

Alexis de Tocqueville  
and American Intellectuals

*From His Times to Ours*

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## Preface

Alexis de Tocqueville (1805–1859) was a French aristocrat, politician, diplomat, foreign minister, and author of the classics *Democracy in America* (1835, 1840) and *The Old Regime and the Revolution* (1856). Tocqueville enjoys a status matched by few political philosophers since the time of the French Revolution. His name is now routinely placed at or near the top of the select company that comprises the very greatest political thinkers of the modern era. This prestige is especially evident in the United States. The fact that, especially since the 1930s, the best work done by some of America's most talented historians, sociologists, and political scientists has been on the subject of Tocqueville constitutes in itself a significant point of contrast between European, especially French, and American intellectual history of the twentieth century. In spite of a French government-sponsored edition of the complete works, which is now fifty years in the making and still not complete, a pervasive distaste for the putative shortcomings and failures of political liberalism on the Continent, as well as the prevalence of Marxist and *marxisant* approaches to the study of society and politics, meant that—for Europeans—Tocqueville was securely lodged in the second rank of political theorists for much of the twentieth century. It is a remarkable fact that the very first French state thesis on Tocqueville, Jean-Claude Lamberti's *Tocqueville et les deux démocraties*, was not published until 1983.<sup>1</sup> The alteration in Tocqueville's status among European political philosophers and historians since the 1980s was therefore a dramatic event, and indeed constituted one of the most striking phenomena in European political thought at the end of the past century.

The conventional understanding of the history of Tocqueville's reception by American intellectuals is that it describes an inverted bell curve. Accord-

ing to this neatly geometric narrative, Tocqueville was venerated as a sage and as an inquirer of uncommon impartiality from the moment that *Democracy in America* appeared in 1835 until the beginning of the Civil War, an event that roughly coincided with his death in 1859. After that, however, interest in him fell into a precipitous decline. From the time of the Civil War until World War II Tocqueville was almost completely forgotten, his works lay unused on dusty library shelves, and in university classrooms throughout the land his name was never uttered. His fate was to have been consigned to oblivion and totally neglected by American intellectuals. As historians Lynn L. Marshall and Seymour Drescher expressed it in 1968, prior to 1938, “only an occasional seminal European political scientist or sociologist” paid any attention at all to Tocqueville’s *Democracy*.<sup>2</sup> Then in 1938 a great work of scholarship about Tocqueville and Gustave de Beaumont’s journey to the United States awakened American intellectuals from their undogmatic slumbers. This was George Wilson Pierson’s *Tocqueville and Beaumont in America*, a work whose enormous length did little to deter an enthusiastic readership from traveling back in time to the age of Jackson in the company of those two brilliant and amiable French aristocrats.<sup>3</sup> The appearance of that celebrated book, however, was but the prelude to an even more significant publishing event, the Phillips Bradley edition of *Democracy in America*, published to universal acclaim just as World War II came to an end in Europe. After 1945, the narrative continues, Tocqueville’s reputation soared into an ascent that was every bit as steep as the previous plunge had been. The esteem that Tocqueville enjoyed by both the right and left endowed him with an iconic status. It just goes to show that history is full of surprises, for, as Drescher put it at a 1994 conference, referring to the fact that Tocqueville’s name had taken on an adjectival form, “In 1894, Tocqueville was hardly an adjective, much less an intellectual perspective.”<sup>4</sup>

This book is an attempt to level out that U-curve. After years of engagement with the contemporary evidence, I have found that almost every element of the story related above is erroneous. Tocqueville was indeed not an adjective late in the nineteenth century as Drescher rightly said, but he was an intellectual perspective and a respected author who exercised a continuing influence on a broad range of American intellectuals: historians, political scientists, sociologists, hard-driving journalists, university presidents, students of industrial and labor relations, Catholic liberals, Jewish refugee intellectuals, Progressive reformers. And, by contrast, at the turn of the twenty-first century, although Tocqueville’s name was ubiquitous, it was certainly debatable whether what he actually did and said was more widely known or

accurately understood than it had been a century earlier. Much was written but, in fulfillment of an inexorable law of intellectual history, the publication of superb scholarship proceeded apace with the appearance of the trivial and the misinformed. The reception of Tocqueville, like that of other standard or “canonical” thinkers, is punctuated by happenstance and accident, while also being the fruit of real merit. There is, in other words, a dialectic of accident and merit, luck and ability, or, as Machiavelli taught us to say, *virtù* and *fortuna*, in the story of Tocqueville’s American career. The unmistakable aura of solemnity that surrounds and infuses so much of the Tocqueville discourse is of a piece with its amnesiac quality—the ignoring of scholarship more than a generation old.

On September 9, 1996, Senator Jesse Helms (R-NC) took the floor during the debate over the Defense of Marriage Act, which defines marriage as between a man and a woman. After reminding his colleagues in his faux-avuncular fashion that “God made Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve,” Helms made an erudite reference to Tocqueville: “Mr. President, at the heart of this debate is the moral and spiritual survival of this Nation. Alexis de Tocqueville said a century and a half ago that America had grown great because America was good. Mr. de Tocqueville also warned that if America made the mistake of ceasing to be good, America would cease to be great.” This quote about America being great because America is good has a long oratorical pedigree stretching back from President Reagan and up to President Clinton. Senator John Ashcroft used it three times in April 1997 alone, twice in the same speech. In 1998, in Congress the line surfaced twelve times on issues ranging from the budget to sexual abstinence and the space station. Unfortunately, the quotation is nowhere to be found in the works of Tocqueville. “Someone made it up and they’ve been quoting each other ever since,” said Seymour Drescher. Reporter Guy Gugliotta of the *Washington Post*, who dug out the quotes and discovered their provenance, wrote, “It survives because it’s much too good to check.”<sup>5</sup> On a higher intellectual plane than the United States Senate, an analogous survival of a bad idea took place regarding Tocqueville’s reputation, as scholars quoted each other about a belief that was too good to check: the belief that Tocqueville’s elevated reputation was the product of postwar anxieties and that it emerged out of nowhere during the fight against totalitarianism.

Tocqueville tells us more about the experience of modernity and its relation to societies based on the principle of equality than any other political theorist of the nineteenth or twentieth centuries with the possible exception of Max Weber. His stature, I believe, emerges directly from his understanding

that *démocratie* was a new social formation, a new “regime,” in the language of many political theorists. He wrote about democracy as a providential development, meaning that it was inevitable, something that could be modified but not turned back. The most successful interpreters of Tocqueville have understood and built upon this insight. American intellectuals after the 1830s lauded what they called Tocqueville’s impartiality, but in doing so they were really, in many instances, just coming to a recognition of the *newness* of the phenomenon that Tocqueville had analyzed. As John Lukacs has said, “We are only at the very beginning of the democratic age.”<sup>6</sup> They needed to have this newness pointed out to them because, as Tocqueville had shown, theirs was the first society to base itself on the idea (of course not always the practice) of equality, rather than having equality forcibly established upon the smoldering ruins of a preceding social system that had existed for centuries and been violently overthrown.

In this book I try to present the thoughts of many intellectuals, some of them nearly forgotten writers of considerable insight and ability, who shaped the ways in which we have come to know Tocqueville and his work and who, in some cases, knew Tocqueville personally. I do so because I hope to explicate, specifically and in detail, one of the major themes in American intellectual history, namely the idea of Tocqueville himself. This book is an effort to weave from separate threads that are in quite a few instances already known to specialists, a tapestry that displays a portrait of Tocqueville as nineteenth- and twentieth-century Americans knew him. This means the recovery or reinterpretation of such figures as Prussian immigrant Francis Lieber, a friend and translator of Tocqueville and Beaumont and the founder of the discipline of political science in America; Harvard University’s crusty Francis Bowen, “the Old Roman” who at the commencement of the putative era of Tocqueville’s oblivion produced an edition of the *Democracy* that was standard for more than a century; Daniel Coit Gilman, the founding president of the Johns Hopkins University; Herbert Baxter Adams, who presided over the diaspora of young Ph.D.s establishing history departments in universities throughout the land; the Progressive Era reformer John Graham Brooks, who compared Tocqueville to James Bryce; Paul Lambert White, dead of appendicitis at the age of thirty-two, who discovered and arranged to have copied large portions of the Tocqueville archive at the family’s château near Cherbourg just after World War I; and many others, up through the present period, including such outstanding scholars as James T. Schleifer, Roger Boesche, Seymour Drescher, John Lukacs, Michael Kammen, Harvey C.

Mansfield, Delba Winthrop, and the late John Higham, all of whom I interviewed for this study.

Throughout the book I attempt to present my evidence as fairly and objectively as possible. But, as the intellectual historian Thomas Haskell reminds us, objectivity is not neutrality.<sup>7</sup> In the course of many years of research and obsessive thinking about this subject, I have indeed reached a number of firm opinions about it, which are in turn firmly stated.

An old-fashioned study, this book relies on very extensive reading in the secondary sources, archival research, and interviews. In a history of this nature, secondary sources are treated not as elements helping to establish a definitive picture of Tocqueville's work, but as primary sources that must be critically analyzed with respect to their contemporary uses, biases, and correspondence with known facts.

In 1966, Norman Mailer received from William F. Buckley an autographed copy of Buckley's memoir of the madcap New York City mayoral race of 1965, in which Buckley and Mailer had been rival candidates. Of course, Mailer opened the book to the index right away and looked up his name, there to find, in Buckley's handwriting, the salutation, "Hi, Norman."<sup>8</sup> One danger in writing a book about Tocqueville and American intellectuals is that so many people will turn to the index straightaway and look for their own names. In fact, not a few of the readers of this particular page have already done so. Some will have been disappointed. This is not the book to peruse for a mention of every study on the myriad of specialized Tocquevillean topics in a truly mountainous literature. It is an examination of main trends in the American reception of Tocqueville. Many outstanding works and writers are barely mentioned; some, not at all. Their absence is not a judgment on their scholarly merit but rather on the light they shed on my restricted topic.

To add a further clarification, this is also not a work wherein I accord a prominent place to my own interpretations of Tocqueville's works. At times it has proven necessary to clarify or explicate Tocqueville's writings as a tactic for helping the reader to understand the perspective of one of his commentators, and such explications are often remedial. When, for example, a writer like E. L. Godkin maintained that there were no significant differences between Tocqueville and Edmund Burke; or a furious Forty-Eighter claimed Tocqueville hated liberty; or a prominent historian identified Tocqueville's idea of individualism as a form of philosophical idealism: on such occasions I do intervene with simple elucidations, as hermeneutical acrobatics are not

called for. I state my views on Tocqueville plainly, but such views are directed in a spirit of debate toward the commentators much more than they are intended as vehicles of Tocqueville interpretation per se. Given the thesis of the book as I have described it in the preceding pages, I devote the most attention to the period during which Tocqueville was supposed to have been suffering from neglect and when American intellectuals were suddenly seized by an inexplicable spell of amnesia.

Book writing, as many have observed, is both excruciatingly private and, for all but a few exceptional cases, a necessarily social form of labor. Writers need the emotional, physical, and financial support of intimates, acquaintances, and institutions to get the words out. Now I take pleasure in the opportunity to acknowledge the personal and institutional support I received during the years when this book changed its character from a foray into a field in which I thought I was well grounded to a long and fascinating journey into unknown terrain. When I was serving as the chair of the History Department at Southwest Missouri State (now Missouri State) University, I began to amass large intellectual debts from colleagues and to receive lesser, but certainly ample and strategically timed, financial assistance from the university. Two summer research grants from SMSU financed interviews with leading scholars and travel to libraries from Baltimore to Pasadena. My deepest and most long-standing debt there is to the superb historian Dominic J. Capeci Jr., with whom I have discussed every phase of this and my previous projects for the last dozen years.

From Saint Louis University, I received a Mellon Faculty Development Grant for travel, research, and interviews in New England. I am grateful for the professional labors of my graduate assistants, Nancy Thompson, Alexis Azar, and especially Alicja Aftyka. My colleagues in the American Studies Department, Elizabeth Kolmer, Shawn Michelle Smith, Wynne Moskop, Joseph Heathcott, Jonathan Smith, and Candy Gunther Brown, have put up with my neglect of department business, stepped in to help with amazing generosity, and listened to my ramblings on Tocqueville's reception with attentive patience. Their support and, indeed, as I hope they know, their very presence, have been vital to my intellectual and affective equilibrium.

In addition to colleagues at work, friends elsewhere proved to be constant in their support. I incurred immense obligations to a number of scholars who agreed to interviews and, at times, to follow-up conversations by phone or in person. My deepest debt is to Seymour Drescher, arguably the finest Tocqueville scholar writing in English. Even though I take issue with him on a number of points with regard to Tocqueville's reputation, his studies of

Tocqueville's life and work—and, it should be noted, Beaumont's as well—are indispensable contributions. I also derived great benefit from the cordial encouragement of John Higham and Michael Kammen. Wilfred McClay has been a model of grace and discernment in both his writing and his support for this book. I am most grateful for his vigorous, long-standing encouragement. In a curious development, my work benefited immensely from four profound conversations with four different people, none of whom is a Tocqueville expert and none of whom knows any of the other three. They are Dominic Capeci, Michael Maas, Sophie Tomlinson, and Eric Will. My son, Philip, grew suddenly into manhood while I was writing about Tocqueville. He was my most reliable source of perspective, knowing automatically when either humor or empathy was called for in the difficult task of dealing with me. Carolyn Williams and Michael McKeon, my beloved in-laws, read and discussed portions of the book many times over the years. My beloved wife, Nancy Williams, always expressed admiration for my work ethic, even though, as it seemed to me, she was working twice as hard as I was. Thanks to her, I have been able to enter into a normal life.

All deep learning emerges from a clear spring source of great teaching somewhere in a writer's past. This book's dedication acknowledges one such source with a prayer of thanks.

## Notes

1. Jean-Claude Lamberti, *Tocqueville et les deux démocraties* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1983); Jean-Claude Lamberti, *Tocqueville and the Two Democracies*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989).

2. Lynn L. Marshall and Seymour Drescher, "American Historians and Tocqueville's Democracy," *Journal of American History* 50, no. 3 (December 1968): 514.

3. George Wilson Pierson, *Tocqueville and Beaumont in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1938), reprinted as *Tocqueville in America* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997).

4. Seymour Drescher, "Worlds Together, Worlds Apart: Tocqueville and the Franco-American Exchange," in *The French-American Connection: 200 Years of Cultural and Intellectual Interaction*, ed. Lloyd S. Kramer (Chapel Hill, N.C.: Institut Français de Washington, 1994), 24.

5. "Defense of Marriage Act," *Congressional Record*, Senate, September 9, 1996, 10067; Guy Gugliotta, "The Tyranny of the Misquote," *Washington Post*, September 6, 1998, W4; John J. Pitney Jr., "The Tocqueville Fraud," *Weekly Standard* 1 (November 13, 1995): 44–45. For an earlier generation's version of the same trickery but with a different quote, see

Odom Fanning, "As Tocqueville (Almost) Said . . ." *Washington Post*, September 27, 1978, D7.

6. Lukacs interview.

7. See, especially, Thomas L. Haskell, "Objectivity Is Not Neutrality: Rhetoric versus Practice in Peter Novick's *That Noble Dream*," in *Objectivity Is Not Neutrality: Explanatory Schemes in History* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 145–73.

8. Martin Peretz, "Cape Cod Diarist: I Am a Footnote," *The New Republic* 215, no. 5 (July 29, 1996): 42.

## CHAPTER ONE



# Reception and Renown

Soon after the great revolution in Paris of July 1830, which abolished for the second time the right of the Bourbons to occupy the throne of France, a young, restless Frenchman obtained a commission from the new government of King Louis Philippe to visit the United States. Deeply stirred by the July Revolution and the seemingly ineluctable progress of equality that it represented, and also immensely curious and ambitious, the young commissioner—he was only twenty-four years of age when the revolution broke out—desired both to contemplate and to experience the future state of his native land by means of these travels in the United States. For there, across the Atlantic, he was sure, the future course of the leading nations of the West could be discerned.

And so it was that during the raucous, confident, heroic, and shameful era that we have since named after the Indian-fighting president whose personality and policies so thoroughly dominated it—during the age of Jackson—that the young man first stepped onto the pier in New York harbor, and thence, somewhat gingerly, on to the dizzying streets of New York City. They were the first steps in a long and difficult physical and intellectual journey that would eventually result in one of the most remarkable books ever produced on the purpose and direction of democratic and commercial institutions in America. It is indeed one of the most insightful works about American culture ever penned by a person from a different culture.

This remarkable volume is packed with incisive analysis and replete with bold prophecy. A century after its publication, the great Yale historian George Wilson Pierson called it “an economic study and a factual survey of America as valuable and as prophetic” as any that has ever appeared. And it is easy to see why. In the mind of the young Frenchman, the democratic

future could be witnessed and evaluated most accurately not in France but here in the United States—for “no people,” he judged, “is so peculiarly fitted by its intrinsic character, as well as by the circumstances of its territory and the condition of its population, for democratic institutions. The Americans possess, therefore, in the highest degree, the better features of democracy, and they have also its inseparable defects.”

The youthful commissioner astutely foresaw the complex dangers to freedom presented by the apparent tyranny exercised by majority opinion. He predicted the threat to social stability posed by an excessive stress on individual rights. He underscored the need for religious belief and devotion in order to offset the self-regarding, acquisitive individualism that equality seemed to engender: “Religion alone,” he warned, “can counterbalance human passions and confine them within the limits in which they serve the progress of society.” And most presciently, he anticipated a not too-distant future in which two colossi, the United States and Russia, “these youthful Titans who are watching each other across the Atlantic and already touch hands on the Pacific,” might “divide the empire of the world.”

The book, in short, was altogether an extraordinary study. It richly rewards careful reading even today. Indeed, no modern reader can help but marvel at the seeming contemporaneity of its descriptions of American institutions and culture. Published in the mid-1830s by Paris’s leading publisher, Gosselin, and almost immediately translated into English for an eager American audience, the book bore the title (in English) of *Society, Manners, and Politics in the United States: Letters on North America*. The author was a young government mining engineer and Saint-Simonian publicist by the name of Michel Chevalier.<sup>1</sup>

Few people today have heard of Chevalier; far fewer still have read him. But in the age of Jackson and of the July Monarchy (which were almost exactly contemporaneous), his was a familiar name to the educated public of two nations. His book, too—an effort to describe, assess, and, as it were, translate the manners and institutions of the United States to a foreign audience—was a substantial contribution to a well-established, familiar literary genre.

By 1836, when his book was published, Chevalier had already undergone a colorful, if bizarre, series of experiences, though perhaps bizarre only to those unfamiliar with the intricacies of the Saint-Simonian religion. In August 1832, he had been arrested for conducting meetings in which the abolition of marriage and private property were advocated. He then spent ten months in prison, but even before his sentence was completed, he was

appointed to a position on the influential *Journal des débats*, and shortly after his release the government sent him to the United States to study that nation's systems of transportation and communication. After the success of his book (first published in 1836, with a second edition in 1840), Chevalier received the prestigious appointment to the chair of political economy at the Collège de France, from which position he became the nation's foremost champion of free trade and eventually the author, with his far better-known British counterpart, Richard Cobden, of the Anglo-French Treaty of Commerce of 1860.<sup>2</sup>

In 1845, the voters in the Department of Aveyron elected Chevalier to the Chamber of Deputies, but once in the chamber his vigorous advocacy of free trade earned him little more than the wrath of his protectionist constituency and defeat in his reelection attempt. For a brief two years, then, he served in the same chamber as another, more illustrious student of America, democracy, and economics—Alexis de Tocqueville.

Both the extent and the gravity of the differences between the two young deputies would be revealed a few years later, when Chevalier, who all his life had advocated that the state should control the distribution of the labor force, had no difficulty embracing the despotism of Napoleon III after the latter's coup d'état of December 2, 1851, while Tocqueville was thrown into prison for his opposition to it. Indeed, Tocqueville composed a derisive account of the coup and arranged for it to be smuggled out of France by his friend Harriet Lewin Grote. She, in turn, pressed it upon Tocqueville's friend and translator Henry Reeve, who saw to its publication in the *London Times*.<sup>3</sup>

When Chevalier's *Society, Manners, and Politics in the United States* rolled off the same presses that, just one year earlier, had produced the first volume of his own study, entitled *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville refused to read it. After all, he had his own project to complete, and he did not want to be distracted. He feared that exposure to the ideas of others might draw him away from the purpose that, Ahab-like, he had fixed on iron rails. But it is obvious from his correspondence that he felt deeply apprehensive about the appearance of Chevalier's book. "Have you glanced at it and, in that case, what did you think of it?" he asked his trusted friend Gustave de Beaumont, who had accompanied him on his own journey to America some five years earlier. (Five years! How time had sped by! And the world was expecting a second volume from him on the institutions and mores of the United States, a volume that was proceeding at an excruciatingly slow pace.) "What is its spirit?" Tocqueville persisted. "What is its direction? Also, what impression [*bruit*] is it making in the world?"<sup>4</sup>

*What impression is it making in the world?* That is, how is it being received? Tocqueville's anxious query about Chevalier's ephemeral book is one that, with sympathy but with perhaps more detachment, we can direct toward his own more enduring work. For the impression an author makes in the world alters with time and circumstance—it is a dynamic historical phenomenon or series of events, each with its enveloping cloud of circumstance and judgment. And it is an especially pertinent question in American intellectual history, for to no nineteenth-century social thinker except Karl Marx have American intellectuals turned so often, and to so many different purposes, especially since World War II, than to Tocqueville.

Both the “impression” made by Chevalier's book and Tocqueville's concern about it can serve as illustrations of the opportunities and perils of undertaking a reception-history such as this. For the reverence with which Tocqueville's name is so often invoked, the canonical status of *Democracy in America*, and indeed the obscurity of Michel Chevalier, are all quite contingent facts. The game of renown might have turned out differently.

Tocqueville's unwillingness to confront Chevalier's book is emblematic of one of the fundamental problems of intellectual history, that of the relation between contingency and quality, accident and essence, or, in contemporary terms, the relation between social and political forces at work in a given historical moment and the depth of wisdom in a given author's work.

In the brief span of a single generation—the last—the field of intellectual history, which had once been the source of illumination for entire eras of American history, suddenly experienced a near total eclipse, then reemerged, somewhat abashed by its experiences in the academic wars but prepared to serve once again our understanding of cultural constructs. Early in the twentieth century, intellectual historians had succeeded in establishing the distinct viewpoint and ideology of their specialty at the center of the curricular reforms that were shaking up the American university. These reforms ushered in a fresh historical approach to the study of civilization by undergraduates. James Harvey Robinson's immensely influential course at Columbia University, “The History of the Intellectual Classes of Europe,” inaugurated in 1904, became the core of the undergraduate curriculum there. By the 1940s and 1950s, two distinct approaches to the field had emerged, each identified with its own label, leading figure, paradigmatic book, and special area of inquiry. The so-called internalists took as their point of departure the inner dynamic that all ideas possess and generate. Their majestic exemplar was *The Great Chain of Being* (1936) by Arthur O. Lovejoy, the founder of the *Journal of the History of Ideas*. In this wide-ranging and deeply erudite

study, Lovejoy managed, first, to capture the imagination of professional historians and students alike and, second, to propound in a programmatic first chapter an agenda for historical study itself, namely the systematic analysis “of doctrines or tendencies that are designated by familiar names ending in *-ism* or *-ity*.”<sup>5</sup> He carefully explained the ramifications of the metaphor of the Great Chain in terms of the unfolding of its own logic. Economic and political forces and events outside the sealed-off bubble of the idea of the chain of being found no place in Lovejoy’s narrative.

To the so-called externalists, by contrast, the great Merle Curti’s foundational *Growth of American Thought* (1943) provided not only a method but even, in a sense, a past itself; it may be said to have fabricated, although to be sure not out of whole cloth, the very subject matter that it set out to examine. It created American intellectual history as such. In contrast to Lovejoy with his emphasis on ideas *per se*, Curti revealed the reciprocal interaction of ideas, events, and “outside” forces; in short, he took as his subject the effects that politics and society exercised on an evolving “growth”—American thought.<sup>6</sup>

Since World War II, then, scholars interested in the history of ideas have tended to favor one or the other of the above approaches. This internalist-externalist duality may appear oversimplified as it is presented here, but in the past generation (which for scholars in the humanities and social sciences in American universities might be called the Age of Binary Oppositions), the split led to bitter divisions and even opera buffa declarations of open war. The primary theater of operations in this “War between the Internalists and Externalists”—as it was actually called at the time—was the history of science. As Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob summarized it in their important history of late-twentieth-century historical controversies, for internalists the “historical development [of science] occurred as the result of empirical work and the unfolding of the rules of logic,” whereas the externalists “looked for the larger interests and values at work within communities of scientists.” In so doing, the latter “vastly extended the definition of the social,” making it refer to “the universe beyond laboratory or university.”<sup>7</sup>

The ascendancy of the externalists over their more hermetic rivals was in part a consequence of the growing authority of social history over intellectual history of *any* sort. Like good social historians, the externalists explained the forces and movements in the realm of ideas as a superstructural variant of more basic changes occurring in the spheres of society and politics. Indeed, the meteoric rise of social history was itself understood to be largely a product of the upheavals in society, culture, and politics that occurred in

the 1960s, a time when massive social and political unrest and protests in Paris and Prague, Oakland and Detroit, Watts and Washington, Berkeley and Cornell, suddenly made the movement of ideas seem low on the priority list of historical causation. The prestige of Marxism among historians of the last third of the twentieth century was not simply the consequence of a prior political commitment; it derived also from a recognition of the fundamental Marxian insight into the primacy of social and economic deep structures and the consequent relegation of ideas, beliefs, “isms,” “itys,” and so on, to the category of mere reflections or echoes of deeper actualities. The dramas of swelling opposition to the war in Vietnam, of civil rights, and of decolonization seemed to empirically confirm this basic order of cause and effect. And thus it was that, as John Higham cogently summarized the situation, “the sixties did for the academic status of social history what the forties had done for intellectual history.”<sup>8</sup>

By 1980 the ever-strengthening currents of social history had nearly cast intellectual history to the periphery of the discipline. In the mid-1970s, two leading intellectual historians, Higham and Paul K. Conkin, organized a high-powered conference on the future of intellectual history, in honor of Curti on his eightieth birthday. In the course of their planning, they were dismayed to discover how many of the most distinguished, senior people in the field saw little of value in the project, or indeed in the future of their own specialty. “I’ve been drifting away from intellectual history and doubt whether I personally could contribute anything of value,” Higham remembered “one very distinguished scholar” responding to his invitation to participate. Others declined to respond at all.<sup>9</sup>

Yet younger historians, such as Dorothy Ross, Thomas Haskell, and Thomas Bender, showed enormous enthusiasm for both the conference and the field—a sure sign of its future regeneration. Bender recalled, “For many of the participants the future was bleak indeed, but several of us who were classified as younger historians were not prepared for such a pessimistic outlook on our future.” He foresaw a field that would soon be rejuvenated, “perhaps chastened by its confrontation with social history but enriched as well.”<sup>10</sup>

Conkin’s own defense of intellectual history remains one of the best. Social historians, he wrote in 1977, had “pushed the issue of mass belief, or of popular mentalities, into the forefront. If intellectual historians would only explore the beliefs of the working classes, they could be on the right side politically and also make use of the newly fashionable research tools required for disciplined inferences from massive but usually thin data.” Yet,

the thought of scientists and philosophers exerts an immense impact on societies, albeit with a lag time sometimes spreading over generations. Therefore, “for a time it remains the property of narrow intellectual communities. . . . If specialized intellectual historians do not attend to such belief, its origin and development will remain a hidden and uncriticized aspect of our past. . . . This helps justify the exclusive focus of specialized intellectual historians.”<sup>11</sup> The present study examines not so much Tocqueville’s own thought as the reception of that thought by American intellectuals, a diverse body of “belief” that has indeed been “a hidden and uncriticized aspect of our past.”

The confrontation between the history of ideas and that of changes in social structure was exemplified in the history-of-science controversy (or, as it was called by its participants, the war). What must be emphasized about the war is the fundamental and rewarding tension between these two ways of describing and explaining the origins, development, reception, and transmission of all kinds of ideas—good, bad, foolish, or clever—in American intellectual life.

We can observe precisely that tension at work in the respective fates of the books written by Chevalier and Tocqueville. Whereas Chevalier faded permanently into the background of history and remained of interest mainly to specialists in nineteenth-century travel literature, Tocqueville is widely counted among the tiny handful of the most important social thinkers of the last two hundred years. A pure internalist could ascribe the ascendancy of Tocqueville solely to the allegedly superior cogency of his ideas and exposition, while an unadulterated externalist might attribute Chevalier’s eclipse to the declining relevance of his commercial and free-trade focus at a time when French national interests were defined ever more forcefully by the imperatives of industry and empire.

It is perfectly evident that neither of these explanations, or starting points for explanations, can come close to providing an adequate context for thinking about Tocqueville’s reputation. Indeed, the very style of framing the problem that I have just presented, this deployment of the “Scylla-and-Charybdis” tactic, in which the writer declares his intention of steering the impartial middle course between two errors of extreme interpretation, and thereby puts himself on display as a cool-headed, lofty analyst who can navigate around the dangerous ideological shoals that ravage other interpretations—this rhetorical trick should always be read with suspicion.

And yet, in the instance of Tocqueville’s reception, the dangers do lie in the clash of two extreme positions.

To begin with, there is the tendency to interpret Tocqueville’s postwar

fame in externalist terms as a both a manifestation and a means of advancing the interests of particular readers, especially those for whom Tocqueville was an antidote to Karl Marx during the cold war. With his thesis of liberty imperiled by advancing equality (because equality could flourish in despotism as well as in free regimes), Tocqueville seemed to have been presciently describing the post-1945 world. What is more, he cemented his reputation for prophecy by explicitly including, at the end of *Democracy in America*, his own prediction about the United States and Russia each swaying the destinies of half the globe. American commentators instantly seized upon this prediction, hardly bold in itself and already a bromide of the Paris salons when Tocqueville tacked it onto his book. It went far toward fixing one absolutely central element of Tocqueville's twentieth-century American image, that of prophet.

To be sure, Tocqueville had also enjoyed that reputation during the nineteenth century, but it had been attained chiefly as a result of his famous prediction, set forth during a speech in the Chamber of Deputies in January 1848, of impending revolution in France. When the barricades were thrown together and the monarchy came crashing down just two weeks after Tocqueville's warning, his renown as a seer was confirmed.<sup>12</sup> A century later, his few words on the approaching U.S.-Russia global rivalry served to secure his stature, ironically in the same prophetic role that he had enjoyed while alive but for a completely different reason—this time despotism, not revolution, was the subject of his prophecy.

In the late twentieth century, then, no single characteristic would be associated with Tocqueville more often than his prescience. And it would require little effort for the historian to mount a case for Tocqueville's stature based not on the character of his thought but rather on the supposed uncanny prescience of his predictions. One writer in the *Nation* felicitously expressed this sense of timeliness upon the 1945 publication of *Democracy in America*: "To read it in the context of these days is to feel that its republication in America . . . was a providential event devised by a higher and more witting power than Alfred A. Knopf."<sup>13</sup>

Yet, the "strong" version of externalism, the Scylla of the tired trope, is manifestly inadequate to explain Tocqueville's great influence and reputation in the second half of the twentieth century. After all, as we saw at the outset, Michel Chevalier was a pretty good prognosticator too, but few people remember who he was. The springs of American intellectuals' faith in Tocqueville must have a deeper source. And that source must be sought in the power of Tocqueville's thought itself. Tocqueville's canonical status

derives from the fact that his life's work was a sustained meditation on the nature and direction of our modern condition, especially on the related phenomena of equality and social mobility—*démocratie*—that the violent break with Europe's feudal past had brought about. And Tocqueville's meditation produced far more than mere sociological analysis but included deep philosophical reflection, as well. Moreover, he saw—and yes, foresaw—that the greatest challenge facing a regime of equality would be the maintenance of its freedom. These are among the most urgent and intractable political issues of the past two centuries, and the warm reception Tocqueville has received from American intellectuals is owing to the generosity, subtlety, and balance of his many investigations into the still-developing modern world. As one of the profoundest of contemporary historical writers, John Lukacs, expressed it in 1997, "I have studied and read Tocqueville for nearly fifty years now, but it is only lately that I have recognized not only the essence but the meaning of the essence of his vision of history," namely the division of the past into two great "chapters," the aristocratic and the democratic.<sup>14</sup>

Just as one could build a case for Tocqueville's reception on the basis of external factors, then, so also could his canonization be explained by the extraordinary quality of his insights into the most basic problems of political and social institutions.

A second Scylla-and-Charybdis dichotomy which the reader should view with suspicion is this: a perpetual theoretical play, the objects of which are an indeterminate text and a kaleidoscopic reader, versus a purely descriptive presentation of undiluted data, a mere recitation of book reviews.

Little work has been done on the subject of the American reception of Tocqueville, and the few pieces that have appeared have been confined to *Democracy in America*. Almost all of this limited body of scholarship has been descriptive. But even this descriptive work can cast a useful light on Tocqueville and his many meanings. Unlike much Tocqueville scholarship in the middle of the twentieth century, the earliest account of Tocqueville's reception was, despite the impressive research that went into it, not a work of scholarly distinction. In a long appendix to the 1945 Knopf edition of *Democracy in America*, Phillips Bradley composed a "historical essay" that is the starting point for all future inquiries into the ways Tocqueville's ideas impressed his nineteenth-century contemporaries.<sup>15</sup> Bradley's essay will receive the separate attention it deserves later in this study; what is relevant for present purposes is its almost purely narrative character, its lack not only of theory but also almost of any thesis or argument.

The approach that will be followed in the present study is not one that

can boast of steering clear of all these obstacles. Rather, it will bump off of each of them from time to time—perhaps, it might seem, somewhat like a pinball in a game machine. But honoring the profundity of Tocqueville while not only admitting but laying out for the reader the contingent elements in his changing reputation, and describing reactions to his writings while maintaining a self-conscious critical distance from the authors of those reactions, are not impossible tasks for the historian to undertake. Daunting, certainly, but not impossible.

In this study of the changing images of one crucial figure for American intellectuals, I will examine the several layers of reception from the superficial to the profound. At the end of the twentieth century, there was a sense in which Tocqueville was everywhere, part of a true “climate” of thought and opinion. Relentlessly quoted, seldom understood, he was one of the very few nineteenth-century thinkers who appeared regularly in the editorial, op-ed, and even “style” sections of not only great but also small-market newspapers.

Furthermore, since the late 1930s, Tocqueville has had the good fortune to be the subject of books and articles by some of the very best American practitioners of historical and social science scholarship, from George Wilson Pierson to Seymour Drescher and James T. Schleifer. And there are also the important American thinkers for whom Tocqueville was formative, whose own ideas reveal, if only by a kind of refraction, the light that Tocqueville shed on the questions of democracy, equality, liberty, revolution, and modernity. From Francis Lieber and Henry Adams in the nineteenth century to Hannah Arendt and John Lukacs in the twentieth, Tocqueville has operated as a leaven, imparting substance and savor to highly distinctive and often influential books, arguments, and ways of thinking.

A thinker’s reputation is a cultural artifact. It is something made. As such, it is eminently suitable to analysis. That analysis is historical only insofar as one can describe a particular process, namely, the process by which that product or artifact has been fashioned. A useful term for the fashioning of a reputation is *reception*. Reception, then, is a historical *process*, reputation a *product*. But since the reception is ongoing, the product is protean. Its shape and even its seeming essence change constantly as the historical environment in which it is manufactured undergoes transformation. Thus, so important has Tocqueville become in the American imagination that writing about his reception carries with it the danger of trying to write the entire intellectual history of the United States since the age of Jackson, a task for which the present writer is unsuited, by either ability or inclination, to undertake. Instead, the attention to layers of reception, from climate of opin-

ion to a few profound thinkers, will help to impose a modicum of structure on a potentially amorphous subject.

I begin with the situation around the turn of the twenty-first century, an ambivalent time for serious students of Tocqueville, and then try to reconstruct the process by which Tocqueville's stature reached its present paradoxical position—paradoxical because it is at once towering and very little understood. As in all good paradoxes, the two elements were intimately intertwined. By the late 1990s, it seemed no intellectual could make a reference to antebellum America without a least a mention of Tocqueville; yet at the same time concrete knowledge of Tocqueville's ideas and analyses was at a premium.

Both the sheer inescapability of Tocqueville in turn-of-the-century discussions of the antebellum United States, and the ways in which his ideas were distorted by that very inescapability, were strikingly evident in an influential 1998 study of the historiography of transcendentalism written by a leading Americanist, Charles Capper.<sup>16</sup> As is well known, Tocqueville never encountered, inquired about, or knew any of the central or peripheral characters in the drama of American transcendentalism, for the excellent reason that the fragile bark of transcendentalism was not launched until five years after Tocqueville's American sojourn. But this fact could not deter Capper (and countless other students of antebellum society and culture) from nudging him onto stage in his principal American role—that of prophetic sage.

Capper's study of transcendentalism is impressive from start to finish, but it contains one glaring anomaly, which becomes evident as soon as one examines the manner in which Capper employed the figure of Tocqueville. The anomaly is this: in an essay containing references to hundreds of books and articles, Capper managed on the one hand, to deploy Tocqueville as the organizing principle around which the main problems in understanding the entire recent scholarship about transcendentalism were to be arrayed and, on the other, to avoid making a single specific, paginated reference to any of Tocqueville's works or to a single work of Tocqueville scholarship.

How can such a lacuna be explained? Serious scholarly investigations like Capper's can make use of such undefined categories as Tocqueville's name summons forth only as a consequence of a protracted and nearly opaque process of substitution by which, to begin with, a thinker's specific ideas are gradually supplanted by his name's adjectival form (the actual concepts of Alexis de Tocqueville by something Tocquevillean), then, in a second, crucial stage, that adjective becomes reified in its turn; that is, it becomes transformed into a distinct entity whose properties can be assumed rather than

demonstrated. In grammatical terms, a substantive morphs into a modifier, which gradually returns cloaked as a substantive. The loose term *Tocquevillean* thereby makes its appearance as a tool for historiographical analysis.

Capper's study provides a superb platform from which to observe that process, or at least its end product. For the essay, far from exhibiting shoddy research, careless composition, or slipshod conclusions, is, rather, a work of high distinction, honored in 1998 with the Binkley-Stephenson Award as the best article to appear on any subject in the leading journal in the field, the *Journal of American History*. Deeply researched and skillfully organized, Capper's study provided a new starting point for students of transcendentalism. It is not Capper's interpretations of the historiography of transcendentalism that are at issue here, however, but the way he brought Tocqueville to bear in the effort to present his findings.

To account for transcendentalism's longevity in American culture studies, Capper began by first noting its settled status in departments of both history and English; then, he ushered the indispensable Frenchman onto the stage. "Historical Transcendentalism has long been buoyed up," Capper wrote, "by that protean trio of cultural configurations that Alexis de Tocqueville, writing in the decade of the movement's rise in the 1830s (and completely ignorant of its existence), first virtually identified with 'America' itself: liberal religion, individualist democracy, and national identity" (503). Capper supported this highly debatable assertion by recourse to a scholarly appurtenance that is becoming increasingly familiar, namely the broad-gauge footnote, one that contains no specific page references but, rather, directs the reader to the entire work being cited. In this case the reference was to *Democracy in America*.

This footnote procedure can be justified, depending on the context and objectives of the work of scholarship in which it appears. Capper's article contained numerous unpaginated footnote references because it was, in large part, a guide to the literature, so that in effect the notes performed the task of a bibliographic essay. But such a method can present disadvantages for both scholarship and clear argument, as well. For example, in the case of the general reference to *Democracy in America*, if a reader were to reverse the ordinary spatial and temporal sequence of reading the sentence and the footnote—if she were first to register the footnote and then look up to the body of the text to see what is being referred to—the interpretation she would come away with would surely be misguided. She would begin by reading the footnote citing, in toto, a book entitled *Democracy in America*, by Alexis de Tocqueville, which was originally published in two volumes in 1835 and

1840. Glancing upward to the body of the text to see what the footnote validated, she would then surmise that the substance of those two large volumes is that Tocqueville identified—or at least “virtually identified”—the triad of liberal religion, individualist democracy, and national identity with the term (in inverted commas) America.

This assertion raises some difficulties, not the least of which is confusion as to its literal meaning. But more to the immediate point, the proposition that Tocqueville identified liberal religion, individualist democracy, and national identity with America is, to put it mildly, a highly questionable interpretation of *Democracy in America*. It is at once plausible, not necessarily incorrect, irrefutable, and tendentious. But it cannot reasonably be maintained that it captures the essence of Tocqueville’s nearly eight-hundred-page (tendentious and plausible) tomes. Like many American commentators, Capper mistakenly identifies the *Democracy*: it is not primarily a book about America but about democracy.

Having scripted a particular version of Tocqueville as a key performer in his endeavor to interpret the historiography of transcendentalism, Capper exhibited his stage works from time to time throughout the argument. Thus, for example, Van Wyck Brooks was portrayed as having “treat[ed] the Transcendentalists’ Tocquevillian individualism as nothing more than a category of moral uplift” (511); and “in the arsenal of post–World War II American historiography, Transcendentalism became, in an abrupt return to the grand theme of the grandfather of unillusioned liberalism, Tocqueville, the proof-text of consensus in America’s idealist individualism” (521). Again, the literal meaning of this second sentence is not altogether clear, at least insofar as it refers to Tocqueville, although taking the two sentences together, a meaning can be constructed. It is, first, that the transcendentalists’ individualism was Tocquevillean and, second, that Tocqueville’s grand theme was idealist individualism. But both these assertions are simply erroneous. Indeed, in one of the most frequently quoted—yet not always best understood—passages of the second volume of *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville went to great lengths to define precisely what he meant by the term *individualism* (a brand new expression in political discourse at that time) and to differentiate it from other forms of self-regarding thought and action. The salient point about Tocqueville’s discussion of individualism is that he identified it as a kind of composite or amalgam of feeling and thinking: he described it as a cold, calculating feeling of self-centeredness that was of a different order than the *égoïsme* that he associated with the French character. Egoism, he wrote, was a baser passion than individualism and, as such, much

closer to the category of blind, unreflective instinct. Egoism and individualism therefore occupied opposite poles within the domain of human sentiments, with egoism being situated in proximity to instinct and individualism close to thought: “Egoism is a passionate and exaggerated love of self that impels man to relate everything solely to himself and to prefer himself to everything else. Individualism is a reflective and tranquil sentiment that disposes each citizen to cut himself off from the mass of his fellow men and withdraw into the circle of family and friends. . . . Egoism is born of blind instinct; individualism proceeds from erroneous judgment rather than depraved sentiment. Its source lies as much in defects of the mind as in vices of the heart” (DIA 585).

“Tocquevillian individualism,” then, far from being “idealist” in the sense in which that term is understood in the history of Continental philosophy—which is the sense that is most relevant to the study of transcendentalism—is instead a selfish emotion that has been fused with a detached, calculated strategizing about the most efficient way to advance one’s material interests. By no stretch of interpretation can it be described as idealist. I do not know precisely how to categorize the individualism of the transcendentalists, but surely theirs was not the kind Tocqueville labored so meticulously to describe. One of Ralph Waldo Emerson’s biographers, Stephen E. Whicher, called it “radical egoism.”<sup>17</sup>

But when a subject is as crucial as individualism is in Tocqueville’s writings, determining the correct definition of the term is only half the task. Attending scrupulously to context is just as important. And here it must be emphasized that the rhetorical juxtaposition of Tocqueville, individualism, and America that Capper advanced (and, in doing so, followed a long tradition and legions of commentators) distorted Tocqueville’s argument almost beyond recognition. Tocqueville’s account of individualism occurs in a section of the *Democracy* in which the topic of America itself has almost completely vanished. In fact, Tocqueville had scarcely made any reference to the United States at all for a full fifty pages prior to his taking up the subject of individualism. That is because, at this point in his inquiry, he had all but abandoned the subject of America in favor of his passionate quest for generalizations about the effects of *démocratie* as such. Indeed, Tocqueville never mentions America until the final sentence of the two-chapter section that treats individualism, and when he does bring America back into the discussion, it is precisely in order to reveal the ways in which Americans *counteracted* individualism’s baneful consequences. In short, Tocqueville forcefully detached individualism from any exclusive or necessary connection with the

United States, instead portraying it as a trait of democracy per se or of “democratic centuries” (*DIA* 585–94). He took up the subject in the section of the book that has the least to do with America and turned to the subject of the Americans only in order to illustrate the means by which individualism can be restrained.

By invoking the allegedly Tocquevillean triad of religion, democracy, and nationality, then, Capper opened up both helpful prospects and serious perils: on the one hand, the three abstractions could be brought to bear on the project of organizing the current state of scholarship about transcendentalism with great effect; on the other hand, they could be made to do so only at the expense of rendering Tocqueville himself—as opposed to a Tocquevillean mask or persona—all but invisible.

Democracy, for instance, became inexplicably transmuted into something Capper termed “the ideology of ‘reform,’” again with unexplained inverted commas. Accordingly, transcendentalist socialism, abolitionism, and feminism were then squeezed into the box of a “Tocquevillian paradigm”—but only by first devising a paradigm to fit the phenomena and then affixing the Tocqueville label to it (535, 536). Admittedly, the term *démocratie*, as Tocqueville employed it, is notorious among scholars for its protean character, but general agreement does obtain that he used it to refer to a regime of broad legal and social equality and social mobility. Although Tocqueville observed that the constant agitation of democratic practices and institutions generated rhetoric and associations devoted to the promotion of social reform, it is fallacious to posit a relationship of identity between antebellum reform ideology and democracy.

Just as Tocqueville was not cognizant of a transcendentalist movement, so also only flimsy and fugitive strands of evidence reveal any awareness of Tocqueville among the transcendentalists (except in the case of Emerson, and that only late in the era of transcendentalism’s ascendancy; the two men met in 1848) or indeed on the part of such nontranscendentalist figures of the American Renaissance as Nathaniel Hawthorne or Herman Melville.<sup>18</sup> One might concede that Capper’s purpose was to show how transcendentalists can be said to have conformed to a broader American cultural paradigm that Tocqueville had presciently devised without having any awareness of transcendentalism’s existence, but even allowing for the fact that the paradigm itself is lacking in empirical connection between itself and the subject under study, it does not conform to what Tocqueville himself is known to have actually thought, written, or said.

Completing the passage from the realm of grounded knowledge to that of

stereotype was the task of the third, most contentious and politically sensitive facet of Capper's model, that of national identity. For at this point his text was salted with politically loaded shorthand terms that implicated Tocqueville in a conservative vision of a homogeneous and consensual United States, with phrases such as "the old Tocquevillian 'American exceptionalist' question" and "1950s Tocquevillian mythic models" (537). Capper linked this aspect of Tocqueville's reputation with the discovery, early in the essay, of a "liberal neo-consensus framework" and a "neo-liberal Tocquevillian rescue" of the transcendentalists in the work of the intellectual historian George M. Fredrickson (529).<sup>19</sup> Capper employed such opaque phraseology to portray Fredrickson's "rescue" as one part of an allegedly broader "Tocquevillian downplaying of contention" in scholarship about American culture in the 1950s and 1960s (528). In this manner, something "Tocquevillian" was made to signify an entire mode of approach and a generation of scholarship. This mode was portrayed as neoliberal, affiliated in an unspecified way with exceptionalism, and yet also characteristic of religiously grounded reformism in the antebellum era. These might be defensible propositions at a certain level of generalization, but their precise connection with Tocqueville was nowhere evident.

The gulf between Capper's deep research, sensitive insights, and judicious conclusions, on the one hand, and the superficiality and breadth of his deployment of Tocqueville, on the other, is so wide as to invite critical commentary in its own right. The fact that the *Journal of American History* could hold its authors to rigorous standards of evidence and argument while its most outstanding article made such cavalier use of Tocqueville's image could be taken to indicate, among other scholarly trends, a serious decline in the relevance of Tocqueville himself among American intellectuals. Capper's essay, therefore, served as a kind of milepost. It pointed to the fact that for many intellectuals, as the new century commenced, Tocqueville increasingly served a decorative rather than an analytical purpose.

The decorative was clearly in the forefront of another scholar's mind, but he hated the decoration. This was Robert Dawidoff, who does know a great deal about Tocqueville, in a puzzling study, *The Genteel Tradition and the Sacred Rage*. Reviewers of this work made note of the unfairness of Dawidoff's deployment of Tocqueville; George Cotkin called him a "straw man" for Dawidoff's tendentious argument, and Ross Posnock characterized the book as "especially interesting on James and Santayana, unoriginal on Adams, and simplistic regarding Tocqueville." Dawidoff set up a vague "Tocquevillian" feeling—completely detached from American popular culture—as a foil to a

more generous “Jeffersonian” one that was inclusive, diverse, and vibrant. Dawidoff postulated a “cult of Tocqueville” and defined “Tocquevillian” as “the feeling that smart Americans have that they are better than the rest of us.” So much for political philosophy.<sup>20</sup> Again, Dawidoff’s contrast between high culture and democratic popular culture could have been drawn without reference to Tocqueville.

One additional example will underscore this crucial point. It is notable because, like the Capper essay, it used Tocqueville in a manner that was manifestly outside Tocqueville’s own expressed area of interest. Also like Capper, the author-editors of the work in question are distinguished scholars, Christopher Waldrep and Donald G. Nieman. In *Local Matters: Race Crime, and Justice in the Nineteenth-Century South* (2001),<sup>21</sup> a collection of essays on Southern legal history, these two respected historians opened their introduction by adverting to the observations of “de Tocqueville” that the law in America stood as a bulwark against the unrestrained force of public opinion and majoritarian tyranny. “But was de Tocqueville correct?” they inquired (ix). Their “book examines crime, justice, and community in the nineteenth-century American south, a region better known for honor and vigilantism than the rule of law” (ix). This was precisely why Tocqueville had excluded the South from his conclusions about both democracy and America. Not surprisingly, as the editors explain, the essays in their book demonstrate that “de Tocqueville overstated his case” (x). That is, the law only marginally, if at all, protected African Americans from the majoritarian tyranny of white supremacy in the postbellum South. “De Tocqueville’s faith in the law ultimately proved elusive in a society more devoted to protecting white privilege than to the rule of law” (xvii).

The Tocqueville theme was picked up in the reviews of this book. Dickson D. Bruce Jr. followed the lead of Waldrep and Nieman by opening his review in the *Journal of American History* with Tocqueville’s observations; the book’s contributors, Bruce wrote, present “important discussions of that devotion to law Tocqueville observed among Americans.” Certainly after reading this review, a reader could reasonably expect to encounter important discussions of Tocqueville’s observations about Americans’ devotion to law, and those expectations would be reinforced by reading the editors’ introduction. Such a reader would be sorely disappointed, however, to discover that not one of the book’s nine essays contained a single reference to Tocqueville.<sup>22</sup>

Tocqueville had been pushed on stage to serve as reinforcement for a banal point about the institution of the law, as if his authority were necessary to endorse the point that Waldrep and Nieman, who, it bears emphasizing,

were extremely respected in their field and hardly needed the literary crutch of a venerated and ill-understood name, desired to make. The idea that law functions to dam the stream of popular prejudice is in any case commonplace, if not tautological.

When Tocqueville is not incorporated into a writer's analysis, in other words, but is instead mined for observations that that writer wishes to make—or in this case, refute—we have an example of a decorative marker. The litmus test, therefore, of Tocquevillean ornamental status is whether using him helps the reader to understand the point because his ideas are incorporated into the analysis—whether he is part of the theory that helps us understand the phenomenon under observation—or whether he illustrates, through quotation or paraphrase, a point an author wishes to underscore. In other words, if the arguments of an author would be unchanged if Tocqueville were absent from them, his status is ornamental. That was the case with Waldrep and Nieman's treatment of Tocqueville.

But this ornamental function proves to be an illusion at a deeper level, as well. For authors like Waldrep and Nieman, and so many others, gave the impression that Tocqueville's thought was being confronted at a serious level and woven into the analysis. It did not appear as if he was just being mined for epigrams, as, for example it would be easy to accumulate from the works of Shakespeare or Voltaire. While the argument on the page gave the appearance of Tocquevillean analysis, the reality was that Tocqueville's observations were utterly dispensable for the authors' purposes—and absent from the essays in the book.

In fact, Tocqueville excluded the South from his generalizations about American culture and took pains to explain why. Simply put, his book was about democracy in America, and the South was undemocratic, so he would just leave the discussion of the South to others, and especially to Beaumont, whose romantic novel, *Marie*, Tocqueville wholeheartedly recommended to readers as illustrative of both his and Beaumont's observations and conclusions about the American South (*DIA* 365, 392n30). And those observations, far from showing that “de Tocqueville overstated his case,” *coincide* almost exactly with those of the essayists in Waldrep and Nieman's collection—for “faith in the law ultimately prov[ing] elusive in a society more devoted to protecting white privilege than to the rule of law” is the theme, and the moral, of Beaumont's *Marie*, as well. The editors, then, applied Tocqueville's generalizations to a region of the United States that Tocqueville pointedly excluded them from, then challenged those generalizations as

not being applicable to that region, and finally concluded that it was Tocqueville who had been in error.

Yet how misleading would the image of turn-of-the-century scholarship on Tocqueville be if the account were abruptly to halt here. For the late twentieth century could also be seen as a true golden age of Tocqueville scholarship, with breakthrough studies in several important and relatively neglected areas of Tocqueville studies, excellent new editions of a kind that had never been successfully attempted before, attention to Tocqueville's more overlooked or marginal works by major historians and political theorists, and greater stress than ever before on the comparative dimension in Tocqueville rather than a dogged continuation of the tradition of treating his *Democracy* as the epitome of his life and a work of more pressing importance to his American than his European readers. There was a Tocqueville Society and a bilingual *Tocqueville Review/Revue Tocqueville*.<sup>23</sup> Some of the new work included an intelligently abridged new translation of *Democracy in America* and even, *mirabile dictu*, a comprehensive anthology with a brilliantly informative introduction. The anthology by two leading Tocquevillians, Olivier Zunz and Alan Kahan, both students of the great *Tocquevillien* François Furet, not only surmounted the traditional dangers that afflict efforts to present a comprehensive picture of Tocqueville's thought, but also gave students and scholars alike a biographical overview, through the anthologized selections, of that body of work.<sup>24</sup>

Studies of Tocqueville's relation to French imperialism illustrated the vigor of turn-of-the-century scholarship. Anyone contemplating the role that imperial conquest played in French history during the years of Tocqueville's active involvement in politics can see immediately that France's leaders had undertaken a foreign policy that, however vigorously it might have supported national interests, cannot be said to have advanced those causes of liberalism and human freedom with which Tocqueville is so often and so closely associated. Universally recognized as one of the pillars of liberal thought in the nineteenth century, Tocqueville was also a firm and at times violent supporter of French colonial conquest in Algeria. In other words, Tocqueville's stance in relation to the crucial question of colonialism seems to present a paradox: how can the liberal be at the same time an imperialist? And how can Tocqueville's support of imperial expansion square with his expressed belief in fundamental racial equality and his active support of slave emancipation?

Tocqueville's writings on these questions (including some that Tocque-

ville did not intend for publication) first appeared in Volume III of the Gallimard edition of the *Oeuvres complètes* in 1962. In their introduction to that volume, André Jardin and J.-J. Chevallier contended that Tocqueville's texts were consistent with his political and moral values: the Algerian reports, they wrote, were "treated by the same expert and lucid pen" that composed *Democracy in America*. "But this pen serves as well France's major interests, in addition to those values—truth, justice, and liberty so dear to its author."<sup>25</sup>

This interpretation provoked a whirlwind of research by Melvin Richter culminating in one of the most important of all Tocqueville articles, published in the following year. Far from harmonizing with the Tocqueville of the *Democracy*, Richter argued, the Algeria reports show him to have abandoned his political principles: "When this issue forced him to choose, he placed nationalism above liberalism." Tocqueville seems indeed to have actively repressed his feelings about the violence that accompanied France's actions in North Africa; and fearing lethargy in France itself, he also approved of war as a means of rousing the French citizenry to great thoughts and stirring actions. As the German political scientist Michael Hereth put it in a discussion much indebted to Richter, "any admirer of Tocqueville is baffled" by the Algerian texts.<sup>26</sup> Richter's essay was for a long time the last word on the Algerian question in Tocqueville's career.

Then, in 1990, the historian and critic Tzvetan Todorov launched a pitiless attack on Tocqueville's colonialist writings and took issue with Richter's position that they constituted a simple contradiction with the liberalism of the *Democracy* and *The Old Regime and the Revolution*. To Todorov, Tocqueville's devotion to the principles of human rights vanished under the pressure of international relations. Human rights inhere in individuals, but, Tocqueville believed (according to Todorov), nations are in a state of nature vis-à-vis one another (as Locke had pointed out). But states, as such, are also analogous to individuals. Todorov's claim was straightforward: "Liberalism seeks to guarantee to each the right to exercise his abilities freely; thus colonizers have the right to colonise. Tocqueville's colonialism is no more than the international extension of his liberalism."<sup>27</sup>

How to reconcile these two views? Perhaps they cannot, or should not, be reconciled. But such is the healthy state of the field that even after such excellent scholarship, a new perspective was still possible. It was provided by Jennifer Pitts in 2001. Her study was especially welcome—and emblematic of the state of the field at the time—because it combined new translations of the key texts with clear analysis. Contra Richter, Pitts perceived more similarities than differences between the Algeria writings and the *Democracy*,

especially because the *Democracy* itself is a far more indeterminate text than many commentators have been willing to concede. “Tocqueville’s writings on European expansion in North America are tinged with the same ambivalence that would permeate his writings on Algeria. His protests at the cruelty of the American settlers and his laments over the extermination of noble cultures were heartfelt. Still, he could not help admiring the energy and perseverance of the English settlers in North America.” But, as against Todorov’s tone of fury at liberalism itself, Pitts emphasized a transformation in Tocqueville’s attitudes during the 1830s and 1840s. “Tocqueville had been chastened by the wanton violence of the French army. . . . [He] came to see that the very means he had countenanced five years before had sown disaster among the native population and produced a society of settlers more violent and oppressive than the army itself.”<sup>28</sup>

Thus, Jardin and Chevallier interpreted the Algerian writings benignly, seamlessly connecting French national interests with the values of liberty and justice. Richter argued that Tocqueville’s embrace of colonial domination in Algeria stood in sharp, deplorable, and puzzling contrast to both the liberal values and the sociological method of *Democracy in America*. Todorov maintained that the *Democracy* did not particularly conflict with the Algerian writings but neither did it matter because liberalism was implicated in imperialism. And Pitts showed that the *Democracy* and the Algerian writings did not conflict as much as Richter thought, but that was because of the *Democracy*’s ambivalences and the evolution of Tocqueville’s ideas. Here indeed were the elements of a serious argument on an important question bolstered by excellent scholarship and clear argument. Cheryl Welch then stepped in with a magisterial overview of the literature combined with a profound investigation of the moral psychology leading to Tocqueville’s inconsistencies, evasions, and dishonesty in an article that reached Richter’s standard, forty years later.<sup>29</sup>

As a third aspect of Tocqueville’s turn-of-the-century standing, I would point to the seemingly endless controversy over the question of what constitutes the proper relationship between civil society and government and the degree to which broad-based participation in associations is a measure of the health of a democratic culture. In 1999, the *Chronicle of Higher Education* published a review of the major book-length literature on the question until that time, entitled “Perhaps We Bowl Alone, but Does It Really Matter?” Within a few years, many of the participants in the controversy were asking, “Here Is Another Bowling Alone Article, but Does Anyone Really Care?”

The research of Harvard sociologist Robert Putnam had shown that

Americans were devoting less and less time and attention to voluntary associations and voluntary and quasi-voluntary civic responsibilities, and he used the decline in bowling-league membership as a marker for civic disengagement. Conservatives and left-leaning scholars viewed the whole controversy differently. Francis Fukuyama, with characteristic fluency, put it this way: “the left-wing vision of civil society is you have a community-action group mobilizing to stop Wal-Mart. . . . The right-wing vision is that these groups are an antidote to government.” The merits of the many sides of the debate are not of concern here. The key point about the arguments over civil society is that the concept itself is derived from the observations of Tocqueville in the *Democracy* about the importance of associations and Americans’ using them to counteract the evils of individualism and democratic excess. Of sixteen books listed in the *Chronicle’s* review, thirteen paid extended tribute or attention to Tocqueville and his chapters on associations. For the most part, however, the debate over civil society, considered strictly as an issue in recent American politics and society, could have occurred without Tocqueville’s help. For example, one of the soundest and most empirically and methodologically sophisticated contributions to the discussion was an article about the effect of the GI Bill on civic participation; Tocqueville was absent from the analysis and the literature search.<sup>30</sup>

Yet, Tocqueville’s role in this controversy is not, as in the cases of Capper and Waldrep and Nieman discussed earlier, that of decorative embellishment *tout court*. For the genesis of the notion of civic associations’ playing a distinctive part in the day-to-day agitation of democratic culture is to be sought in Tocqueville, and not only in the *Democracy* but, as is almost always overlooked in the debate, in *The Old Regime* as well. Therefore, it is necessary and right for the civic-participation writers to cite and explicate Tocqueville, even though his particular conclusions or methodology are not woven into the accounts such writers present.

So flowed the currents of Tocqueville’s reception at the turn of the twenty-first century. The scholarly trends were as follows: Greater attention to Tocqueville’s works besides *Democracy in America*. Complementing this turn, more work with a comparative dimension, picking up on studies by comparativists of an earlier generation like Drescher. New editions and translations of works from all sides of Tocqueville’s oeuvre, including the *Democracy*. Less attention to Tocqueville as a commentator on American life and institutions. Tocqueville’s non-American works being examined using the insights and methods of poststructuralist reading strategies.

Side by side with the scholarship specifically devoted to Tocqueville was

the ornamental use of the French seer with his prescience who could always be used as a prop or straw man. Finally, Tocqueville was also brought into discussions in which he did not contribute to the analysis but was important because key concepts in political thought derived from his work.

In 1962, the historian Richard Herr wrote a discerning study of Tocqueville's *The Old Regime and the Revolution*. He approached *The Old Regime* in Dantesque fashion as a text that could be interpreted at varying depths. Tocqueville's description of the faltering society and government of the Old Regime, presented to the reader by means of the themes of centralization and an increasingly decorative aristocracy, are like waves on the surface of the sea, Herr wrote. Beneath the waves on the surface, however, are the ocean tides, the forces delivering those institutions to the point of revolution's inception. But still deeper, running below even the tides, are the mighty ocean currents of the beliefs, mores, and habits of heart and mind of the people.<sup>31</sup> Some metaphors are meant to induce visual correlatives; some conceptual parallels; a few are aids to philosophical insight. In my judgment, Herr's metaphor of the waves, tides, and current is a hermeneutical tool and not merely a visual aid. I would borrow the trope, and venture the proposition that the decorative use of Tocqueville, while a surface wave, is yet significant as a marker of Tocqueville's indispensability; running deeper, however, than such references or than injections of Tocquevillean concepts into social and political analysis runs a current of scholarship that is flowing away from the older concerns with America and democratic mores.

## Notes

1. Michel Chevalier, *Society, Manners, and Politics in the United States: Letters on North America*, ed. John William Ward, trans. T. G. Bradford (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1961), 95, 367; TBA, 175. On the Russia–United States prophecy, see Theodore Draper, “The Idea of the ‘Cold War’ and Its Prophets,” *Encounter* 52, no. 2 (1979): 34–45.

2. Arthur Louis Dunham, *The Anglo-French Treaty of Commerce of 1860 and the Progress of the Industrial Revolution in France*, University of Michigan Publications in History and Political Science, vol. 9 (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1930), 28–34.

3. Alexis de Tocqueville to the editor of the *London Times* [published December 11, 1851], *Letters*, 266–78.

4. Alexis de Tocqueville to Gustave de Beaumont, November 4 [December 3], 1836, OC, VIII, pt. 1, 176. (The letter is dated November 4 and postmarked December 3.)

5. Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1936), 5.

6. Merle Curti, *The Growth of American Thought* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1943); on the contrast with Lovejoy see Thomas Bender, “Intellectual and Cultural His-

tory” in *The New American History*, ed. Eric Foner, revised and expanded ed. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997), 3–4.

7. Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth about History* (New York: Norton, 1994), 172.

8. John Higham, introduction to *New Directions in American Intellectual History*, ed. John Higham and Paul K. Conkin (Baltimore, Md.: John Hopkins University Press, 1979), xiii. For specific application of this theme to Tocqueville’s work, see Delba Winthrop, “Tocqueville’s *Old Regime*: Political History,” *Review of Politics* 43, no. 1 (January 1981): 88–111; and Olivier Zunz, “Tocqueville and the Writing of American History in the Twentieth Century: A Comment,” *Tocqueville Review* 7 (1985–1986): 131–35.

9. Higham, “Introduction,” xiv.

10. Thomas Bender, *Intellect and Public Life: Essays on the Social History of Academic Intellectuals in the United States* (Baltimore, Md.: John Hopkins University Press, 1993), 3.

11. Paul K. Conkin, “Intellectual History: Past, Present, and Future,” in *The Future of History*, ed. Charles F. Delzell (Nashville, Tenn.: Vanderbilt University Press, 1977), 126.

12. “Your conversations have so much prepared me for the events which have passed since May, that I seem to be looking at a play which I have read in manuscript.” Nassau William Senior to Tocqueville, November 30, 1851, in *Correspondence and Conversations of Alexis de Tocqueville with W. Nassau Senior*, ed. Mrs. M. C. M. Simpson, 2nd ed., 2 vols. (London: Henry S. King, 1872), I:271.

13. Margaret Marshall, “Notes by the Way: Alexis de Tocqueville’s Discussion of Cultural Matters,” *Nation* 162, no. 5 (February 2, 1946): 130.

14. John Lukacs, “Fear and Hatred,” *The American Scholar* 66, no. 3 (Summer 1997): 441.

15. Phillips Bradley, “A Historical Essay,” appendix II in Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Henry Reeve, 2 vols. (New York: Vintage, 1945), II:389–487.

16. Charles Capper, “‘A Little Beyond’: The Problem of the Transcendentalist Movement in American History,” *Journal of American History* 85, no. 2 (September 1998): 502–39; subsequent references appear parenthetically in the text.

17. Stephen E. Whicher, *Freedom and Fate: An Inner Life of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1953), 51–57.

18. Robert D. Richardson, *Emerson: The Mind on Fire: A Biography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 453; the exhaustive research conducted by Merton M. Sealts Jr., *Melville’s Reading*, rev. and enl. ed. (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1988), reveals no reference to Tocqueville; no record of either Tocqueville or Beaumont, including the *Penitentiary System*, appears in Marion L. Kesselring, *Hawthorne’s Reading 1828–1850: A Transcription and Identification of Titles Recorded in the Charge-books of the Salem Athenaeum* (New York: New York Public Library, 1949).

19. George M. Fredrickson, *The Inner Civil War: Northern Intellectuals and the Crisis of the Union* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965).

20. George Cotkin, review of *The Genteel Tradition and the Sacred Rage*, by Robert Dawidoff, *American Historical Review* 98, no. 1 (February 1993): 250; Ross Posnock, review of *The Genteel Tradition and the Sacred Rage*, by Robert Dawidoff, *Journal of American History*

80, no. 1 (June 1993): 293; Robert Dawidoff, *The Genteel Tradition and the Sacred Rage: High Culture vs. Democracy in Adams, James, and Santayana* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), xvii.

21. Christopher Waldrep and Donald G. Nieman, eds., *Local Matters: Race Crime, and Justice in the Nineteenth-Century South* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2001). References appear parenthetically in the text.

22. Dickson D. Bruce Jr., review of *Local Matters: Race Crime, and Justice in the Nineteenth-Century South*, edited by Christopher Waldrep and Donald G. Nieman, *Journal of American History* 89, no. 1 (June 2002): 227–28.

23. Theodore Caplow, “The Early Days of the Tocqueville Society,” *La Revue Tocqueville/The Tocqueville Review* 21, no. 1 (2000): 5–9; Olivier Zunz, “Twenty Years with *The Tocqueville Review*,” *La Revue Tocqueville/The Tocqueville Review* 21, no. 1 (2000): 13–15. As these articles imply, the society was very much a closed affair, with membership by invitation only in a classic old-boys and -girls network.

24. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, abridged by Sanford Kessler, trans. Stephen D. Grant (Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett, 2000); Olivier Zunz and Alan S. Kahan, eds., *The Tocqueville Reader: A Life in Letters and Politics* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2002).

25. OC, III, Pt. 1, 9.

26. Melvin Richter, “Tocqueville on Algeria,” *Review of Politics* 25, no. 3 (July 1963): 362–98 quote, 364; Michael Hereth, *Alexis de Tocqueville: Threats to Freedom in Democracy*, trans. George Bogardus (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1986), 158.

27. Tzvetan Todorov, “Tocqueville’s Nationalism,” *History and Anthropology* 4 (1990): 357–71 quote, 366; reprinted in Todorov, *On Human Diversity: Nationalism, Racism, and Exoticism in French Thought*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), 191–207.

28. Jennifer Pitts, introduction to *Writings on Empire and Slavery*, by Alexis de Tocqueville, ed. and trans. Jennifer Pitts (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), xv, xxvi. Hereth had also noted a change over time, without developing the theme; Hereth, *Tocqueville*, 145–65.

29. Cheryl Welch, “Colonial Violence and the Rhetoric of Evasion: Tocqueville on Algeria,” *Political Theory* 31, no. 2 (April 2003): 234–64.

30. D. W. Miller, “Perhaps We Bowl Alone, but Does It Really Matter?” *Chronicle of Higher Education* 45, no. 45 (July 16, 1999): A16–A18; Fukuyama quote, A16; Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000); a comprehensive study focused on Tocqueville’s role is Chad Alan Goldberg, “Social Citizenship and a Reconstructed Tocqueville,” *American Sociological Review* 66, no. 2 (April 2001): 289–315; Suzanne Mettler, “Bringing the State Back into Civic Engagement: Policy Feedback Effects of the G.I. Bill for World War II Veterans,” *American Political Science Review* 96, no. 2 (June 2002): 351–65; Theda Skocpol, “The Tocqueville Problem: Civic Engagement in American Democracy,” *Social Science History* 21, no. 4 (Winter 1997): 455–79, is the best critique of Putnam.

31. Richard Herr, *Tocqueville and The Old Regime* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1962), 35–36.