



Tocqueville's Discovery of America

Leo Damrosch

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Jrobertus says

Tocqueville and his friend Gustave Beaumont toured America in 1831-2, nominally to study the modern prison system. In fact they were sampling the life style of the new land. Tocqueville was a member of the aristocracy that survived the French Revolution and Terror, and held many theoretical ideals about democracy in America, and of course wrote his famous book on the subject. Damrosch draws on this, and on the work of other contemporary European observers to paint a picture of the new land. Business, money, course manners and braggadocio seem the order of the day, and yet there is an incredible dynamism that will clearly sweep the earth. Not a great read, but still worth knowing.

Kathy Petersen says

As writer (actually, ghostwriter) for the director of a history museum, I have frequently delved into de Toqueville's *Democracy in America*, but I absolutely reveled in Damrosch's discussion of the young Frenchman's journey. Damrosch uses plenty of de Toqueville's best known work, but he also quotes from his letters and notes and from his companion Beaumont as well as other contemporary travelers and observers. It's a deep and fascinating exploration of an America that was but that also has continuing consequences that we experience 180 years later.

Lauren Albert says

Damrosch does an excellent job of tracing Tocqueville and his companion's trip across America and their changing thoughts and feelings about the country. Damrosch refers to Tocqueville's book as "prescient" and that is exactly how I felt years ago reading it for a class. Perhaps only an outsider could have been so spot-on about the effects of democracy on a culture. If you read it for yourself, you will probably think, as I did, "could he really have been writing in the early 19th-century?" Because it shows remarkable insight (and foresight). "In proportion as slavery departs, the whites grow more afraid of mixing the races and grow more contemptuous. The law is less harsh, but hatred is more so." He is anticipating here the work of 20th century anthropologists like Victor Turner and Mary Douglas. Freed African-Americans were thrust into a social limbo--a liminal state as Turner called it--they were hated and feared for no longer being in a fixed, controllable category. Tocqueville, in many ways, was a social anthropologist before the discipline existed and his book shows many such insights.

Elizabeth says

this is a wonderful look at the lives and journey of Alexis de Tocqueville and Gustave de Beaumont who traveled to America in 1830 and observed the prisons, people, and government of this new land. As you all know the result was "Democracy in America." This is an engaging portrait of that journey and what was observed. Having read *Democracy in America*, this is an even more interesting look at the authors.

As it describes their lives, it describes the turmoil and politics of France. De Tocqueville has a talent for seeing into a subject and describing it. Read it!

Mike W says

Domrosch's book is a pleasant and easy read. It offers the reader a vivid portrait of the journey through the US taken by Tocqueville and his companion that made his classic work "Democracy in America" possible. Through the narrative, the Damrosch gives the reader a sense of what life was like in the US in the 1830's.

Unfortunately, the book fails to summarize or analyze Tocqueville's political views well. It provides glimpses here and there, but never really synthesizes the great man's views in a coherent way. Moreover, Damrosch annoyingly over-emphasizes what he considers Tocqueville's errors. Indeed, a reader who read this before reading "Democracy in America" would wonder how such a bumbling political analyst could have become so famous.

But there are interesting tidbits in the story--about Charles Dickens' bigotry and about JQ Adams' disdain for Andrew Jackson, for example.

So Damrosch's book is enjoyable and worth reading, but could have been much better.

mali says

A quick and enjoyable read. I wish it was a bit longer.

Marfy says

From the Prologue, "The America that [Tocqueville] encountered was no abstract embodiment of democracy, but a turbulent, competitive, rapidly changing society. During the 1830s the nation was still young. It had recently elected its first populist president in Andrew Jackson, it was expanding aggressively westward, and it was deeply conscious of class, regional and racial tensions, forebodingly aware that civil war might one day tear it apart. This book seeks to bring that world and that traveler to life, through Tocqueville's own highly perceptive observations at the time and through the wealth of comments on Jacksonian America made by a host of contemporaries, especially other foreign visitors who published book-length accounts."

Howard Mansfield says

Leo Damrosch has a sure touch, deep knowledge of the period, and of Tocqueville's French milieu. His own translations of Tocqueville's letters and notes give Tocqueville a steady voice which is lacking in other books which rely on many different translations. Damrosch shows us what Tocqueville and his friend Gustave Beaumont saw, who they talked to, and what they missed and misjudged. What makes the book is the intelligence and good spirit of the 26-year-old French aristocrat eager to see this new nation. In Upstate

New York, Tocqueville surveys the countryside from a church steeple. "When you climb a steeple there's nothing as far as the eye can see but trees, agitated by the wind like waves in the sea. Everything attests to a new world."

Claritybear says

For anyone who has read "Democracy in America" this is a wonderful companion book. I knew almost nothing about Tocqueville but have very much enjoyed reading and rereading "Democracy in America" over the years for his incredibly accurate and insightful observations of my country. "Tocqueville's Discovery of America" provided me with a lot of insight into Tocqueville's life pre-American visit and post. It also gives valuable historical information on what was going on in France and across Europe at the time of Tocqueville's life. It is well-written, very accessible without being easy or simple. Damrosch cites many previously unpublished letters and journal entries from Yale's Tocqueville collection. He also writes a lot about Tocqueville's travel companion Gustave de Beaumont who I previously knew nothing about and who of course influenced and helped Tocqueville greatly. After finishing it I just want to reread "Democracy in America" again with my new knowledge of what Tocqueville was thinking, feeling and experiencing when he took the notes that would eventually become the great two part book.

David R. says

A fine companion to the seminal "Democracy in America". Damrosch tells the story of Alexis de Tocqueville's voyage to the youthful USA and speculates on the encounters and discoveries that led to his eventual masterpiece. Along the way we derive the benefit of a look at 1830s America from an outsider's perspective. Highly recommended to any student of Americana and to all who had the pleasure of reading Tocqueville.

Jeremy K says

I thought this was a book that did not need to be written. The sort of information contained in the book - where Tocqueville and Beaumont went, who they met, what America was like at the time, a brief synopsis of Tocqueville's life - are appropriate for an introduction to Democracy in America, but not for an entire book.

If the book were interesting in some way, then I might have enjoyed it more. But instead, it reads like one long encyclopedia entry on Alexis de Tocqueville. The only interesting parts were when the author quoted from Democracy in America. One good thing I got out of this is that I'll read Tocqueville's classic. But as for this book, I didn't care for it.

Philip says

De Tocqueville's "Discovery of America" (1831) remains a landmark evaluation of this country, its institutions, and its people. I read it years ago and was deeply impressed with the author's sharp, intuitive judgments. Now along comes Leo Damrosch's book about de Tocqueville and his book--and I found it

fascinating! He analyzes de Tocqueville's background, family, and culture (post-revolution France); his and Beaumont's trip to America, their route, what they saw; and how it affected de Tocqueville and what he subsequently wrote. An important book for anyone interested in the American character, and a wonderful way to revisit the original.

Lars Guthrie says

A wonderful companion to Peter Carey's 'Parrot and Olivier,' Damrosch's work sticks with the real historical figure, while still offering a fresh perspective. 'Discovery' follows Tocqueville through his nine month peregrination using contemporary accounts from the same times, places, and personalities found in his notes, which Damrosch does a beautiful job of translating.

Tocqueville certainly made keen and pithy observations on the new land he was visiting, some of which have proved their truth over many years. He was far less judgmental than other European tourists of the period, like Charles Dickens and Francis Trollope (Anthony's mother), who saw 'a nation of spitters.'

But Damrosch reminds us Tocqueville was also a very real young man, who could be insecure, depressed, compulsive, and frustrated with the sexual mores of American women. And that he was sometimes wrong, as when he portrayed a vast and homogenous middle class without economic divisions, or when he failed to see the cagey intelligence behind Andrew Jackson's corn-pone personality.

Tocqueville's journey (with his friend Gustave de Beaumont) itself makes for a good story--something Peter Carey picked up on. The two men were indefatigable travelers, tramping through endless forest and bouncing over relentlessly rough roads, bearing up under illness, mosquitos, and a freakishly cold Southern winter, meeting luminaries and common folk. They were up for an adventure, and they had one.

Damrosch presents their story in a slender and immensely readable volume that makes excellent use of primary sources, acknowledges modern perspectives, and even concisely assesses both the myth and the matter of Tocqueville's masterpiece, 'Democracy in America.'

Mundi says

I've been on a bit of a history bender for the past few years - no favorites, all history is interesting - and getting back down into American history has been especially intriguing, one, as new authors and producers put together their own intricate tales, and two, as a liberal dose of genealogy has flavored my personal knowledge of history.

Alexis De Toqueville was a french aristocrat who was commissioned to travel in America in 1830, and to report on the penitentiary system. As a personal journey, he was interested in seeing this experiment in democracy for himself. And Indians, he wanted to see the savage Native Americans.

And yet, even as an aristocrat, he was an fair-minded, observant, balanced, and objective man, and found much of interest in America under the category of Democracy. Especially in comparison to his own motherland of France, having birthed a revolution of her own only a few decades earlier.

He dutifully toured the penitentiaries, but his questions and his eyes were focused more on how these ideas of democracy and liberty were playing out in a country that was rapidly expanding west, with the perception at the time of unlimited resources.

In the south, slavery and the treatment of slaves disturbed him profoundly, yet he very clearly understood the law and the tenuous knit of the United States, and wrote with great accuracy what would drive America into a civil war only three decades later: "The only case in which a civil war could break out would be if the army was divided, one part raising the flag of rebellion and the other remaining loyal."

Toqueville published his observations a few years after his return (after the required report on the penal system of course) as 'Discovery of America'. It has been a literary hit ever since. Yet I'd like to be clear that this book is not Toqueville's published works, this is more of a biography of Toqueville, and includes passages and quotes from many others who also made observations in America around the same time period. There are many references to his frame of mind, and why he may have been able to comment in the manner that he did; letters from his travelling companion and friend that help to explain more of their journey.

This is more a summary of 'Discovery of America' and an examination of the man who wrote it, than the actual publication. But in my opinion, it is the journey that is of interest - not the destination.

Liam says

"We go about constantly questioning the people we encounter, we squeeze whoever falls into our hands, and at night we write up what we've heard during the day." (Beaumont, 18)

"Whenever someone fails to strike me with something unusual in the mind or feelings, I, so to speak, do not see him. I've always thought that mediocre men, just as much as people of merit, have noses, mouths, and eyes, but I've never been able to fix in my memory their particular version of these features ... I respect them, for they lead the world, but they bore me profoundly." (Tocqueville in Souvenirs, 20)

"A description of a beautiful thing is always an ugly thing." (Tocqueville, 91)

"I doubt More would have written his Utopia if he had been able to realize some of his dreams in English government, and I think the Germans of our day wouldn't philosophize so passionately about universal truth if they could put some of their ideas into political practice." (Tocqueville, 108)

"The Americans don't have a literature, but they do have books." (Tocqueville, 109)

"His mind has long lost all power of communicating any other. I know no man who lives in such utter intellectual solitude." (Harriet Martineau of Calhoun, 174).

"I've hurled myself at America in a sort of fury ... I think about hardly anything else, even when I'm pulling my cock." (Tocqueville writing Democracy in America, 200)
