the healthy political culture that Tocqueville celebrated in *Democracy in America* has clearly decayed, even or especially in the United States itself. It seems that western democracies now face what he feared: a lack of shared values and norms, little sense of civic efficacy, and a polarized politics often on the brink of violence. What is to be done?

It is a sobering lesson of Tocqueville’s work that social and political *moeurs* are “sticky” and very difficult to change by political and legal means. One of the virtues of Zunz’s focus on Tocqueville’s political career, however, is to remind us that using politics and law to transform a toxic culture was precisely the herculean task that Tocqueville set for himself. Unlike some accounts of Tocqueville in politics, Zunz takes his efforts as a politician quite seriously and

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<sup>6</sup> Alan Kahan also concludes on this note in “And What if Tocqueville was Wrong,” *The Tocqueville Review/la revue Tocqueville* 39:1 (2018), 244.

recognizes some modest successes around social reform. But what also emerges from the account of Tocqueville's actual political career is the difficulty of trying to use one's place in a dysfunctional and corrupt system to transform it. One sees him at once attempting to guard his moral independence, by keeping those with whom he disagrees at arm's length, and trying to combine with those same others to create a collective force for change. This is a balancing act that recurs frequently in modern legislatures, especially ones in which existing patterns of cooperation and horse trading have broken down. It seems that Tocqueville never squared the circle, but neither did he give up until he was sidelined by Louis-Bonaparte's coup d'état.

It is also noteworthy that in his efforts to shift French political culture on to a different track, Tocqueville did not push for many of the solutions he had found in America: decentralization or empowering local levels of government or widening the suffrage. The divisions in the country were so great, he thought, that these measures would backfire. Rather, he hoped to educate the political elite to provide exemplary leadership, to develop their proper role as the moral and deliberative center of politics, and to push for gradual change by taking a bipartisan reform agenda to the people, an agenda that would help to moderate inequality and defuse revolutionary passions. If we lead, he argued, they will follow. None of this worked out in the short run, and in his *Recollections* he blamed the political class for spinelessness and cowardice.

One may wonder whether there was any chance of successfully nudging elite French political culture in a more civic direction in the 1840s. Perhaps the demise of such efforts in revolution and then an authoritarian coup is further cause for pessimism about rote calls for bipartisanship, cooperation, and reform. What is not in doubt is that Tocqueville's political failure sparked a brilliant analysis, in *The Old Regime and the Revolution*, of how French political culture had come to such a sorry pass. In that work, Tocqueville perceptively redescribed the previous hundred years—spanning the *Ancien régime*, the Revolution, the Empire, and subsequent French political regimes—to identify the rise of a new set of social and political *mœurs* embedded in the administrative state, new configurations of action and meaning that explained why he and his *concitoyens* had such an uphill battle in creating stable liberal democracy. Perhaps what *The Man Who Understood Democracy* suggests to us most forcefully is that we need such a creatively historical Tocquevillian diagnosis of why and how we have come to our own sorry pass, in which the most urgent political issues of our day are met only with bewildering *blocages* and ritualistic rhetoric.<sup>7</sup>

“*Comme disait Monsieur de Tocqueville,*” Antoine Redier commented in 1925 in his book of the same name, had by the early twentieth century become an oratorical flourish, a reference to what every French politician vaguely knew: there was a nineteenth-century prophet of democracy, and his name was Tocqueville. And an obligatory nod to Tocqueville's putative authority on all things democratic is still *de rigueur* in American popular political writing and speechifying. Olivier Zunz's new biography helps to set the record straight on what Alexis de Tocqueville said, but also—at least for this reader—helps to show why “*comme disait Monsieur de Tocqueville*” will and should continue to provoke and stimulate deeper analytical thinking about democracy and its discontents.

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<sup>7</sup>Arthur Goldhammer made this point to me in one of our many conversations about the man who understood democracy.

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## Reply by Olivier Zunz (University of Virginia)

It is with deep appreciation for the four critical readings of *The Life of Alexis de Tocqueville: The Man Who Understood Democracy* published in this *Tocqueville 21* forum that I will say something of the circumstances which prompted me to write this biography. I will also note some aspects of Tocqueville's personality to which I paid special attention in outlining his seminal contribution to democracy and liberalism.

I first set out to understand not just Tocqueville's ideas but how he arrived at them, and the context in which he formulated them, in teaching an undergraduate seminar at the University of Virginia on "Reading Tocqueville." Students were naturally stunned when they discovered that a young French aristocrat, only two or three years older than them, from a monarchist family, with only a hesitant knowledge of English and no real idea of what he was going to see, emerged from a short nine and a half months in the United States in 1831-32 with a powerful new understanding of modern history as a vital struggle between liberty and equality, and produced a work that has ever since helped Americans and others around the world think of themselves and their society anew.

In *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville was largely silent on his sources. He was content to say he had done his homework and the reader should trust him. To know more as I was reading along with students, I followed the lead of a small group of scholars who had delved into Tocqueville's papers. It was my good fortune, as Madeleine Rouot points out, to begin my query as the edition of Tocqueville's *Œuvres Complètes* at Gallimard was slowly nearing completion (an editorial project begun in the early fifties, which took over 70 years to complete). I read closely and prepared with Arthur Goldhammer an English-language edition of Tocqueville's (and Beaumont's) extensive travel diaries, letters home to family and friends, and related material. I could then assess Tocqueville's arguments in *Democracy in America* against his recorded observations. I did not realize immediately I had embarked on a much longer journey through Tocqueville's life.

As I worked on the biography, I sought to understand how Tocqueville continued to develop his early ideas on democracy not only as an intellectual reflecting on the changing world around him but also and simultaneously as a politician pledged to action and reform. The thirty-two volumes of *Œuvres Complètes* (in eighteen tomes) comprise all of his parliamentary papers which I, of course, supplemented with research of my own.

Tocqueville was conscious of living in a special moment in history. He told his British friend Henry Reeve, his first translator, that because aristocracy was already dead when his life began and democracy did not yet exist, he was, as he put it, "perfectly balanced between past and future." He sought to become a significant player in the important transformations of his lifetime. Indeed, he experienced two bloody revolutions in France—first in 1830, which brought a constitutional monarchy, and then in 1848, which instituted a republic he joined. He was briefly imprisoned during what Karl Marx famously named "the eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte," when Napoleon Bonaparte's nephew orchestrated his elevation from president of the Second Republic to emperor of the Second Empire.

Tocqueville ran several electoral campaigns. Elected to the Chamber of Deputies in 1839, he took on great causes: the abolition of slavery in the French colonies, the rehabilitation of

criminals (following his prison investigation in the United States), the defense of church-run schools as an acceptable alternative to state schools, and legal and constitutional reform. Intense work on all these issues naturally influenced his thinking on democracy. He told his brother that holding office gave him, otherwise “lost in theory,” a chance to “handle the most precious interests of the population.”

His was a life in both letters and politics not as separate activities but as interrelated means to turn greater equality into a source of liberty for a large number of citizens. He wanted to see a society where individual and general interest join and become one. In the United States, Tocqueville witnessed a phenomenon heretofore unknown to him, in which individuals served the common good by satisfying their personal ambitions. He labeled the practice “self-interest properly understood.” As he jotted in his notebook, “Ancient republics operated on the principle that the particular interest was to be sacrificed to the general good ... The principle of this republic seems to me to require the particular interest to serve the general interest. A sort of refined and intelligent egotism appears to be the axis about which the whole machine revolves.” Tocqueville went on later to argue that turning self-interest into a benefit for all was a positive development for civilization because self-interest was in so much greater supply than virtue. One could not be more tolerant of human weakness.

While Tocqueville became an ardent defender of democracy, he was nonetheless keenly alert to its weaknesses, including its susceptibility to demagoguery, despotism, and violent revolutionary upheaval, having lost many relatives to the guillotine during the Terror that followed the French Revolution.

Always thinking comparatively, Tocqueville traveled widely not only in America but also toured England several times, Ireland, Germany, Switzerland, Italy, and Algeria. He worked comparatively, as Jeremy Jennings underscores, but he was rarely clear about the terms of comparison. He used observations in one country to make a case about another. He relied on British examples of industrial exploitation to describe the danger of an emerging industrial democracy in America. He reflected on the French state’s repression of associations to hail the virtue of American associations he had not observed in any detail. I give many examples of this in the biography. To Tocqueville, this was all part of his strategy to guide democracy towards the common good. Even the first volume of *Democracy in America*, closest to the travel notes, relied on description only as a building block of a larger theoretical construct. And what Tocqueville missed did not necessarily affect his judgment. To give one concrete example, Tocqueville did not recognize the growth of evangelical Protestantism in America despite the Second Great Awakening unfolding under his own eyes, but he was right to insist in *Democracy in America* that America combined the spirit of religion and the spirit of freedom. He could then argue for his French readership that the Catholic church’s ideal of universalism made it best suited for democracy. Here Cheryl Welch rightly talks about Tocqueville’s “alchemy of observation and intuition.” Tocqueville’s grand theory of democracy in volume two of *Democracy in America* was clearly more invention than observation—as John Stuart Mill, the keenest critics at the time—realized. The wonder is that Tocqueville’s inventions ended up more often than not resembling reality more than his observations.

Tocqueville participated in all the great controversies of his time in the halls of government, the Chamber, academies and scholarly societies, Parisian salons, and the newspapers. I set out to retrace out how he combined these multiple commitments. Tocqueville consistently synthesized them to express, as Jeremy Jennings notes, “the character of democracy.”

In the process, Tocqueville kept revisiting the same issues and perfecting his grasp of them. He grew with them in important ways. Tocqueville readers are often struck by the stylistic differences between his two masterpieces, *Democracy in America* and *The Ancien Régime and the Revolution*. *Democracy in America* is a young man’s book, full of (controlled) passion, with brilliant hunches, yet disorganized. Tocqueville felt the need to write it twice to give it a more theoretical bent. *The Ancien Régime and the Revolution*, which Tocqueville published shortly before his premature death, is the work of a seasoned writer and a politician who had experienced the exercise of power. As a piece of literature, it is perfectly calibrated—there is not an extra word in it—and brimming with erudition. Tocqueville died before he had a chance to produce the intended sequel. He left us only reading notes and a few short drafts of his planned history of the French Revolution and Napoleonic empire, and one can only imagine the brilliant analytical narrative he would have produced of the long French Revolution “made in the name of liberty but tragically ending in despotism,” characteristic of the cycle of freedom and dependence—a decidedly French malady—he had diagnosed. Tocqueville became a symbol of political opposition in his domestic exile after Louis-Napoleon’s coup pushed him to resign in protest from the French Chamber and local political office he still held.

As a writer and a politician, Tocqueville attempted against the odds to operate a singular blend of theory and practice. Even when discouraged, as after his frustrating stint as minister of foreign affairs in 1849, his was not a compartmentalized life fragmented among various kinds of activities but a creative mix of political theory and policymaking. He embraced such high stakes as “the government of the country by the country” and the reconciliation of church and state. As a biographer, I was of course retracing his various ventures--observer of distinct cultures, polemicist in the press, policymaker in the Chamber, social reformer, historian, and assessing his actions as well as his thought. That Tocqueville is considered one of the great political philosophers of the modern age but is remembered only as a mediocre politician did not matter in writing the biography because his qualities as a political philosopher heavily depended on his engagement in politics, as Baptiste Gauthey notes.

All this was plenty to keep the biographer busy but there was more. Tocqueville had a genuine gift for lasting friendship. Here is a man who was shy and diffident, never at ease with colleagues in the Chamber, and yet he forged deep friendships, often sustained through richly detailed correspondence. The galaxy of correspondents included American informants (abolitionist Charles Sumner, historian Jared Sparks, political philosopher Francis Lieber), British friends (John Stuart Mill, economist Nassau William Senior), and some of the most important men of his time in France. He corresponded not only with intellectual and political figures but also with family members, old friends of his teenage years, and of course constituents. Correspondence was a daily activity. Of the thirty-two volumes of his complete works, eighteen are exclusively volumes of correspondence, revealing to the reader his engrossing debates with colleagues in the Chamber and the Academies, conversations in the Parisian salons of the July Monarchy, and details about his electoral campaigns, among many other things. Remarkably, he was able to

establish genuine personal connections and maintain real exchanges of ideas with almost all of his correspondents, even some he hardly knew. As a biographer, reading this immense collection of letters closely, I came to share Tocqueville's emotions, to worry about his responses to events, and to identify with the issues he faced. The main thing these letters did for me was to convince me of Tocqueville's integrity in both expressing his convictions and voicing his doubts, and this gave a moral quality to the life I tried to narrate.

I, of course, made judgment calls. I believe the weight of the evidence shows Tocqueville passionately committed to democracy as the best form of government where equality is the source of liberty for the greater number. I see him deeply influenced by the American example throughout his life as a writer and politician. I describe him as a public intellectual with moral responsibility. Tocqueville was haunted by doubt, but he channeled his anxieties into a creative force, always looking for the better formulation, respecting complexity, and he knew how to change his mind when confronted with new evidence.

I have been asked many times what Tocqueville would say were he to return today and find democracy in crisis. Tocqueville knew democracy to be fragile, resting on collective will towards a shared goal, and sustained by hard-to-acquire habit of liberty. We can only be struck by the similarities between the concerns he expressed and ours today: fear of extremists taking a hold of power, economic inequality limiting opportunity, lawlessness destroying trust. At the same time, Tocqueville's life has the power to inspire us to sustain our democracy in every feasible way, remembering that he developed his ideas partly for their beauty but mostly as tools of human improvement.

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