

The Images of Democracy: Tocqueville and American Exceptionalism

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Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree
of Master of Arts in the Department of
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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

This thesis addresses how Alexis de Tocqueville's political thought is related to American Exceptionalism. First, I illustrate the multiple meanings of the concept of American Exceptionalism and in what sense it is indebted to Tocqueville. Second, I articulate how the historical background and personal qualities of Tocqueville contribute to the success of his masterpiece *Democracy in America*. In the main part, by analyzing Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* and other writings on America, I argue that he indeed reveals America as exceptional and increasingly recognizes this idea through a process of intellectual development. An elaboration on Tocqueville's theoretical contribution to the discussion of American Exceptionalism can reveal the different images of modern democracy and how they would influence the prospect of human freedom.

Dedication

To my parents.

哀哀父母，生我勞瘁。

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1. Introduction

Alexis de Tocqueville (1805-1859), a French aristocrat who visited America during 1831 and 1832, later published a study in two separate volumes (1835 and 1840) under a common title *De La Démocratie en Amérique*, the direct English translation of which should be *Of the Democracy in America*. Tocqueville's friend and the first English translator Henry Reeve decided to put it under a simpler name *Democracy in America*, which has been commonly known and used. Since its publication, *Democracy in America* has inspired countless studies on the topic Tocqueville addresses and also on the work itself. Nowadays, some scholars have honored it as "the best book ever written on democracy and the best book ever written on America."¹ But both this evaluation and the title *Democracy in America* suggest a puzzle: is this book mainly about democracy or about America? What does the preposition "in" imply? Why did not Tocqueville name it as *(Of the) Democracy of America*? If the subject is democracy itself, why did a French aristocrat bother crossing the Atlantic Ocean to study the form of democracy in America?

When Tocqueville paid the visit to America and composed his work, he actually bore these questions in mind, which were further related to some more essential questions. What was the role of America in world history? What was the role of

¹ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), "Editors' Introduction," p. xvii. Also see Alan Kahan, *Alexis de Tocqueville* (New York: Continuum, 2010), 35. Similar claims are also held by Edward Banfield and Gordon Wood, see David Wallace-Wells, "The Trouble with Tocqueville," Apr. 14, 2010, *Newsweek*, <http://www.newsweek.com/trouble-tocqueville-70747>.

democracy in world history? And what was the relationship between America and democracy? Responding to these questions, *Democracy in America* became a milestone work in the history of political thought, in the sense of permanently tying America and modern democracy together. Partly thanks to the enormous influence of this work, the name of America has somehow become synonymous with that of modern democracy. By stressing America's seminal role in the development of modern democracy, Tocqueville's work also profoundly revealed how exceptional the situation of American society itself was, which was (later) often discussed under the topic of so-called "American Exceptionalism."

The relationship between American Exceptionalism and Tocqueville's thought is the issue I will address in this thesis. My thesis is not a direct study of American politics or American Exceptionalism itself. Rather, it is aimed to elaborate my understanding of Tocqueville's political thought by arguing that Tocqueville actually admitted the exceptionality of America and held a gradually confirmed perspective of this idea. Clarifying this perspective can shed light upon Tocqueville's political thought on modern democracy and human freedom, which can also deepen the understanding of American society and politics. I think this argument is worth articulating because, although the scholarship on Tocqueville has produced enormous works and many of them have mentioned the contribution by Tocqueville to the discussion of American Exceptionalism, a systematic articulation of this problem has not been done before.

The paper will first explain the idea of American Exceptionalism and how it is related to Tocqueville. Second, a brief introduction of the background of Tocqueville's writings and his theoretical scope will reveal the importance of his political thought especially that in *Democracy in America*. The main part of the paper will show how Tocqueville's articulation of the exceptionality of American society reflects his deep concern for the future of human freedom under the circumstance of modern democracy. The conclusion will point out the implication and significance of American Exceptionalism. The primary method of this paper is analyzing the texts of Tocqueville's writings on America above all *Democracy in America*. Thanks to the current English scholarship on Tocqueville, I can enrich my arguments by integrating many historical details of his intellectual development which can conduce to the appreciation of his personal characters and political thought.

2. American Exceptionalism Traced Back to Tocqueville

The concept “American Exceptionalism” has a special allure for some people while arousing considerable controversies among others, due to its multiple meanings which are not easy to define consistently. In this section I will discuss the three most important (definitely not all) aspects which the discussion of American Exceptionalism covers and clarify how this idea can be traced backed to Tocqueville.

The original and primary concern of American Exceptionalism came from the question raised by the German scholar Werner Sombart: *Why is There No Socialism in the U.S.?* (first published in 1906)¹, noting the phenomenon that America was largely exempt from the roaring working class movements and socialist revolutions that occurred in 19th century Europe. This question responded to the Marxist historical law that capitalist society will finally collapse due to its innate deficits and be superseded by socialist society. In this sense, American society seemed to be an “outsider” of the historical law at that time. Sombart explained that the American workers’ life which was not so miserable as to be called proletarian like their European counterparts’ and their somehow “capitalist mentality” formed therewith rendered the idea of socialism less desirable for most Americans. Sombart did not use the word “American

¹ See Werner Sombart, ed. C. T. Husbands, trans. Patricia M. Hocking and C. T. Husbands, *Why is There No Socialism in the U.S.?* (White Plains, NY: International Arts and Sciences Press, 1976).

Exceptionalism,” but his question triggered heated debates on the relevant historical and political questions.

The term “American Exceptionalism” was, surprisingly, first be notably invented in the 1920s by Joseph Stalin (“the heresy of American Exceptionalism”) to repudiate his adversaries.² He wanted to consolidate his comrades’ faith in defeating those capitalist empires hostile to the new Soviet regime, America of course mainly targeted. After World War II, when the disputes between the “orthodoxy” and the “heresy” in Marxist theory developed into the real confrontations between the East and West, many American scholars began to reflect on their own uniqueness through the study of so-called American Exceptionalism. The American historian and political thinker Louis Hartz, inspired by Tocqueville’s statement that the American society was “born equal,” articulated how the lack of a feudal past and the deep-rooted tradition of liberalism rendered the bourgeois values and liberal democratic institutions continually more appealing than the “alien” Marxist ideology and the socialist mode of centralized government to most American people who lacked a class consciousness and distrusted the state intervention into their life.³ Even the American socialist theorist

² Donald E. Pease, “Exceptionalism,” in *Keywords for American Cultural Studies*, ed. Bruce Burgett and Glenn Hendler (New York: NYU Press, 2007), 108.

³ For example, he says, “[o]ne of the central characteristics of a non-feudal society is that it lacks a genuine revolutionary tradition, the tradition which in Europe has been linked with the Puritan and French revolutions: that it is ‘born equal,’ as Tocqueville said. And this being the case, it lacks also a tradition of reaction: lacking Robespierre it lacks Maistre, lacking Sidney it lacks Charles II. Its liberalism is what Santayana called, referring to American democracy, a ‘natural’ phenomenon.” Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America: An Interpretation of American Political Thought Since the Revolution* (New York and

Michael Harrington lamented that the socialist ideal was not too different from or definitely more attractive than American capitalism itself because many goals like the workers' political equality of voting rights and a comparatively affluent life had already been the fact of American society.⁴ Other studies further explained how certain societal and political factors doomed the decline of the American socialist movement in history. Although once emerging prominently, unlike in similarly industrialized Europe or even Canada, socialism in America finally failed to take root and produce a successful left-wing Socialist or Labor party in the American political spectrum.⁵

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union in the 1990s, (traditional) socialism has not only failed in America but also declined around the world. With this change of historical context, Sombart's question seems to lose its realistic concern – most countries

London: A Harvest/HBJ Book, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1955), 5. The similar argument was summarized as "No feudalism, no socialism." See Walter Dean Burnham, "The United States: The Politics of Heterogeneity," in Richard Rose ed., *Electoral Behavior* (New York: The Free Press, 1974), 718.

⁴ Michael Harrington, *Socialism* (New York: Saturday Review Press, 1972), 118.

⁵ See Daniel Bell, *Marxian Socialism in the United States* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996) (Based on the paper first published in 1952); Theodore Draper, *American Communism and Soviet Russia* (New York: Viking Press, 1960); James Weinstein, *The Decline of Socialism in America 1912-1925* (New York: Vintage Books, 1967); Martin Lipset, "Why No Socialism in the United States?" in S. Bialer and S. Sluzar ed., *Sources of Contemporary Radicalism, I* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1977), 31-149 and 346-363; Eric Foner, "Why Is There No Socialism in the United States?" *History Workshop*, No. 17 (Spring, 1984), pp. 57-80; Michael Shalev and Walter Korpi, "Working Class Mobilization and American Exceptionalism," *Economic and Industrial Democracy*, 1 (February 1990), pp. 31-61; Ian Tyrrell, "American Exceptionalism in an Age of International History," *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 96, No. 4 (Oct., 1991), 1031-1055; Martin Lipset, "Trade Union Exceptionalism: The United States and Canada," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences*, 538 (March 1995), pp. 115-130; Kim Voss, *The Making of American Exceptionalism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993). Seymour Martin Lipset, *American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword* (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1997), 77-109.

have been “exempt” from the Marxist historical law. The discussion of American Exceptionalism, nevertheless, does not fail to keep producing controversies. Today it is often used to describe a conservative moral self-characterization or a self-appraisal of American values,⁶ which might be traced back to the first American immigrants’ ambition to establish a Christian kingdom in the new world,⁷ and be expressed by some Americans’ faith in the nation’s special mission or “manifest destiny” endowed by God to spread freedom and democracy in this world.⁸ In this sense, American Exceptionalism sometimes in the name of “Americanism” largely implies America’s unique excellence and superiority in human civilization. However, pointing out certain historical facts including the oppression of the blacks, the decimation of the Native Americans, and the later imperialist expansions, as well as the salient inequalities in present days, some critics think that the narrative of American “exceptionalism” (unique excellence) is largely a “self-pleasing whimsy” or self-deceptive “myth”.⁹

⁶ See Newt Gingrich, *A Nation Like No Other: Why American Exceptionalism Matters* (Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, 2011).

⁷ “[T]he lord make it like that of New England: for we must Consider that wee shall be as a City upon a Hill, the eies of all people are uppon us.” See John Winthrop, “A Model of Christian Charity,” (1630) in Isaac Kramnick and Theodore J. Lowi ed., *American Political Thought: A Norton Anthology* (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2009), 11-16.

⁸ “[T]his nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom; and that government of the people, by the people, for the people shall not perish from the earth.” Abraham Lincoln, “Gettysburg Address”, in *American Political Thought: A Norton Anthology*, 683. Jefferson also regarded America to have a mission to “light up” the “sacred fire of freedom and self-government” in other regions of the earth. See Merrill D. Peterson, *Thomas Jefferson and the New Nation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 920.

⁹ See Godfrey Hodgson, *The Myth of American Exceptionalism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009).

It is clear that Tocqueville as a 19th century man was not directly involved in the 20th century debate of American Exceptionalism concerned with the absence or weakness of socialism in America. Nor did he mean to “write a panegyric”¹⁰ for American culture, which yet he generally described in a positive tone. Tocqueville’s study on America was aimed as a “scientific”¹¹ analysis of the political society in America of his time. What he revealed, if truly through a “scientific” scope of examination, inevitably must be that America was an unprecedentedly new nation largely different from others, which is a meaning of American Exceptionalism primarily discussed in this thesis.

Contemporary scholarship on American Exceptionalism is indebted to Tocqueville,¹² simply because, I believe, any serious academic discussion on the American society and politics would be incomplete without at least a mention of his milestone work. It was Tocqueville who first and systematically elaborated on the practical success (thus different from the Founding Fathers like Madison’s theoretical designs) of the modern democracy in America which posed as an exceptional and at the same time an exemplary model for human civilization. He clearly claimed that: “the

¹⁰ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (New York: The Library of America, 2004), Introduction, 14. (**DA for abbreviation in the citations refers to this edition. For example, based on the structure of this edition, I.2.5 refers to the volume one (1835), part 2, chapter 5; II.4.1 refers to the volume two (1840), part 4, chapter 1.**)

¹¹ See his famous statement “A world that is totally new demands a new political science”. *DA*, Introduction, 7.

¹² See Donald E. Pease, “Exceptionalism,” in *Keywords for American Cultural Studies*, 109.

situation of the Americans is entirely exceptional (*exceptionnelle*), and there is reason to believe that no other democratic peoples will enjoy anything like it." (DA, II.1.9, 517-8)

American democracy was exceptional first because there was no modern democracy before it (the Swiss republics were not democratic from the view of Tocqueville). It was also exemplary because it signified the advent of a modern democratic era, which was a durable "providential fact," smashing any impediments in front of it. Therefore, other countries which went through democratization later would commonly look upon America as a democratic "model". With a broader meaning, American Exceptionalism not merely refers to the absence or weakness of socialism in America but is essentially concerned with the unique origin and nature of the democratic society and politics of America, the two meanings of which are certainly logically interrelated. In terms of this meaning, Tocqueville has contributed much to the later discussion of American Exceptionalism. As some scholars point out: "For Americans, Tocqueville is an honorary citizen, who reinforces their idea of their own exceptionalism."¹³ Martin Lipset admirably states: "In his great book, Tocqueville is the first to refer to the United States as exceptional – that is, qualitatively different from all other countries. He is, therefore, the initiator of the writings on American Exceptionalism."¹⁴

¹³ Françoise Mélonio, "Tocqueville and the French," trans. Arthur Goldhammer, in Cheryl B. Welch ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Tocqueville* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 337.

¹⁴ Lipset, *American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword*, 18.

With its extreme importance, it is therefore crucial to see how the masterpiece *Democracy in America* anticipated, grounded, and inspired the later studies on American Exceptionalism, and how it could edify the understanding of American society and politics. The meaning of American Exceptionalism “attributed” to Tocqueville in this thesis is borrowed from Lipset’s interpretation as “qualitatively different,” which might be somehow too simplistic and vague to avoid controversies. But I believe that this simplistic meaning will not harm displaying the richness of Tocqueville’s thought and could be further clarified in the following detailed discussion.

3. An Exceptional Work and Its Author

A great writer and a great subject deserve and accomplish each other. This statement can best describe the relationship between Tocqueville and his study of America. It was Tocqueville who decisively saved America from the Europeans' previous prejudice that this new society was no more than an underdeveloped state of their own advanced civilization – an “infant in diapers” as Joseph de Maistre disdained.¹ Instead, Tocqueville declared that the things going on in America were not Europeans' childhood but their future and paragon. John Bigelow in his introduction to the 1899 English edition of *Democracy in America* said: “it was the first book written about the United States by any European of repute that was not conceived in a spirit of disparagement and detraction.”² Through illustrating the success of American democracy, Tocqueville first consecrated America to the world.

It was also this “book of the year” of 1835 in France that saved Tocqueville from the unpromising career as an anonymous assistant judge (*juges auditeurs*) even without salaries at the district court of Versailles. His contemporaries immediately recognized a great mind. The literary critic Sainte-Beuve and the respectable leader of the *Doctrinaires* Royer-Collard both lauded this young man as the “contemporary

¹ See Françoise Mélonio, “Tocqueville and the French,” trans. Arthur Goldhammer, in *The Cambridge Companion to Tocqueville*, 342. On the relevant discussions, see André Jardin, *Tocqueville: A Biography*, trans. L. Davis and R. Hemenway (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1988), 102-7.

² *Democracy in America*, trans. Henry Reeve (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1899), xii, cited from James T. Kloppenberg, “Life Everlasting: Tocqueville in America,” *The Tocqueville Review/La Revue Tocqueville*, vol. XVII, 2, 1996, pp. 19-36.

Montesquieu.”³ Agreeing to that analogy, the English thinker John Stuart Mill further commented on the (second volume of) *Democracy* as: “The first philosophical book ever written on democracy, as it manifests itself in modern society ... the essential doctrines of which it is not likely that any future speculations will subvert.... the beginning of a new era in the scientific study of politics.”⁴ After its publication and translation, Americans even used this foreigner’s work as the textbook to teach American political institutions, which “helped later Americans make sense of their own practice.”⁵ New translations, editions, and prints of *Democracy* have kept being produced by Americans, who even honor Tocqueville higher than his French compatriots do.⁶ It is amazing to see scholars dedicating their life efforts to analyzing the texts written by a young man even less than 30 years old. Among the book series published by The Library of America up

³ “Not one of the chapters of this book,” wrote Sainte-Beuve, “fails to testify to one of the best and most assured minds, to one of those minds most appropriate for political observation, a field in which we find so few striking and solid strides since the incomparable figure of Montesquieu.” See Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. Eduardo Nolla, trans. James T. Schleifer (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2010), “Editor’s Introduction,” xc. Royer-Collard said: “Since Montesquieu, there has been nothing like it.” cited from George Wilson Pierson, *Tocqueville in America* (London and Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1996), 4.

⁴ Mill as an equally great thinker was among the very few who could appreciate the merits of the second volume of *Democracy* at that time. See John Stuart Mill, “De Tocqueville on Democracy in America [II],” in John Stuart Mill, *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill, Volume XVIII - Essays on Politics and Society*, ed. J. M. Robson (Toronto and Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977), 156. Mill called Tocqueville the “Montesquieu of our times” in “Bentham” (1838), see H. O. Pappe, “Mill and Tocqueville,” *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 25, No. 2 (Apr. - Jun., 1964), pp. 217-234.

⁵ Pierson, *Tocqueville in America*, 8-9. Olivier Zunz, “Tocqueville and the Americans: Democracy in America as Read in Nineteenth-Century America,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Tocqueville*, 370.

⁶ Jon Elster declares: “A generation ago it would have seemed absurd to see Tocqueville as the greatest political thinker of the nineteenth century. Nowadays, there is nothing unusual in this view.” Jon Elster, *Political Psychology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 101. Many contemporary scholars of democracy resonated: “We are all Tocquevilleans now.” *Journal of Democracy*, 11:1 (2000), 9. Both cited from Cheryl Welch, “Introduction: Tocqueville in the Twenty-First Century,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Tocqueville*, 1.

to now, *Democracy* as the only exceptional translated work indicates that Americans regard a foreigner's work as their own literary legacy.

It is said that Tocqueville's father recognized his youngest son's greatness from his facial expressions at the birth.⁷ This might be an exaggeration, but Tocqueville's intellectual and literary gifts were shown early from his childhood. His family tutor and quasi-grandpa, a Jansenist Father Abbé Lesueur, was particularly keen on this son's literary talent and thus strongly discouraged him from taking a military career like his older brothers who followed their family tradition as "the Nobles of the Sword." Abbé even composed a verse for the family when Tocqueville was at the age of 17:

As wise as a Demosthenes
is the youngest of your sons
going to appear in the arena:
to testify to his victory,
the name of the great Alexis
will be inscribed in the history [of the college].⁸

In fact the eloquence of Demosthenes was totally absent among Tocqueville's many strengths.⁹ But for sure, his name has been inscribed in the tablets of the *Académie Française* (elected in 1841) and in the history of political thought considering the

⁷ Harvey C. Mansfield, *Tocqueville: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 2. For concision, this book leaves out detailed citations. Thus I do not know the source of this statement.

⁸ *Democracy in America*, ed. Eduardo Nolla, trans. James T. Schleifer, "Editor's Introduction," li, fn. 34.

⁹ Due to his lack of the talent of public speech, his career as the assistant judge and later as the congress member were both unsuccessful, the fact of which he regret a lot: "I wrongly supposed that as a speaker I should have the same success that my book had had.... I soon noticed that and saw that I was classed among those speakers who are correct, straightforward and sometimes profound, but always cold and consequently powerless." Tocqueville, *Recollections*, ed. J. P. Mayer and A. P. Kerr, trans. George Lawrence (NY, Garden City: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1970), 82.

countless scholarship on him. A mind of talent is born, but a life of accomplishment is earned. Tocqueville's intrinsic endowment could flourish only under his historical milieu and by his lifetime efforts.

Tocqueville was born a child of a new century, but immersed in the grave shadow of the past one. The unprecedented French Revolution cut a wound in the heart of the French society which Tocqueville sincerely resonated with, thereupon constantly aching by tearing and healing its tissue from the inside. The waxing and waning of the social and political evolution in post-revolutionary France imposed on Tocqueville's contemporary a deep feeling of transition, confusion, and split. In his own case, he was by instinct attached to his noble lineage, but much more intellectually sober than his aristocratic compatriots in terms of admitting the doomed failure of the French aristocracy.¹⁰ The intellectual and emotional displacement between the past and the

¹⁰ "I came into the world at the end of a long Revolution, which, after having destroyed the old state, had created nothing durable. Aristocracy was already dead when I started life and democracy did not yet exist, so my instinct could lead me blindly neither toward one nor toward the other.... Belonging to the old aristocracy of my homeland, I had neither hatred nor natural jealousy against the aristocracy, and that aristocracy being destroyed, I did not have any natural love for it either, since one only attaches oneself strongly to what is living.... I would say as much about the democratic element. No family memory, no personal interest gave me a natural and necessary bent toward democracy. But for my part I had not received any injury from it; I had no particular motive for either loving or hating it, independent of those that my reason furnished me. In a word, I was so thoroughly in equilibrium between the past and the future that I felt naturally and instinctively attracted toward neither the one nor the other, and I did not need to make great efforts to cast calm glances on both sides." Tocqueville to Henry Reeve, March 22, 1837, *Selected Letters on Politics and Society*, ed. Roger Boesche, trans. James Toupin and Roger Boesche (Los Angeles and London: University of California Press Berkeley, 1985), 115-6. But I think that another passage might reflect his more authentic inner prejudice: "My mind favors democratic institutions but my heart is aristocratic: I despise and fear mobs... I differ with the conservatives rather in their means than in their end, while I differ with the radicals both in their means and in their end." A fragment discovered by biographer M. Redier, cited from John Lukacs, eds and trans., *Alexis de Tocqueville: "The European Revolution" and Correspondence*

future, the reactionary and the revolutionary, the conservative and the liberal, ingrained an “elegiac mood”¹¹ in Tocqueville’s character.¹² He was open to the irresistible social progress and necessary political reform for French society, while cherishing the noble elements in the tradition such as the aristocratic loftiness and independence.

“Where are we headed on, then?” was a question he asked to himself and his nation. (*DA*, Introduction, 6) He echoed the feeling of uncertainty of his times and often felt disappointed toward the reality of France, but he never lost hope. He was dedicated in his faith of liberty: “I have no traditions, I have no party, I have no *cause*, if it is not that of liberty and human dignity; of that, I am sure.”¹³ He spent his lifetime fighting for the liberal enterprise in France and defending against all forms of complacent but

with Gobineau (Garden City, New York: Doubleday Anchor Books Doubleday & Company, Inc, 1959), 20. More pride of birth was shown in his statement of the connection to his great-grandfather Lamoignon de Malesherbes: “I am the grand-child of M. de M. [Malesherbes]. No one is unaware that M. de M. after having defended the people before King Louis XVI, defended King Louis XVI before the people. It is a double example that I have never forgotten, and that I will never forget.” A posthumously published note, cited from Seymour Drescher, *Dilemmas of Democracy: Tocqueville and Modernization* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1968), 103. As Guizot judged Tocqueville’s choice between aristocracy and democracy, “You judge democracy like an aristocrat who has been vanquished, and is convinced that his conqueror is right.” Pierson, *Tocqueville in America*, 750.

¹¹ Cheryl Welch, *De Tocqueville* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 168.

¹² He often confessed his feeling of isolation and misfit toward his time: “My contemporaries and I go by more and more divergent ways – sometimes such opposite ways that we can hardly ever now meet with like feelings and like thoughts... I have relations, neighbours, people who are close to me; but my mind has neither family nor motherland... such spiritual and moral isolation often gives me a sense of loneliness more intense than any I ever experienced in the primeval forests of America.” Cited from a letter from Tocqueville to Mme. Swetchine, J. P. Mayer, *Alexis de Tocqueville*, 30. Also see, *Selected Letters*, 147, 326.

¹³ Tocqueville to Louis de Kergorlay, Dec. 15, 1850, *Selected Letters*, 257; also see 115.

coward historical determinisms which underplayed human freedom and responsibility that dignified our existence.¹⁴

Tocqueville's perseverance was also "physical" as in his spiritual faith. His symbolic ill appearance because of health problems was totally deceptive. When he made up his mind on a right path, he would not easily give it up despite of obstacles. This is firstly a literal saying. His friend and colleague at the *Académie Française* Jean-Jacques Ampère recalled with a sense of humor as well as respect: "he was a great walker; and in order to follow the straight line that seemed to be his natural course he would cross over a hedge, a ditch, sometimes a wall, if he had to."¹⁵ With a character like this, Tocqueville's visit in America was far more than merely communicating elegantly at the firesides of luxurious salons or passing by the sights on a comfortable wagon. Instead, he fancied exploring the American virgin forests and stunning wilderness, sometimes mercilessly hunting birds accompanied by those "noble savages" (for example, with the Chickasaws Indians near Memphis). When he had to disembark the steamboat at Westport, Kentucky, because of the frozen and blocked Ohio River which was extremely uncommon, he did not hesitate to march forward on foot toward the

¹⁴ For example, Tocqueville discusses the different inclinations by historians of the aristocratic and the democratic times to interpret history. The danger of the latter is leaning toward a fatalism to doubt the existence of free will and "suggest that man has no power over either himself or his surroundings." (*DA*, II.1.20, 572) He calls those fatalism disparaging human freedom as "false and cowardly doctrines, which can only produce weak men and pusillanimous nations." *Ibid*, 834.

¹⁵ Cited from, *Tocqueville: A Biography*, 455.

destination Louisville 25 miles away, on the pathless land covered by snow up to the knees; which was given up by some other passengers daring to have a try.¹⁶

His determination in adventure eventually paid back him a dangerous sickness because of the exposure to the severe coldness. He was then stuck in a Tennessee log cabin ventilated to the piercing wind and without any medical treatment. Thanks to the care and support of his travelling companion and life-long comrade, Gustave de Beaumont, Tocqueville could survive all the difficulties and complete this historical journey, physically and intellectually. Beaumont often had to adapt himself to this stubborn soul: "It is impossible to imagine the activity of mind and body which, like a burning fever, preyed upon him incessantly. Rest was foreign to his nature; and whether his body was actively employed or not, his mind was always at work.... he never reached a place without first assuring himself of the means of leaving it..."¹⁷ Later when Tocqueville was at the end of his life, stuck to the bed and unable to study and read by himself, he hired a schoolboy to read newspapers for him and felt satisfied not to waste time. Tocqueville's mind was "restless" as the modern people generally were, not in the pursuit of material happiness he contempt, but marching along the road of spiritual struggles and elevation.¹⁸

¹⁶ They were actually encountered with the coldest winter since 1776. See *Tocqueville in America*, 577-8.

¹⁷ Cited from Larry Siedentop, *Tocqueville* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 11.

¹⁸ "The natural restless in the minds of the people, with the inevitable ferment in the desires, thoughts, needs and instincts of the crowd, formed on the fabric on which the innovators drew such monstrous and

Tocqueville was always very serious about his work, more precisely speaking, serious about the work he felt of worth. He fulfilled with passion the official task while also only a “pretext” of his visit in America: researching America’s penitentiary system and providing suggestions for the prison reform in France.¹⁹ When Beaumont became bored with the routine visits to prisons, Tocqueville still valued the opportunity of interviewing the prisoners one by one in Philadelphia’s Eastern State Penitentiary. Dramatically in contrast, when they returned to France and needed to draft the report, Tocqueville failed to do any writing on the prisons: “I lean back into my easy chair and my eyes half-closed, I wait for the spirit of the penitentiary system to appear to me. I have finally tired of this way of working, because I have observed that I was thinking about everything except prisons.”²⁰ The “everything” was about the democracy in America. Beaumont had to mainly undertake the task of drafting the report and force his beloved fellow at least to write some footnotes. The co-authored report at last also made a success like their respective works.

groutisque patterns.” *Recollections*, 76. Further see Peter A. Lawler, *The Restless Mind: Alexis de Tocqueville on the Origin and Perpetuation of Human Liberty* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1993).

¹⁹ From the beginning, Tocqueville’s purpose of the trip was to do an overall study on the American society, and also to evade the unhappy life in France because of his stagnant career after the July Revolution of 1830. But for receiving the conveniences from the French government’s support and the American government’s acceptance, Beaumont and he decided to use examining the penitentiary system in America as “a pretext, but a very honorable pretext.” See Tocqueville to Charles Stoffs, Nov. 4, 1830, *Alexis de Tocqueville and Gustave de Beaumont in America*, ed. Oliver Zunz, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2010), 3-4.

²⁰ Tocqueville to Beaumont, Apr. 4, 1832, *Selected Letters*, 78.

Tocqueville's genius of focusing on key factors also contributed to his success. Hearing his saying that the "equality of conditions" was what made American society exceptional, some critics might blame his underplaying of the tenacious gaps and oppressions among the races in America. But this is far from due to his failure of recognizing the reality. Beaumont, instead, prioritized the racial inequalities in America in his novel and sociological study *Marie, or Slavery in the United States*, which Tocqueville was more than familiar with because of their daily exchanges of ideas and even notes and texts. Tocqueville also dedicated a chapter on this issue in *Democracy*. (DA, I.2.10) It is astonishing to see the two companions writing on the same object in opposite directions. This was a choice or even a gamble. To be honest, Tocqueville was more insightful than his fellow traveler with respect to emphasizing the dominant equality rather than mourning for the temporary inequalities. All unfair inequalities are merely interludes in the great democratic revolution of the modern time.²¹

Tocqueville was also aware that only America as a newly born nation could be studied in such a one-point-focused way. He explained the adequateness of such concentrative scope: "One could compare America to a large forest crossed by a great many straight roads all leading to the same place. The only thing one has to do is find the spot where these roads come together, and everything is revealed in a flash. But in England the roads cross each other and it is only by following each one of them to its

²¹ See DA, I.2.10, 419.

end that it is possible to form a clear idea of the whole.”²² The converging point, of course, is “equality of conditions.” Later when American society grew into more complexity and the democratic revolution prevailed around the world, both internally and comparatively speaking it would be hard to conclude that either equality or inequality dominated in America. It was exceptional that one book could illustrate enough a country. A successful work is embedded in its historical context.

As the original scope of American Exceptionalism implies, the modern socialist theory elaborated by Karl Marx is what Tocqueville (and American Exceptionalism) largely fight against.²³ These two great thinkers of the 19th century are often regarded as theoretical adversaries. However, in my understanding, we could detect certain similarities between them. Marx and Tocqueville were both required by their families to be trained as a lawyer. But they were both unsatisfied with merely studying and professing the legal provisions. The young Marx was struggling with the Hegelian philosophy of right, which he originally aimed to emulate to produce a new system but finally worked out a substantive critique. The young Tocqueville also felt suffocated as a legal practitioner, fearing that he might become “a law machine.”²⁴ Inspired by the French tradition since Montesquieu and Rousseau, he was drawn to what was behind

²² Cited from *Tocqueville: A Biography*, 239.

²³ Tocqueville was clearly against the socialist theory. He did not approve the February Revolution of 1848 based on the socialist ideas of the French workers, which was obviously opposite to Marx’s attitude. Compare Tocqueville’s *Recollections* and Marx’s *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*.

²⁴ Tocqueville to Louis de Kergorlay, July 23, 1827, *Selected Letters*, 34.

the laws, namely the “spirits of the law” or “mores”.²⁵ The choices of these two young great minds to go deeper behind the political appearances of human society are thus alike, although the directions of their intellectual paths might be largely contrary. It then follows to see how Tocqueville delved into his groundbreaking analysis of the modern society and above all democracy, sometimes by contrasting Marx’s likewise revolutionary idea.

²⁵ When he as the assistant judge delivered the annual speech at the court in the late 1820s, he had already touched the germ of his latter thought that effective laws needed to be supported by mores. See *Tocqueville: A Biography*, 75.

4. How Tocqueville Reveals America as Exceptional

4.1 Seeking Democracy Itself: From France to America

“I confess that in America I saw more than America. I sought there an image of democracy itself – its inclinations, character, prejudices, and passions. I wanted to become familiar with democracy, if only to find out what we had to hope from it, or to fear.”(DA, Introduction, 15) In the Introduction to *Democracy in America* (1835) Tocqueville claimed that seeking the “image of democracy itself” was the essential purpose underlying his writings on America. Then it is reasonable to ask how he became interested in democracy itself and why he chose America to learn that. The “we” implies a simple answer: born a Frenchman, he formed his scope of questions during his early life in France.

It was the French Revolution that brought the salient problem of democracy to France, and further to Europe and the modern world. Tocqueville’s last generation of Frenchmen struggled bitterly with this issue, which set up the milieu of Tocqueville’s intellectual development. The question of democracy came to his mind long before he visited America: “nearly ten years ago I was already thinking about part of the things I have just now set forth. I was in America only to become clear on this point.” (written in 1835)¹ But at that time he could only recognize the image of democracy in France. Thus it is not surprising to hear James Bryce, the author of *The American Commonwealth* (1888),

¹ Tocqueville to Louis de Kergolay, January, 1835, in *Selected Letters*, 95.

who followed Tocqueville's route to examine America but finally found a world drastically different from what Tocqueville described, to criticize Tocqueville's work "for being over-stylized, a child of an *a priori* theory, invented to deal not with American but with French problems."² From my point of view, to be *a priori* is largely inevitable for a thinker, but the question is what kind of *a priori* notion is presumed. As for Tocqueville, it was by knowing France and the old continent well enough that he could fully understand the significance of the new world.

Tocqueville's theoretical focus was directly indebted to the early 19th century French liberal thinkers who, in their struggles against the ultra-conservatives, shaped the scope of debate for the post-revolutionary French society, e.g. democracy, revolution, and liberty. Struck by the Reign of Terror and Napoleon's Empire, the first generation of French liberal thinkers such as Madame de Staël and Benjamin Constant urged France to adopt a British mode of mixed government and a constitutional order respecting "modern" individual liberties. The young Tocqueville was more familiar with the later *Doctrinaires'* parliamentary speeches, articles, and pamphlets, during the debate of the 1820s in Restoration Monarchy, which aimed to defend the liberal principles in French politics. He attended with ardor François Guizot's lectures at the Sorbonne College in 1829 and 1830 on the history of civilization in France and Europe. He was immediately

² See Isaiah Berlin, "The Thought of de Tocqueville" (review of *The Social and Political Thought of Alexis de Tocqueville*, by J. Lively), *History*, 50 (1965), 201.

attracted by Guizot's analysis of the risings and fallings of social classes in France and the progress of civilization.

More importantly, *Doctrinaire* thinkers like Guizot and Royer-Collard first interpreted democracy as a social condition (*état social*, or social state), advanced from the classical understanding of democracy as merely a type of political institution.³ Pointing out the rising of the Third Estate and the waning of the feudal aristocracy, they argued that through the levelling of social classes France was irreversibly entering a social state of democracy, namely equality of conditions, of which process the Revolution was the culmination and also a strong push forward. Tocqueville was firmly convinced of this viewpoint. He also inherited from Royer-Collard's worry that in an equalized and "atomized" social condition the State administration was more likely to centralize and impose despotism on the people.⁴ However, although the *Doctrinaires* like Guizot accepted the reality of social democracy, they largely concluded the chaos and bloody struggles in the Revolution era as the results of the radical democratic politics based on the principle of popular sovereignty, and thus held a relatively reactionary attitude toward the democratic reform in France. This was where Tocqueville would depart from the *Doctrinaires*.

³ Aurelian Craiutu, "Tocqueville and the Political Thought of the French *Doctrinaires*," *History of Political Thought*, 20 (1999), 456-93. Also see Siedentop, *Tocqueville*, Chapter 2 "The Great Debate of the 1820s", 20-40. Craiutu convincingly refuted the past mistaken notion that Tocqueville was the first to understand democracy as a social condition. For example, see Michael Zuckert's "On Social State", in *Tocqueville's Defense of Human Liberty*, ed. P.A. Lawler and J. Alulis (New York, 1993).

⁴ Siedentop, *Tocqueville*, 6, 26.

Tocqueville was too aware of the deep extent of the French democratic revolution to believe that the conservative (aristocratic) British mode was still adequate and possible for France. He was more logically consistent than his forefathers in terms of believing that social democracy must lead to political democracy.⁵ However, the real and situation and consequence of this mechanism were still uncertain and unclear to him. Bringing these questions, he moved his eyes to another model of democracy across the Atlantic. After the July Revolution of 1830 overthrew the reactionary Restoration Monarchy, he was more insistent on embarking to see what the real democracy was like in America.

In 1844 *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, Marx regarded *Phenomenology of Spirit* as “the true birthplace and secret of the Hegelian philosophy.”⁶ The rediscovery of Marx’s *Manuscripts* with a “humanistic” tone in the 20th century also seemed to reveal the “birthplace and secret” of Marx’s thought.⁷ I want to argue using the similar idea that, the Introduction to *Democracy in America* is the true birthplace and secret of Tocqueville’s thought. Its significance of guidance to the whole book of *Democracy* need not be mentioned. In addition, it even anticipated and guided his later works.

⁵ “[I]n the long run, political society cannot fail to become the expression and image of civil society.” *DA*, II.3.8, 686, footnote.

⁶ Karl Marx, *Early Writings*, trans. Rodney Livingstone and Gregor Benton (London: Penguin Books, 1975), 383.

⁷ However, scholars like Althusser rejected such humanistic interpretation of Marx and insisted the materialistic critique of capitalism as the core thought of Marx.

Concerning the intellectual origin of his *The Old Regime and the French Revolution* (1856), a conspicuous early landmark was the essay *Political and Social State of France* published on *London and Westminster Review* in 1836 at the request of John Stuart Mill who was the editor. However, some scholars have already recognized the continuous scope of question throughout Tocqueville's intellectual life, which was the puzzle imposed by the French Revolution. Therefore they rightly claimed that in *Democracy in America* the *Old Regime* had already been anticipated.⁸ The French historian François Furet concluded: "the example like that of Tocqueville was rare in the history of thought: the ensemble of questions formed at an early stage pervaded all of his intellectual activities from *Democracy* to the *Old Regime*," or in a word, "his question is the French Revolution."⁹ Thus it is crucial to see how Tocqueville's understanding of democracy (in America) originated from his perceptions and reflection of the French Revolution.

In the Introduction, although Tocqueville started from his experience of astonishment by the "equality of conditions" in America, he returned to the old world to

⁸ About former viewpoint, see Siedontop, *Tocqueville*, 114; Jardin, *Tocqueville: A Biography*, 247-8. Robert Garnet in his study of the making of *The Old Regime* has discussed this issue in more details. Tocqueville's British friend and economist Senior in his introduction to the 1836 essay has interpreted it to settle down the framework of the later book. See Garnet, *Tocqueville Unveiled: The Historian and His Sources for The Old Regime and the Revolution* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 40. In contrast, François Furet, James T. Schleifer, and Eduardo Nolla stressed the continuity of theoretical framework from *Democracy* to *Old Regime*, see *Ibid*, 3. Garnet himself provides a more detailed analysis of the making of *Old Regime*, which is not appropriate to classify in this way.

⁹ François Furet, "The Intellectual Origins of Tocqueville's Thought," ("托克维尔思想的知识起源") in Raymond Aron and Daniel Bell, etc, *Tocqueville et l'esprit de la démocratie* 《托克维尔与民主精神》, trans. Lu Xianggan and Jin Ye (陆象淦, 金烨) (Beijing : Social Sciences Academic Press, 2008), p. 62-3, quotation translated from the Chinese edition.

explain how this salient equality had come into being. He recognized that “something quite similar” was taking place in both places, that was, the “democratic revolution.” He made a famous statement that: “The gradual development of the equality of conditions is therefore a providential fact. It has the essential characteristics of one: it is universal, durable, and daily proves itself to be beyond the reach of man’s powers. Not a single event, not a single individual, fails to contribute to its development.” (*DA*, Introduction, 6)

Tocqueville focused on the situation in France to elaborate the significance of the modern democratic revolution. In his understanding, when the political and social order of feudalism was once stable in the climax of medieval times, the French society was hierarchical but still somehow harmonious: “In this society one saw inequality and misery, but souls were not degraded.” (*DA*, Introduction, 9) Later on, the French society abandoned the feudal state and embraced the equality of conditions. However, with the loss of the former’s merits it also failed to receive the real benefits from the latter. Echoing Guizot, Tocqueville gave a narration of how France marched toward a democratic social state through struggles among classes: the kings deprived the power of the lords and concentrated it in their own hands, people were enlightened and elevated, the aristocracies were impoverished, the distinction of ranks became blurred,

democracy¹⁰ began to show its own temper and character, the development of which was however gradually out of control. The noble individuals and traditional intermediary groups were destroyed, so were the barriers against the central government's tyranny. The nobles and the masses came close to each other. But with the parasitic privileges of the former and the ambitions of the latter, their mutual hatred was only constantly escalated and finally exploded. The society was discomposed as if being "amid the rubble," left with only infirm and enervated individuals unable to freely cooperate in great social enterprises. The religion which was supposed to shape noble souls with the principles of equality and freedom, because of its conflation with the political privilege, became the ally of the reactionary and the target of the revolution. Those revolutionaries, in the name of enlightenment and civilization, attacked the religious faith, simultaneously shattering the moral foundation of liberty. In this process, "[r]ather than gradually taking control of society so as to rule in peace," the untamed democracy in France "marches on through the chaos and tumult of battle." (DA, 11) This was how at last the French Revolution and its consequences actually made democracy terrifying to Tocqueville and his contemporaries.

The previous paragraph is a summary of the Introduction to *Democracy*, but the framework of *The Old Regime* has already been roughly displayed. It is thus

¹⁰ In the very first part of his work, Tocqueville began to use "democracy" with vague meanings. It firstly refers to the equality or equalization of social and political conditions. He also uses it in a personified way largely meaning the people, since he says "to educate democracy", or "teaching it to govern" (DA, Introduction, 7-8).

unsurprising to hear some scholars say that the question of the French Revolution pervaded Tocqueville's intellectual development. Tocqueville later stated that: "Although I very rarely spoke of France in my book (*Democracy in America*), I did not write one page of it without thinking about her and without having her, so to speak, before my eyes."¹¹ However, from my point of view, this is largely insincere since we can detect the appearance of France in many places throughout the whole book, and especially untrue for the Introduction because more than half of it is about France.

After Tocqueville addressed enough words on the democratic revolution in France and returned to the theme of the book, America, he almost made a contradictory statement: "There is one country in the world in which the great social revolution of which I speak seems almost to have attained its natural limits," but "this country has witnessed the effects of the democratic revolution that we are now undergoing without having had the revolution itself." (*DA*, Introduction, 14) I say "almost" because the American democracy is definitely the child of the previous European (British) democratic revolution. But concerning its own development, a democracy without a political and social revolution toppling the previous feudal society is a saliently distinct fact compared to that of France. Given this fact, regarding the democracy in America and that in France as the same thing seems to need further justification.

¹¹ Tocqueville to Louis de Kergorlay, Oct 18, 1847, *Selected Letters*, 191.

At least for Tocqueville, he saw the future of France in America: "There is no doubt in my mind that sooner or later we will come, as the Americans have come, to an almost complete equality of conditions." (*DA*, 14) Therefore, he decided to examine the features of democracy that was looming over the whole Christian world, through studying the specific case in America from which the influences of the violent revolution like that in France were by nature detached. Here he focused on a one-direction vision: how democracy (equality of conditions) as a common and dominant factor would shape the American and French societies in similar ways.¹² However, consciously and unconsciously, Tocqueville in his revelation of "the democracy in America" would also unavoidably describe much about "America in democracy," thus illustrating the features of democracy dressed by many American characters. To some extent he seemed to overlook the other important question: how the different social and historical conditions including the violent revolutions or the strange fact of lacking a violent revolution against the social and political order of feudalism would also shape democracy itself differently. It is here adequate to ask: how successfully could Tocqueville extract "the image of democracy itself" from the American scenario alone? Or is the American democracy a representative type of modern democracy or an exceptional type? Is there more than one image of democracy?

¹² Also see *DA*, I.2.5, 224; *DA*, I.2.9, 360.

4.2 Discovering the “Point of Departure”: The Natural, Social, and Political Origins of America

It was not Tocqueville’s purpose, especially in the first volume of *Democracy* (1835), to stress that the success of American democracy was so exceptional that the European nations undergoing the “same” democratic revolution could not learn something positive from it. His aim was through studying the “pure” democracy in America to provide an image of democracy itself so that Europe could know “what to fear or hope” when pure democracy would dominate as well. “The organization and establishment of democracy among Christians is the great political problem of our time. To be sure, the Americans have not solved this problem, but they offer useful instruction to those who wish to do so.” (DA, I.2.9, 360)

However, the sole fact that the American society was originally organized in a democratic and republican way was quite exceptional. If the United States was really exceptional, it was most so during (even before) its founding and early times. Even those who reject the concept of American Exceptional admit this: “The period between the American Revolution and the Civil War was the time when the United States was most clearly exceptional.”¹³ Therefore, Tocqueville confronted a right time to discover the facts of American Exceptionalism. As an “observer of genius,”¹⁴ Tocqueville of course could not miss this point. He reflected on the reality of the American society he

¹³ Godfrey Hodgson, *The Myth of American Exceptionalism*, 60.

¹⁴ Isaiah Berlin, “The Thought of de Tocqueville”, *History*, 50 (1965), 205-6.

witnessed and experienced, and traced it back to “the point of departure” (*point de départ*) of America, the idea of which he thought could explain every “single opinion, habit, or law” and every “single event” of America. He stressed that the idea of “point of departure” was the key to the entire work. (DA, I.1.2, 33)

The primary meaning of “the point of departure” for Tocqueville refers to how the first English immigrants, above all the Puritans in the New England area, organized their communities in the coastal colonies. “The social condition, religion, and mores of the first immigrants ... exerted an immense influence on the destiny of their adopted land.” (49-50) Thus the “point of departure” indicates the origin and nature of American society (“origin” is synonymous with “point of departure”¹⁵). The idea of origin has a special figurative significance for Tocqueville. He argues that, if we want to understand the vices and virtues in a man’s maturity, we should:

“Go back in time. Examine the babe when still in its mother’s arms. See the external world reflected for the first time in the still-dark mirror of his intelligence. Contemplate the first models to make an impression of him. Listen to the words that first awaken his dormant powers of thought. Take note, finally, of the first battles he is obliged to fight. Only then will you understand where the prejudices, habits, and passions that will dominate his life come from. In a manner of speaking, the whole man already lies swaddled in his cradle....Something analogous happens with nations. Every people bears the mark of its origins. The circumstances that surround its birth and aid its development also influence the subsequent course of its existence.” (DA, I.1.2, 31)

¹⁵ “Earlier I said that I saw in the origin of the Americans, in what I called their point of departure, the first and most effective of all the causes to which one can attribute the present prosperity of the United States.” DA, I.2.9, 321.

Tocqueville did not mean to claim a “genetic determinism.” For him, only knowing the born characters of a man and a nation could we find the right ways to cultivate the advantages or overcome the disadvantages in order to attain and defend real freedom.

An echoing of Rousseau, whose works Tocqueville would have read everyday,¹⁶ is heard here, as Rousseau writes: “The body politic, like the human body, begins to die from the very moment of its birth and carries within itself the causes of its destruction.” To argue how human endeavors could contribute to the longevity of a state, Rousseau continues: “But both can have a constitution that is more or less robust and suited to preserve them for a longer or shorter time. The constitution of man is the work of nature; the constitution of the state is the work of art. It is not within men’s power to prolong their lives; it is within their power to prolong the life of the state as far as possible by giving it the best constitution it can have.”¹⁷ From this argument we can partly see how the modern social contract theory stresses the importance of the founding constitution as the origin or “point of departure.”

The importance of origin is also emphasized by Aristotle: “He who thus considers things in their first growth and origin, whether a state or anything else, will

¹⁶ Tocqueville wrote: “I spend a little bit of time each day with three men: Pascal, Montesquieu, and Rousseau.” November 10, 1836. Cited from David Selby, “Tocqueville’s Politics of Providence: Pascal, Jansenism and the Author’s Introduction to *Democracy in America*,” *The Tocqueville Review/La Revue Tocqueville*, 2012(2), p. 167-190, endnote 1.

¹⁷ Rousseau, *Social Contract*, Bk. 3, cp. 11, in *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Basic Political Writings*, ed. and trans. Donald A. Cress (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2011), 214-5.

obtain the clearest view of them.”¹⁸ In Aristotle’s philosophic teleology, the origin is at the same time the purpose and the end, for example, a seed contains the full development of a whole tree. Although based on a modern cosmology, Tocqueville and the other seminal modern political thinkers do not give up all the traditions of the classical political philosophy. Similar to how Plato explores the justice of a man in the justice of the state, Tocqueville here also bases his argument on the similarity between the original constitutions and later development of an individual man and of a state.

Generally speaking, the origin of a nation is difficult to discern, as John Locke writes: “it is with commonwealths as with particular persons, they are commonly ignorant of their own births and infancies.”¹⁹ Tocqueville also recognized this: “Nations developed an analytic spirit only as they grew old, and before it occurred to them to reflect on their beginnings, time had already shrouded the moment of their inception in fog, and ignorance and pride had surrounded it with fables behind which the truth lay hidden.” But there is one exceptional case: “America is the only country in which it has been possible to witness the natural and tranquil course of a society’s development and to pinpoint the influence of a state’s point of departure on its future.” (*DA*, I.1.2, 32) The time and materials made it possible for Tocqueville to see the origin of American society

¹⁸ *Politics*, 1252a24-5, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. Jonathan Barnes (NJ, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), (Electronic Edition), vol. 2, *Politics*, trans. B. Jowett, 3.

¹⁹ John Locke, *Second Treatise*, section 101, in *Two Treatises of Government and A Letter Concerning Toleration*, ed. Ian Shapiro (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003), 144.

more clearly than the later researchers, as well as to perceive it in his field study when the nation was still in early growth.

During his visit in America, Tocqueville was often reminded by the Americans themselves of how important and different their origin was. The Senator of the State of Massachusetts Mr. Gray told him: “we had the English spirit and a completely republican religion as points of departure.” The former American ambassador to Spain and later Harvard president Alexander Everett said: “The point of departure for a people is of immense importance.” Tocqueville’s lifelong American friend and the most important American informant Jared Sparks (also later Harvard president who granted Tocqueville an honor degree) told him: “You can see what strength such a point of departure must have given to the spirit of locality which so eminently distinguishes us even among other Americans, and to republican principles. Those who would like to imitate us should remember that there are no precedents for our history.” The former president Quincy Adams explained the differences between the western States and those of New England as: “That is due almost entirely to the point of departure.”²⁰ These local celebrities of Boston were the so-called proto-Whigs at that time, and they had a huge influence on Tocqueville’s understanding of America. Thus it is not difficult to

²⁰ Quoted from *Journey to America*, ed. J. P. Mayer, trans. George Lawrence (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1960), 57, 58, 59, 120.

understand why Tocqueville dedicated a separate chapter about the “point of departure” which mainly discussed the New England society.

The most crucial “point of departure” for Tocqueville was the people themselves rather than the external environment. But he could not deny that an exceptional people must “depart” and further flourish on an exceptional land. As Thomas More imagined, a “Utopia” must be established on an isolated and naturally well-fortified island. The continent of North America might be the closest real setting for an ideal republic. Realizing this, Tocqueville wrote maybe one of the most beautiful, concise, and profound passages on the natural environment of America, in the very first chapter of his book.

Tocqueville followed a Montesquieuan sociological scope to describe how the natural environment would influence the character of a nation. Inheriting the tradition of classical political philosophy, Tocqueville reflectively implied morality when he wrote about nature. In America, inexhaustible resources remained to be explored in the vast hinterland between the Alleghenies and the Rockies, nurtured by the Mississippi River – “Father of Waters.” However, the birth of the first republican states was not granted with such “mana” from the heaven. Rather, the east of Alleghenies was only a “strip of rock and sand that appears to have been left behind by the receding ocean” on which “the soil yields to the farmer’s labors only grudgingly.” (*DA*, I.1.1, 24) “It was on

this inhospitable coast that the efforts of human industry were first concentrated. On this arid tongue of land the English colonies that would one day become the United States of America were born and matured." (Ibid, 24)

For Tocqueville, the first Puritan settlers were lucky as not to settle down on the paradisiacal West Indies islands, beneath the "brilliant cloak" of which actually lay death, because the blissful environment taught inhabitants to enjoy the present while ignoring the future. In contrast, "North America presented a different aspect: there, everything was grave, serious, solemn. It seemed to have been created to become the domain of the intelligence, and the other (South America) to become the abode of the senses." (DA, I.1.1, 25) The residents of the new world had to first prepare themselves on the relatively sterile land where human beings must strive hard to survive. (In fact, several attempts of settlements on the east coast of North America in the 16th century indeed failed.) However, the initial harshness grounded for Americans' later success in exploring the vast inner continent toward the other coast. With their carried religious teachings and forged invincible courage in "the point of departure," the American explorers were capable of marching forward relentlessly to discover and utilize the infinite wealth once hidden by nature. In contrast to South America, here in North America, "death in a way served life." (Ibid, 25) Therefore, the natural environment of North America was exceptional not in terms of simply being rich, but rather displaying an austere moral character before opening the warm bosom.

It seems to have been a commonsense or even a platitude to stress how the isolated and safe location, the vast space of the continent, and the abundant resources, in a word how the favorable natural environment contributed to the prosperity of the American society and the success of its democracy. Among the early precursors of this thought, Tocqueville dedicated a section “On the accidental or providential causes that help to maintain the democratic republic in the United States” in I.2.9 to illustrate this point. Although whether being the most crucial factor to maintaining democracy is arguable, the natural gift of America is obviously exceptional:

“Their fathers instilled in them a love of equality and liberty, but it was God himself who, by giving them a boundless continent, granted them the means to remain equal and free for a long time to come. ... General prosperity contributes to the stability of any government, but particularly to that of a democratic government, which depends on the attitudes of the majority, and especially of the neediest, of its people. When the people govern, it is essential that they be happy lest they overthrow the state. Misery does to the people what ambition does to kings. In America, the material causes of prosperity – independent of the law – are more numerous than they have ever been in any other country at any time in the history of the world.” (DA, I.2.9, 322)

Here I do not need to repeat too much on this point or what Tocqueville wrote in *Democracy*, but to mention somehow the formation of his ideas. In a letter he wrote from America to his father he had somehow confirmed his later statement: “This land, which is still nothing but an immense forest, will someday be one of the richest and most powerful in the world. You don’t have to be a prophet to see this. Nature has laid the groundwork with fertile and shipping routes unlike any other in the world. Nothing is

lacking but civilized men, and they are knocking at the door.”²¹ Anticipating the later “frontier thesis” proposed by Frederick J. Turner, Tocqueville had already touched the significance of the west expansion, which had also been noticed by the Americans themselves. The former president Adams explained to Tocqueville that “one of the greatest guarantees of order and internal security in the United States was found in the movement of the population toward the west.”²² The biggest landlord in America and the last living signatory of the Declaration of Independence at that time, Charles Carroll in Baltimore, expressed the similar idea: “if we tolerate ours (a pure democracy), that is because every year we can push our innovators out West.”²³ Agreeing to this thought, in “A Fortnight in the Wilds” Tocqueville wrote that the West pioneers are “a wandering people whom rivers and lakes cannot hold back, before whom forests fall and prairies are covered in shade; and who, when they have reached the Pacific Ocean, will come back on its tracks to trouble and destroy the societies which it will have formed behind it.”²⁴ The West worked as a safety valve to let out the internal tension, which was crucial to the peace and order of the America society.

Some people would emphasize that it was the American people who could utilize well the land of the new continent, while others would stress that it was the

²¹ Tocqueville to his father, Aug. 14, 1831, in *Alexis de Tocqueville and Gustave de Beaumont in America*, 110.

²² *Journey to America*, 62.

²³ *Ibid*, 86.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 340.

extraordinary condition of the new continent that shaped the character of American people. I think these two statements cannot be detached from each other strictly. Back to the issue of the failure of socialism in the United States, the American workers' distinct minds and characters were often regarded as one of the most decisive factors. Even Frederick Engels somehow realized and felt disappointed that the American workers held deep-rooted "bourgeois prejudices."²⁵ But their "capitalist mentality," as Sombart pointed out, was also caused by their living conditions different from the European workers'.

The workers' strikes in America were not definitely less numerous or less violent than in Europe. ²⁶ But their claims were largely not to grasp, concentrate, and monopolize the political and economic power in the hands of themselves as a class. Rather, they always aimed to destroy the concentrated power of the capital and guarantee their own individual freedom, same with most American citizens' willingness. The American workers were generally not real proletarians without means to live, and they could hardly imagine destroying the principle of private property. Richness could simply change one's mind. Tocqueville mentioned that a French immigrant, who was once an ardent revolutionary against the political and economic orders in France, after

²⁵ Friedrich Engels to Friedrich Adolph Sorge, Dec. 31, 1892,
https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1892/letters/92_12_31.htm.

²⁶ See Daniel Bell, *Marxian Socialism in the United States*.

settling down in America and making a fortune for himself, became a defender of property and a believer in God. (*DA*, I.2.9, 330)

Tocqueville and Beaumont first landed in New York from the voyage across the ocean, somewhat pleased to see that living in the most luxurious hotel in Manhattan was not very expensive. “[T]he cost of living – eating and sleeping – is no higher than in Paris,” however, “everything man-made costs a fortune.”²⁷ The value of human labor was reaffirmed during their visit to the still underexplored Michigan Territory. There the pioneers told Tocqueville that one acre of uncultivated land was never more than the price of a day’s labor, while the primary expense was hiring people to clear the land.²⁸ Thus the things “mixed” with human labor would always be ten-fold in worth. It was salient to see that in America the most valuable thing was always the work of a man himself compared to the value of common natural resources especially the land. The worth of human labor further strengthened a sense of the dignity of human individuals. I believe that in contrast, for the constructions of the ancient Egyptian Pyramids and the Chinese Great Wall, the “cheapest” were always human labors, or more exactly, human lives, in the circumstances of which the idea of individual rights was unknown. Furthermore, there was respect and no hierarchy for all forms of labor in America. “In the United States, professions are more or less difficult, more or less lucrative, but they

²⁷ Tocqueville to his father, Jun. 3, 1831, *Alexis de Tocqueville and Gustave de Beaumont in America*, 27.

²⁸ See *Journey to America*, 210, 343.

are never noble or base. Every honest profession is honorable.”²⁹ This point shows how the external settings contribute to the notion of “equality of conditions.”

If the failure of socialism to replace capitalism in the United States can be regarded as exceptional, it might also be because the origin and development of the capitalism in America was more or less exceptional. Marx himself in the last chapter of volume one of *Capital*, “The Modern Theory of Colonization,” had touched this point. In his account, the capitalist mode of production is based on a social structure in which the majority of the population is “expropriated” of their land and has to live on wages, causing a constant surplus of supply of labor power. Therefore, with the unbalance in the labor market, the capital could exploit the labor and the capitalists could dominate the workers. However, it is easy to see that, the American workers were always free, free to settle down as well as to leave, often free of big wealth, but never totally free of land. The easiness of accumulation of land “prevents the existence of a class of labourers for hire.” “So long, therefore, as the worker can accumulate for himself – and this he can do as long as he remains in possession of his means of production – accumulation and the capitalist mode of production are impossible.”³⁰

In Marx’s account, the distinct circumstances of American colonies became the “resistance to the establishment of capital.” “[T]he labour-market is always

²⁹ *Democracy in America*, ed. Eduardo Nolla, trans. James T. Schleifer, 971. The Goldhammer translation of this passage is not correct.

³⁰ Marx, *Capital, Volume One*, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin Books, 1976), 933.

understocked. The law of the supply and demand of labour collapses completely. ... Today's wage-labourer is tomorrow's independent peasant or artisan, working for himself. He vanishes from the labour-market – but not into the workhouse. This constant transformation of wage-labourers into independent producers, who work for themselves instead of for capital, and enrich themselves instead of the capitalist gentlemen, reacts in its turn very adversely on the conditions of the labour-market. Not only does the degree of exploitation of the wage-labourer remain indecently low. The wage-labourer also loses, along with the relation of dependence, the feeling of dependence on the abstemious capitalist.”³¹ Therefore, the capitalist mode of mass production could not be organized in America as in Europe. The capitalists were in a relatively disadvantaged position. Sometimes the strong independence and influence of the workers were to so high an extent that “simple workers have been seen to exploit in their turn the industrial entrepreneurs, demanding from them wages which bear absolutely no relation to the legitimate share in the product which they ought to receive.”³² The strange fact that workers could exploit capitalists is partly the ground for the later disenchantment of American workers and society toward the socialist ideology which promised the so-called master position of the working class.

³¹ *Ibid*, 936.

³² *Ibid*, 937, Marx cited from Molinari.

Marx wrote at the end of his book: “we are not concerned here with the condition of the colonies.”³³ For him, the hardship of the capitalism in America is illustrated to confirm the theory that the “annihilation” of the workers’ private property (land and other means of production) is the necessary condition for the capitalist mode of production, and to show that the American society is rather underdeveloped in the historical progress of modern capitalism. However, the underplayed implication of the last chapter in *Capital* (volume one) is somehow a landmine set to explode in his theoretical system. Marx himself realized that America was exceptional, but he could not foresee that this exceptionalism would in the end destroy his universal law of historical progress (if he truly believed in such a historical law as the dogmatists think). Therefore, it is not accidental that the United States finally became the nightmare for the socialist movements around the world, because from the beginning it was an outsider of the rule.

American workers held strong bourgeois prejudices because most of Americans worked for wages and also had some money to invest for profits. Thus, most Americans were at the same time working men and capitalists, or more generally speaking, were the so-called middle class.³⁴ In this sense, there were no permanent class divisions or

³³ *Ibid*, 940.

³⁴ “America from the beginning has been a society in which the ‘middling condition of men’ has been of primary importance, and for the past hundred years or so, the middle class, in the modern sense of the term, has so dominated our culture that neither a genuinely upper-class nor a genuinely working-class culture has fully appeared. Everyone in the United States thinks largely in middle-class categories, even when they are inappropriate.” Robert N. Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in America* (Harper & Row, 1986), viii.

irreconcilable class struggles in America. Marx also somehow realized this: "in the United States of North America, where, though classes already exist, they have not yet become fixed, but continually change and interchange their elements in constant flux."³⁵ Society was constantly transforming and opportunities always remained to found at some time somewhere. People generally had similar expects toward an affluent future, and thus did not have time to hate and fight against each other in rigid class divisions.

Tocqueville could only affirm the similar idea. In New York, he was strongly impressed with the city's prosperity and the Americans' passions for business and industry: "Nothing is easier than becoming rich in America; ... As a result, at first sight this people seems to be a company of merchants joined together for trade, and as one digs deeper into the national character of the Americans, one sees that they have sought the value of everything in this world only in the answer to this single question: how much money will it bring in?"³⁶ The pioneers in the wildness worked as farmers, but only regarding it as an occupation instead of an identification of class status. They had no "pure" ignorant minds as like the French peasants, and they were no less greedy than the businessmen in cities, the fact of which quite disappointed and irritated Tocqueville.³⁷ Merchants and farmers were just the same class in one society:

³⁵ Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (New York: International Publishers, 1963), 25.

³⁶ Tocqueville to Ernest de Chabrol, Jun. 9, 1831, *Selected Letters*, 39.

³⁷ After witnessing how the pioneers duped the Indians whom they made "transactions" with, Tocqueville lamented: "We ourselves were daily victims of their extreme greediness for gain. It is very true that they do not rob at all. They are too enlightened to do anything so imprudent, but otherwise I have never seen a

“In America, even more than in Europe, there is one society only. It may be rich or poor, humble or brilliant, trading or agricultural, but it is made up everywhere of the same elements; it has been levelled out by an egalitarian civilization. The man you left behind in the streets of New York, you will find him again in the midst of almost impenetrable solitude (he means the virgin forest): same dress, same spirit, same language, same habits and the same pleasures. Nothing rustic, nothing naive, nothing that smells of the wilds, nothing even that resembles our villages.”³⁸

Aristotle summarizes the development of human communities (namely society, but society is a modern idea) as following the order from family, village, and to the final completed stage of state. “[T]he first society to be formed is the village. And the most natural form of the village appears to be that of a colony from the family, composed of the children and grandchildren, who are said to be ‘suckled with the same milk’.”³⁹ Nearly all traditional (agricultural) societies develop roughly in this way. Aristotle indicates that the ruling power of the ancient kings is often naturally developed from the paternal authority of the leaders in the family and village. Thus it is not accidental that most traditional states were patrimonial. Furthermore, the village life values the authority based on age and experience. It cannot be imagined that a strong sense of equality and individual independence could be appreciated in a traditional family with

hotel-keeper in a great city overcharge more impudently than these dwellers in the wilderness among whom I expected to find the primitive honesty and simplicity of a patriarchal way of life.” “A Fortnight in the Wilds,” *Journey to America*, 355.

³⁸ *Journey to America*, 33.

³⁹ *Politics*, 1252b16-19, p. 3.

several generations living together for a long time. Where the villages are the basic units of a society, there must be an approving notion of paternal ruling and a social order of hierarchy.

In contrast, America is originally a republican society, partly in the sense that there have been no villages in America from the beginning. The former American Minister in France and in England Mr. Gallatin told Tocqueville: "We have no villages in America, that is to say none inhabited by people who cultivate the land. A landowner lives on his estate and the houses are scattered all over the country. What you take for villages had better be called towns as they are inhabited by shopkeepers, craftsmen and lawyers."⁴⁰ The ambassador with a comparative vision was indeed insightful. There was vast rural or agricultural area in America with farms, but not villages. First, time had not been long enough for one or several families to gather and develop into a village. Second, a village was ostensibly too crowded, too unpromising, and too suffocating for Americans to live in, with the vast empty land to explore in the wilderness. The emerging American society was based on individuals or core families, who organized their communities with a spirit of cooperation as well as independence. This was also the typical Jeffersonian nostalgia for the American agrarian republic in its "point of departure."

⁴⁰ *Journey to America*, 21.

Such social origin and organization valuing individual independence and equal prospects for future became the social foundation of the republican states and liberal politics in America. Tocqueville's friend and the early founder of American political science Francis Lieber (immigrated from Germany) summarized: "We Europeans think we can make republics by organizing a great political assembly. But on the contrary[,] of all forms of government a republic is the one that grows most from the roots in the whole of society. Consider this country. The republic is everywhere, in the streets as much as in Congress. If there is something blocking the public way, the neighbors on the spot form a body to discuss it, ... The idea of an authority pre-existent to those who need it, does not come into anybody's head: the people have something of the republic in the marrow of their bones." ⁴¹

Tocqueville was convinced of the uniquely republican nature of America's political society: "Society there has been built from a clean slate. There is neither victor nor vanquished to be seen, neither working man nor noble, neither prejudices of birth nor of profession, but the whole of all America is in like case and a republic succeeds only in the United States." ⁴² American politics is based on the principles of self-government and decentralization, essentially because the power is originally decentralized in the society itself rather than being monopolized and manipulated by

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 54-5.

⁴² *Ibid*, 179.

the State. A centralized state or omnipotent sovereignty was by nature foreign to Americans. Tocqueville was more than once impressed with the absence of government and the autonomy of American society: "What is most striking to everyone who travels in this country, whether or not one bothers to reflect, is the spectacle of a society marching along all alone, without guide or support, by the sole fact of the cooperation of individual wills. In spite of anxiously searching for the government, one can find it nowhere, and the truth is that it does not, so to speak, exist at all."⁴³ In the sense of a society "marching along all alone" without the guidance or intervention by the government, the essential feature of American Exceptionalism, as Daniel Bell concludes is that "the United States has been the complete civil society (to use a Hegelian term), perhaps the only one in political history."⁴⁴

The other seminal feature of self-government and decentralization in American politics is reflected in its federal system, the structure of which is grounded on local freedom and autonomy. "In most European nations, political existence began in the upper reaches of society and was communicated, gradually and always incompletely, to other parts of the social body. ... In America, by contrast, the local community was organized before the county, the county before the state, and the state before the Union."

⁴³ Tocqueville to Chabrol, Oct. 7, 1831, *Selected Letters*, 59. Also see Tocqueville's conversations with the incumbent Harvard president Josiah Quincy and the president of the Second Bank of the United States Nicholas Biddle, in *Journey to America*, 50-2, 87-9. And see *Democracy*, I.1.5, 79.

⁴⁴ Daniel Bell, "American Exceptionalism Revisited: The Role of Civil Society," in *The Public Interest*, Spring 1989, 38-56.

(DA, I.1.2, 45) This statement was almost directly borrowed from Jared Sparks' teachings.⁴⁵ Sparks wrote a long article discussing the local political system at the request of the longing young Frenchman, titled as "Observations by Jared Sparks on the Government of Towns in Massachusetts," the ideas of which are strongly echoed in *Democracy*.⁴⁶ (We also should not underestimate how the hungry mind of this foreign young man impressed, edified, and even bothered Sparks' thinking and imagination.)

How could we not be surprised about that when an author introduces a country's political system, he does not first describe the magnificent palaces in the capital or the majesty of the imperial court, but starts with how local folks run their small towns? However, the township politics of New England, for Tocqueville, is like the "the true birthplace and secret" of the American political system and even lighting the future for human society.⁴⁷ The practices of local self-government nurture a sense of autonomy and responsibility that is the authentic foundation of a republic. He admires

⁴⁵ In their conversation Sparks said: "Almost all societies, even in America, have begun with one place where the government was concentrated, and have then spread out around that central point. Our forefathers on the contrary founded the locality before the State. Plymouth, Salem, Charleston existed before one could speak of a government of Massachusetts; they only became united later and by an act of deliberate will. You can see what strength such a point of departure must have given to the spirit of locality which so eminently distinguishes us even among other Americans, and to republican principles. Those who would like to imitate us should remember that there are no precedents for our history." *Journey to America*, 59. Tocqueville, in contrast, lamented for France: "America created municipal liberty before it created public liberty. We have done and still do exactly the opposite. Cause of all our ills, we want to erect a column beginning with the capital; to be master-craftsmen before we are apprentices." *Ibid*, 180.

⁴⁶ Herbert B. Adams, "Jared Sparks and Alexis de Tocqueville," in ed. Herbert B. Adams, *John Hopkins University Studies in Historical and Political Science, Series XVI, No. 12* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins Press, 1898), 17-38.

⁴⁷ "The civilization of New England was like a bonfire on a hilltop, which, having spread its warmth to its immediate vicinity, tinges even the distant horizon with its glow." (DA, I.1.2, 36)

the American township politics so highly as: "It is man who creates kingdoms and republics; the community (*commune*, or locality) seems to stem directly from the hand of God." (DA, I.1.5, 67)

The Federal system stemming from and formed by the local governments constitutes the exceptional aspect of American politics that other countries can hardly dream of replicating. Tocqueville concluded the good of the federal systems as: "The Union is free and happy like a small nation, glorious and strong like a large." (DA, I.1.8, 185) The Federal Constitution was indeed a masterpiece that grounded for the longevity of the Union, but more essentially, it has been supported by the character of the American people themselves. Later when Tocqueville was in charge of drafting the 1848 Constitution for the Second Republic of France, he lamented that he could not be accompanied by the similar great souls of the American Constitution framers, and especially without a people like the Americans to defend those liberal principles of self-government and autonomy.⁴⁸

Compared to the democratic principle of popular sovereignty that can be universally applied to every modern state, the system of federation is the blessing enjoyed almost only by America. Tocqueville concluded that the "primary credit for the adoption and persistence of the federal system must be ascribed" to America's geographical situation. (DA, I.2.5, 190) The lack of a centralized government is mainly

⁴⁸ *Recollections*, 167-183.

because of the lack of external threats. Military mobilization is always the excuse and beginning of the concentration of the state power, as sociologist Charles Tilly says: “War made the state and the state made war.”⁴⁹ In the “point of departure,” American explorers were not free from the worries of security, but largely free from the invasions of the traditional great powers at the other side of the ocean, because they were already the “invaders” to the farthest frontiers. Thus different systems of political powers or “sovereignties” could originate naturally and separately on the vast continent and coexist for a long time. The space for expansion and the security of homeland were the crucial conditions for a decentralized society exempt from an omnipotent state.

Tocqueville concluded the first part of volume one which discussed the political institutions of the United States with a strong sense of exceptionalism:

“No one can be more appreciative of the advantages of the federal system than I. I see it as one of the most potent arrangements there is for making men prosperous and free. I envy the lot of the nations that have been permitted to adopt it. Yet I refuse to believe that a confederated nation can hold out for long against an equally powerful nation whose government is centralized.

Any nation confronting the great military monarchies of Europe that chose to fragment its sovereignty would, in my view, thereby abdicate its power and perhaps its name and very existence.

How admirable is the position of the New World, where man still has no enemies other than himself! To be happy and free he has only to wish it.” (DA, I.1.8, 193)

⁴⁹ Cited from Francis Fukuyama, *Political Order and Political Decay: from the Industrial Revolution to the Globalization of Democracy* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2014), 10.

4.3 Americans' Mores: An Enlightened and Liberal People without the Enlightenment Attack on Religion

A primary concern of Tocqueville is the possibility of liberty under the circumstance of modern democracy ("equality of conditions"). As mentioned before, the constant revolutionary upheavals in France seemed to reveal an unpromising future for modern democracy. Doubtful of this, Tocqueville resorted to the case of America in order for a different answer. What somehow consoled him was that, the successful operation of the democratic republic in America, in contrast, shed light on the brighter facets of modern democracy. However, it is easy to be recognized by Tocqueville and others that the natural settings and historical trajectory of the American society are quite unique and cannot be replicated. The happy images of American Exceptionalism thus might be sad facts for other nations.

Tocqueville decided not to be limited to the discouraging natural and historical determinism. Among the three causes that contribute to the liberal democracy of America: physical causes, institutions (or laws), and mores, he insisted that the first was the least important and the latter two especially the mores were more crucial. The natural environment is given "by God," while the institutions can be introduced and the mores can be shaped by human efforts, which promises a hope of freedom for all democratic societies. Tocqueville's purpose was "to show, by using America as an example, that laws and above all mores could allow a democratic people to remain free." (DA, I.2.9, 364)

When Tocqueville was in America, he held an optimistic view of learning from Americans' experience: "The American people taken in mass is not only the most enlightened in the world, but – what I put much higher than that advantage – is the one whose practical political education is the most advanced. It is that truth in which I firmly believe that inspires in me my one hope for the future happiness of Europe."⁵⁰ The "enlightenment" and "political education," Tocqueville believed, were within the capacities of all human beings, which meant that the exceptional (excellent) aspect of America could be learnt by other nations.

Tocqueville believed that other countries could establish the successful democratic republican government like that of the United States. "What I saw among the Anglo-Americans leads me to believe that democratic institutions of this nature, if prudently introduced into society in such a way that people could become accustomed to them little by little and gradually absorb them into their opinions, could survive in places other than America." (*DA*, I.2.9, 358) He pointed out that the Americans also needed to overcome the dangers of democracy through certain institutional and cultural endeavors. Thus the other countries marching toward the equal social conditions could also through similar strivings maintain freedom political practices. "American mores and laws are not the only ones appropriate to democratic peoples, but the Americans

⁵⁰ *Journey to America*, 179.

have shown that one need not despair of regulating democracy with the aid of laws and mores." (359)

Using laws and mores to establish democratic republican governments can be realized in America as well as in other equalized societies. However, as implied above, the approaches toward liberal democracy taken by America and by other countries are not exactly the same. Tocqueville had noted: "In America free mores have made free political institutions; in France it is for free political institutions to mould mores. This is the end towards which we must strive but without forgetting the point of departure."⁵¹ The significance of this difference is related to his further statement that mores are more important than institutions (laws) to maintaining democratic republican governments. Thus even in this aspect, Tocqueville would again, consciously or unconsciously, reveal that America was actually exceptional.

Clauses of the constitution and law can be easily copied or readapted. But without certain spirits and characters of the people to support these legal provisions, the laws are only on the paper. Mexico replicated the republican constitution of the United States but was still unable to avoid the miseries of military dictatorships and anarchies because their people were not used to these free institutions. "The Constitution of the United States resembles those beautiful creations of human industry that bring abundant glory and wealth to their inventors yet in other hands remain sterile." (DA,

⁵¹ *Ibid*, 150.

I.1.8, 187) The French colonists were more affinitive to the Anglo-Americans and had access to the same natural resources, but they had not achieved the equal success because of a different spirit from the latter. The French residents of the Canadian colonies, with the habits of the French peasants under the old regime, were used to be confined to their small communities and reluctant to explore the wilderness as the Anglo people zealously tried. They were willing to tolerate the price of land in Quebec as high as in Paris, rather than taking a risk to cultivate the empty land not far from their home. Tocqueville lamented that they would at last be surrounded and swallowed by their English neighbors, like “a drop in the ocean.”⁵² In these two cases, different mores make a big difference.

“Mores” (*les moeurs*) constitutes the core idea of Tocqueville’s political thought. “The importance of mores is a common truth, which study and experience have repeatedly confirmed. It is a truth central to all my thinking, and in the end all my ideas come back to it.” (*DA*, I.2.9, 356) Mores in Tocqueville’s works is used in broad meanings, but not unclear:

“By mores I mean here what the Ancients meant by the term: I apply it not only to mores in the strict sense, what one might call habits of the heart, but also to the various notions that men possess, to the diverse opinions that are current among them, and to the whole range of ideas that shape habits of mind. ... Thus I use this word to refer to the whole moral and intellectual state of a people.” (*DA*, I.2.9, 331)⁵³

⁵² *Ibid*, 193.

⁵³ Other definitions include: “the whole range of intellectual and moral dispositions that men bring to the state of society.” (*DA*, I.2.9, 353) “[T]he practical experience, habits, and opinions.” (*DA*, I.2.9, 356)

Mores are the essential undergirding force of the laws: “Laws are always shaky unless they are supported by mores. Mores are the only robust and durable power in any nation.”⁵⁴ (I.2.8, 315) “What greater impotence than that of institutions, when ideas and mores do not nourish them!”⁵⁵ Tocqueville’s American friend Francis Lieber resonated with him: “I am increasingly inclined to think that constitutions and political regulations are of no importance in themselves. Such creations are lifeless and inert until the mores and social situation of the people breathe life into them.”⁵⁶ A political society, for Tocqueville, is not “what their laws make them, but what sentiments, beliefs, ideas, habits of the heart, and the spirit of the men who form them, prepare them in advance to be, as well as what nature and education have made them.”⁵⁷ With this understanding, his argument that mores are the most important factor to maintain a democratic republic seems quite consistent because a political society is essentially characterized by mores.

However, as Tocqueville himself notes, mores as the inner nature of a person, a people, or a nation, are the most “durable power.” How could then the mores that have been formed through hundreds of years’ historical and social practices be easily learnt or transplanted by others, especially those valuable “free mores” which can effectively defend “free institutions”? Although Tocqueville suggests not to “despair of regulating

⁵⁴ This statement in *Democracy* is almost directly adapted from his notebook writings: “laws are always unsteady so long as they are not based for support on morals (*moeurs*). Morals are the only tough and durable power among a people.” *Journey to America*, 287.

⁵⁵ Tocqueville to Beaumont, Feb. 27, 1858, *Selected Letters*, 366.

⁵⁶ Alexis de Tocqueville and Gustave de Beaumont in *America*, 239.

⁵⁷ Tocqueville to Claude-François de Corcelle, Sep. 17, 1853, *Selected Letters*, 294.

democracy with the aid of laws and mores," he has to admit that, in addition to the natural environment, the legal system and above all the mores of Americans are also somehow exceptional so that he suggests not to simply "mimic". (DA, I.2.9, 364)

In Louis Hartz's interpretation of the American political history, an exceptional aspect is that there is a consensus of liberalism originating from the non-feudalist past exempt from serious class struggles. The conclusion of the so-called "consensus school" launched by Hartz is well put in Richard Hofstadter's words: "It has been our fate as a nation not to have an ideology, but to be one."⁵⁸ The "consensus school" (of liberalism) is later criticized and supplemented by the so-called "Cambridge school of republicanism."⁵⁹ As for Tocqueville, he would rather say that there is just one "republican consensus" (if we can call) in American society, because the Americans' consensus is firstly based on their approval of and confidence in their republican governments. (For instance, although the founding fathers of the United States disputed over the federal system, most of them would agree that they were republicans.)

Tocqueville believes in the importance of consensus because a society "exists only when men see many things in the same way and have the same opinions about many subjects and, finally, when the same facts give rise to the same impressions and

⁵⁸ Richard Hofstadter, "Without Feudalism," review of Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America: An Interpretation of American Political Thought Since the Revolution*, *New York Times*, February 27, 1955.

⁵⁹ See J.G.A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), Chapter XV "The Americanization of Virtue," 503-552.

the same thoughts.” (DA, I.2.10, 431) He somehow anticipated the later consensus school, pointing out that the United States was based on commonly held ideas and mores: “from political and religious ideas to the philosophical and moral opinions that regulate everyday actions and guide conduct in general, we find the same agreement.” (431)

During his visit in America, Tocqueville was more than once impressed and even bothered by the Americans’ common belief and pride in their country, namely patriotism. In New York he wrote: “Americans are usually proud people. ... Hence if you want to get on well with them, you must praise them endlessly.”⁶⁰ In the west States, this national pride (by the slaveholders in Kentucky and Tennessee descending from the big Virginian families) was stronger: “they have much more than any other Americans we have yet met, that instinctive love of country, a love mixed up with exaggeration and prejudices, and something entirely different from the reasoned feeling and the refined egotism which bears the name of patriotism in almost all the States of the Union.”⁶¹

As implied here, there are two kinds of patriotisms which Tocqueville would clarify in *Democracy*. One is an instinctive love of the place where one is born. It is an “immediate, disinterested, and indefinable sentiment,” which as an “unreflective passion” is sometimes as strong as religious zeal but is not stable and cannot last long. (DA, I.2.6, 269) The other type of patriotism is “born of enlightenment,” which “develops

⁶⁰ Tocqueville to his father, May. 16, 1831, in *Alexis de Tocqueville and Gustave de Beaumont in America*, 18.

“Americans, in their relations with foreigners, seem impatient of the slightest censure and insatiable in their appetite for praise.” DA, II.3.16, 719.

⁶¹ *Journey to America*, 256.

with the aid of laws, grows with the exercise of rights, and eventually comes to be bound up in a way with personal interests.” (270) As a French aristocrat, Tocqueville was more familiar with the first type of patriotism and somehow despised the second. But after reflecting on the situation in America and generally under modern democracy, he came to appreciate the second type of “reasoned” or “enlightened” love of country because it was more reliable.

The enlightened patriotism is based on the resonance of interests between the citizens and their political communities, especially those small, local, self-ruled township governments. Through professing the legal rights to manage their republican government, the citizens feel the community to be owned by themselves. Therefore, they are willing to share the interests brought about by the prosperity of the community as well as bear the deficits of it. The republican regime in which every citizen (should) actively take part and have a strong feeling of attachment is where Americans’ love for their country firstly comes from. “I have not yet been able to overhear in a conversation with anyone, no matter to what rank in society they belong, the idea that a republic is not the best possible government.... That is an opinion that is so general and so little discussed, even in a country where freedom of speech is unlimited, that one could

almost call it a belief.”⁶² (Letters, 46-7) In this sense, the “republican consensus” constitutes the foundation of the American political society.

The mores of Americans are consensual as well as liberal (let us put aside the difference between liberal and republican for the time being because the republican regime for Tocqueville is namely liberal). Being consensual and deep-rooted, the liberal spirit of the Americans supports their liberal governments in an extraordinary way. Tocqueville does not hesitate to admit that the liberal government is superior to others. But he cannot help feeling “regrettable” that “all peoples are not made to enjoy such government to the same extent.” The free democratic republican government in the United States is actually organized in a “simple and logical” way, maybe so simplistic as to be non-existent. But such simple government “requires, within the people that confers it on itself, a long habit of liberty and of a body of true enlightenment which can be acquired only rarely and in the long run.”⁶³

Simple, limited, and free political institutions are especially dependent on exceptional, responsible citizens and a mature, autonomous civil society.⁶⁴ When the

⁶² Tocqueville to Kergorlay, Jun. 29, 1831, *Selected Letters*, 46-7.

⁶³ *Ibid*, 56-8. “Democratic government, though based on a very simple and very natural idea, always has a very civilized and thoroughly educated society as its prerequisite.” (DA, I.2.5, 238) Also see *Selected Letters*, 98-9.

⁶⁴ Some contemporary political theorists have echoed that liberal democracy expects more highly of the characters of its citizens. Thomas Spragens beautifully elaborates: “It should not be surprising that the norms of civic virtues are more extensive and demanding in liberal democracies than in other political regimes. Because they are democracies, their citizens are collectively sovereign. Therefore these citizens must possess at least some of the moral and intellectual virtues requisite of those who rule. Because these democracies are liberal, they leave as a matter of principle significant areas of social space free from

English colonists began to settle down in the new continent, they had already been equipped with a mature civilization. American society “had no infancy; it was born into manhood,” in the sense that it has originally been used to the authentic principles of freedom, namely self-government. (DA, I.2.9, 350) The principle of self-government essentially requires that the people and society could safeguard the order “of, by, and for” itself, instead of being ruled merely as useful servants. This liberal principle is, however, hard to learn and maintain. “It cannot be said too much. There is nothing more fruitful in wonders than the art of being free; but there is nothing harder than apprenticeship in liberty.”⁶⁵ The reason why Americans can be proficient in “the art of being free” is, again, due to its “point of departure.”

American society is by nature democratic, but even before that, it has known to be free: “[w]ith the Americans, therefore, it is liberty that is old; equality is comparatively new.” (DA, II.4.4, 797) America’s liberal tradition was formed through a long time of practices and experience, which could be traced back to their English ancestors. America kept some free institutions that were even with an aristocratic origin,

governmental supervision and control. Therefore their citizens must be capable of exercising self-restraint and creating forms of social order on their own recognizance. It is an intrinsic part of the logic of both democracy and liberalism that its adherents be capable of governing well and of governing themselves. Liberal democratic societies are highly permissive toward their citizens, but at the same time and for some of the same reasons they are very demanding of them as well. To be successful, liberal democracies depend upon a wide dissemination of traits and capacities often thought to be the province of the few rather than the many.” Thomas A. Spragens, Jr., *Civic Liberalism: Reflections on Our Democratic Ideals* (Lanham, Boulder, New York, Oxford: Bowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1999), 231.

⁶⁵ *Democracy in America*, ed. Eduardo Nolla, trans. James T. Schleifer, 393.

for example, the English Common Law system. Tocqueville regards the jurists (*légiste*, by this Tocqueville means lawyers, judges, or more generally, legal practitioners) as the aristocracy in American society. The spirit of rule of law which the jurists defend is sometimes contrary to the blind passions of the people. But it is this somehow conservative institution of aristocratic remnant that tempers the tyranny of the majority and keeps Americans free. "It is fairly generally admitted that Roman Law is more complete, less tied up, more provident and competent than the Common Law, but it is maintained, and with reason, that there prevails in the latter a respect for political rights, and spirit of liberty absolutely unknown to Roman Law."⁶⁶ However, this liberal as well as aristocratic system is suitable only for those people with corresponding habits or mores: "The Common Law is a dangerous weapon in the hands of a people with little enlightenment."⁶⁷ The institutions adopted by the Americans are firstly embedded in their own cultural tradition.

Tocqueville clearly affirms American Exceptionalism: "The destiny of the Americans is singular: they took from the aristocracy of England the idea of individual rights and the taste for local liberties, and they were able to preserve both because they had no aristocracy to fight." (DA, II.4.4, 799) Later scholars also note the strange integration of democratic and aristocratic elements in America. As Hartz argues, the

⁶⁶ *Journey to America*, 300.

⁶⁷ *Ibid*, 299.

American Whigs who should have been liberals like their English counterpart were put into the dilemma of playing a role of aristocrats, because the American society was too democratic to allow all factions to appear equally democratic.⁶⁸ The pure democracy of America thus in return, but also spontaneously, produces and keeps an aristocratic balance within itself. Pierre Manent summarizes with an insight: "Because the American democracy is pure democracy, it is moderate and free democracy."⁶⁹ Educating and even sometimes taming "democracy" (the people) to be moderate so that they can enjoy the real freedom is also Tocqueville's life-long concern.

In addition to the moderate and conservative spirit of an aristocratic source, the other seminal aspect of Americans' free mores as well as of American Exceptionalism is, strangely speaking, religion. Tocqueville was somewhat astonished that the American people were the "freest and most enlightened" while also the most religious. (*DA*, I.2.9, 335) The exceptional combination of liberty and religion at first puzzled Tocqueville very much during his visit in America. But the Americans kept explaining to him that this was more than natural. An American pastor well put: "Religion is our best security for liberty. It enhances our freedom and sanctifies its principles."⁷⁰ Through observing the religious and political practices among the American people, Tocqueville gradually realized how this was the case.

⁶⁸ See Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America*, Chapter IV "The Whig Dilemma," 89-113.

⁶⁹ Pierre Manent, *Tocqueville and the Nature of Democracy*, trans. John Waggoner (Lanham, ML: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1996), 123.

⁷⁰ Alexis de Tocqueville and Gustave de Beaumont in *America*, 246.

The freedom of conscience was one of the primary causes why the first immigrants came to America, which was later confirmed and institutionalized by the separation of Church and State in the constitutions of the states. This separation further ensured that religion and liberty could co-exist and both flourish. The laws guaranteed the free practices of religious beliefs. In return, religion nurtured the social mores by cultivating a love for peace and order which was essential to the stability and prosperity of society. For those ambitious American explorers, religion instilled a firm faith into their hearts when they pursued happiness or underwent hardships in this world, at the same time setting a line against the dangerous revolutionary audacity which they should not cross. "[E]ven as the law allows the American people to do anything and everything, there are some things that religion prevents them from imagining or forbids them to attempt." (*DA*, I.2.9, 338) Although in America the people is the sovereign political power, in their hearts there is an even superior power in charge. For Tocqueville, religious faith as the natural and permanent feature of mankind is especially necessary for maintaining a free democratic republic. "Despotism can do without faith, but liberty cannot." (*DA*, I.2.9, 340) "I doubt that man can ever tolerate both complete religious independence and total political liberty, and I am inclined to think that if he has no faith, he must serve, and if he is free, he must believe." (*DA*, II.1.5, 503) Although in America religion did not directly interfere in politics, it was actually "the first of America's political institutions" because "even if religion does not give

Americans their taste for liberty, it does notably facilitate their use of that liberty." (DA, I.2.9, 338)

The dominance of religion in America has been kept till present days. As Robert Putnam described in the 1990s: "Indeed, by many measures America continues to be (even more than in Tocqueville's time) an astonishingly 'churched' society. For example, the United States has more houses of worship per capita than any other nation on Earth."⁷¹ Religion as "the first of America's political institutions" is thus part of this democratic republican country. In such a modern society as like America, it is astonishing to see those "awaking movements," "Adventist movements," and "prophecy beliefs" constantly emerged and prevailed. The United States with its "unmatched combination of high levels of education and high levels of religions belief and activity" is extremely unusual in the modernized Western countries.⁷²

In France, the relationship between religion and liberty was almost the opposite (as mentioned in 4.1). The French Enlightenment Movement shattered the religious faith and the French democratic revolution kept deviating from the path to freedom. As President Quincy Adams told Tocqueville, the ferocities occurring in the French Revolution further confirmed the Americans' belief in their religions.⁷³ This is again

⁷¹ Robert Putnam, "Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital", *Journal of Democracy*, (January 1995), 65-78. Words in brackets are by Putnam.

⁷² Paul Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture* (Cambridge and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1992), 15.

⁷³ *Journey to America*, 62.

related to the exceptional aspect of America aforementioned that it was exempt from serious revolutionizing struggles, in terms of political, social, and also spiritual. Even the spirit of the American Independence Revolution was not that “revolutionary”: “The revolution in the United States was the result of a mature, reflective preference for liberty and not a vague, indefinite instinct for independence. It did not depend on the passions of disorder. On the contrary, it demonstrated love of order and legality as it went forward.” (DA, I.1.5, 79) The true love of liberty, for Tocqueville as well as his intellectual forefather Rousseau, is definitely different from the license as doing anything one likes and despising the law.⁷⁴ Liberty is essentially an invaluable character grown in the mores or “habits of the heart,” about the autonomy of regulating oneself and the responsibility toward the community. The true secret of Americans’ freedom is therefore ultimately in their mores. The dilemma posed by the so-called American Exceptionalism is that, other countries want the liberal democracy of America but after all “have no Americans to uphold it.”⁷⁵

⁷⁴ “For liberty is like those solid and tasty foods or those full-bodied wines which are appropriate for nourishing and strengthening robust constitutions that are used to them, but which overpower, ruin, and intoxicate the weak and delicate who are not suited for them. Once peoples are accustomed to masters, they are no longer in a position to get along without them. If they try to shake off the yoke, they put all the more distance between themselves and liberty, because, in mistaking for liberty a unbridled license that is its opposite, their revolutions nearly always deliver them over to seducers who simply make their chains heavier.” Rousseau, “Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality Among Men”, in *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Basic Political Writings*, 32. Liberty as “a difficult food to digest” is a common metaphor in Tocqueville and Rousseau, see Roger Boesche, *The Strange Liberalism of Alexis de Tocqueville* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1987), 124-5.

⁷⁵ Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America*, 38.

4.4 Tocqueville's Strengthened Feeling of American Exceptionalism

In this section, by comparing the two volumes of *Democracy in America* (1835 and 1840), I will address how Tocqueville increasingly recognized the exceptional aspects of the American society and its democracy, as his thought developed and political experience increased. Some Tocqueville scholars have addressed the differences and coherency between the two volumes with insightful analysis.⁷⁶ My focus is on how it is related to American Exceptionalism.

First, the two volumes are indeed different because they were written as two books, although Tocqueville wants to stress that “[t]hese two volumes complement each other and together constitute a single work.” (*DA*, Preface, 479) In fact, Tocqueville at first planned to title the 1840 book as “The Influence of Equality on the Ideas and the Sentiments of Men.”⁷⁷ However, the new volume finally appeared under the same name of the 1835 one, maybe partly because of his and his publishers’ marketing ambitions.⁷⁸ The public embraced the first volume beyond the expectation of Tocqueville and above all of his cunning publisher who refused to print more than 500 copies for the first

⁷⁶ See Seymour Drescher, “Tocqueville’s Two Democracies,” *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 25(2)(1964), 201-16; James Schleifer, *The Making of Tocqueville’s Democracy in America*, “Epilogue: How Many Democracies?” 354-368; Jean-Claude Lambert, *Tocqueville and the Two Democracies*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge and London : Harvard University Press, 1989).

⁷⁷ *Democracy in America*, ed. Eduardo Nolla, trans. James T. Schleifer, “Editor’s Introduction,” ciii.

⁷⁸ Schleifer, *The Making of Tocqueville’s Democracy in America*, 367.

edition. But up to 1839, there had come seven editions of *Democracy*.⁷⁹ In contrast, the 1840 volume was not as well received, which quite disappointed the sensitive Tocqueville. He confessed to Royer-Collard: "when it comes to the great public,..., the book is little read and badly known. This silence distresses me. ... I wonder if there is indeed something of worth in this work. ... this doubt leads me to wonder if the ability that some were kind enough to see is to be found in me."⁸⁰

Tocqueville's emotional confession to his mentor was changed to intellectual sobriety when he wrote to Mill: "When I wrote only of the democratic society in the United States, I was quickly understood. ... But starting from ideas given me by American and French society I wanted to paint the general features of democratic societies of which no complete specimen yet exists. This is where I lose the ordinary reader. Only those very used to the search for general and speculative truths care to follow me in such a direction. I think that it is due to the original sin of the subject, rather than to the way in which I treated any portion of it that I must attribute the comparatively weaker effect produced by this work."⁸¹ This self-evaluation has clearly revealed the difference between the two volumes, as he summarized more concisely: "The first book more American than democratic. This one more democratic than

⁷⁹ Tocqueville: *A Biography*, 224.

⁸⁰ Tocqueville to Pierre-Paul Royer-Collard, Aug. 15, 1840, *Selected Letters*, 146-7.

⁸¹ Tocqueville to Mill, Dec 18, 1840, cited from Seymour Drescher, "Tocqueville's Two Democracies," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 25(2)(1964), 201.

American.”⁸² This difference can be easily recognized by comparing the chapter titles of the two volumes. Each of the 18 chapters in the 1835 book contains the name or element of America. Among the 75 chapters of the 1840 book, there are around 37 chapters’ titles which do not directly indicate the American element but address the topics of the general democracy (equality). It is more salient to see that in the chapter titles of Part 4, the image of America seems to totally diminish.

When Tocqueville wrote the 1835 volume, the impressions of America were still fresh and deep. From the content of the book and his writing process, we can tell that he was focusing on the American circumstances more than the general democracy. The former Secretary of State and the incumbent Ambassador to France Edward Livingston granted Tocqueville the access to many official documents of the United States government. Tocqueville even hired two American college graduates to help him handle the plenty of materials about America. Immersed in the condition of America, Tocqueville wanted to prove to his French readers that the modern democracy as displayed in America could be different from the violent and chaotic version of the French one. Thus he aimed to distinguish the elements of revolution and the elements of democracy. He viewed America to provide an image of pure democracy which could help him clarify that. However, he would later realize that the problem of democracy and revolution was more complicated.

⁸² Tocqueville’s drafts, *The Making of Tocqueville’s Democracy in America*, 37.

In the 1840 volume, Tocqueville transferred to the discussion of the general characteristics of democracy (equality of social conditions) because he more strongly realized that America might not be able to represent the whole picture of modern democracy. This is why in the short Preface to the 1840 volume, he saliently mentioned that there were other factors that shaped the American society other than “democracy”: “the nature of the country, the origin of its inhabitants, and the religion, acquired learning, and prior habits of its original founders all exerted, and continue to exert, independent of democracy, an immense influence on the way in which people think and feel.” (DA, Preface, 479) In the same sense, the distinct factors of Europe itself could also shape its societies differently, although under the same category of “democracy.” The difference between the two volumes is not only that the first “more American” and the second more “democracy,” but also that the second was more concerned with Europe. By adopting a broader view of comparison, Tocqueville more clearly recognized that America was distinct or exceptional. Therefore, it is not accidental that it was in the 1840 volume that Tocqueville used the word “exceptional” (*exceptionnelle*) to describe America. (DA, II.1.9, 517)

In the following part, I will choose one point to reveal that Tocqueville’s feeling of American Exceptionalism was strengthened: his shifting concern for the danger of modern democracy.

It has been somehow recognized as “notorious” that Tocqueville used “democracy” in various meanings, sometimes ambiguously and confusingly.⁸³ Tocqueville himself realized that this might be unavoidable: “The human mind invents things more readily than words. That is why so many improper terms and inadequate expressions are in use.” (DA, I.1.8, 178)⁸⁴ Modern democracy was still a new thing in his time, and this was why he could not really be sure of what it meant for human civilization, and also why his work was ground breaking. Even nowadays, a hundred political theorists would give more than a hundred understandings of democracy.

As mentioned before, Tocqueville followed the early French liberals to stress democracy as equality of social conditions. Tocqueville himself elaborated this meaning and its implications to a theoretical height which no other political thinkers could supersede or match. However, democracy itself is a word descending from the origin of Western political thought, at the time of which it referred to a type of political regime (*politeia*). This was a primary meaning until Tocqueville’s time and even currently. The “demos” originally means the people, especially the mass or majority who are not rich. Thus democracy means the rule of many or majority, which is based on citizens’ equal birth as free men. Aristotle distinguishes two types of rule of many: the one for the public interests he calls republic (*politeia*), and the degraded form which is for the

⁸³ *The Making of Tocqueville’s Democracy in America*, 325, fn 1.

⁸⁴ Quoted in Jack Lively, *The Social and Political Thought of Tocqueville* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), 30.

private interests he calls democracy.⁸⁵ Whether majority could rule well is an eternal question, of which Plato was quite doubtful. During the medieval feudal ages and early modern monarchical period, democracy as a form of government was largely unimaginable. However, Rousseau historically changed the situation by instilling a new understanding into democracy: the sovereignty of the people. Since then, no government could be justified unless it is authorized by the people as a whole.

In the 1835 volume, Tocqueville bore this understanding of democracy as popular sovereignty and self-ruling republican government in mind, and actually saw it as the case in America. Popular sovereignty is the “fundamental principle” of the political society of America. Self-government by the people is the form of all political and social communities and all levels of governments in America. As a democratic society from “the point of departure,” America was undergoing further democratization in Tocqueville’s time. The property qualification on suffrage was abandoned in many states when Tocqueville visited, which anticipated the advent of universal suffrage. The principle of popular sovereignty is “recognized by mores, proclaimed by laws,” and sheds its influence on almost every aspect of Americans’ life. “The people reign over the American political world as God reigns over the universe. They are the cause and end of all things; everything proceeds from them, and to them everything returns.” (*DA*, I.1.4, 65)

⁸⁵ See Aristotle, *Politics*, IV.7-13.

It was based on such political understanding of democracy that Tocqueville expressed his concern for the danger of democracy – tyranny of the majority. It is not surprising to hear an aristocrat who “despises and fears mobs” expresses his distrust of the mass people’s unlimited power in politics. For Tocqueville, no one except God could be endowed with the unlimited authority, because men would mistake. The decision of the majority is not necessarily right. The blind passions of the people are especially dangerous, which could sometimes violate the rights of the minority. This is a common concern for democracy and majority rule, even as a stereotype.

What is more interestingly argued by Tocqueville is his worry about the suffocating effect of the majority’s thoughts on the individuals. The tyranny of the majority is essentially spiritual. Under the circumstances of democracy, as everyone is regarded as essentially equal in social and political status as well as in intellectual capacities, no individual’s opinion has an absolutely higher authority than others’. But in this case, the opinion of the majority becomes sovereign. For Tocqueville, there was no real freedom of thought in America since the opinion of the majority was regarded as inerrant. “In America, the majority erects a formidable barrier around thought. Within the limits thus laid down, the writer is free, but woe unto him who dares to venture beyond those limits.” (*DA*, I.2.7, 293) The spiritual tyranny of the majority is more pervasive, even more severe than the physical tyranny of the monarch, which poses as a potential risk of the collapse of American society. “If America ever loses its liberty, the

fault will surely lie with the omnipotence of the majority, which may drive minorities to despair and force them to resort to physical force. This may lead to anarchy, but to an anarchy that will come as a consequence of despotism." (DA, I.2.7, 299)

Tocqueville's idea of "tyranny of the majority" was partly indebted to his American friend Jared Sparks. But Sparks later criticized Tocqueville for overstating this problem.⁸⁶ Sparks rightly pointed out that, there was no real sign that the rule of the majority was so despotic in America as Tocqueville worried, considering the freedom the American people enjoyed. Tocqueville himself also noticed that in Americans' social and political practices, there were many institutional devices that could temper the tyranny of the majority, such as the decentralized structure of political power, the English Common Law system especially the jury, the voluntary associations, the freedom of press, and the religion. Therefore, Tocqueville failed to prove his sense of the danger of democracy by using America as an example. As an aristocrat, Tocqueville was rather shocked by and also concerned for the mass people's sovereign authority in America. Immersed in his American experience, Tocqueville's critique of democracy was America-oriented, yet at the same time too not American because it was largely based on his own aristocratic prejudice.

⁸⁶ Sparks to Major Poussin, Feb, 1, 1841 and to William Smyth, Oct. 13, 1841, in Herbert B. Adams, "Jared Sparks and Alexis de Tocqueville," in Herbert B. Adams ed., *John Hopkins University Studies in Historical and Political Science*, Series XVI, No. 12, 43-4. Also see Guy Aiken, "Educating Tocqueville: Jared Sparks, the Boston Whigs, and *Democracy in America*", *The Tocqueville Review/La Revue Tocqueville*, 2013(1), p. 170.

It was in the second volume of *Democracy in America* that Tocqueville addressed the features and problems of modern democracy more comprehensively. To achieve this, he adopted a more broadly comparative scope in his argument. What contributed to the development of his thinking on democracy between his visit to America and the final 1840 book were his two visits to Britain (1833 and 1835, one before and one after the 1835 volume). The English experience most importantly influenced Tocqueville's thoughts about modern democracy with respect to the danger of centralization. The Bill for Reform of the Poor Laws (1834) in England for Tocqueville "is not only a bill of social economy, but is above all a political bill."⁸⁷ The Poor Law reform authorized the government to deal with this social affair by transferring the power from the local aristocracy to the central government run by the middle class. This change typically showed how democratic government would concentrate power in its hands.

Centralization was the most important idea and also the most urgent danger of modern democracy for Tocqueville in the 1840 book. The other factors contributing to his thinking on centralization included his involvement in French politics from 1837. More interestingly, in the second volume, he regarded China as a typical form of "democratic" society in the sense that the central government had long diminished the local feudal aristocracies. (*DA*, 2.3.19) For Tocqueville, both modern France and traditional China were typical of centralized monarchies, and that was why France was

⁸⁷ *Democracy in America*, ed. Eduardo Nolla, trans. James T. Schleifer, "Editor's Introduction," xciv-xcv.

once appreciative of Chinese politics. Compared to the aristocratic society in which the local lords held considerable secondary powers, the levelling structure of the democratic society would more easily favor the central government to monopolize power. The concern for centralization indicates that Tocqueville superseded the traditional worries about democracy with respect to the majority rule and popular sovereignty.

It is easy to see that America as a decentralized society by nature was exceptional in this aspect. When Tocqueville discussed the problem of centralization of modern democracy in Part 4 of the 1840 volume, obviously he did not seek the evidence mainly from America. In the 1835 volume, the issue of centralization had already been touched. Tocqueville distinguished two kinds of centralization: the administrative centralization and the governmental (legislative) centralization. (DA, I.1.5) France and China represented the notorious first type. America with its centralized legislation and decentralized administrative system posed as an admirable form of politics combining the effective political actions and the local autonomy. Here, Tocqueville obviously did not yet regard centralization as the natural danger of modern democracy because he had not realized that America might be exceptional with respect to this problem. Later in II.4.2 of *Democracy*, when Tocqueville said that democracy naturally favored centralization of power, he began to blur the distinction of the two types of centralization because he realized that finally they would converge as the same thing.

The favorable balance of centralization and decentralization in America might be largely due to America's distinct nature instead of the nature of modern democracy.

In Part 4 of the second volume, Tocqueville notably revealed that modern democracy was generally entangled with revolutions which deeply transformed the modern world. Revolutions often destroy a traditional society's structure, above all the intermediate powers like the feudal aristocracy, the process of which further facilitates the concentration of power in the central government. "Today, therefore, two revolutions seem to be working in opposite directions: one is continually weakening power, and the other constantly reinforcing it. In no other era of our history has power seemed either so weak or so strong." (*DA*, II.4.5, 814) The political revolution, under a spirit of disorder and license, kept destroying old feudal powers and causing anarchies. The social revolution of equalization, on the other hand, rendered individuals equally weak and helpless, thus cultivating an instinctive preference in people's heart for a powerful centralized government that could take care of their needs. Individuals are increasingly weak and the state is increasingly centralized and powerful. Tocqueville was concerned that centralization would ultimately produce a new form of despotism that harmed the practices of liberty, essentially on the spiritual level:

"The sovereign, after taking individuals one by one in his powerful hands and kneading them to his liking, reaches out to embrace society as a whole. Over it he spreads a fine mesh of uniform, minute, and complex rules, through which not even the most original minds and most vigorous souls can poke their heads above the crowd. He does not break men's will but softens, bends, and guides them. He seldom forces anyone to act but consistently opposes action. He does not destroy things but prevents them

from coming into being. Rather than tyrannize, he inhibits, represses, saps, stifles, and stultifies, and in the end he reduces each nation to nothing but a flock of timid and industrious animals, with the government as its shepherd." (DA, II.4.6, 819)

Obviously Tocqueville did not acquire such a pessimistic vision of democracy from the liberal society of America, but based on the situation of the old world. In Europe, constant wars among nations, the accelerated progress of industrialization, and the bureaucratic government descending from the modern monarchies all exacerbated the problem of centralization. By contrast, in Tocqueville's time, America had not yet experienced an overall military mobilization, and the industrialization had just been launched. The danger of bureaucracy was still far from the reality, considering that the Governor of New York had an official meeting with Tocqueville in a boarding house and that he had to spend half a year to manage his farm to make a living.⁸⁸ All these facts suggested that America was exceptional in the sense that it was exempt from the upheavals of the modern "democratic revolution": "The great advantage of the Americans is to have come to democracy without having to endure democratic revolution and to have been born equal rather than become so." (DA, II.2.3, 589)

Michael Gauche thinks that Tocqueville did not realize that "America's political novelty was essentially contrary to the normal march of modernity."⁸⁹ However, as I have argued, Tocqueville recognized "American Exceptionalism" through a process of

⁸⁸ *Journey to America*, 131, 195.

⁸⁹ Marcel Gauche, "Tocqueville" (a translation of "Tocqueville, l'Amérique et nous," *Libre*, 7 (1980)), in Lilla, *New French Thought*, 91. Cited from Welch, *De Tocqueville*, 249.

intellectual development. Furthermore, Tocqueville was more insightful in foreseeing that, if America would undergo a further progress of democratization, as well as foreign wars, capitalist industrialization, and development of the administrative system, the danger of centralization would also loom over the American society, although it had certain natural advantages to overcome it. In this sense, the discovery of American Exceptionalism did not prevent Tocqueville from seeking the modern democracy itself, however, not one image of it, but multiple images.

5. Conclusion: The Implication and Significance of American Exceptionalism

The political society of America was originally established on a vast continent which remained to be “exploited” by modern civilization and exempt from imminent threats of invasions from other traditional political powers. The first colonial settlers in the new world had to launch their new life from a generally same starting point. The principle of equality roughly reflected the social reality of the new nation as well as was rooted in people’s minds and habits. The residents immigrating to America as the descendants from the European civilizations could practice their liberal republican governments based on the prized legacy of the Western political tradition and at the same time were able to elude the unfavorable constraints of the feudal system. Indebted to and undergoing the same process of democratization in the modern era launched from the old continent, America was fortunate as not need to endure the destructive political revolutions and social upheavals that occurred during the profound social transformations in other traditional countries. These facts are all revealed by Tocqueville’s study on “the democracy in America,” which constitute his articulation of the so-called American Exceptionalism.

American Exceptionalism might not be a theoretical goal Tocqueville wished to emphasize, but was a historical fact he had to admit. American Exceptionalism has a maybe unfortunate implication. The democracy originally and naturally established in

America is a different form or displays a different image from the revolution-driven democratization that commonly occurred in Europe and other traditional societies like China. Therefore, the successful operation of liberal democracy in America (both governments and civil society) is largely owing to the favorable conditions of its natural environment, social structure, political tradition, and above all the Americans' spiritual characteristics and cultural features – in a word, mores. In sum, America is exceptional in the sense that other countries could not replicate its unique success.

However, there is something more than the discouraging implication of American Exceptionalism. Modern democracy, for Tocqueville, does not necessarily mean freedom or the opposite. Democracy could enjoy peace, prosperity, and liberty, as well as could fall into anarchy, misery, and servitude. Tocqueville insightfully reveals that centralization is an essential danger of modern democracy which could threaten the future of human freedom. The equalization of social conditions spontaneously paves the road to the modern socialism and totalitarianism which infinitely enhances the power of the state and weakens the strength and even dignity of the individual man. Therefore, Tocqueville was strongly distrustful of the socialist ideology and practices that just began to loom in his time. This issue is related to the significance of American Exceptionalism concerned with the failure of socialism in the United States.

America and Russia's "points of departure are different, their ways diverse. Yet each seems called by a secret design of Providence some day to sway the destinies of

half the globe.” (*DA*, I.2.10, 476) This is one of Tocqueville’s most famous prophecies. In the 20th century, the struggles between America and the Soviet Union were not only between these two nations, but also as confrontations between liberal democracy and centralized socialism, essentially between free modern democracy and unfree modern democracy. The victory of the former over the latter on the international stage is reflected as the failure of socialism within American society. Because America is exceptional, its liberal democracy can be deep-rooted and well-defended, and it can be disenchanted with the utopian fantasy of Socialism. And because its liberal democracy is so successful, it can further export its liberal enterprise to the world. The Soviet Union was defeated by America and somewhat converted to a “democracy.” The Nazi Germany and militarist Japan were “forced” to be free directly in the charge of the American occupiers. The European countries do not need to watch each other and fear external threats because the United States leads them in national security and defense. Many other traditional political societies are also under the pressure of the United States to become more liberal regimes. The global liberal order is actually dependent on the exceptionality of America, which is so exceptional as to become the sole hegemonic power in the world. Therefore, Americans’ boasting of their historical and cultural exceptionalism is not totally ungrounded. American Exceptionalism matters because it represents a possibility that modern democracy has a free prospect. In this sense,

American democracy promises freedom for human civilization not quite through being learnt by other nations as Tocqueville assumes, but through its exceptional success.

But we should also remember what Rousseau says: "The body politic, like the human body, begins to die from the very moment of its birth and carries within itself the causes of its destruction." It is in a nation's exceptional nature (both exceptionally good and bad) the causes of both its rising and falling are contained. Liberty is not a quality one is born with, but needs to be acquired through "apprenticeship." Although some people appear to be "born into manhood" in the sense of being skilled in "the art of being free" at the very beginning, it is not because they are really endowed with the talent of freedom, but they are indebted to the legacies from their forefathers and to their own constant efforts. However, legacies can be inherited as well as abused and ruined. The art of liberty need constant exercise and reflection, otherwise it will be rusty and forgotten. To remain admirably exceptional requires the hardest endeavor, which essentially depends on men's free but difficult choice of their future, as Tocqueville subtly ends his book: "It is beyond the ability of nations today to prevent conditions within them from becoming equal, but it is within their power to decide whether equality will lead them into servitude or liberty, enlightenment or barbarism, prosperity or misery." (*DA*, II.4.8, 834)

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