



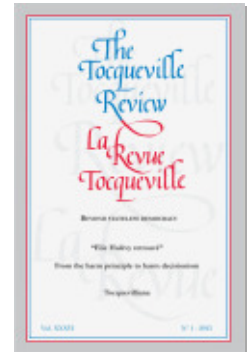
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Editorial

Stephen W. Sawyer

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EDITORIAL

Stephen W. SAWYER,
Directeur de publication

“Ma conviction profonde : je crois que nous nous endormons à l’heure qu’il est sur un volcan, j’en suis profondément convaincu...”¹ This sentence from Tocqueville’s famous speech of January 1848 intuited yet another transformation in the process of modern democracy. Considering the extraordinary number of works diagnosing the crisis of our contemporary democratic regimes, it would seem that coming to grips with Tocqueville’s warning is as urgent as ever.

Never has mass democracy been so widespread, and yet never have its institutions been so under attack. Even those most committed to democracy on the surface, it would seem, see representative institutions as amounting to little more than roadblocks to long-range thinking rendered inefficient by democratic feedback and NIMBY-style impediments.² Tony Blair, a Prime Minister who seemingly mastered the game of electioneering and spin has recently asked point blank, “Is Democracy Dead?” while editorials in *Le Monde* suggest that our democracies are gravely ill.³

Meanwhile, diagnoses of our democratic crisis seem almost endless: Colin Crouch has defined our current neo-liberal malaise as a moment of “post-democracy” in which “all the institutions of democracy remain, we use them, it’s just that the energy of the system, its innovative capacity has moved to other spheres.” Dominique Rousseau has called for a radicalization of democracy at

the same time that Wendy Brown warns us that the demos is being undone. And while Jacques Rancière has referred to our moment as one of the “hatred of democracy,” Pierre Rosanvallon has focused on the fundamental transformations involved in a *counter-democracy* rooted in new forms of civic engagement such as citizen audits and popular veto power that transcend the vote and traditional forms of representation.⁴

So in a strange historical irony, the massive wave of democratization across the world over the last four decades—in southern Europe and Latin America in the 1970s and 80s; in former Soviet countries in the 1990s; in the Middle East in the 2000s—and the inspiring popular movements across the world from Maidan to the Indignados and Occupy has left us convinced that democracy remains the sole horizon for just popular government while generating seemingly endless critique of democracy’s inability to successfully live up to the ideals it has unleashed.

It is our conviction that *The Tocqueville Review/La Revue Tocqueville* has a special role to play in grappling with this epochal shift in our democratic practice and theory. When the journal was founded in 1979, the Tocquevillian renaissance was just beginning. Almost four decades later, countless volumes and articles have brought Tocqueville back to the center of our understanding of democratic thought. So what is left for such an enterprise? As the works above as well as the articles to come suggest, just about everything.

Beyond his specific arguments, there remains Tocqueville’s position as witness, theoretician, and historian of the advent and transformation of democratic processes. In this, he is directly of our time, as is this journal. Here, from where we stand, in the drowning wake of neo-liberalism’s rising tide across the world and under the shadow of democratization studies that cloak the potential of self-rule in a normative soft imperialism, we confront a very different set of questions. To this extent, the initial rediscovery of Tocqueville’s analytical distance was essential, but in many ways it was a mere prolegomena; as if much of the work necessary for interrogating our contemporary democratic conditions still remains to be uncovered. Today, the necessity of a new *critical democratic studies* has become even more vital.

Indeed, a shift has taken place in democratic studies that may be situated roughly in the mid-1990s, and has become more apparent over the last decade. The very call for a study of democracy has changed radically, tainted with hints of post-Cold War triumphalism and echoes of overcoming an “axis of evil.” We suggest that in such a context, an essential element of the democratic project rediscovered in Tocqueville by Claude Lefort and many others has been pushed aside, namely democratic indeterminacy. As Lefort suggested of Tocqueville: “si nous nous satisfaisions de l’idée que Tocqueville ne s’est pas départi d’une conception aristocratique de la liberté, la recherche serait vaine et la conclusion, comme d’avance, ni nouvelle ni féconde. Bien davantage nous importe-t-il de relever les signes de l’indétermination d’une pensée à l’épreuve de l’énigme de la démocratie.”⁵ In light of Lefort’s reading of Tocqueville, we might suggest that to pursue the history, literature, sociology, political science, and theory of democracy is to embrace the critical nature of the democratic process.

As a bi-lingual journal focusing on transnational and global questions of politics and society, the *The Tocqueville Review/La Revue Tocqueville* seeks to play an important role in these investigations. The intellectual program guiding this research and publication is once again “old and new.”⁶ Among the newness is the relationship with the American University of Paris an institution with an undeniable kinship to the Tocquevillian project as a site for elaborating and deepening our understanding of the democratic. In discussing the “democratic ideal” of education, John Dewey argued that there are two traits that combine the educational experience and democracy. The aim of education, he argued, is to “generate greater reliance upon the recognition of mutual interests” and “continuous readjustment through meeting new situations.”⁷ Building on this observation, Dewey developed some of the most innovative and engaged models for educational and democratic practice of the last century. It is our hope that “the new situation” generated by the “recognition of mutual interests” between our journal and the AUP will have a special role to play in the research and practice of the democratic on both sides of the Atlantic and far beyond in the years to come.

NOTES

- [1] Alexis de Tocqueville, “Discours prononcé à la chambre des députés le 27 janvier 1848,” *Œuvres complètes d’Alexis de Tocqueville*, Paris : Simon Raçon, édition 1866, vol. 9, 526.
- [2] David Brooks recently wrote in the *New York Times*, May 19, 2014: “These Guardian States [China] have some disadvantages compared with Western democracies. They are more corrupt. Because the systems are top-down, local government tends to be worse. But they have advantages. They are better at long-range thinking and can move fast because they limit democratic feedback and don’t face NIMBY-style impediments.”
- [3] Tony Blair, “Is Democracy Dead?” *New York Times*, December 4, 2014; Arnaud Leparmentier, “La démocratie, un régime malade,” *Le Monde*, 29 avril 2015.
- [4] Colin Crouch, *Post-Democracy* (Wiley, 2004); Dominique Rousseau, *Radicaliser la démocratie. Propositions pour une refondation* (Paris: Seuil, 2015); Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution* (New York: Zone books, 2015); Jacques Rancière, *La haine de la démocratie* (Paris: La fabrique, 2005); Pierre Rosanvallon, *La contre-démocratie. La politique à l’âge de la défiance* (Paris: Seuil, 2006).
- [5] Originally published in *Libre*, 3, 1978. Republished in Claude Lefort, *Essais sur le politique XIXe-XXe siècles* (Paris: Seuil, 1986), 248.
- [6] Emmanuel Loyer, Editorial, *The Tocqueville Review/La revue Tocqueville*, Volume 30, Number 1, 2009, pp. 5-6.
- [7] John Dewey, “Democracy and Education,” in *The Collected Works of John Dewey*, Jo Ann Boydston, ed., (Carbondale, SIU Press, 2008), 92.