

Statement of Intended Research

Rethinking aristocratic liberalism in the social and political thought of Alexis de Tocqueville

My undergraduate thesis focused on Alexis de Tocqueville's ambivalent relationship with democracy, analysing his divergence from conventional conservative and liberal movements of nineteenth century France. Building on my previous work, my MPhil dissertation will seek to understand where Tocqueville's sophisticated position fits in the wider liberal tradition.

Tocqueville's repeated desire to stay impartial and his precaution not to flatter 'any one of those great parties creating agitation in France'¹, has nurtured over time vehement debates regarding the classification of his work. Nonetheless, when writing to Stöffels in 1836: 'I cannot believe that people don't see me clearly as a new kind of liberal', he confirms his affiliation to the liberal tradition, especially when considering Bell's summative definition of liberalism as 'the sum of the arguments that have been classified as liberal, and recognized as such by other self-proclaimed liberals'².

Critical convention has been to underline the polarity of Tocqueville's thought which merged conservative concerns with a radically advanced democratic idea of freedom. For instance, Boesche stressed Tocqueville's systematic defence of the main liberal principles, before highlighting his distaste for the new middle-class culture founded upon self-interest and individualism, an apprehension shared by traditional conservative figures like Chateaubriand or Burke. Such observations have led commentators such as Lakoff to characterize Tocqueville as a hybrid liberal-conservative whose ideas prefigured 'right-of-centre modern liberal conservatism'³ which emerged in the late 20th century with thinkers like Aron or Oakeshott.

Nonetheless, viewing Tocqueville as a precursor of modern political theories violates his intention of setting himself apart from his contemporaries by systematically refusing to be a man of party. Arguing that Tocqueville's thought arose from mere political tinkering does not take account of what Skinner has referred to as 'the more general social and intellectual matrix out of which [an

¹ Tocqueville 2003, p.490

² Bell 2014, p.690

³ Lakoff 1998, p.461

author's work] arose'⁴. Hence, my dissertation will locate his thought within 'its appropriate ideological context' or '*mentalités*'⁵ to recognize the 'exact direction and force of [his] arguments'⁶.

In this regard, theorists of aristocratic liberalism, such as Kahan, de Dijn or Jaume offer a more convincing approach, by understanding Tocqueville's thought through a close analysis of his personal history and private correspondence. In my dissertation, I will argue that what honed Tocqueville's acute perception of the democratic transition and its vulnerability was his aristocratic background. More precisely I intend to show that the fusion of Tocqueville's relativist vision of the 'two humanities'⁷, with his strong aristocratic moral idealism prompted him to overcome Guizot and Necker's elitist liberalism, to offer an aristocratic liberalism compatible with sovereign popularity and equality.

On the one hand Tocqueville's contextualist approach of merging historical research with theoretical form⁸, fuelled by his dispassionate understanding of aristocratic culture, convinced him to consider aristocracy and democracy as two extreme forms of society, one promoting the angelic and the other the bestial side of human nature⁹. On the other hand, he counterbalanced his relativism with a noble vision of liberty and human dignity, as the mastery of one's passions to prevent the worship of Mammon, and not just as mere independence. The combination of both approaches, the relativist and the idealist, would help him to understand that the only way to accomplish the necessary mourning of the old aristocracy was to show that the values of the feudal nobility had to 'be transfused into the blood of democracy'¹⁰.

Yet, far from concluding with de Dijn that Tocqueville's end goal was 'to make [democracy] more similar...to an aristocratic society'¹¹, responding to a mere nostalgic impetus, I will show that he wished to revive the aristocratic spirit 'in personal lives and social settings'¹² of the masses, in order to limit the bourgeois sentiments '*sans vertu et sans grandeur*'¹³. This is particularly visible in his repudiation of the revolutionary pamphleteers and the Doctrinaires who he thought were mistakenly rejecting the *spirit* of aristocratic societies, to instead revive the *hierarchies* of the old regime in order

⁴ Skinner 1978, p.xi

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., p.xiii

⁷ Manent 1982, p.107

⁸ Wolin 2001, p.503

⁹ Kahan 2015, p.102

¹⁰ Jaume 2013, p.259

¹¹ de Dijn 2008, p.151

¹² Mitchell 1989, p.136

¹³ Tocqueville 1978, p.13

to create a ‘natural aristocracy’¹⁴. For instance, de Barante viewed the old nobility, as an impediment to liberty, rather than, as Tocqueville defended, the mainstays of liberty¹⁵.

Moreover, I will incorporate in my analysis the influence of Tocqueville’s historiographic context on the development of his twofold contextualist and idealist approach. First Tocqueville’s thinking was profoundly marked by the revolution of 1830 where he saw ‘the framework which supported the values of his family’s entire history...collapsing, never to be rebuilt’¹⁶. He thus entered life and the political scene at a time of transition, when aristocracy was dead and democracy did not exist¹⁷. Yet, convinced that ‘*toute réaction est vouée à l’échec*’¹⁸, he sought solutions in America, in that sense breaking with ‘the growing perception that came to dominate French public opinion...that America was...a degenerating society’¹⁹.

Second, my investigation will focus on the twists and turns of Tocqueville’s intellectual development over the course of his life, attempting to consider the roles of different influences and education on the evolution of his thought. For example, Tocqueville’s chapter XI of the *Old Regime and the Revolution* can in many ways be seen as a rejection of Sieyès’ conception of liberty which he defined as a form of power allowing individuals to access countless enjoyments and material satisfaction, to satiate their desires. Moreover, I will situate Tocqueville’s thought within the intellectual environment of the 1810s-1850s, by considering his opinion on the works of liberal theorists such as Mounier, Guizot or Mme de Staël whose desire to preserve a substantial *de facto* inequality²⁰ convinced them to exclude the mass from the political scene. In contrast, Tocqueville adopted the dual role of the ‘memorialist of ancient mores’²¹ and of the ‘theorist-traveller’²², whose goal was to defend and ennoble the people against the vile mediocrity of the bourgeoisie in power during the July Monarchy.

¹⁴ Jaume 2013, p.267

¹⁵ De Dijn 2008 p.118

¹⁶ Ibid., p.292

¹⁷ Tocqueville 1985, p.115

¹⁸ Tocqueville 2003b, p.105

¹⁹ Craiutu & Jennings 2004, p.395

²⁰ Spitz 2000, p.148

²¹ Jaume 2013, p.282

²² Wolin 2001, p.412

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