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The aristocracy in democracy

by Harvey Mansfield

A review of *Tocqueville: The Aristocratic Sources of Liberty* by Lucien Jaume

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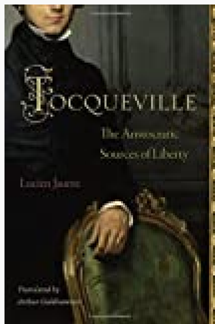

Lucien Jaume

Tocqueville: The Aristocratic Sources of Liberty

Princeton University Press, 360 pages, $39.95

In 2008, the French critic Lucien Jaume published an interpretation of Alexis de Tocqueville that won a prize from the Académie Française. An English version by the eminent translator Arthur Goldhammer has now appeared, which is a second recommendation. The book's subtitle, "The Aristocratic Sources of Liberty," reveals that it takes up a worthy and understudied topic in today's theorizing about democracy—which amounts to a third recommendation. To put it more plainly and aggressively: Can a democracy sustain itself without the help of its rival, apparently its enemy, aristocracy?

M. Jaume does not raise this question directly. His book studies Tocqueville through Tocqueville's French contemporaries. On the basis of a letter in which Tocqueville says that, in writing *Democracy in America*, he always had his own country in mind, M. Jaume concludes that he was not writing about America except as a way of addressing the French. M. Jaume therefore studies what he calls the "intellectual and ideological landscape of French liberalism," also including anti-liberals,

combining Tocqueville's context with an "internal reading" of his book to show how he addresses French critics even if he does not name them. M. Jaume's internal analysis selects important passages but does not follow the movement of Tocqueville's argument as it unfolds. It divides the "new political science" that Tocqueville says is needed for a new world into the roles of Tocqueville as publicist, sociologist, and moralist. For M. Jaume, democracy is not the new world, encompassing everything, that it was for Tocqueville. Nor was America the location of the new world that Tocqueville thought to be the future of France and Europe, and not their obstreperous, backward cousin.

In the same spirit of confidence, M. Jaume criticizes Tocqueville for trying to "grasp too many things at once," and says further that he was "partial," "unfair," held a "myth," carried "intellectual baggage," "contradicted himself," and other such disparagements. M. Jaume's book excels in the introduction of figures in Tocqueville's lifetime, now forgotten, such as Frédéric Le Play, Silvestre de Sacy, Abel-François Villemain, Louis-François Villeneuve-Bargemont, and Alexandre Vinet. He also considers the more familiar names—reactionaries such as Joseph de Maistre and Louis de Bonald, eminent monarchists such as Guillaume-Chrétien de Lamoignon de Malesherbes and François-René de Chateaubriand, as well as the stalwarts of nineteenth-century French liberalism Benjamin Constant and François Guizot. Acting from afar and through intermediaries are the great figures of Pascal, Montesquieu, and Rousseau—whom Tocqueville mentions as having read from every day without intermediaries and in rather naughty violation of the protocol of M. Jaume's intellectual history.

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Tocqueville too did not raise the question of democracy's relationship to aristocracy directly, but he treated it in several ways in his masterpiece *Democracy in America*. M. Jaume is right that the book is not simply about America, but it is, as the title says, about democracy *in* America, where Tocqueville found an "image of democracy." Democracy has its own logic, its own penchants—for example, that it "naturally" prefers equality, for which it has a "passion," to liberty, for which it has a "taste." America, too, has its own features, for example its township government and its two races of blacks, made slaves, and reds, excluded and oppressed but left free. The first is an advantage for democracy, the second not. Tocqueville wanted to discuss democracy as a practical whole, not just its principles; he also wanted to discuss America in the light of its universal significance, not only for France, as the vanguard of the democratic revolution. So he wrote about democracy as it is in America, as America is.

To be a practical whole and not just a principle or set of principles, democracy must deal with those aspects of human nature that are not or do not seem to be democratic. In America, democracy dominates society; using Tocqueville's term, America has a democratic social state, and democracy is moving toward ever greater equality. The democratic majority in due course always

gets its way. But there are aristocratic features to American democracy: the rich, the masters and slaves of the South, the Indians on their reservations. In classrooms today one will often hear objections that Tocqueville overlooked obvious inequalities when he called America a “democracy.” But he does not overlook them; he explains them, showing how democracy treats surviving aristocratic features that it has not tried or is not able to eliminate.

M. Jaume is, unfortunately, among those who interpret Tocqueville’s attitude toward aristocracy as “nostalgia,” supposing that he yearned for its return even while thinking it to be impossible. But the unrealism of nostalgia that this view attributes to him is better understood as his thoughtful realism, for aristocracy has its roots in human nature just as much as, though differently from, democracy. Even in the democratic age that he pronounces “irresistible,” aristocracy must be reckoned with. Tocqueville, always so conscious of human convention, does not often refer to “human nature,” as in an attempt to state universally what all humans have in common. There is nothing like the individualistic “state of nature” that the seventeenth-century philosophers of liberalism used as the beginning and foundation of their political thought. He speaks instead of a “social state” as the “first cause” from which he reasons. He frequently contrasts democracy to aristocracy as different wholes, each by itself, almost as if there were not one but “two humanities.” Any attempt to combine them as in the classical mixed regime he declares to be a “chimera.”

Yet democracy in America has certain features that date from aristocracy but are now democratized: the notion of rights that originated in the willingness of feudal nobles to stand up against the monarchy; juries of one’s peers, once fellow nobles, now fellow citizens; democratic associations that arise through the “art of association” rather than, but in imitation of, the feudal responsibilities of a single aristocrat; the devotion of lawyers to the traditions of the law; religion that restrains human excess while connecting heaven and earth. Moreover, these inheritances from aristocracy are grounded in the intractable nature of democratic peoples that makes them desire to rule themselves rather than be ruled by others. This is an assertive impulse contrary to aristocracy that resembles the very desire to rule that constitutes an aristocracy. Intractability is the untaught basis on which democrats build the constructions of self-government—in America ranging from the spontaneous cooperation of the township to the theoretical artifices of the American Constitution (whose Federalist framers Tocqueville praised as a party of aristocrats).

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On top of these aristocratic sources of liberty Tocqueville points to the possibility of greatness in democracy (mentioned but not developed by M. Jaume). The desire for greatness, with the disdain for the people that accompanies it, is the overall character of aristocracy in Tocqueville’s description, while honest, comfortable democracy suffers from its own normal defect of mediocrity. But in the practices of self-government Tocqueville finds in America, democracy achieves the character of

"political liberty" that constitutes its greatness and gives Tocqueville's liberalism its special flavor. Even the grave defects of American democracy mentioned above are used to illustrate the requirements of political liberty: the willingness to adopt the white man's civilization found in blacks but not in Indians, and the fierce love of liberty found in Indians but not in blacks.

M. Jaume refers to Tocqueville's use of classical style in writing as opposed to democratic floridity, but he does not discuss the two most prominent themes in *Democracy in America*: political liberty (or self-government) and greatness. Tocqueville ends his book by looking at politics from the standpoint of God, in which democracy and aristocracy appear as two aspects of one whole. This standpoint is available at least dimly to a legislator or political scientist like Tocqueville, because it uncovers God's intellect rather than piously accepting God's mysteries (for Tocqueville, God's providence in bringing democracy is not hidden, as M. Jaume has it, but apparent in history). But God's standpoint is not available to most human beings, because their partisanship prevents them from seeing the whole impartially, thus forcing them to construct their own partial wholes, typically democracy and aristocracy as Tocqueville contrasts them. That is why he says that there are almost—don't forget the "almost"—two humanities in the two regimes and that a mixed regime is a chimera—though a necessary one in his own mind! Paradoxically, the desire of partisans to make their favorite part, the few or the many, into a whole makes compromise with the opposing part seem unnecessary as well as unwelcome.

M. Jaume understands the "aristocratic sources of liberty" differently. Rather than study the substance of the matter to see where democratic liberty comes from, he looks at how Tocqueville might have picked up his thoughts from sources among his contemporaries and so how he might have been or was read by them. This emphasis on the context in which he wrote and thought willy-nilly takes the focus away from the readers Tocqueville may have intended to reach and from the effects he may have wanted to produce. A writer of his elegance and intelligence has the power to create his own context. Surely one of his intended audiences was his fellow aristocrats, particularly those who suffered, unlike himself, from nostalgia for the old regime of the French monarchy. He would want those readers to abandon their hopes and to accept the irrevocable character of democracy as a "providential fact" (a critical phrase from the Introduction to *Democracy in America*) and then turn their energies to the making of a strong constitutional democracy in France, whether a monarchy or republic. Under a democracy, liberty can be gained or lost, and if it is gained it will be because of its "aristocratic sources" prudently democratized.

With M. Jaume's method, Tocqueville's thoughts become "commonplaces," always contextual and never creative. One of them is the phrase "social state," but the way in which Tocqueville uses the phrase, as the "first cause" of America, is far from a commonplace of his or any time. But M. Jaume does not care for first causes. In a different way Tocqueville does not either, though he seems to like that rather metaphysical expression. He called himself "a new kind of liberal," and he wrote his book on democracy, which is also a book on liberty, in the context of America. This is the context that Tocqueville saw for himself, not the one imposed on him by his time. The context of America that he studied and visited precedes and illuminates the context of France in which he

lived and for which, in part, he wrote. Of course he read the many contemporaries that M. Jaume describes and discusses, and M. Jaume has written a good book in the category of contextual studies, from which anyone can learn relevant facts of his life and thought useful for understanding him. It does not, however, show a path leading toward that understanding.

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