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De Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America*: A Sociology of Knowledge Perspective*

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Alexis de Tocqueville is accepted as one of the most insightful and important commentators on American democracy. He explores at length in his seemingly timeless treatise, *Democracy in America*, enduring and dominant characteristics of American democratic society: the tyranny of the majority, the social and economic equality of the American people, the predominant materialism of American culture, and finally the importance of manners and mores in setting the character of a political society. In fact, de Tocqueville is viewed by some as the author of the “first sociological study of American society,” and often is ranked with Marx for the persistent relevance of contributed insights and ideas.

Despite the impressive content of de Tocqueville’s writings, there are reasons to wonder why his pre-eminence is rarely challenged, but merely allowed to wax and wane. First, serious omissions and misevaluations are as much a part of de Tocqueville’s analysis as are his substantive contributions. Second, he did not originate many of his most important observations, but actually held them in common with other European travellers to the United States during the same time period. Third, though de Tocqueville came to America to study “universal” processes, his legacy is most pertinent to a thesis of American “exceptionalism” claiming unique conditions as the basis of American democracy.

Our query asks why there has been such an uncritical reception of de Tocqueville’s analysis throughout the decades, such that even those recognizing limitations in his work, nevertheless praise and elevate him to the heights of a perspicacious standard-bearer of social science truth. This question assumes cultural factors importantly influence the generation and acceptance of knowledge, regardless of inherent truth and validity. Investigating what these extraneous factors might be in the case of de Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America* introduces a sociology of knowledge perspective to an evaluation of this classic work.

It is well known that de Tocqueville, a descendant of French aristocracy, visited the United States for ten months in the early 1830’s when he was 26 years old, accompanied by his friend, Gustave Beaumont. Though their ostensible mission was to study the American penal system, it is generally thought that the real motivation may have been to escape French society during a period of political unrest hostile to their French aristocratic interests. Armed with letters of introduction to the “best” American families of the major cities in the United States, they were active travellers and visitors in this country for the duration of their stay.

The resulting experiences for de Tocqueville—most important of which seem to have been his extended and elaborate conversations with those Americans representing the “Establishment” of that time—were compiled

39
in what is known as *Democracy in America*. Originally a four volume work, it represents a panoramic and seemingly timeless portrait of American political culture. However, there are serious substantive voids in the content of his analysis, derivative ideas which cast his analysis in less than an original framework, and finally, evidence and writings from other travellers of this same time period that do not have these weaknesses, even though they have not attained the stature of de Tocqueville’s work.

Our question is not so much why de Tocqueville did not perceive certain areas of importance to American democracy as it is why modern commentators continue to find de Tocqueville so perspicacious despite significant omissions and misleading analyses. Among the most serious weaknesses in de Tocqueville’s evaluation of American democracy are: (1) his analysis of the West, especially the significance of the frontier and the accession of Andrew Jackson to the Presidency, (2) the importance of economic, industrial, and transportation factors in the development of American democracy, and (3) the theoretical model (or lack thereof) used to explain how democracy develops as the outcome of a process.

**The West.** Perhaps one of the most glaring omissions in de Tocqueville’s analysis of American democracy is his treatment of the West and the importance of Westward expansion. He was interested in the natural features of the frontier areas and made every effort, despite considerable obstacles, to travel to the outer frontier areas. However, de Tocqueville viewed the West and the frontier as the antithesis of civilization rather than as a constructive influence developing the character and distinctive features of a democratic polity.7

Here [on the frontier] man seems furtively to enter upon life. There is no meeting around his cradles of several generations to express hopes that are often vain and given rein to premature joys to which the future gives the lie. His name is not inscribed on the registers of the city. None of the touching solemnities of religion are mingled with the family’s solicitude . . . To get to the wilds he seems to have broken all the ties that bind him to life; one does not find him with wife or children . . . The most civilized of Europeans have turned [on the frontier] into a worshipper of the savage life. He prefers savannas to city streets and hunting to agriculture. He is taking chances with his life and lives without a care for the future.8

As a corollary to his rejection of the West, de Tocqueville considered the East coast the stronghold of democracy:

It is in the Eastern States that the Anglo-Americans have been longest accustomed to the government of democracy, and that they have adopted the habits and conceived the notions most favourable to its maintenance. . . . In the Western States, on the contrary, a portion of the same advantages is still wanting. Many of the Americans of the West were born in the woods, and they mix the ideas and the customs of savage life with the civilization of their parents. Their passions are more intense; their religious morality less authoritative; and their convictions less secure.9
Though de Tocqueville could see the "loss of an aristocratic class" in American society, he did not fully appreciate the rise of a "pioneer class" and the resultant shift in the center of political gravity from the East coast to the Western frontiers. In fact, he saw the frontier and the West as obstacles not catalysts, to the establishment of democratic processes, thus completely missing the importance of the "frontier thesis" of democracy, classically formulated by Frederick Jackson Turner. Some argue that he perceived all development in terms of an increase in the conditions of equality and a concomitant decrease in the principles of privilege. The last premise led him to interpret all historical change in terms of a decrease in aristocracy and an increase in democracy, such that a dominant theme in Democracy in America is the struggle between aristocracy and democracy.

De Tocqueville's rejection of the frontier and West extended to his failure to appreciate the significance of the first President of the United States to be elected from the West: Andrew Jackson. Just recently elected at the time of de Tocqueville's visit and representing an historic shift in the political center of gravity from the Eastern seaboard to the Western frontier areas, the importance of Andrew Jackson's election as well as Andrew Jackson himself was contemptuously dismissed by de Tocqueville as further evidence of the uncivilized, undemocratic character of the West.

General Jackson, whom the Americans have twice elected to be the head of their Government, is a man of a violent temper and mediocre talents; no one circumstance in the whole course of his career ever proved that he is qualified to govern a free people; and indeed the majority of the enlightened classes of the Union has always been opposed to him.

Given de Tocqueville's aristocratic heritage, it is not surprising that he was uninterested in the West. However, it is surprising that his book, Democracy in America, can remain a standard reference work about America and democracy, when the West is all but ignored, if not sternly dismissed.

Economics. The irony of de Tocqueville's work is that he was interested in the transition from aristocracy to democracy, but because he was interested primarily in democracy rather than in America, he missed critical factors specifically related to the development of American democracy. "While still in America, de Tocqueville had reflected that there might be an important link between political liberty and economic prosperity, but perhaps because of the obvious unique conditions, he made little attempt to investigate the economic element of the country."

Not only did de Tocqueville ignore the importance of unique economic features of America responsible for the development of democracy, but he failed to grasp the real nature of the changes taking place in England, to which he contrasted America. Granted, he had not yet visited England at the time of his pronouncement that America and England were fundamentally different. However, even after visiting England in 1833 and 1835, it took him considerable time to modify his basic orientation that democracy and aristocracy were political opposites, such that evidence of the existence of the one precluded the existence of the other.

Thus, he perceived England as well as America in rather narrow terms, for although he noted that a new kind of aristocracy had evolved in
England—one based on wealth as well as birth and therefore accessible to a mercantile class regardless of family origins—he failed to see the importance of urban middle class interests which resulted in the passage of the Reform Bill of 1832. In fact, de Tocqueville did not think that aristocracy and democracy could mix, and "his alphabetic notebook did not even include an entry on reform." 

Theoretical Model of Democracy. We also must question the frequent acceptance of de Tocqueville as an empirical social scientist employing the tools and perspective of "modern" social science. Some consider de Tocqueville to be in the tradition of Durkheim and Weber because he derives a "non-utopian" model of a political system by "observing regularities in society." Others applaud de Tocqueville's scorn for "abstractions" and celebrate his intellectual distance from any attempts to "reify" concepts. De Tocqueville himself claims to be "objective" in his analysis rather than "normative" and to base his theories on actual information and first hand observations. This may be true, but we must look further to the logic of his explanation to see if his method of observation and analysis can be considered contemporary.

Although de Tocqueville does describe insightfully a wide variety of variables important to the operation of American democracy, he does not conceive of these variables in terms of their complex interrelationships or groupings into stages of development. As such, de Tocqueville does not present us with a theory of democratic development involving a succession of variables constituting a "process." Rather, de Tocqueville assumed that there was an important casual link between social equality and political equality which was activated in the American context because of the "initial" conditions of the American people—such as their manners, customs and laws. The initial conditions are of such importance to de Tocqueville, that unravelling a causal explanation about how American democracy developed reveals the undeniable conclusion that he literally thought "the origins explain everything." 

At the period when the peoples of Europe landed in the New World, their national characteristics were already completely formed. . . . If we carefully examine the social and political state of America, after having studied its history, we shall remain perfectly convinced that not an opinion, not a custom, not a law, I may even say not an event, is upon record which the origin of that people will not explain.

Instead of a "theory" we are left with a simplistic "cause-effect" proposition that American origins explain everything, including, most importantly, American democracy defined primarily in terms of sovereignty of the people. As Nisbet argues, "Democracy in America in its entirety is a composite—one of extraordinary diverse perceptions, reflections, and far from least, moods," but it does not contain a theory of democracy. Riesman notes that despite de Tocqueville's considerable contributions, he founded no school.

De Tocqueville's inadequate theoretical understanding of the development of American democracy can be attributed to two paramount features of his work: (1) his theoretical preconceptions regarding the nature and direction of history and (2) his over-riding concern that the advent of democ-
racy held for a general “way of life.” In the first instance, de Tocqueville assumed history to be the underlying factor responsible for the initial cause of democracy: that is, equality of conditions. In the second instance, he was as concerned about the “after-effects” of this historical occurrence—democracy—as he was in the components of democracy itself.

De Tocqueville’s conviction that history was inevitably moving toward democracy contains no rigorous theoretical structure. History would seem to be, according to his view, no more than a passing of time. However, as time passed through the centuries, he noted an increasing tendency for “democracy” to develop and become established both at the level of society in the form of “equality of conditions” and at the level of political institutions in the form of “sovereignty of the people.” As such, America was only unique in the “extreme degree” to which history had advanced in establishing equality of conditions and sovereignty of the people; it was not unique in the occurrence of democracy itself.

In pursuing the pages of our [human] history, we shall scarcely meet with a single great event, in the lapse of seven hundred years, which has not turned to the advantage of equality. . . . The gradual development of the equality of conditions is therefore a providential fact, and it possesses all the characteristics of a Divine decree; it is universal, it is durable, it constantly eludes all human interference, and all events as well as all men contribute to its progress.

. . . If the men in our time were led by attentive observation, and by sincere reflection, to acknowledge that the gradual and progressive development of social equality is at once the past and future of their history, this solitary truth would confer the sacred character of a Divine decree upon the change. To attempt to check democracy would be in that case to resist the will of God; and the nations would then be constrained to make the best of the social lot awarded to them by Providence. 23

Therefore, rather than identifying de Tocqueville with modern nineteenth and twentieth century social scientists, his premise that the “passage of time” contains an inevitable, providential “political outcome” more accurately categorizes him with classical teleological theorists. 24 In fact, Benson argues that unlike Marx, de Tocqueville had no general theory of societal evolution, other than the “will of God” and that his theory of nature “represents an updated variant of ancient elitist notions” relying on concepts such as master people, natural aristocracies, and divinely-blessed elects. 25

Early Nineteenth Century Travellers and Commentators. It is relevant to note that 1825 marked the date of the first full opening of trans-Atlantic steam navigation. 26 It is undoubtedly true that de Tocqueville was perspicacious about many political, social and cultural aspects of America. However, within the context of this time period many of the features he cited as being distinctive to democracy were those noted by other travellers as well. For example, a concern with the social behavior of people as related to or influenced by “democracy” was a subject of interest to almost every
visitor to the United States in the first half of the 19th century. De Tocqueville was more assertive in defining manners with a broader scope inclusive of "habits, customs, and mores," but the extreme interest in the relationship between social behavior and politics was a characteristic focus of foreign travellers.

Equality of conditions also was a characteristic of the United States unanimously noted by travellers. Charles Dickens liked the lack of class even though he remained contemptuous of the West where supposedly there was the least "class of all." In splendid Victorian prose and humor his description of travel to the outlying areas of America is memorable. Similarly, Harriet Martineau was positive in her appreciation of the equality of conditions that existed in the United States at the time of her travels in 1834.

The "tyranny of the majority" is a phrase made famous by de Tocqueville, but it was a potential problem for democratic life that was discussed by many travellers in the early nineteenth century. Indeed, by some it is thought that the very distinction of the 18th and 19th centuries is the shift in a concern about political tyranny, expressed by Madison, to a fear of social tyranny, such as popularized by de Tocqueville. Other travellers noticed the pressures of conformity and even Americans themselves, such as James Fenimore Cooper, were aware of the dangers to a popular government with the possible rise of a "vulgar tyrant." De Tocqueville's friend, Jared Sparks, not only was aware of this problem, but took exception with de Tocqueville as to its nature and its potential threat.

In other areas as well—such as prison reform, the inherent problem and evil of slavery, the mercantile-trading mentality of Americans, the proliferation of newspapers, and the influence of lawyers and religion—travellers commonly identify these features as being particularly characteristic of American democracy. However, de Tocqueville was very wise to separate his analysis from his diary-like notes so that one can read the analysis of Democracy in America without the distraction of the travel log format of his Journey to America. Other writers were less explicit in separating their descriptive and analytic enterprise, and, thus, mixed their presentations, such as Dickens did in American Notes.

Michel Chevalier. However, one visitor who came close to duplicating not only de Tocqueville's scope but the explicitness of his aim, was Michel Chevalier. Monsieur Chevalier visited America one year after de Tocqueville and stayed two years (1833–1835) compared to de Tocqueville's ten months. Both Chevalier and de Tocqueville were on official missions of the French government: de Tocqueville and his friend Gustave Beaumont to study the American penal system and Chevalier to study the railroads, canals, and transportation and communication systems in the United States. Both came to similar conclusions, though Chevalier did recognize the key factors uncharted by de Tocqueville, namely, the importance of economics, industrialization, transportation, and communication.

De Tocqueville and Chevalier were contemporaries, but obviously represented quite different orientations. By the 1830's in the United States many state governments had invested sufficiently in canals, railroads, and such enterprises so as to produce a mixed economy, rather than the classic condition of laissez-faire. De Tocqueville's resigned but interested acceptance of democracy as in inevitable occurrence did not seem to extend
to the industrial and economic components destined to accompany the emergence of new and "modern" political systems. There is a glaring absence in de Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America* of explicit reference to or concern with the Industrial Revolution itself and/or the implication this major development would have for democratic processes.34

By contrast, Chevalier recognized that industrialism was the mode which would dominate the future and he came to America to discern the mechanics of this development as well as to determine its impact upon the social and political system. In Chevalier’s view, building canals and railroads in the early nineteenth century promoted “a real, positive and practical liberty” by providing economic opportunities for the American egalitarian ideal. Chevalier saw America as developing with a double thrust: expansion (the frontier) and industrial consolidation (urban concentration).35

Chevalier and de Tocqueville both were impressed with the American economic equality of conditions. As Chevalier said, “one thing in the United States that strikes a stranger . . . is the general ease in the condition of the people . . . there are no poor here . . . there are only an imperceptible minority of dissolute or improvident persons.”36 However, Chevalier saw the pioneer in relation to the mercantilist and integrated his interpretation of the wilderness with American economic and cultural development.

... There are nowhere merchants of more consummate ability than those of Boston, but it is particularly as the colonist of the wilderness that the Yankee is admirable. Fatigue has no hold on him . . . He grapples with nature in close fight, and, more unyielding than she, subdues her at last, obligating her to surrender at discretion, to yield whatever he wills, and to take the shape he chooses . . . Thus to the genius of business, by means of which he turns to profit whatever the earth yields him, he joins the genius of industry which makes her profit, and that of mechanical skill which fashions her produce to his wants . . .

The pre-eminence of the Yankee in the colonization of the country has made him the arbiter of manners and customs.37

Consequently, even though de Tocqueville and Chevalier were contemporaries, they seem to be quite distinct in their “point of departure.” It is to Chevalier that we must credit recognition of how the frontier and industrialism are integral to the development of American democracy. Furthermore, in France, despite de Tocqueville’s attempt to gain a foothold on political economy, it was Chevalier who truly grasped the significance of economics in the future world order. De Tocqueville, due to pragmatism rather than principled commitment, eventually advocated mild tax reforms in 1847 to delay the coming revolution which he accurately foresaw and dreaded.38 However, he was unwilling to entertain the notion of socialism as a remedy and continued to hope for political reform without concomitant economic revolution.39 Chevalier, on the other hand, became an expert in the field of economics, writing many discourses on a wide range of topics, including natural resources, money and banking, and the organization of labor. He was not only aware of the existence and importance of the "work-
ing class," but was interested in their welfare as well.\textsuperscript{40}

Thus, it must be contended that de Tocqueville was hardly on the forefront of the intellectual developments of his time, but rather was a part of the general mainstream of ideas that were quite widely held about democracy in America. He made it a point not to read published writings on subjects close to his own and he was extremely resistant to incorporating knowledge about economics or socialism into his frame of reference in any form whatsoever.\textsuperscript{41}

A Sociology of Knowledge Perspective. From the analysis above we realize the need to extend our search beyond de Tocqueville's work per se in order to understand the sources of his enduring acceptance. This orientation leads us to a discussion of de Tocqueville's intellectual heritage, his clear concern with ideology, and his placement in the American political tradition.

De Tocqueville's Intellectual Heritage. De Tocqueville harks back to the 18th century, admiring the Philosophes and Voltaire, and impressed by the logic and morality of Pascal.\textsuperscript{42} However, an even greater influence was Guizot. During the summer of 1829 de Tocqueville had attended Guizot's lectures on the "History of Civilization in France" and was struck by several points which he later incorporated into his own thought and writings. The principles adopted from Guizot were: (1) the attempt to reconcile the relationship between the individual and society as means and/or ends, (2) the belief that democracy would be victorious over aristocracy and monarchy and that the development of free political institutions would constantly be challenged by the centralizing tendencies of modern governments, (3) the belief that the present had greater social reform and justice for all, but that there was a concomitant loss of individual energy and strength, and (4) the view that history revealed a slow triumphant rise of the middle class.\textsuperscript{43}

Aside from his theoretical preconceptions, we could surmise that de Tocqueville's personal predispositions inclined him to converse with and question those people in America who were most complementary to his own privileged background. By definition these were not Americans of an aristocratic class, since America did not possess such a class. Yet they were the next best thing, since almost without exception the individuals de Tocqueville interrogated about life in America were very settled, extremely respectable, and the most distinguished in America.\textsuperscript{44} In fact, it is clear from de Tocqueville's notebook, \textit{Journey to America}, that he did not talk at length with pioneers or settlers who could have given him an insightful picture of life in a new territory or of the rationales, goals, and aspirations which led men and women out to the wilderness. Nor would we expect de Tocqueville in his frame of mind to seek out this sort of humble person or to take a great deal of interest in what such people might have to say. De Tocqueville had identified democracy in America as an essentially settled affair, based on the Jeffersonian principle of small rural land holdings and marked by a state of consensus rather than conflict.\textsuperscript{45}

Yet why has de Tocqueville continued to be so important and such a powerful influence in American social science?

Clear Concern With Ideology. Among the group of travellers to the United States in the early part of the nineteenth century, de Tocqueville is distinguished by the \textit{explication} of his thesis, if not by its absolute originality.
As has been pointed out, many other visitors at this time remarked upon the same characteristics of American life as did de Tocqueville. However, they did not do so with the same clarity of purpose and definition of project. Instead, many embedded their insights in endless descriptions of landscapes and train schedules. Even Chevalier's observations in *Society, Manners, and Morals* are in the form of "letters," albeit titled with instructive and classificatory headings.

Furthermore, the period between 1825-1845 coincided in England with the influence and dominance of the great Tory reviews, the *Quarterly* and *Blackwood's*. These reviews gave a public forum to a growing distaste if not hatred of America, which intensified during the crisis attending the Reform Bill of 1832. De Tocqueville published *Democracy in America* in the midst of this controversy. Though de Tocqueville was not aware of the importance of the Reform Bill in England, he nevertheless had an enormous impact on public opinion in Great Britain and his analysis of American democracy provided invaluable ammunition to the proponents of liberal reform seeking a vindication of democratic sentiments.

Therefore, in understanding the reasons for the acceptance and powerful position de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* has had and continues to have today, we must be cognizant that it was not so much the originality of content and insightfulness as it was the careful delineation of issues relevant to political considerations. That combined with de Tocqueville's French background, his English alliance and connections by marriage, as well as the opportune timing of his publication (the first two volumes practically coincidental with the controversy over the English Reform Bill; the second two volumes five years later), made for a readable and powerful treatise concerning democratic life in America.

*Provides Conservative Perspective.* A final consideration when examining the social and political context influencing the acceptance and enduring value of de Tocqueville's writings is the appreciation of his work in relation to the American political heritage. The mixture of many intellectual traditions inherited from Europe importantly includes a set of abstract principles and concepts to define a political reality most often associated with "liberalism" if not "philosophical anarchism." Concepts such as man, the state, a state of nature, social contract, natural rights, and equality before the law are but examples of abstractions whose validity is meant to transcend the particularities of individual empirical observations and whose revelation is established by human reason. In fact, Louis Hartz argues that the two major factors in the development of American society were the absence of feudalism and the presence of liberalism. Furthermore, Americans actually were able to implement premises of liberalism—such as natural law theory and the concept of free individuals in a state of nature—because of their freedom from the myriad associations of class, church, guild, and place encumbering their European, feudal counterparts. Accordingly, the primary assumption of American political thought became the reality of atomistic social freedom envisaged by John Locke and the distinctive element in American civilization became its social freedom and its sense of equality.

To this heritage of liberal abstraction, de Tocqueville contributes the vantage point traditionally associated with a *conservative* position, becoming "the greatest foreign critic America ever had" due to his "deep insights into
Conservatism and liberalism are viewed by some as "half brothers" since both are attempts to meet the needs of "mass government in an age of dawning industrialism." Furthermore, conservatism continues to retain significance just because liberalism exaggerates the claims of "naked reason, abstract theory, pure science, statism, and inevitably managed progress." Conservative thought counters liberal premises on the basis of these six canons: (1) A "belief that a divine intent rules society as well as conscience" in opposition to liberalism's premise of the rationality of human reason, (2) An "affection for the proliferating variety and mystery of traditional life, as distinguished from the narrowing uniformity and equalitarianism" of liberal systems, (3) A "conviction that civilized society requires orders and classes. The only true equality is moral equality; all other attempts at leveling lead to despair," (4) The "persuasion that property and freedom are inseparably connected, and that economic leveling is not economic progress," (5) A "faith in prescription" and a belief that man is governed "more by emotion than by reason" such that "tradition and sound prejudice provide checks upon man's anarchistic impulse," and (6) A "recognition that change and reform are not identical, and that innovation is a devouring conflagration more often than it is a torch of progress." From the above it is clear why de Tocqueville can be identified as a conservative (or at most a liberal conservative). Scorning those who separate themselves from the facts of social and political life, he instead sought to ground his general understanding of the "frame of the universe" upon concrete realities. Furthermore, his belief in Divine Providence as the dynamic historical force accounting for the growing equality between peoples, his faith in the political relevance of religious institutions for safeguarding democracy his emphasis on the particularized and traditional habits of a people as the locus of their national character rather than their intellectual heritage and political ideals per se are all examples of a conservative position.

However, our question is why has de Tocqueville's conservative position held such enormous and lasting appeal to Americans? We can agree with Hartz that Americans did not experience Europe's political upheavals and rendering of social cleavages, and, thus, did not need to produce proponents of the conservative tradition comparable to Burke. However, this is not to say that the liberal tenets of American political culture successfully encompass the full range of its social and political realities such that conservative concerns are irrelevant. In fact, we can surmise that de Tocqueville's aristocratic heritage leading to his conservative vantage point sensitized him to those very realities of the American social and political condition most often ignored because of our liberal tradition. Furthermore, de Tocqueville's conservative contribution has been particularly powerful and acceptable because it was untainted by the incorporated defense of slavery which so profoundly marred the indigenous efforts of pre-Civil War "feudal" theorists, such as Fitzhugh and Holmes.

Though Americans may be "atomistic individuals" compared to the European context, nevertheless, within the American context the social fabric of family, class, religion, and place are realities to be explored and understood. That de Tocqueville did not accurately perceive or judge the exact calibre of these realities—such as the importance of the West or the
very real existence of economic and social divisions—is not nearly as impor-
tant as that he paid attention to the concrete facts of social and political life
in the first place. For this he is a constant reminder that in addition to the
liberal heritage giving us premises such as the "equality of all human beings
before the law," we must be cognizant of conservative premises pointing to the
power of tradition and particularized mores and habits tempering idealistic
and abstract constructs of political reality. Thus, we gain from de Toc-
queville the conservative perspective—without an ideological defense of
such feudal institutions as slavery—alerting us to those enduring social and
political complexities of American democratic life characteristically ignored
by our liberal premises and heritage.
FOOTNOTES


3Some have carefully charted the periods and distinctive ways in which de Tocqueville has been preeminent, see Robert Nisbet, “Many Tocquevilles,” The American Scholar 46 (1976): pp. 59–75. Our purpose, however, is to examine basic reasons underlying de Tocqueville’s popular acceptance.


7Thus, he describes the frontier in romantic terms as an area of wilderness evidencing the power of nature, but not as an area receptive to man or as one offering new economic opportunities for advancement and social mobility vis-a-vis the settled urban areas.


10Frederick Jackson Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” The Frontier in American History (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1920), pp. 1-38. We cannot agree with Schleifer’s rather generous interpretations of de Tocqueville’s comments about the frontier as brilliantly prophesizing the “specific links between natural circumstances and American society.” For example, we do not think de Tocqueville’s statement that on the frontier “each man is ignorant of his nearest neighbor’s history” is evidence that de Tocqueville perceived “frontier individualism and self-reliance” as Schleifer claims, nor that de Tocqueville’s statement; “there are inhabitants already in the new states of the West, but not as yet a society” can be interpreted accurately to mean that de Tocqueville thought the frontier “repeatedly reconstructed social institutions,” James T. Schleifer, The Making of Tocqueville’s Democracy in America (No. Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1980), p. 46.


12De Tocqueville, Democracy, op. cit., p. 341.


14Ibid., p. 51.

15Eberts and Witton, op. cit., p. 1090.


18Others note the impossibility of drawing a clear distinction between the hypotheses advanced by de Tocqueville and the data, or evidence, he offers to test those hypotheses, Costner, op. cit, p. 420.

19In fact, de Tocqueville believes that the explanation of the development of all countries is to be found in their origins, though in the case of most nations the historic circumstances of their origins are unknown. Thus, America is unique not because the origins explain everything, but simply because the origins are known, clearly distinguishable, and, therefore, able to be studied, de Tocqueville, Democracy, op. cit., p. 13.


21Nisbet, op. cit., p. 61.


24However, unlike classical theorists such as Aristotle, de Tocqueville failed to develop his teleological orientation into a theoretical model explaining political change. We are left merely with his teleological premise that “history” is a process whose outcome is inherently contained in its origins. See Marvin Zetterbaum, Tocqueville and the Problem of Democracy (Stanford, Ca.: Stanford University Press, 1967).

Before that time most visitors who came to America were Englishmen of the middle class who came to investigate the possibility of economic investment in America. Even at this early time, however, most seemed to agree that Americans could be characterized by energy and activity and that there was an absence of class consciousness and behavior, Allen Nevins, (ed.), America Through British Eyes (New York: Oxford University Press, 1948), pp. 6-9.

Mrs. Frances Trollope, for instance, is notorious for her horror of the lack of refinement of American behavior. Yet even Mrs. Trollope, who does not represent a particularly analytical style of observation, does make the de Tocquevillian connection between manners and the influence of a political system, (though she reverses the direction of the cause and effect by thinking it is the influence of the political system which affects manners instead of vice versa). Frances Trollop, Domestic Manners of the Americans, (New York: Whittaker, Treacher and Co., 1832), preface.


Harriet Martineau, Society in America, 2 vols, (London: Saunders and Otry, 1837) and Retrospect of Western Travel, 2 vols, (London: Saunders and Otry, 1838).


Sparks thought that for a tyranny of the majority to be dangerous, it would have to exercise its control through laws and legislation and that the resultant oppressive laws would effect them as well as the minority. In addition, the composition of the majority and minorities would have to remain constant over time, while in fact Sparks saw the nature of majorities and minorities in the United States as shifting in their constituents. Finally, Sparks thinks that de Tocqueville has confounded "tyranny of the majority" with "public opinion" which Sparks observed is the same in all countries regardless of the form of government, see Herbert Baxter Adams, "Jared Sparks and Alexis de Tocqueville," in Anglo-American Relations and Southern History, Vol. 16 (Baltimore, Md. Johns Hopkins Press, 1898). James Bryce advanced a similar argument when he stated that de Tocqueville overestimated the danger of a tyranny of the majority because a "tyranny of the majority does not strike one as a serious evil in America today [1887]... it can not act through a state legislature," James Bryce, The Predictions of Hamilton and de Tocqueville, (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1887), P. 54. See Roger Boesche, "The Prison: Tocqueville's Model for Despotism," Western Political Quarterly, 33 (1980): pp. 550-563.


"Even enthusiastic advocates of de Tocqueville's work concede that he neglected the "astonishing developments in transportation and communication that signaled an American technological revolution" Schleifer, op. cit. pp. 73-75.


Ibid, p. 97.


De Tocqueville was against socialism for a variety of reasons, not the least of which was what he saw to be its destructive, centralizing tendencies, Drescher, op. cit., pp. 142-144.


De Tocqueville published his first volume of Democracy in America in 1835 and Chevalier read this volume in time to make a note of it for the third edition of his own work, Society, Manners, and Politics in the United States, recommending it to his own readers. However, de Tocqueville had a policy never to read other writers while he was working on his own treatises, and so deliberately avoided Chevalier's book, though he mentioned it in a note to his friend, Beaumont, in a letter in 1836, Chevalier, op. cit., p. ix; Schleifer, op. cit., pp. 82-83. Since it took de Tocqueville five years to complete the second part of this Democracy in America, it would seem that this was rather a long time to refrain from reading and thinking about the related writings of others. Similarly, as late as 1843 de Tocqueville was as yet unfamiliar with the basic arguments and main works of socialist thinkers and the "right to work" argument. Four years later, just in time for the Revolution of 1848, he had read some of the writings of Owen, Saint-Simon, Fourier, Louis Blanc, and socialist novelists, though the arguments of these writers do not seem to have had much impact on him, Drescher, op. cit., p. 11.


Nevins, op. cit., p. 79.

Some would cite the myth of the "perceptive Outsider" as another factor accounting for


