Bernard Rosenberg and *Dennis H. Wong*

DEMOCRACY IN AMERICA

AN APPRECIATION ON THE OCCASION OF THE CENTENNIAL OF TOCQUEVILLE'S DEATH

Like a great work of literary art, which indeed it is, Alexis de Tocqueville's extraordinary analysis of American society grows more impressive with each exposure to it. Everything has changed and nothing has changed since *Democracy in America* was published in the 1830's. Its author grasped with remarkable perception both the mutable and the immutable qualities of man. There could be nothing more salutary for us today than to assimilate his fine sense of what was permanent in a world which, like ours, was undergoing deep convulsions. Committed to the classical economics of Adam Smith, Tocqueville did not share Smith's illusions about the eternal nature of the market. On the contrary, as Albert Salomon has emphasized, his point of view was Heraclitean, the specter of continual change and ceaseless transformation dominating his thought. Surely such a perspective, which antedates both Darwin and Marx, is more ap-

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propriate for sociologists in a revolutionary age than elegantly constructed theories of social equilibrium which treat change as a special problem or a *deus ex machina.*

This is perhaps the first and most important lesson to be learned from Tocqueville by a generation of social scientists who so often suffer from a kind of self-imposed cultural amnesia. To those who neglect the comparative and historical understanding of a social reality that is evolving before our eyes, it must surely be instructive to read a book about the United States which is also about ancient Rome and medieval Europe, as well as about France and England through the centuries. Not that Tocqueville makes use in any formal and self-conscious way of what is sometimes called the "comparative method" or the "historical approach." These were built into his outlook: he could not help seeing reality as changing or viewing the new society he wished to understand as a "figure" against the "ground" of the European and classical social orders he knew so well. As he said of his own book on America:

> Though I seldom mentioned France, I did not write a page without thinking of her, and placing her as it were before me. And what I specifically tried to draw out, and to explain in the United States, was not the whole condition of that foreign society, but the points in which it differs from our own, or resembles us. It is always by noticing likenesses or contrasts that I succeeded in giving an interesting and accurate description of the New World . . . I believe that this perpetual silent reference to France was a principal cause of the book's success.

It is precisely the absence of "perpetual silent reference" to other times and places that makes so much of American sociology seem parochial. And too often, when this deficiency is noted, a comparative and historical view is recommended as a special methodological "approach" to be added to a repertory of competing and alternative approaches. Or else comparative study is regarded as a means of attaining abstract generalizations or social "laws" rather than as a way of understanding deeply a particular slice of reality by, in Tocqueville's words, "noticing likenesses or contrasts."

For the rest, what shall we say of a work whose chapter headings contain more pith and wisdom than any lengthy treatise since published on the same subject? Let us consider only a few

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of the riches Tocqueville set before his reader over a hundred and twenty years ago in the second volume of *Democracy in America*:

1. A full-blown sociological approach, derived in part from his incomparable predecessor, Montesquieu, for whose geographical determinism he had no more use than for Gobineau's racism. Tocqueville's broad-ranging rejection of geographic and racial theories of cultural differences resembles that of Arnold Toynbee in the first volume of *The Study of History*. But unlike Toynbee, Tocqueville develops a conception of ethos or national character to account for the varieties of men and institutions he observed. So, for example, he noted how, in their habitual intercourse, Americans are much more sociable than the English. This discrepancy in somewhat puzzling because, "The Americans are connected with England by their origin, their religion, their language and partially by their customs"—which is why these two peoples are so much alike; if the dominant personality of one is outgoing and that of the other is imperturbable, it is because "they differ only in their social condition." To Tocqueville the normative and cultural determination of national character was taken for granted. Thus for him the reserve of Englishmen proceeds much more from the constitution of their country, and from the total social condition implied by that constitution, than from the innate qualities of its inhabitants. Their stock, as he explicitly put it, has no bearing on the matter.

2. A modern sociology of religion. Tocqueville anticipated the position later taken by Durkheim and others that religion in some form is a constitutive, and therefore indispensable, element of all social orders. Men cannot do without a body of dogmatic belief that most of them uncritically accept and on the basis of which they achieve cohesion and unity. Ritual observances are also necessary. These assumptions Tocqueville would share with contemporary sociologists of religion. Furthermore, he would share a large measure of their objectivity, a detached and disinterested state more remarkable in him as a self-conscious Christian than, let us say, in the " religiously a-musical" Max Weber. Yet he is Weberian in spirit when he observes that he has neither the right nor the

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intention "of examining the super-natural means that God employs to infuse religious belief," that he is "considering religions in a purely human point of view," and that "Christianity itself has felt, to some extent, the influence that social and political conditions exercise on religious opinions." And Tocqueville also reminds us of Weber in noting how the American taste for material well-being had been joined to religious institutions despite—or because of—their original and mistaken effort to eradicate that taste. Weber might have said what the Lynds documented and what any reader of *The Power of Positive Thinking* might conclude, that judging from the sermons of American clergymen, "It is often difficult to ascertain ... whether the principal object of religion is to procure eternal felicity in the other world or prosperity in this."

3. A sensitive grasp of life in the pecuniary civilization he was studying. One need not wait for Veblen in the twentieth century to apprehend the ubiquitousness and omnivorousness of business. Two and a half decades before the Civil War foresaw the same qualities. Writing in the early decades of the Industrial Revolution, he already beheld a country in which there were not just the usual manufacturing and commercial classes but a free-for-all where everybody was simultaneously engaged in industry and commerce. In an overwhelmingly agricultural economy husbandmen had begun to forsake traditional subsistence farming for specialized cash crops. Much later Veblen was to say of them that they cultivated "the main chance" as much as the soil. Tocqueville knew when it could not have been so obvious to the world at large that "The Americans carry their business-like qualities into agriculture, and their trading passions are displayed in that as in their other pursuits." Art and science were among "the other pursuits" he had in mind.

If a taste for letters has been aroused in new classes, they in turn have introduced the trading spirit into literature. Tocqueville regarded it as a calamity that the same mercantile spirit should have been injected into scientific inquiry. He warned against confounding the dominant desire of a business minded community to utilize scientific knowledge with the pure desire, the "disinterested passion" to acquire such knowledge. Nor was it from hostility to

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pragmatism, the indigenous American philosophy he so clearly anticipated and even espoused without giving it the name Pierce and James were later to supply, that Tocqueville came to hold this view. William James began his essay on religion, "The Will to Believe," with a famous passage from Pascal's Wager. Neither James nor Tocqueville could abide the commercialization and banalization of spiritual life. On the ethical side, Tocqueville stood for a kind of purified pragmatism. He saw his contemporaries teaching what seemed to him a perverse gospel: that what is useful is never wrong. It led him to exclaim, "Will nobody undertake to make them understand how what is right may be useful?"

As for science, he understood it to be an enterprise divided into three parts: the first consisting of theoretical principles and abstract notions with no obvious applicability; the second composed of general truths still belonging to pure theory but leading "by a straight and short road to practical results;" the third made up of methods of application and execution. While he conceded that each could be cultivated separately, Tocqueville believed that no one of them would prosper for long without the other two. All this is truistic by now; it is the standard view of philosophers of science. Yet, how empty and abstract are the formalism with which so many of us still work, how excessive the technological and methodological preoccupations of an American science —natural and social—still so largely given over to engineering and profitability. Not out of opposition to pragmatism, but from devotion to it, did Tocqueville inveigh against sterile theorizing and the contrasting but related addiction of American science to premature practicality.

4. Open-mindedness and clearheadedness in the perception of all things. Although Tocqueville was profoundly engagé, he was able to view human institutions—those he feared and those he admired—in their final ambiguity and their infinite complexity. A democrat who felt that the credo of equality might lead to new forms of submission in man, he was also a defender of *laissez faire* capitalism who recoiled from the cruelties of that system and skillfully anatomized its imperfection. Adam Smith was a professional moralist in *The Wealth of Nations* no less than

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in everything else he wrote. The manufacture of pins is Smith's most memorable illustration of the division of labor and of industrial efficiency. Yet it was Tocqueville who raised the question, "What can be expected of a man who has spent twenty years of his life in making heads for pins?" But his answer is much closer to that of Karl Marx than to that of Adam Smith. An industrial worker has his thoughts forever set upon the object of his daily toil; he is hopelessly constricted; even his body has contracted certain fixed habits which it can never shake off; "In a world," Tocqueville wrote, "he no longer belongs to himself." Or, as Marxists would put it, the factory worker is a victim of alienation.

We too often tend to remember only that Tocqueville deplored the consequences of equality, as if he had not explored the subtleties of stratification in modern society. Equality meant many things—above all homogeneity—to him; it did not mean the abolition of economic classes. In point of fact, a typically compressed and immensely suggestive chapter of *Democracy in America* is entitled "How an Aristocracy May be Created by Manufactures." And Tocqueville believed that the rise of a moneyed aristocracy or plutocracy proceeds in proportion as the workman becomes weaker, more narrow-minded and more dependent. "The art advances, the artisan recedes." And again, "At the very time at which the science of manufactures lowers the class of workmen, it raises the class of masters." One paragraph in this vein resembles a nightmare out of H. G. Wells, for it conjures up nothing so much as the counter-Utopian world envisaged in *The Time Machine.* Soon, Tocqueville predicted, the workman "will require nothing but physical strength, without intelligence," whereas the master already "stands in need of science, and almost of genius, to ensure success. This man resembles more and more the administrator of a vast empire; that man, a brute." It was his holistic and organic conception of society which enabled Tocqueville to apprehed not only the defects of a civilization's virtues and the virtues of its defects, but also how such a thing as equality could flourish alongside growing inequality.

David Riesman recently remarked that much of *Democracy in America* is truer today than when it was written. This is so of Tocqueville from first to last, and nowhere more so than in his

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reflections on the American economy. This young Frenchman, only in his twenties, surveying a domestic scene still crowded with plows and spinning wheels, could clearly discern the business cycle, the principle of mass production, the triumph of salesmanship, of creative destruction and of planned or "built in" obsolescence. He called commercial panics the endemic disease of a people so completely devoted to productive industry that they would always be exposed to formidable and unexpected economic embarrassments. In contrasting earlier ages with his own, he not only foresaw Henry Ford's achievement but actually described it in advance. Formerly an artisan sought to sell his workmanship at a high price to the few, whereas "he now conceives that the more expeditious way of getting rich is to sell them at a low price to all." Why, Tocqueville inquired of an American sailor, are the ships of this country not built to last for a long time? Because, came the reply, such rapid progress is taking place in navigation that the finest vessel would be useless if it lasted beyond a few years. With these words that fell "on a particular subject, from an uninstructed man," Tocqueville "recognized the general and systematic idea upon which a great people direct all their concerns," much as Max Weber crystalized his thinking on the social significance of religion in America after an apparently casual club-car conversation.

Tocqueville understood that we mass produce goods to be sold in large volume at a low price, that such goods cannot be durable, and that they are regularly misrepresented to their purchasers. The boon is therefore a mixed one; "when none but the wealthy had watches, they were almost all very good ones; few are now made that are worth much, but everyone has one in his pocket." The worker has been constrained to produce many imperfect commodities at a rapid pace, claiming for them qualities they do not really have—and the consumer has had to content himself with them. There is very little in our affluent society or its consumer economy that Tocqueville failed to find in early nineteenth century America.

5. A prevision of mass society and mass culture. What struck Tocqueville most forcibly wherever he went was that men had grown more like one another. Americans lived homogeneous,

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excited and monotonous lives, and in this they were merely a step ahead of other peoples. For, cried Tocqueville, as if he had just circumnavigated the globe in a jet airliner, "Variety is disappearing from the human race; the same ways of acting, thinking, and feeling are to be met with all over the world." And the sameness they have created has not made them happy. Tocqueville, who captured the pathos of American culture as thoroughly as he did its political promise, sensed a brooding presence, a cloud hung habitually over the brow, a certain seriousness amounting almost to sadness in the pleasures of Americans who clutch at everything, hold nothing fast and soon loosen their grasp to pursue fresh gratifications. Why was this the condition of *Homo Americanus* and why would it presently be the condition of mankind at large? Here is a large part of Tocqueville's explanation:

> When all the privileges of birth and fortune are abolished, when all professions are accessible to all, and a man's own energies may place him at the top of any one of them, an easy and unbounded career seems open to his ambition and he will readily persuade himself that he is born to no common destiny. But this is an erroneous notion, which is corrected by daily experience. The same equality that allows every citizen to conceive these lofty hopes renders all the citizens less able to realize them; it circumscribes their powers on every side, while it gives freer scope to their desires. Not only are they themselves powerless, but they are met at every step by immense obstacles which they did not at first perceive. They have swept away the privileges of some of their fellow creatures which stood in their way, but they have opened the door to universal competition; the barrier has changed its shape rather than its position. When men are nearly alike and all follow the same track, it is very difficult for any one individual to walk quickly and cleave a way through the dense throng that surrounds and presses on him. This constant strife between the inclination springing from the equality of condition and the means it supplies to satisfy them harasses and wearies the mind.

This "constant strife" produces the subterranean despair and perpetual dissatisfaction of Americans. It helps to account for the high crime rate in this country—as Edwin H. Sutherland and Robert K. Merton have argued. And it is also directly responsible for something else that Tocqueville noticed: the inordinately high rate of insanity among a people whose hopes and desires were often blasted, whose souls were more stricken and perturbed, and whose reason more frequently gave way just as its pleasures were more intense than those of earlier peoples.

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We do more than read our own anxiety into Tocqueville if we find him, as a lover of freedom, most fearful that modern human beings will become passive and indifferentiated members of a mass, willing to submit without complaint to remote authorities as long as they are permitted "to procure the petty and paltry pleasures with which they glut their lives." He thought that democratic man had developed a greater readiness to listen submissively to the voice of the herd, that public opinion was more than ever mistress of the world, that in the Unites States, to use his own absolutely up-to-date terminology, "the majority undertakes to supply a multitude of ready-made opinions for the use of individuals, who are thus relieved from the necessity of forming opinions of their own."

Such strictures on the "tyranny of the majority" and their author's conviction that "a democratic society ... might offer singular facilities for the establishment of despotism" are often praised, particularly by conservative thinkers, as a prevision of the cruelties of modern totalitarian regimes, which unfailingly claim to act in the name of the nation or the masses. But Tocqueville's conception of a democratic despotism, like that of Mill who, influenced by him, expressed similar views, bears little resemblance to the terroristic dictatorships of Hitler and Stalin. Witness the following observation:

> This same principle of equality which facilitates despotism tempers its rigor. We have seen how the customs of society become more humane and gentle in proportion as men become more equal and alike. When no member of the community has much power or much wealth, tyranny is, as it were, without opportunities and a field of action. As all fortunes are scanty, the passions of men are naturally circumscribed, their imagination limited, their pleasures simple. This universal moderation moderates the sovereign himself and checks within certain limits the inordinate stretch of his desires.

This hardly describes a world of purges, mass deportations, concentration camps, ideological fanaticism, and ambitions to world conquest! It suggest a Huxleyan world of souls enervated by constant satiation of material and bodily desires rather than an Orwellian world of brutality and deprivation creating a reservoir of hatred to be exploited and manipulated by the rulers. But Tocqueville's vision of democratic despotism brings to mind most

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forcefully the drift and tendency of American life in the past two decades, and nowhere more so than where he remarks "I have always thought that servitude of the regular, quiet, and gentle kind which I have just described might be combined more easily than is commonly believed with some of the outward forms of freedom, and that it might even establish itself under the wing of the sovereignty of the people."

Any further selection of brilliant flashes, sustained *aperçus*, prescient insights, and what are pretentiously known as "researchable hypotheses" must be arbitrary. Every page of *Democracy in America* has its own harvest. In this one book Alexis de Tocqueville made direct contributions to: the philosophy of history (he rejected the Great Man theory as firmly as Marx did without losing sight of the contingent in human affairs); the sociology of language (he touched upon a separate language of the poor, a language of the rich, a language of the commoner, and a language of the nobility; a learned language and a colloquial one; what happens to the idiom when social classes are recruited from and mixed with each other, how dialects decline and patois disappears in the New World where Tocqueville recognized that an American language—still not generally acknowledged in H. L. Mencken's day—had come into being); the sociology of literature in which, as usual, he struck just the right note: "I should say more than I mean if I were to assert that the literature of a nation is always sub-ordinate to its social state and its political constitution. I am aware that independently of these causes, there are several others which confer certain characteristics on literary productions; but these appear to me to be the chief. The relations that exist between the social and political condition of a people and the genius of its authors are always numerous; whoever knows the one is never completely ignorant of the other"; the sociology of education, on which Tocqueville's comments are as topical as this morning's headlines, for they concern our grammar schools where so often "superfluous matters, badly learned," stand in the way of sound instruction; where the national vice of "in-attention" is cultivated, and where the American child's curiosity reveals itself to be "at once insatiable and cheaply satisfied," for the reason that as a youth and in adulthood that child "cares more to know a great deal quickly than to know

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anything well;" the whole problem of radical discrimination which he understood to be the virulent and disruptive force it was and is, and whose essence he convened in a single sentence: "To debauch a woman of color scarcely injures the reputation of an American; to marry her dishonors him." There is nothing in American sociology or American literature to compare in compactness with this quotation except the one word Herman Melville put in Don Benito Cereno's mouth when he had his naïve American, Captain Delano, ask: "What has cast such a shadow upon you?" That one word was "The Negro."

With some effort, we stop here, ignoring what Tocqueville had to say about the family, the army, the voluntary association and the lonely crowd. These are all fairly familiar. There are more pressing ethical issues of which we constantly need to remind ourselves. In an age of just such merciless pressure for conformity as Tocqueville predicted, it is well to remember his moving credo: "For myself, when I feel the hand of power lie heavy on my brow, I care but little to know who oppresses me; and I am not the more disposed to pass beneath the yoke because it is held out to me by the arms of a million men."

Our interest in Tocqueville should not be treated as an antiquarian exercise. To establish that all of sociology is a footnote to Tocqueville would resemble too much that scholarly gamesmanship with which we are already surfeited. It is enough to say that we can learn a great deal from our superb precursor, a thinker who was not afraid to speak in plain specific terms, a man who wanted us to realize that civilization may not only be torn from our grasp, but that we might trample it underfoot ourselves, that we could ultimately be enervated by a kind of "virtuous materialism," and that we might noiselessly forsake our freedom. All of this is of the utmost relevance to us as citizens, as intellectuals and as social scientists. But there is one final admonition in Tocqueville that is even more to the point. When so many of us have become employees of corporate institutions of learning, of business, of the military and of government, we should be more mindful than ever of Tocqueville's passionate belief that it is our task to help prevent the prostration of man, not to complete it. Social science can find no better guide to professional ethics than the magnificent young Frenchman we are commemorating this year.

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