

The New Criterion

Books

May 2007

Lacking elevation

by [Harvey Mansfield](#)

On Hugh Brogan's *Alexis de Tocqueville: A Life*.

To write the biography of a thinker is a difficult thing. His thought claims our attention at a level above the doings and deeds of his life, the latter irrelevant to the truth of his thought. "Aristotle was born, philosophized, and died." That's all you need to know when reading Aristotle (perhaps close to all you can know). Yet Alexis de Tocqueville had a life more significant to his thought than Aristotle's. He was in the first place preoccupied with his time, the time when democracy came out of the shadows in which it had been gathering force for centuries to emerge "in broad daylight" (one of Tocqueville's favorite phrases), visible in form and loud of voice. His time was no mere context surrounding or enveloping his thought but rather the center of his intent. In his *Souvenirs* and *The Old Regime*, as well as in *Democracy in America*, the nature of modern democracy is the main object of his thought.

Together with this fact, perhaps a consequence of it, is Tocqueville's life-long absorption in the politics of his country. He ran for office in the National Assembly under the monarchy of Louis-Philippe instead of finishing the second volume of *Democracy in America*, thus postponing its completion for four years. After being elected he took a leading part in its affairs and suffered through the Revolution of 1848, on which he secretly wrote his memorable *Souvenirs*, not for publication. In 1849 he held office briefly as foreign minister under the presidency of Louis Napoleon, who dismissed the government of which Tocqueville was a member in order to clear the way for his coup d'état in 1851. Then, passionately detesting the new regime and hampered by illness, he turned as if to console himself for political defeat to the writing of *The Old Regime*, his last work, unfinished (though in part published) when he died.

Thought in Tocqueville's case seems to take its turn when action is suspended. Yet might there not be a reason in his thought for his engagement in politics? He seems to have a respect for politics unusual in a man of thought. His respect includes respect for political motives such as the "reputation" that he avows he sought for himself in politics. It extends to the study of actual politics as opposed to immersing himself in works of political theory. He came to America to seek "the image of democracy," an object of theory, not in democratic theorists but in American politics.

Hugh Brogan's new biography of Tocqueville does not wrestle with the coherence of his thinking and his actions. [1] Brogan's biography joins André Jardin's (1984), and it is a welcome addition. Brogan writes with intelligence and style entertaining to a serious reader, and instructive to students of biography. I do not know any biographer simultaneously so admiring and so critical of his subject. He does not stint his praise, for example agreeing that Tocqueville's two masterpieces, *Democracy in America* and *The Old Regime*, are indeed masterpieces (and the *Souvenirs* not far

behind), but he is even more generous with blame and denigration. On one page he calls *The Old Regime* “a medley of fiction and wishful thinking,” and on the next “the work of a great historian.” Tocqueville was “too intelligent and too honest intellectually to surrender to his prejudices.” Was he then too stupid and dishonest not to abandon them?

Tocqueville declared himself a friend of democracy, which was a way of admitting or asserting that he was not a democrat, pure and simple. This is not good enough for Brogan. He looks at Tocqueville as a democrat might, suspicious of those who want to keep a distance from democracy so as to consider rather than embrace it. In particular, he has nothing to say about Tocqueville’s appeal to greatness, to “the true friends of freedom and human greatness” among his readers. These friends can also be friends of democracy, like Tocqueville, but it is not easy for them to accept democracy and even harder for democracy to accept them. Democracy is more naturally envious than admiring of greatness. Brogan is capable of admiration, but he lacks any appreciation of Tocqueville’s elevation above the partisan democrat who sees nothing wrong with democracy and believes that every apparent fault can be remedied with more democracy.

Perhaps this is why Brogan feels free in the course of a long book to make many remarks not merely critical but hostile to Tocqueville—that he was “discharging spleen,” “guilty of odious snobbery,” “blindly prejudiced,” “double-dealing,” “insincere,” “self-righteous,” “credulous,” “infatuated,” “wasting his time,” “ignoring common sense,” and “seriously” or “fundamentally” mistaken. Generally Tocqueville is exempt from this sort of abuse and receives due respect from both Left and Right, though to be sure not for the same insights. His readers feel that they are in the presence of a thinker who cannot be dismissed as abstract or irrelevant, one who therefore needs or at least deserves to be understood. Brogan has no such reverence; he seems to feel that when he praises Tocqueville he has license to knock him still harder. This is impartiality as he sees it, overall an unpleasant duty, but with the side attraction of being able to repeat or formulate saucy disparagements.

Brogan uses actions in and conditions of Tocqueville’s life, sometimes expressly, to bring his thought down from what he considers its pretentiousness. Let us see if we can reverse the procedure and find the meaning of his life in his thought, beginning with the demand for greatness unnoticed by Brogan.

Tocqueville believed that greatness can be found in the collective action of a democracy, as in the making of the French Revolution. But greatness pertains much more to an aristocracy because aristocracy is devoted to individuals. Most aristocrats are the landed rich, but they give opportunity to individuals who are truly individual because they are great. Democracy favors equal opportunity, which promotes talents rather than virtue, and it suffers from “individualism,” the condition in which individuals are not truly individual because they are weak and feel incapable. In entering politics, Tocqueville could readily have supposed he was doing democracy a favor. He was showing how virtuous individuals like himself could act for the common good with an exercise and a display of their ambition.

For Brogan, however, Tocqueville’s muted appreciation for aristocracy was nostalgia for the old regime, despite all he said in the most forcible terms to instruct the partisans of that regime that it was gone for good. His sympathy for the Bourbon Legitimists in his family meant that “although his head had renounced the Bourbon cause, his heart found it difficult to do the same.” More vengefully, he was “one of a defeated class, and could not forget or pardon the defeat.” His attempt to educate democracy signified that he was acting on behalf of the “notables” or the “educated classes,” who if they could not dispose of democracy would still contrive to rule it. An “elitist” he was.

Brogan regards Tocqueville’s frequent comparisons between democracy and aristocracy as the sign of an irrepressible penchant for the latter. It would be better to say that they are reminders of the

partiality of democracy, of the fact that democracy does not comprise the whole human good. It constitutes almost a whole within humanity, distinct from aristocracy, replacing it but not invalidating it. Even though aristocracy is gone, its past existence as a kind of humanity sets limits to democracy and serves to restrain democratic extremism. This thought helps explain Tocqueville's courageous opposition to the revolutionary mob in Paris in 1848, scorned by Brogan as a defense of the propertied classes. Tocqueville's warnings against socialism, also disapproved by Brogan, again show the effect of his thought, for socialism is more democratic than the defense of private property, but dangerous to the success of democracy. Tocqueville had reason to behave as he did.

Brogan mocks the notion that Americans might indulge in the tyranny of the majority. It is only "special interests" who tyrannize, and they tyrannize the majority. It is hard to square this view with the fact of slavery of which Tocqueville takes ample notice in the mighty Chapter 10 that ends the first volume of *Democracy in America*. Contrary to Brogan's view that the first volume is an unstructured hodge-podge (and he says the second volume is a failure), this chapter culminates a movement in Tocqueville's argument through the first volume from democratic forms to the informal reality of democracy. The effectual truth of American democracy is that it permits slavery. True, slaveowners constitute a special interest promoting slavery, but slavery is sustained by the majority, either out of prejudice or in fear. It would have been easy for a despot to free the slaves, as happened in Russia, or for a free country like Britain to free the slaves in its colonies. It was not easy to free them from the majority of a democracy. Reading Tocqueville's chapter on the difficulties makes one wonder that they were overcome and better understand the failure to overcome them completely.

According to Tocqueville's second volume of *Democracy*, the means by which the majority has its way is through the administrative centralization of big government (the "immense being"), and it rules, if that is the proper term for it, through its own indifference and unconcern for the public. The result is "mild despotism," which, contrary to Brogan, is not without a certain rationality and good will on the part of government; that is its mildness. Brogan takes note of Tocqueville's unremitting hostility, in his political life as in his writings, to centralized administration whether royal, republican, or Bonapartist. He forgets the distinction Tocqueville makes between political centralization (necessary and good) and administrative centralization (stifling and harmful to liberty), which makes his hostility more specific. By lack of sympathy, or failure to read respectfully, Brogan treats this Tocquevillean theme as exaggerated. Brogan makes him seem aberrant instead of prescient.

A last instance of misinterpretation regards the crisis of belief that came upon Tocqueville when, as he says, "I first began to think" and read the books of atheist philosophers. This crisis occurred when he turned sixteen, Brogan figures, and except for an ambiguous deathbed conversion, disbelief never left him. Tocqueville's self-declared "blackest melancholy" at this point and later is not easy to understand, but, while basing his interpretation on "conjecture," Brogan rushes to interpret the doubt as solely religious and with a religious resolution in a half-Christian deism. This, he thinks, was not a view of Tocqueville's own, but one he shared with his time and his class. Nonetheless, it shows "the unremitting struggle of his brilliant, sensitive mind to shake free of the mental trammels of his upbringing ... and to confront the realities of a new age." Here was genuine liberation, and Brogan likes him for it.

Closer attention to Tocqueville's words, however, reveals that he spoke of "universal doubt" of all "demonstrated truths," not just religious ones. Philosophy, particularly modern philosophy with its certitudes and its insincere skepticism, was also open to doubt. Tocqueville did not reject faith in God merely to deliver himself to faith in science, like the *philosophes* he read in his father's library. He did not follow the pretended doubt of Descartes to the certainties he discovered in reason. He criticized Descartes as the author of the democratic dogma that each individual is a sufficient guide

to his own happiness. Descartes' advice to question all authority leads only to the unreasoned acceptance of each individual's authority, *faute de mieux*. That acceptance creates the new "trammels" of democratic authority as the reality of a new age, the age of democracy.

Brogan says confidently that Tocqueville was "no philosopher." But it would be more prudent to say that he had his doubts about philosophy, particularly the "pantheism" purveyed by "democratic historians" (in *Democracy*) and "literary men" (in *The Old Regime*). He did not want to add to the authority and public role of philosophy, not even by attacking it, as did Edmund Burke. This deliberate, not altogether benign neglect of theory distinguishes Tocqueville from John Stuart Mill, who sent the old man a copy of *On Liberty* in 1859 as he lay dying. Modern, rationalist philosophers, Tocqueville believed, undermined democracy by substituting for the providence of God a materialist teaching that human beings are moved primarily not by individual virtue and common effort but by large, impersonal forces beyond their control.

Tocqueville was a political philosopher who saw humanity in human greatness, greatness in great actions, great actions in liberty, and liberty in politics. He shared some part of the anti-foundationalism of postmodern thinkers today, but he was more consistent than they in his distrust of theory. And for all his criticisms, he paid America the best compliment it ever received from a foreigner when he came here to look for "the image of democracy." Hugh Brogan would be a gifted biographer from beneath his subject; the trouble is that he thinks he is above it.

Notes

[Go to the top of the document.](#)

1. *Alexis de Tocqueville: A Life*, by Hugh Brogan; Yale University Press, 736 pages, \$35. [Go back to the text.](#)

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This article originally appeared in *The New Criterion*, Volume 25 May 2007, on page 64

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