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*Reading Tocqueville: From Oracle to Actor*, eds. Raf Geenens and Annelien De Dijn (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007). 200 pp. \$ 74.95 (cl). ISBN 978-0-230-52746-1 (hardcover).

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The outcome of an international conference organized in Belgium to commemorate the bicentenary of Tocqueville's birth in 2005, *Reading Tocqueville* aims at setting up a dialogue between the historical and the contemporary Tocqueville and purports to show the ways in which a contextualization of Tocqueville's writings throws fresh light on his relevance as a political thinker today. The book also examines the diversity of readings of Tocqueville's writings as well as their reception on both sides of the Atlantic. It is the diversity of viewpoints expressed in this heterogeneous (and unequal) volume that demonstrates that the greatness of Tocqueville does not lie in any single doctrine that he espoused but rather in the ambivalent and often critical lenses through which he analyzed the multiple facets of democracy.

The subtitle of the book, *From Oracle to Actor*, reveals the intention of all contributors to analyze Tocqueville's writings with an open mind by taking into account not only his brilliant insights into the nature of modern democracy but also his allegedly "darker" side (as illustrated by his views on Algeria) and his controversial belief that that a democratic social structure could not exist outside the Christian world. This point is stressed by the two editors in their introduction to this volume: "Looking at Tocqueville from this perspective, seeing him as an *actor*, allows us to gain more insight into one of the most important puzzles in Tocqueville scholarship: the existence of profound internal contradictions in his work" (p. 3). Nonetheless, Tocqueville the political actor appears only partially in the first two chapters written by Jennifer Pitts and Cheryl Welch. Tocqueville feared that his fellow citizens would become dangerously apolitical in an increasingly bourgeois society. His fear, Jennifer Pitts notes, was exacerbated by the thought that there were no longer opportunities for glorious political action in this time. According to Pitts, Tocqueville believed that large-scale colonial enterprises emerged as the only possible arenas for grand politics during his lifetime. Tocqueville, writes Pitts, "responded to such anxieties, in part by turning to the conquest of Algeria as a political experiment that might lend dynamism and confidence to a weak French public" (p. 25). A properly colonized Algeria appeared to him as a new America filled with prosperous settler-citizens. Pitts calls the readers' attention to "the callousness with which Tocqueville was willing to legitimate imperial exploits" (p. 25) and claims that Tocqueville's writings on Algeria, demonstrate his belief that the development of a stable and liberal democratic regime sometimes require the exploitation of non-European societies, and might legitimate suspending principles of human equality and self-determination abroad to secure glory at home, in France.

Cheryl Welch's contribution sheds further light on the fragility of Tocqueville's hope of rebuilding colonial societies under the tutorship of French state. Although Tocqueville admired the British attempt to ease the transition to a free society in its former colonies by creating a system of temporary apprenticeship to former masters, he also believed that this policy had created some confusion among ex-slaves and granted too much power to the former masters. He hoped that the case of the French colonies would be more amenable to race-mixing and assimilation than the English one. There was also an important economic consideration behind Tocqueville's hope. Slave emancipation was absolutely necessary to save the French empire in the Caribbean, once the English had made the decision to

emancipate the slaves in their own colonies. When confronted with the legacy of slavery and mismanagement in the colonies, Tocqueville came to see administrative centralization (which he had previously considered as a significant threat to freedom) as an opportunity for hope. Welch is quick to point out the irony of this hope. Tocqueville's belief that ex-slaves could be convinced that their interest lay in temporary subjection to the bureaucrats in Paris, and that the French state would protect them from social oppression may indeed be surprising in the case of a man who had previously denounced administrative centralization as a major evil. "It is hard to believe that such a society could be regenerated through the discipline of the administrative state, about whose neutrality and benevolence Tocqueville had few illusions," Welch writes. "His proposal to blend ex-masters and ex-slaves into 'one society' under the sponsorship of the metropole appears in retrospect to be more rhetorical than real" (p. 47).

Two essays by Jean-Louis Benoît and Serge Audier examine the diversity of French (Raymond Aron, Marcel Gauchet, Louis Dumont, Claude Lefort) and North-American readings of Tocqueville (David Riesman, Charles Taylor, Michael Walzer, Michael Sandel, Robert Putnam, Benjamin Barber, James Fishkin, and Bruce Ackerman). Both authors agree that some readings of Tocqueville have been partial, with rigorous analysis often giving way to an ideology straying from the true path of his thinking. Some of these authors offered in-depth analyses of Tocqueville's works while others made use only of scattered fragments or themes which became the background for further reflections on democracy in modern society. Audier's chapter sheds light on the extent to which American interpretations of Tocqueville differ from the French ones.<sup>[1]</sup> The latter have often tended to underestimate the role of local associations and the importance of religion in Tocqueville's works, while the Americans have traditionally focused on Tocqueville's views on citizenship, decentralization, and self-government. "Tocqueville's thought," Audier remarks, "remains, until today, more easily assimilated in its coherent totality—that is, including the decisive question of religion—by Anglo-American thinkers than by their French counterparts" (p. 87).

Audier goes further than Benoît in challenging the common view that Tocqueville disappeared almost entirely from the French intellectual scene for almost a century (from 1870s to 1960s) only to be rediscovered by Aron, whose analysis of Tocqueville in *Les Étapes de la pensée sociologique* (1967) marked an important moment in the return of Tocqueville's in France. "The rediscovery of Tocqueville in France," Audier argues, "is much more complex than is commonly thought, and cannot be reduced to a trend or a substitute ideology for a fallen Marxism" (p. 72). Audier reminds us that Tocqueville's early French interpreters in the twentieth-century analyzed his works within the framework of a critique of modernity. He calls our attention to a few overlooked exegeses of Tocqueville such as Antoine Rédier's *Comme disait Monsieur de Tocqueville* (1925) that stressed the anti-democratic aspects of Tocqueville's works, and J.-P. Mayer's writings that interpreted Tocqueville primarily as a prophet of the mass age, the very title of Mayer's book published in 1939.

A central role in both Benoît's and Audier's chapters is played by Raymond Aron whose interpretation of Tocqueville came at a particular moment in French history when liberals like Aron were faced with the important task of reconstructing a coherent conception of the political (etiolated by the ascendancy of Marxist ideas in France), giving strength and vigor to liberalism, and transforming it into a viable alternative to Marxism. While Benoît disagrees with Aron's claim that Tocqueville failed to grasp the full consequences of the industrial revolution and had a weak understanding of economics, Audier insists that Aron's reading of Tocqueville reduced his works to a critique of totalitarianism and a defense of liberalism seen as an absolute political and economic whole, without nuances. In the footsteps of Aron, Marcel Gauchet's important essay, "Tocqueville, l'Amérique et nous" (1980), and Claude Lefort's writings reintegrated totalitarianism as a key moment in the evolution of modern democracy. In Gauchet's view, Tocqueville's genius lies in his prescient remark that the malaise of democratic mind paves the way for totalitarianism which is above all a mere substitute for genuine religion. As such, all forms of twentieth-century totalitarianism filled the open space left by religion in the democratic mind.

For Lefort, the attractiveness of Tocqueville's works stems from the fact that they brought to the fore all the contradictions at work in modern democracy and showed how even the most promising democratic developments (political freedom) might lead to their opposites (soft bureaucratic despotism).

Ringo Ossewaarde's essay, focusing on democratic threats and threats to democracy, seeks to demonstrate that for Tocqueville liberty was above all a classical (rather than an aristocratic) value, exercised by virtuous citizens engaged on a common pursuit of the common good and common liberty. Ossewaarde offers an excellent discussion of Tocqueville's classicism illustrated by his belief that liberty and human dignity can survive only if the classical standards of thinking and feeling are preserved in turn. Noting a striking resemblance between Molière's *Le bourgeois gentilhomme* and Tocqueville's depiction of bourgeois passions, Ossewaarde links Tocqueville's critique of individualism to his fear that the latter would ultimately make classical virtues and standards, necessary for an active public life, entirely redundant. Yet, in spite of Tocqueville's distaste for the mediocrity of bourgeois culture, Ossewaarde remarks, he never became an admirer of the romantics. Nor did he share their philosophical idealism that sought to substitute aesthetics for politics and often demanded artistic freedom in place of political liberty. Tocqueville was skeptical toward the romantic type of democratic individual whose radical Cartesianism makes him "deaf" to classical values and standards. The apprenticeship of liberty, he pointed out, is always difficult because freedom requires a great deal of effort, self-restraint, sacrifice, practical wisdom, and virtue. Tocqueville, Ossewaarde writes, understood virtue in the classical tradition as the habit to choose and do what is good. On this view, the preservation of liberty implies determining those conditions that sustain or reduce the opportunities to practice civic virtue by participating in the pursuit of the common good through self-government. As such, Ossewaarde notes, classicism became Tocqueville's solution for safeguarding the highest civic and religious strands of thought, feeling, and action, without which a self-governing democratic republic cannot properly function. All these virtues and standards of action and feeling must be properly (and actively) cultivated in democratic societies.

Both Paul Cliteur's and Agnès Antoine's essays focus on the role of religion in Tocqueville's works. They start from Tocqueville's acknowledgment that religion is not only compatible with democracy but it is in fact necessary to uphold the democratic order. Yet, there are important differences between the two contributions. Cliteur proposes a secular reading of Tocqueville that presents him as "the expounder of the notion of a 'civil religion' that is much broader than religion in its confessional meaning" (p. 124). It is this denominationally neutral civil religion of the Enlightenment thinkers such as Rousseau (and, I would add, Spinoza) that Cliteur identifies in those passages from Tocqueville where the latter refers to the republican religion of the majority in America. This is, in Cliteur's opinion, the best way of making Tocqueville's writings relevant for our democracies today in a multicultural secular age.

A distillation of the ideas presented in her acclaimed book, *L'impensé de la démocratie. Tocqueville, la citoyenneté et la religion* (Paris: Fayard, 2003), Agnès Antoine's chapter emphasizes that Tocqueville's reflection on democracy cannot be properly understood apart from his reflections on the role of religion in modern society. The reconciliation of democracy, religion, and morality is the underlying theme that runs through all of Tocqueville's works and political views. Antoine argues that "the types of questions Tocqueville poses to democracy arise out of a religious sensibility and a theological framework that implicitly underlie his sociological method. ... Tocqueville's approach to the human condition is Augustinian in that his questions are mainly addressed to the 'heart' of the democrat, towards the object of his love." (p. 133).

Antoine claims that Freud and Augustine are the best guides for reading Tocqueville, along with Pascal and Rousseau. What all these thinkers have in common is the fact they see human beings as creatures of passion and desire, divided between self-love and love of God, between the angel and the beast. Tocqueville's greatest innovation, Antoine argues, is to have presented "the potential for narcissism as

more properly a result of social conditioning than a choice of modernity” (p.135) and to have offered through his new science of politics artificial means for countervailing the corrosive effects of narcissism. Because it took into account not only the body but also the soul of democratic citizens, Tocqueville’s new science of politics was much more comprehensive and ambitious than that of many of his predecessors (Madison and Hamilton) and contemporaries (J. S. Mill)

Larry Siedentop’s and Wilfried Swenden’s contributions to this volume draw on Tocqueville’s ideas to offer a Tocquevillian perspective on European integration today. Siedentop remarks that “Tocqueville, when confronted with the European Union, would probably have gone through the whole gamut of emotions” (p. 143). He would have certainly been worried by the potential of a new form of bureaucratic tyranny in Brussels as he would have been dismayed by the absence of adequate public debate about the nature and purpose of the new European project. Siedentop suggests that Tocqueville would have rejected a purely economic approach to European integration since, for him satisfying consumer and voters wants did not exclude trying to improve the quality of those wants. Tocqueville would have also resisted “the infiltration of liberalism by economic reductionism” (p. 149) and would have deplored the etiolation of the political as the result of the habit of subordinating political and constitutional issues to economic arguments.

*Pace* Siedentop, Swenden believes that “by today’s standards, the European Union is far from heading towards the bureaucratic tyranny which Tocqueville (and Siedentop) fear(ed) so much” (p. 155). He compares the present institutional form of the European Union to federalism and suggests that the Union does not display the strong centripetal tendencies that Siedentop finds. In this sense, Swenden writes, “a more accurate description of the European Union is to see it as a ‘poly-centric’ polity or a system of multi-level governance in which functions are dispersed and shared across various levels of authority, without producing the ‘centralizing’ implications which Tocqueville (and Siedentop) seemed to fear so much” (p. 162). In the end, both Siedentop and Swenden agree that creating a constitutional sense requires first politicizing the European Union, an arduous task not devoid of its own perils.

It is not surprising that the nature of Tocqueville’s new liberalism continues to elicit different interpretations, from Tocqueville as proponent of civil religion to Tocqueville as defender of imperialism. For all their virtues, some of the chapters included in this book do not render justice to the complexity of Tocqueville’s thought and practice (I should also point out in passing that a number of chapters, such as those by Pitts, Antoine, and Siedentop, repeat the core arguments made by the respective authors in previous books). It is a pity that Tocqueville’s political agenda (which is discussed to some extent in Pitts’ and Welch’s essays) does not loom larger in this book, since his parliamentary speeches and initiatives clearly show his unflinching commitment to freedom throughout his entire life.[2] And it is regrettable that two important works of Tocqueville—his *Recollections* and *The Old Regime and the Revolution*—are not properly discussed in this volume.

While I strongly believe that Tocqueville’s writings benefit from being subjected to an open and critical reinterpretation, *Reading Tocqueville* does not shed fresh light on at least two important issues that are central to the declared agenda of the book. Contrary to the intentions of the editors, the contributions to this volume do not clearly demonstrate how Tocqueville’s work was shaped by the political milieu in which he was writing. Nor is it evident the extent to which Tocqueville’s new science of politics offers a coherent framework, concepts, and tools for studying the processes of democratization and the state of democracy *beyond* North America and Western Europe. In other words, the reader is left wondering how the tools used by Tocqueville in his study of the democratic revolution in the United States and Europe can also be effectively updated and applied to understand the ongoing global democratic revolution taking place all over the world in the twenty-first century.

Tocqueville was fully aware of the multifarious nature of his work as well as of the various reactions to his writings. In a letter to Eugène Stoffels from February 21, 1835 (quoted in the editors’ introduction),

the author of *Democracy in America* wryly remarked: “I please many persons of conflicting opinions, not because they understand me, but because they find in my work, by considering it only from a single side, arguments favorable to their passion of the moment.”<sup>[3]</sup> His words remain as valid today as they were two centuries ago. *Reading Tocqueville* proves that there are still many Tocquevilles speaking different languages and addressing various intellectual and political constituencies.<sup>[4]</sup>

## NOTES

[1] It is regrettable that Audier does not refer to Françoise Mélonio’s seminal study *Tocqueville and the French* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1998).

[2] The last years of Tocqueville’s life are revealing in this regard. For more information, see Alexis de Tocqueville, *Letters and Other Writings: Tocqueville on America after 1840*, edited and translated and with an introduction by Aurelian Craiutu and Jeremy Jennings (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

[3] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Selected Letters on Politics and Society*, ed. and trans. Roger Boesche and James Toupin (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), pp. 99-100. It is not a mere coincidence that Tocqueville refused to give a single definition of democracy and worked with no less than nineteen meanings of democracy. For more detail on this issue, see James T. Schleifer, *The Making of Tocqueville’s Democracy in America*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2000), pp. 325-39.

[4] For more information, see François Furet, “The Passions of Tocqueville,” *The New York Review of Books* (June 27, 1985): 23-27; François Bourricaud, “Les ‘convictions’ de M. de Tocqueville,” *The Tocqueville Review/La revue Tocqueville*, 7 (1985-1986): 105-115; Robert Nisbet, “Many Tocquevilles,” *The American Scholar* Winter (1976-1977): 65-75; Roger Boesche, *The Strange Liberalism of Alexis de Tocqueville* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), pp. 15-18, and Alan S. Kahan, *Aristocratic Liberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992). The contest for finding Tocqueville’s “true” beliefs would have probably amused the Frenchman as much as it would have irritated him. Marcel Gauchet once argued “there is a cutting Tocqueville, to be delivered from his pale and lukewarm liberal flatterers, even a polemical Tocqueville, to be contrasted with our mediocre professors in subversion and other contemporaries certified in a subject about which they understand nothing” (Marcel Gauchet, “Tocqueville, l’Amérique et nous,” *Libre* 7 [1980]: 83-84).

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