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Prologue

“IS IT ANY WONDER that titles should fall in France? Is it not a greater wonder that they should be kept up anywhere? What are they? . . . When we think or speak of a Judge or a General, we associate with it the ideas of office and character; we think of gravity in one and bravery in the other”; but for “a Duke or a Count,” one cannot say whether these words “mean strength or weakness, wisdom or folly, a child or a man, or the rider or the horse.” So wrote Thomas Paine in 1791 during the French Revolution.¹ Alexis de Tocqueville, born in 1805, a scion of the highest ranks of the French nobility, agreed. He became the only member of his family to choose democracy over aristocracy. He always declined to use his own title of count, and he was annoyed when others so addressed him. Although he recognized he had aristocratic “instincts,” he was a democrat “by reason” and worked hard to advance the great modern shift from aristocracy to democracy.² In an aristocracy, Tocqueville noted, “families maintain the same station for centuries, and often in the same place . . . link[ing] all citizens together in a long chain from peasant to king.” Tocqueville opted instead for democracy, which “breaks the chain,” “severs the links,” and invites individual citizens to achieve their potential on their own.³

The measure of any form of government, Tocqueville believed, was liberty and equality. In an aristocracy, only privileged aristocrats could enjoy liberty—at the expense of the liberty of others. In Tocqueville’s democracy, by contrast, all citizens have the liberty to act within an agreed-upon legal framework. Tocqueville viewed equality as the

engine of liberty, and although he recognized the need to repair social injustice, he saw equality not as a means of leveling but of uplifting. He believed that the pursuits of liberty and equality were intimately linked; he even imagined “an extreme point at which liberty and equality touch and become one.”⁴

The transformation from aristocracy to democracy was not without its costs, either for Tocqueville or society at large. Tocqueville’s own family was decimated during the Revolutionary Terror that engulfed France between 1793 and 1794. Tocqueville’s parents, Hervé de Tocqueville and Louise-Madeleine Le Peletier de Rosanbo, married in March 1793, only two months after Louis XVI had been beheaded. This alliance between a young army officer from Normandy, born to an ancient family of the military nobility (the nobility of the sword), and the daughter of a family that had risen through the highest echelons of royal administration (the so-called *grande robe*) might have fueled controversy only a few years earlier. But the wedding took place when the time for negotiating rivalries between different castes of French nobles was gone. Every noble in France was now suspected of conspiring against the Revolution—a crime whose penalty was death.

The bride’s father, the marquis de Rosanbo, was an important man before the Revolution. He was a principal magistrate of the highest appeals court of the time, *président à mortier* of the “*parlement*” in Paris. The bride’s grandfather, Chrétien-Guillaume de Lamoignon de Malesherbes, was even more important. As director of the book trade (la librairie) under Louis XV, Malesherbes had protected the philosophes, and as Louis XVI’s minister he had promoted liberal reforms. He was one of two lawyers who defended the king at his revolutionary trial. Tocqueville admired his great-grandfather (whom he called his “grandfather”) for “having pleaded the cause of liberty, a principle so dear to him, in the court of his no-less beloved royalty, and for having advocated for equality of rights despite being among those already privileged.”⁵ But Malesherbes’s liberal views secured his family no protection.

The revolutionaries arrested all the adult members of the Malesherbes-Rosanbo-Tocqueville family—ten in total—at the château of Malesherbes in the Loiret over the course of a few days in December 1793,

transporting them to various jails in Paris to await summary trial and execution. Alexis's maternal grandfather, Rosanbo, was first to be guillotined, on April 20. Two days later, on April 22, his grandmother, Marguerite, went to the scaffold, followed by Aline-Thérèse de Rosanbo, his aunt, and her husband, Jean-Baptiste de Chateaubriand (older brother of the great Romantic writer). Malesherbes was beheaded last on that day, after the executioners made him watch his daughter and grandchildren's heads fall from the guillotine in front of him.

The remaining family members—Tocqueville's parents, Aunt Guillemette and her husband, Charles Le Peletier d'Aunay, and Uncle Louis Le Peletier de Rosanbo—were in jail awaiting their turn when Robespierre's own fall and execution on 10 Thermidor Year II of the French First Republic (July 27, 1794) put an end to the slaughter. They remained imprisoned for another three months before finally being freed in October.

Louise-Madeleine, already prone to depression in her youth, never recovered her sense of well-being. Tocqueville's parents spent ten months of the first eighteen months of their married life in jail. They mourned the execution of their closest family, and on release, they found themselves caring for the survivors. On the day Jean-Baptiste de Chateaubriand was taken from prison to the guillotine, Hervé de Tocqueville promised him that, should he himself survive the Terror, he would adopt his brother-in-law's two young sons, Christian and Geoffroy, the only family members still in hiding at Malesherbes.

Eleven years later, in 1805, Louise-Madeleine gave birth to Alexis, her third biological child. She was disappointed that the baby was yet another boy, so keen had been her hopes for a daughter. Her husband attempted to console her with an optimistic prediction. Hervé recalled in his *Mémoires* that on first sight of the baby, he thought, "This child was born with so singularly expressive a figure that I told his mother he would become a man of distinction, adding with a laugh that he could one day become Emperor."⁶ The first half of his prophecy came to pass. The boy would enter the canon of great political philosophers. But far from becoming an emperor, he would dedicate his life to ending despotism.

Great thinkers do not always have a life worthy of detailed telling. We often understand them better in conversation with other great minds across the ages rather than with their contemporaries. In this respect, however, Alexis de Tocqueville stands apart. His early life was shaped by the aftermath of the Revolutionary Terror in France, and he died two years before the start of the American Civil War. He was witness to a profound transformation of society and was as passionate about participating in politics as he was about studying the subject.

Tocqueville's fateful decision to journey to America, at age twenty-five, in 1831, showed remarkable initiative. There, he observed the palpable reality of a functioning democracy, and America remained central to Tocqueville's thought and action throughout his life, long after the trip and in almost inverse proportion to its brevity. He realized the extent to which the principle of equality gave "a certain direction to the public spirit and a certain shape to laws, establishe[d] new maxims for governing, and foster[ed] distinctive habits in the governed."⁷ These observations would form the foundation for his most enduring work, *Democracy in America*.

Upon his return to France, Tocqueville pursued both his intellectual and political ambitions. As soon as possible after reaching the legal age to run for elected office, he campaigned to represent the area around his ancestral estate in Normandy in the French Chamber of Deputies. He participated in the great controversies of the July Monarchy on suffrage extension, the separation of church and state, and the colonization of Algeria. He was notably invested in the abolition of slavery in the French Caribbean, prison reform and the rehabilitation of criminals, and welfare reform. His political career climaxed in 1849 under the Second Republic in the aftermath of the 1848 Revolution, as drafter of its constitution, then briefly as foreign minister. Tocqueville continuously bridged the worlds of letters and politics, engaging in debates of literary academies, publishing polemics in the press (he briefly directed a newspaper), and participating in conversations in Parisian salons.

This biography tells how Tocqueville developed his ideas in the context of the charged political events of his lifetime. Fortunately, Tocqueville left an ample written record: speeches, draft speeches, a volume of

memoirs on the Revolution of 1848 and his role in the Second Republic. Add to these the journals of his extensive travels not just to America but also to England, Switzerland, Sicily, and Algeria, as well as his notes on India, and his wide-ranging correspondence with some of the best minds of his generation. It is in this correspondence that Tocqueville's emotions and personal judgments come through. He often drafted and redrafted his thoughts about past and current events, developing a subtle analysis. Tocqueville corresponded not only with a galaxy of intellectuals and politicians in France, the United States, England, and Germany but also with family members, close friends he had made in his teenage years, and, of course, constituents. His many correspondents cherished his frequent letters, written with vibrancy in his barely decipherable handwriting. His gift for enduring friendships, sustained by daily correspondence over a lifetime, is a boon to the biographer.

Throughout his political career, Tocqueville remained firmly focused on current affairs, the future of democracy, and the need for political and social reform. Only after Louis Napoléon Bonaparte put an end to a short republican experiment and restored an authoritarian regime did Tocqueville retire from politics and turn his sustained attention to the Ancien Régime, and to the intensely complex drama of the French Revolution that ended the prominence and indeed the lives of Malesherbes and other members of his mother's family. But it was in mourning not for his family but for the recent demise of democracy in France that Tocqueville wrote his second masterpiece, published as *The Ancien Régime and the Revolution*. He intended it as the first installment of a larger work on the cycles of revolution and reaction that had become the curse of French history.

Confronted with many ambiguities in Tocqueville's thought, readers have often questioned the depth and sincerity of this scion of aristocracy's support for democracy. Tocqueville often vacillated between democratic ideas and more conservative views informed by his aristocratic heritage, though he may not have fully realized how conflicted he was. In reading him, one comes to appreciate the power of his conclusions because he persists in making them in the face of misgivings. He shared his doubts with readers by presenting opposite sides of many issues, tilting the balance only slightly one way or the other.

Tocqueville also assumed contradictory positions: He encouraged entrepreneurship while decrying materialism; he promoted the equality of all people but championed colonial domination; he wanted to reconcile democracy and religion—yet was unsure about his own faith. The list goes on. His need to resolve the opposing poles of his thought is one reason for his almost obsessive revisions. Although his edits did not necessarily clarify his thoughts, they did make his prose more pleasurable, something that was very important to him.

Readers then and now, especially of *Democracy in America*, have pointed to these real inconsistencies. Some contemporaries even turned the book into an indictment of democracy, to Tocqueville's dismay. For foreign readers, the potential for misreading a text that was already hard to grasp was compounded by translation. The correspondence between Tocqueville and his British translator Henry Reeve highlights these issues. In one letter, Tocqueville reproached Reeve for making him too much a foe of monarchy; in another, too much one of democracy.⁸

The upshot was that Tocqueville pleased no faction. Shortly before *Democracy in America* was published, Tocqueville confided to his cousin Camille d'Orglandes, "I do not hide what may be troubling about my position. It is not likely to enlist the active sympathy of anyone. Some will find that at bottom I do not like democracy and treat it rather severely. Others will think that I am incautiously encouraging its spread."⁹ Even when Tocqueville took a stand against his elders, he remained ambiguous. To his uncle Louis de Rosanbo, a survivor of the Revolutionary Terror, who admonished his nephew for not being loyal to the Legitimist cause in the Chamber, Tocqueville wrote affectionately, "Let me continue to believe that my venerable ancestor [Malesherbes] continues to judge me worthy of him, which is all I have ever sought to be."¹⁰

For all the equivocation and sincere doubts that Tocqueville shared with family, friends, and readers, he nevertheless remained true to a set of basic unshakable convictions. He expressed them with perfect clarity in a brief note he sent to Chateaubriand that accompanied an advance copy of *Democracy in America*. This was, he wrote, a work in which he had joined heart and mind: "I've shown in this work a feeling carved

deeply into my heart: the love of liberty. I've expressed an idea that obsesses my mind: the irresistible march of democracy."¹¹

In other words, what has kept Tocqueville's work alive, read, and discussed are not his equivocations but his convictions, the force of which also drive this biography. Tocqueville's deepest belief was that democracy is a powerful, yet demanding, political form. What makes Tocqueville's work still relevant is that he defined democracy as an act of will on the part of every citizen—a project constantly in need of revitalization and of the strength provided by stable institutions. Democracy can never be taken for granted. Once the aristocratic chain connecting all parts of society is broken, democracy's need for vigilance, redefinition, and reinforcement is constant if it is to ensure the common good on which it must, in the end, depend.

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Note: In the index, AT is Alexis de Tocqueville, GB is Gustave de Beaumont, DA I is *Democracy in America* (1835), DA II is *Democracy in America* (1840), and ARFR is *The Ancien Régime and the French Revolution*. Page numbers in *italics* indicate maps.

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