

The Citizen in de Tocqueville's America

"A great democratic revolution is taking place in our midst. "

--Alexis de Tocqueville

On May 9, 1831, two young Frenchmen sailed into the harbor of Newport, Rhode Island and began a remarkable journey through the United States. Alexis de Tocqueville and Gustave de Beaumont, both minor French court officials, had been sent by their government to study new experimental prisons in America. However, even before leaving France, de Tocqueville and de Beaumont decided to spend most of their time observing American democracy in action. Both were excited by the prospect. America was such a young nation, and most Europeans had only a vague idea about its unique democratic system.

After traveling thousands of miles over a period of nine months, the young men returned to France. De Tocqueville spent the next eight years writing two volumes on his observations. In 1840 the two volumes became one book which de Tocqueville titled *Democracy in America*. Much more than a mere record of his travels, *Democracy in America*, in the words of one modern historian, turned out to be "perhaps the greatest commentary ever written about any culture by any person at any time."

Alexis de Tocqueville was born into an aristocratic family in 1805, the year after Napoleon Bonaparte was crowned emperor of France. De Tocqueville's parents had been imprisoned earlier during the French Revolution. Both escaped execution, the fate of many aristocrats at the time.

De Tocqueville studied law and became a low-level judge in the French court system. Early 19th-century political events in France convinced de Tocqueville that aristocratic government in Europe was doomed, soon to be replaced by democracy. It was at this time that he and his fellow nobleman, de Beaumont, arranged their trip to America. From de Tocqueville's point of view, it would also be a journey into the future.

American Equality

During his travels which took him from the East Coast to the Mississippi River, de Tocqueville filled 14 notebooks with his observations, thoughts, and interviews with over 200 Americans. De Tocqueville's relentless curiosity urged him to probe into every area of American culture, but it was the American people that interested him the most. Specifically, he wanted to find out about the role of the American citizen in this new democratic society. De Tocqueville set out to find the answers.

"No novelty," he wrote, "struck me more vividly during my stay there than the equality of conditions." Coming from a society still heavily influenced by its aristocratic heritage, de Tocqueville was astounded at how much equality had become a part of American life. It surprised him to see everyone shaking hands with one another. De Tocqueville marveled, and also worried, about a society where social class did not seem to matter and everyone expected to be treated the same.

From our point of view today, the United States in 1831 was far from being a society based on equality. The Indians were viewed as an alien people to be driven outside the bounds of civilization. Black slaves were considered the property of their masters. Women could not vote and were legally controlled by their husbands. "In America," wrote de Tocqueville, "a woman loses her independence forever in the bonds of matrimony."

In de Tocqueville's America, the idea of equality applied mainly to free white adult males. Full citizenship rights belonged only to this group. Yet, even this limited degree of equality made the United States radically different from the rest of the world and fascinated de Tocqueville.

Politics in de Tocqueville's America

"No sooner do you set foot on American soil than you find yourself in a sort of tumult," de Tocqueville wrote in his book. "A confused clamor rises on every side, and a thousand voices are heard at once, each expressing some social requirements." De Tocqueville was amazed at the large number of people active in public affairs. "All around you everything is on the move," he reported. De Tocqueville saw all kinds of people busily planning local projects, choosing representatives and assembling to criticize their leaders. He was especially impressed with New England town meetings where every citizen had the right to vote on public matters.

De Tocqueville thought it remarkable how often Americans joined together in various organizations which he called associations. "Americans of all ages, all stations of life and all types of disposition are forever forming associations," he wrote. "There are not only commercial and industrial associations in which all take part, but others of a thousand types-religious, moral, serious, futile, very general and very limited, immensely large and very minute."

De Tocqueville went on to observe that Americans naturally formed groups when they wanted to hold a celebration, found a church, build a school, distribute books or do almost anything else. "Finally, if they want to proclaim a truth or propagate some feeling ...they form an association. In every case, at the head of any new undertaking, where in France you would find the government ... in the United States you are sure to find an association."

"The people reign over the American political world as God rules over the universe," wrote de Tocqueville. Although property requirements for voting were still common, they were beginning to disappear. Elections were usually held every year for local and state offices. Those who had the right to vote did so and in large numbers. During the time that de Tocqueville toured America, 70% or more of the voters turned out on election day, compared to under 50% today.

The four-year cycle of presidential elections, which de Tocqueville called a "revolution ... in the name of the law," fascinated him. He wrote:

Long before the appointed day arrives, the election becomes the greatest, and one might say the only, affair occupying men's minds.... The President, for his part, is absorbed in the task of defending himself before the majority.... As the election draws near, intrigues grow more active and agitation is more lively and widespread. The citizens divide up into several camps.... The whole nation gets into a feverish state. . . .

With the election over, de Tocqueville reported, everything quickly calmed down like a river that only momentarily overflowed its banks. "But was it not astonishing," remarked de Tocqueville, "that such a storm could ever have arisen?"

At- the time of de Tocqueville's visit, political parties in America were undergoing great change as old ones died out and new ones emerged. The most significant development was the birth of the Democratic Party under the leadership of Andrew Jackson, elected president in 1828.

De Tocqueville observed a "constant agitation of parties," each attempting to draw voters over to its side. In his notes he wrote that a party candidate ". . . must haunt the taverns, drink and argue with the mob; that is what is called Electioneering in America."

De Tocqueville leveled some of his sharpest criticism against American political leaders themselves. He became convinced that outstanding men avoided elected office in order to pursue their private ambitions and careers. Those who did seek public office, he believed, were often poorly educated and open to corruption.

In one of his notebooks, de Tocqueville ridiculed Congressman Davy Crockett as a man "...who had received no education, could read only with difficulty, had no property, no fixed dwelling, but spent his time hunting, selling his game for a living, and spending his whole life in the woods." But de Tocqueville saved his sharpest barbs for President Jackson whom he described in his book as a "man of violent character and middling capacities." In his view, Jackson possessed few qualities for political leadership.

Law and Citizenship

De Tocqueville found a deep respect for the law in America. The reason, he felt, was that the American citizens themselves held the ultimate power to change any laws they disliked.

On the other hand, those who chose to violate the law were immediately branded as outcasts by the law-abiding majority. In Europe, de Tocqueville observed, the people merely watched as the authorities tracked down a criminal, while in America "...everyone thinks he has an interest in furnishing proof of an offense and in arresting the guilty man."

De Tocqueville wondered how American citizens learned about the law and their rights. Public schools, even at an elementary level, hardly existed outside of New England. Newspapers helped to inform the public, but the majority of Americans could not read. De Tocqueville discovered that the courtroom and jury actually served as a "free school" for civic education. "I do not know whether a jury is useful to the parties involved," de Tocqueville wrote, "but I am sure it is very good for those who have to decide the case." De Tocqueville also declared that juries "...make all men feel that they have duties toward society and that they take a share in its government."

"Tyranny of the Majority"

A number of things bothered de Tocqueville about democracy. One of them was that in a society made up of equal citizens, the majority is always right. To de Tocqueville, a majority of equals, just like a single all-powerful ruler, could abuse its power. In a democracy, de Tocqueville argued, this abuse becomes the "tyranny of the majority."

De Tocqueville did not claim that the tyranny of the majority as yet existed to any great degree in America. Still, he saw evidence of it developing. For example, de Tocqueville found that in the North, free black males who had the right to vote often were discouraged from voting by the white majority.

De Tocqueville maintained that even freedom of speech, guaranteed in the Bill of Rights, was affected by majority opinion.

"I know no country," he wrote, "in which, generally speaking, there is less independence of mind and true freedom of discussion than in America." He added that the lack of great writers in the United States was due to the absence of "freedom of spirit" brought on by a majority intolerant of minority views.

"If ever freedom is lost in America," de Tocqueville warned, "that will be due to the ... majority driving minorities to desperation...." De Tocqueville did identify certain elements at work in American democracy which checked the formation of a tyranny of the majority. Among these elements were the large number of independent associations, the press and the courts.

The Future of Democracy

In Europe, most critics of democracy believed that America would sooner or later descend into anarchy. De Tocqueville, however, saw another even more disturbing threat to American democracy. He feared that American citizens would become so satisfied with being equal to one another that they would abandon their

deep interest and involvement in self-government. If this should happen, cautioned de Tocqueville, government would grow more powerful and in a kindly sort of way cover society with "a network of petty, complicated rules." Far from dissolving into anarchy, American government under these conditions could become as oppressive as any cruel European monarchy. Americans would end up having equality through slavery.

In the last sentence of *Democracy in America*, de Tocqueville wrote about the fate of Americans and all others who would choose the path of equality. "It depends on themselves whether equality is to lead to servitude or freedom, knowledge or barbarism, prosperity or wretchedness."