Arthur Goldhammer, "What Would Alexis de Tocqueville Have Made of the 2016 US Presidential Election?"

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In 1831, the young French aristocrat Alexis de Tocqueville and his friend Gustave de Beaumont, both lawyers in their early 20s bored by their desk jobs at a courthouse in Versailles, traveled to the United States. They ostensibly came to study American prisons, but more importantly to see for themselves the great American experiment with democracy, which both intrigued and terrified them. After nine months in Jacksonian America, which saw the pair ranging from the drawing rooms of New York and Boston to the frontier outpost of Saginaw in the Michigan Territory, and from the pestilential swamps of Frenchified New Orleans to the still largely barren national capital on the banks of the Potomac, they returned home—Tocqueville to write a book that would become a classic, *Democracy in America*, Beaumont to publish his novel *Marie, or Slavery in the United States*.

"A presidential election in the United States may be looked upon as a time of national crisis," Tocqueville wrote. "As the election draws near, intrigues intensify, and agitation increases and spreads. The citizens divide into several camps, each behind its candidate. A fever grips the entire nation. The election becomes the daily grist of the public papers, the subject of private conversations, the aim of all activity, the object of all thought, the sole interest of the moment."

To be sure, for all his prescience, the French visitor could hardly have foreseen the unique "agitation" of the 2016 presidential election, although he was under no illusion that popular sovereignty posed any sort of bar to the election of the uncouth and uncultivated. After all, the voters of one congressional district had sent to the House of Representatives "a man with no education, who can barely read [and] lives in the woods." (The man's name was Davy Crockett.) Nor was Tocqueville unfamiliar with the pretensions of wealthy New Yorkers who resided in "marble palaces" that turned out, on closer inspection, to be made of "whitewashed brick" with "columns of painted wood." Hence, neither the ersatz splendor of Trump

Tower nor its principal inhabitant's unfamiliarity with the US Constitution or the Russian occupation of Crimea would have surprised him, although Donald Trump's nomination as the presidential candidate of a major political party would surely have shocked him even more than Crockett's election to Congress. A democratic people might not always choose its leaders wisely, but the quality of its choices would surely improve, Tocqueville believed, as education was democratized and "enlightenment" spread. Perhaps he was too optimistic.

This summer, as the quadrennial fever gripping the United States reached a paroxysm with the Republican and Democratic national conventions, I joined my colleague Olivier Zunz, with whom I've collaborated in translating a number of Tocqueville's works, in hosting a National Endowment for the Humanities seminar on "American Democracy With Tocqueville as Guide." For two weeks, we met with 16 handpicked scholars from around the country to ponder Tocqueville's precocious masterpiece.
With remarkable concentration, we focused our efforts on parsing the author's meaning, and the frenzied agitation of the convention week rarely intruded on our conversations. Yet it proved impossible to reread Tocqueville's text without sharing his anxiety about the thousand natural and unnatural shocks that democracy is heir to. For who does not feel that this election represents a moment of extreme peril for the United States? And "extreme peril," Tocqueville wrote, "does not always impel a nation to rise to meet it; it is sometimes fatal. It can arouse passions without offering guidance and cloud a nation's intelligence rather than enlighten it."

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What is the source of the danger? Before that question can be answered, we first must ask what Tocqueville thought about two things: democracy and revolution. Democracy, in his eyes, wasn't merely a political system but above all a "social state" characterized by what he called "equality of conditions." By that phrase, he didn't mean equality of income or wealth: "I am of course aware that in any great democratic people there will always be some citizens who are very poor and others who are very rich." The kind of equality that Tocqueville had in mind was aspirational rather than material: It meant that no person's rights or ambitions should be circumscribed by birth.

In the democratic social state, the future is boundless, in stark contrast to prerevolutionary France, where low birth was an insuperable impediment to certain careers, to the consummation of certain marriages, and to the achievement or even the inception of certain ambitions (such as a military command or high office). What impressed Tocqueville about the United States was that life's horizons were free of impediments for the many and not just the few—at least in principle. Practice was another matter: The French traveler was given to overestimating social mobility in democratic America, but many Americans, then as now, are prone to the same error.

Yet Tocqueville was not the lugubrious sort of social critic for whom lofty principles serve merely to shroud a sordid reality. Despite the myriad imperfections of this world, he held that its improvement wasn't beyond reach. By visiting the United States, he hoped to discover lessons he might impart to his own countrymen, for whom he believed a more democratic future was inevitable. He was impressed, in particular, by the American preference for gradualism over the dangerous French predilection for revolution: "What the word 'republic' means in the United States is the slow and tranquil action of society on itself."

But how can an abstraction like "society" act on anything, let alone itself? At times, Tocqueville might seem to have anticipated Margaret Thatcher's sentiment that "there is no such thing as society." He had harsh words for the imprecision of democratic writers, who loved to "personify…abstractions and set them in action as though they were real individuals." This barb in particular was aimed at one of his teachers, François Guizot, a historian turned politician who advocated government not by the people, but rather by those with "capacities"—Guizot's airily abstract term for the educated elite.

Unlike Thatcher, however, Tocqueville could posit "society" as an actor with itself as the object because he recognized that thought is hamstrung unless it can avail itself of "general ideas." Admittedly, abstract words are dangerous; they are, he wrote, "like a box with a false bottom: you can put in any ideas you please and take them out again without anyone being the wiser." But they are nevertheless essential. To speak of society in this abstract way was a novelty in Tocqueville's time. Neither venerable tradition nor divine commandment could limit the horizon of the possible in the democratic social

state. Politics thereby acquired a new purpose: not just to administer society but to shape it. Democratic man claimed the freedom to imagine his own future, individually and collectively.

Tocqueville nonetheless rejected the idea that the future could be totally severed from the past. This was the error of the French revolutionaries, who thought that by declaring the date of the monarchy's destruction Year Zero, they could wipe the historical slate clean and start humanity's clock anew. For Tocqueville, however, the idea of a future wholly purged of the past was but a shimmering mirage forever receding into the distance. True freedom, he believed, lay rather in slow and tranquil action in concert with others sharing some collective purpose.

But what makes an effective revolution? And can there be a democratic social state without one? Normally, "a people that has lived for centuries under the regime of castes and classes can achieve a democratic social state only by way of a long series of more or less painful transformations." The United States had been largely exempt from the pain of such convulsions, Tocqueville argued, because it had sprung from "the middle" of English society. The "Anglo-Americans," as he liked to call the American people (slighting the multicultural diversity that already existed in 1831 and has only increased since), had achieved equality without a "great revolution"—the American Revolution having been, in his eyes, merely the consecration of an already existing de facto independence. Thus, Americans were able to avoid the "deep turmoil" that "lives on for quite some time" in the wake of revolution, during the period when the previous social order continues to exist in memory.

Tocqueville didn't live to see America's civil war, which surely would have counted as a social revolution in his eyes, though he did anticipate it: "If America ever experiences great revolutions, they will be brought on by the presence of Blacks on the soil of the United States." He did foresee how the enormous expansion of the federal government that followed the Civil War could lead to something like the New Deal, another revolution of a kind. But for Tocqueville, as for so many other observers of the United States before and since, America was exceptional precisely because it had come to

democracy without a great revolution comparable to the French Revolution of 1789.

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The young traveler, living in the shadow of the grand upheaval that took the life of his great-grandfather Malesherbes and nearly claimed his parents (who were scheduled for the guillotine on the day Robespierre fell), would come to realize that he had distinguished too sharply between "great revolutions" and the petty yet inexorable pace of ordinary political life. He corrected the error in his second masterpiece, *The Ancien Régime and the Revolution* (first published in 1856), in which he acknowledged the lengthy gestation of the Revolution of 1789. Revolutions can be a long time coming, the older Tocqueville conceded, and glacially slow changes can, over time, reshape the social landscape as thoroughly as the more rapid upheavals for which we normally reserve the word "revolution."

I think he would have been comfortable applying that term to the last half-century of American history, during which a series of major upheavals has led to a greater equality of conditions. For most of American history, the "average Joe" was a white heterosexual male, and with that status came the privilege associated with averageness in a democratic social state. Yet despite stiff and continuing resistance, previously disadvantaged groups—African Americans, women, gays and lesbians, immigrants of non-European origin—have successfully asserted their right to be defined by their sameness vis-à-vis other citizens rather than by their difference; they have become *semblables*, or "fellow human beings," to use Tocqueville's hard-to-translate French term. Formerly discriminated against as "minorities," they have joined the majority—not in the electoral sense, but in the more psychologically fraught realm of social representation.

In 1992, a former long-haired hippie who lived through the upheavals of the 1960s (all right, he didn't inhale, but neither did he serve) was elected president of the United States. With his election, the more inclusive counterculture of the baby-boom generation arrived in the White House. That former president's wife, symbolizing the emancipation of women from the private into the public sphere, has achieved prominence in her own right as an activist, senator, and secretary of state. When her quest to become president was put on hold eight years ago, it was because a black man—also

a symbol of that half-century of upheaval—defeated her in the primaries and became the nation's 44th president.

Proceeding slowly if not always tranquilly, the overlapping egalitarian revolutions that shaped the careers of Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton have nevertheless occasioned "deep turmoil," as Tocqueville recognized would be the case whenever equality expanded and hierarchy receded. The public prominence suddenly enjoyed by a few exceptional figures from groups long denied rights and equality has shifted the perception of the average. This is an essential change, because in a society built on putative equality, the average is the key criterion according to which individuals build an identity and protect it from threats, real or perceived. People do not quickly forget the advantages they once enjoyed gratis. It is not just that the average Joe must now compete with Jill and Jamal; it is rather that Jill and Jamal are not average at all. They cannot be, because the groups they represent, while "more equal" than before, still face prejudice and social disadvantages. (The president is a black man, but presently only one black woman runs a *Fortune* 500 corporation.) Hence, as representative figures of the new average, Jill and Jamal are necessarily, if paradoxically, exceptional—winners in the competitive struggle by which the nation has over the same extended revolutionary period come to select its elites.

And there's the rub, for at the heart of that competitive struggle is the unequal distribution of talents inherent in the human condition. The (relative) equalization of conditions with respect to gender and race has given new prominence to a long-developing differentiation of conditions with respect to, among other things, educational attainment. Jill and Jamal, having swotted their way through the SATs, the Ivy League, and prestigious law schools, have risen to the commanding heights, while the formerly average Joe is now thoughtlessly derided in certain quarters as "Joe Six-Pack." And he is nursing a powerful resentment of the new and, in his eyes, undeserving elite.

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This year's election, therefore, is the culmination of a long-simmering backlash against the social revolutions of the past half-century. The reaction distills several strands of resistance to the loss of white male heteronormative

privilege. Although it is not exclusively economic in origin, the backlash does have an economic component. Study after study has shown that less-educated white working-class men are a crucial factor in the growing polarization of our politics as well as the increasingly caustic tone of political debate. The stagnation of the median wage since the 1980s is incontrovertible, as is the growth of inequality in both income and wealth in the same period. Many small-business owners—another constituency overrepresented in Trumpist ranks—feel that their economic position has become more precarious and that their children's prospects have dimmed since the financial crisis.

But why should a shift in equality's center of gravity owing to greater racial and gender inclusiveness affect this group so powerfully? After all, it's not as though the white working-class man once wielded power that has now been taken from him. He previously saw himself as subject to the whims of what Tocqueville called the "industrial aristocracy," which thought of itself as "born to command," while the worker seemed "born to obey." Having observed firsthand the ravages of the early Industrial Revolution, Tocqueville expected that this aristocracy might be "one of the harshest that has ever existed on earth," but he also thought that it would be "one of the most limited and least dangerous," because it would "not know how to exert its will." This was not one of Tocqueville's more far-sighted judgments, no doubt because he pictured commerce and government as existing in separate spheres, with the latter having no role in managing the former. He surely would have been astonished by the spectacle of a man of great wealth but common tastes serving as the mouthpiece for the resentments of the formerly average Joe, whom he might have expected rather to resent the rich man's ostentatiously flaunted privilege.

Yet to explain the unnatural marriage of white status anxiety with gold-plated notoriety, we must look beyond economic grievances. After all, working-class blacks, Latinos, and women, who earn less in comparable jobs than white men and are less likely to have amassed any significant wealth, haven't deserted the Democratic Party, whereas white working-class men have—especially in the South. Thus, any purely economic explanation for what's happening in American politics is inadequate, and better explanations must be sought elsewhere.

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What has been most striking, and disturbing, about the Trumpist movement from the beginning is the vehemence of the passions that drive it. We have become inured to extreme political polarization in recent years, but the unusually virulent passions on the right this year still have the power to shock. It is easy (and true) to say that the candidate encourages them, but his brash bigotry and scornful contempt for opponents have landed on eager ears. It wasn't Trump who was shouting "Lock her up!" at the Republican National Convention or wearing a "Kill the Bitch!" T-shirt; it was his supporters. They respond not to his policy proposals, which are vague at best, but to his belligerence, mockery, and contempt.

What accounts for the sudden revelation of these surly passions? I say "revelation" because it's clear that these hostile sentiments have been festering for some time, only to be elevated to greater visibility by Trump's unlikely series of primary victories—to the point that many Americans, including many Republicans, wonder how well they understand their own country. Tocqueville experienced a similar shock in 1848: "We console ourselves for our lack of knowledge of foreign countries by telling ourselves that at least we know our own, but we are wrong, for there are always regions we have not visited and races of men of which we know nothing." On encountering radical Montagnards in the lower house of the French Parliament, Tocqueville remarked on the strangeness of their "idiom and manners": They "spoke a jargon…full of coarse words…. Jocular quips jockeyed with sententious judgments, and the tone varied from the ribald to the pretentious."

The writer J.D. Vance, whose recent memoir *Hillbilly Elegy* recounts his formative years in impoverished rural Appalachia and his escape to Yale Law School and subsequent career in finance, sees Trumpism as partly a reaction against the easy dismissal by educated elites of his own poor white subculture—the only subculture in America, he asserts, against which prejudices can be openly voiced in elite circles. In Vance's view, Trump is effectively expressing the frustrations of this and other allegedly despised groups, in a lexicon and tone they recognize as their own.

Tocqueville knew about these kinds of frustrations. He famously described "the revolution of rising expectations," which breaks out when improving conditions make it impossible for people to bear their old shackles any longer. What's happening now is the opposite: a reaction driven by falling expectations, by fear of the imminent loss of privileges once attached to the white race and the male gender. We might call these sociological frustrations, because they stem from a group's position in the social structure, from which escape is rare.

Tocqueville discusses this dilemma in a seldom-quoted chapter of*Democracy in America* devoted to class in democratic armies. There he briefly sketches the psychology of the noncommissioned officer, whose station in life condemns him to "an obscure, narrow, uncomfortable and precarious existence"—rather like the Americans today who see themselves as deprived of opportunities for advancement by the influx of women and people of color into positions formerly reserved for white males. The noncommissioned officer is caught between an elite officer corps that he stands little chance of entering and the mass of common soldiers, from which he tries to distinguish himself by emulating the attitude of his superiors and pouring scorn on those below. The cadres of Trump's army, the NCOs of his movement, are similar: They compensate for their "uncomfortable and precarious existence" by identifying with a man who pretends to incarnate unflinching decisiveness and incomparable success. They see no essential difference between themselves and him; he shares their tastes, reviles their enemies, and exhibits no particular talent other than force of will, which they are sure they could match if they were ever in a position of command.

The military analogy calls to mind another of the virtues that Tocqueville believes society must muster from time to time—the spirit of sacrifice. He associates this virtue primarily with war: "In order for a nation to wage war on a grand scale, its citizens must be prepared to make numerous and painful sacrifices." Sacrifice, however, is not the cardinal virtue of democracy, which is motivated by self-interest. At its best, "self-interest properly understood," as Tocqueville called it, can be enlightened, capacious, and far-sighted, as opposed to narrow selfishness; but it is still quite different from voluntary sacrifice, which Tocqueville associates with aristocratic honor. Vance says that his "military service is the thing I'm most proud of," yet he discovered that this service—which he links to "the Scots-Irish honor culture" of his

rural white Southern milieu, where people “enlist in the military at a disproportionate rate”—was not respected by his classmates at Yale.

Accurate or not, what fuels the anger of those who see themselves as displaced and despised is the belief that, while they are prepared to sacrifice self-interest to honor and country and receive nothing in return, newly included groups—blacks, women, gays and lesbians, immigrants—are welcomed with open arms by elite institutions and given a leg up in the competition for high-status jobs despite avoiding military service (much like comparably educated whites). The revolutionary social changes that have brought a black man and now, perhaps, a woman to the White House have thus conspired to make the 2016 presidential election a moment of real danger, unleashing anger of such astonishing intensity that the election of a man with evident authoritarian instincts by a relatively prosperous and flourishing democracy is not altogether unthinkable. If we survive the national crisis of this presidential election unlike any other, we’ll need to think harder about alleviating the alienation and sociological frustration of those pockets of society in which that anger has long festered.

In that effort, Tocqueville can at least teach us how not to respond. We must not lose our sangfroid as he did when confronting the socialists of his day: “What characterizes all socialists is a persistent, varied, relentless effort to mutilate, truncate, and impede human liberty in every way possible,” Tocqueville declared to the French Parliament in 1848. At the very least, it will be better to keep our cool and refrain from meeting irrational passion and contempt with wildly inflated rhetoric and vituperation.