

BOOKS IN REVIEW

Writings on Empire and Slavery

By Alexis de Tocqueville, edited and translated by Jennifer Pitts. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, pp. xxxviii, 277, \$45.00.

Reviewed by Delba Winthrop

Tocqueville is much loved these days, largely because most everyone can find in his writings something to agree with. So his major works have recently been retranslated, and others, never translated into English or found only in out-of-print editions, are now being made readily available. Among these is Jennifer Pitts's collection of his thoughts on slavery in France's West Indian colonies and on the subjugation and colonization of her then newly acquired Algerian territory. These writings, Pitts maintains, are necessary to understand not only the history of France and European colonization in the nineteenth century and the phenomenon of empire, but the character and coherence of Tocqueville's liberalism and thus to appreciate his best known work, *Democracy in America*.

Pitts has produced both a highly readable translation of several of Tocqueville's writings on colonization and slavery and a useful introduction of just the right length. She has also adopted the notes from the authoritative French edition (André Jardin, ed., *Ecrits et Discours Politiques*, Gallimard, 1962) and added a few of her own. These are quite helpful to readers who may know little about French history or Algeria. While making additions, she might have included a map of Algeria, since these same readers are probably equally ignorant of North African geography.

As for the translation proper, it is a bit loose for my taste. Often, when Tocqueville uses the same word or root more than once within a para-

graph or even in consecutive sentences, these instances are rendered inconsistently in English, whereas different words in the French are translated as the same in English; sentence structure is changed; occasionally words in the French are inexplicably dropped in the English. This is unfortunate, since Tocqueville prided himself on clarity of expression and took pains with his writing style, and some of these works were prepared for publication. Moreover, many of the changes are made with no significant gain in readability. There are also some minor errors that should have been caught (*six* and *dix* look similar, but sometimes the difference between six and ten matters). This being said, nowhere did I find the translation to be seriously misleading.

The same, unfortunately, cannot be said unflinchingly of the interpretations Pitts offers in her introduction. There is no getting around the fact that Tocqueville endorsed the conquest of Algeria and urged its colonization, with the use of violent, even warlike, means as necessary. This is a big pill for contemporary admirers of *Democracy in America* to swallow. But Pitts makes the pill an especially bitter one. According to her, Tocqueville advocates means that are "visibly iniquitous" and that would turn a quarrel between governments into one between races. In fact, these are points Tocqueville makes to argue *against* an attempt to colonize a portion of Algeria. To be sure, his reasoning here is more prudential than moral. But it nonetheless shows that the means he will countenance

have limits—those set "by humanity and by the law of nations." He did not and would not have, as she puts it, "justified any aggression the nation could muster." In fact, he recommends interdiction of commerce as more effective than violence, and where violence is necessary, he prefers ravaging the countryside, a mode of warfare he doubts is worse than the European practice of bombarding villages, which puts civilian lives at direct risk. Similarly, he does not say or imply in *Democracy*, as Pitts has it, that "American industrialization relied on slave labor." On the contrary, others may hold to this view, but Tocqueville argues that the institution of slavery is not merely a moral abomination and a political liability, but a hindrance to America's economic growth. Ultimately these small misrepresentations matter less than her larger omission. She sees clearly enough that what makes Tocqueville's views on emancipation and colonization consistent is that he finds *greatness* in each cause, yet she fails to think through the implications of her observation. I shall return to this point.

Pitts has no sympathy whatsoever for Tocqueville's embrace of colonialism, and she relegates his abolitionism to less than "staunch" because of his insistence that the French government indemnify slave owners. For the West Indian colonies, he urges a policy of deliberate emancipation, not only for its humanity to black slaves, but for the interest and greatness of France. These colonies could become reliable markets for France's manufactures in an era in which the concerns of her working class would matter increasingly; and they could be crucial in her global rivalry with England. But they will be viable, he argues, only if slavery is abolished. To this end, he advocates a ten-year termination period, during which slaves are to be given some (limited) rights to inspire habits of freedom and to be required to work and receive partial compensation for it. Emancipation is just. So, too, is not ruining the white French citizens

who had held slaves as property and worked them in sugar production according to a scheme which they had not devised and which had been sanctioned by the metropole. Not least, slavery is inconsistent with the principles France had taken to heart and mind in the Revolution; thus, emancipation is also a matter of national honor. One could be sure of the utility, the justice and the nobility of the endeavor, though not of its successful outcome (as Britain's experience showed). Hence the greatness of it.

Tocqueville's adamant support for the conquest and colonization of Algeria must come as a shock to present-day readers. He is aware of the enormous difficulties and costs for France, and with twenty-first century hindsight, these seem larger, more futile and less justified. Nor is he sanguine about the character of the society and government that might emerge in the colony. That he would have advised the initial seizure of Algiers from the Turks in 1830 we do not know, even though he readily grasped its strategic potential. In politics, however, an honest man plays the hand he is dealt, and in Tocqueville's mind, great powers never fold without loss of esteem and therefore of power itself. Once begun, the conquest would have to be completed and accompanied by colonization. Colonization, however, would mean expropriation of land; and even with fair compensation, that was sure to exacerbate the enmity of the indigenous population. His early hopefulness for the eventual creation of a peaceful, amalgamated community of Europeans and Arabs is soon lost. At best French rule might come to be tolerated and a community of interests established. It would be hard enough to guarantee a modicum of security to settlers and good administration, civil rights and economic opportunity to either settlers or natives; there would be no political freedom for either in the foreseeable future. Even maintaining a European presence would be a problem: by neither national charac-

ter nor political culture are the French well suited to colonize anywhere, he thinks; and in Algeria, where a large army would long be needed, one must worry about the contempt, if not animosity of the military toward French settlers, who to be successful colonizers should be motivated chiefly by a love of gain. For the indigenous population, existing custom and civil law should be left intact—with the notable exception of the institution of slavery.

More shocking—and puzzling—than Tocqueville's enthusiasm for a dubious enterprise is his apparent lack of moral or political reservations about the end and therefore about many of the requisite means. He rarely adopts the rhetoric of a superior on a mission to civilize an inferior, even when he argues that the French could give Algeria better rule than it currently has. This imperium is for the sake of France and occasionally, though never essentially, for that of the inhabitants of Algeria. He is untroubled by the notion of Europeans conquering and governing non-Europeans. Yet he shows little disdain for Arab and Kabyle peoples or for Islam; his remark that their civilization is "backward and imperfect" is in the context of a criticism of the French for undermining Muslim schools and charities. What troubles him greatly is his observation that France had thus far given colonists and subject populations each bad government. The only way France can hope to hold her conquest, he insists, is by giving settlers a government with more flexibility and less arbitrariness and Arabs a government that is rigorously just and in their long-term interest as well as France's. No mean feat in either case.

Why, given all these costs, risks and ambiguities, would Tocqueville embrace the colonization of Algeria? The issue is not a marginal one. His interest in Algeria and in European colonization generally predated his political career. Even in *Democracy in America* by far the lengthiest chapter is devoted to relations between and prospects for America's

white settlers, its aboriginal occupants, and the black slaves transported there—despite these matters being explicitly tangential to his subject, democracy. Then, in anticipation of his entry into politics, he determined to make himself an expert on Algeria. He read the Koran, and he later visited the country twice. He also made a point of learning all he could about the English occupation of India. In the last decade of his life he ceased to write about Algeria, perhaps, as Pitts contends, because he grew disillusioned, perhaps, as she also notes, because he was otherwise occupied, first with urgent political matters and afterwards, in self-imposed political exile, with the writing of *The Old Regime*.

Pitts frames her analysis with a view to an essential issue: how can Tocqueville's colonialism be reconciled with his liberalism? She concludes that it cannot be. Tocqueville, of course, was a liberal, albeit "of a new kind." As a theory, liberalism leads inexorably to neither support of nor opposition to western imperialism. On the one hand, liberal principles are held to be universally true and just; why, then, should we not expect peoples of all countries to live by them? On the other hand, these principles proclaim the freedom and equality of all human beings; how, then, can it be just for one nation to impose them on another? The stand of any particular liberal, she concludes, will ultimately depend on the specific historical moment in which he writes. Thus Tocqueville's ardent avowal and subsequent refusal to disavow colonialism must be his response to the domestic political woes of the July Monarchy. And in the end, his colonialism is at odds with his liberalism.

Tocqueville was indeed a proud Frenchman and a practicing politician, but that his support of colonialism follows from his diagnosis of the specific maladies of the July Monarchy is not established by the writings Pitts has translated here. In any case, she needs some explanation beyond this to support her contention that

an appreciation of these writings enriches one's understanding of Tocqueville's liberalism and thus of *Democracy in America*, and that this enriched understanding matters to contemporary Anglophone readers. Since I do think Pitts is correct on this last point, I shall attempt to provide that explanation for her.

No one foresaw more clearly than did Tocqueville that the emerging democratic world would be increasingly sensitive to and intolerant of the slightest deviations from equality, whether among individuals or peoples sharing a country or among nations. Surely there is no greater deviation from the principle of human equality than the institution of slavery, and there are other good reasons to oppose it. Arguably, though far less clearly, the conquest and colonization of a whole foreign people is also an egregious violation of human equality. What if a geographic entity does not correspond to a discrete, unified population group, i.e. what if it is not home to a potential nation-state? What if it is home to a people that is not democratically constituted and even holds slaves? What if it should threaten the existence of other liberal democracies?

Perhaps as incomprehensible to today's egalitarians as is the liberal Tocqueville's willingness to endorse colonization is what emerges here as his deepest reason for endorsing it. Algeria was to be "a great monument to our country's glory." This—not the stability of the July Monarchy, he says, is "the greatest affair," the "greatest task." I didn't count the number of times "great" appears in these writings, but one cannot help but notice its frequency. Tocqueville brought his intellect to bear on this matter because of its *greatness*, and he connected both to his own political ambition. This says a lot about his mind and soul, and about the distinctive quality of his liberalism.

Tocqueville's writings on colonialism, rather than revealing the limits of his liberalism, lead one to the core of it, and contemporary admirers of *Democracy in America* would do well to reflect on this. Tocqueville wanted to visit America, he said, to see what a great (*grande*) republic is like—and by that I doubt he meant "big." He was an unabashed lover of liberty and a hesitant admirer of democratic equality. The latter he endorsed in the end because in its justice he could appreciate "its greatness and its beauty." He, in a tacit departure from most liberals, does not ground democratic equality on natural rights discovered in a state of nature, but accepts equality as a fact and looks

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to the kind of life democracy may provide. In an explicit departure from them, he would gladly trade some modern virtues for the singular "vice" of *pride*. Democracies tend to pay little heed to the character and possible sources of *pride*—a quality of soul they neither can nor should want to eradicate from individuals or peoples. His long chapter on race in *Democracy* traces the plights of Blacks and native Americans to the defective or misdirected pride of all three racial groups, especially that of the white settlers who constitute the core of America's democratic future. To support and guide pride,

democracies need, yet tend easily to lose, a sense of honor. The specifics of honor may vary from people to people and from time to time. But any code of honor serves to promote the virtues of a citizenry that sustain rule, and as befits a democracy, a whole people's capacity for *self-government*. Democracies also tend not to generate either challenging long-term enterprises to make politics worthy of their attention or appropriate outlets for "moderate, yet vast" ambition. These need not be military ventures like conquest; in fact, Tocqueville worries about the consequences of a military career's emerging as the last legitimate venue for ambition. Should democratic governments ignore these concerns, most citizens will fall into pusillanimity and subsequent apathy and impotence while a few will seek undemocratic ways of attempting "greatness" as they conceive it. For Tocqueville, democracies must think about honor and greatness in addition to justice and interest because meaningful democratic self-government cannot long survive without this thoughtfulness.

Whether in fact Algeria or France and the West would have been better off had France much earlier abandoned the colonial empire that seemed to go with great power status in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is a question we need not try to answer now. Whether a liberal democratic republic must at times aggressively assert itself in the world, if need be against a seemingly irresistible egalitarian tide, in the name of its own interest and honor—its greatness, is a question we are required to ponder.

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