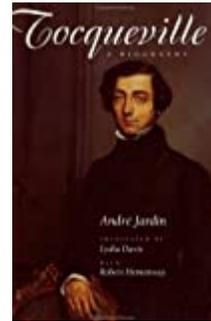




Andre Jardin. *Tocqueville: A Biography.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998. 558 pp. \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8018-6067-6.



Reviewed by Eileen Ka-May Cheng (Department of History, Hanover College)

Published on H-Ideas (August, 1999)

Andre Jardin's Life of Tocqueville

Alexis de Tocqueville's influence and reputation rest above all with his classic work, *Democracy in America*. The publication of the first volume in 1835 gained Tocqueville immediate fame and recognition in both Europe and America. Tocqueville followed this volume with a second, published in 1840. This work offered more than just a description of America in his own time. Scholars have variously read it as a sociological analysis, as a work of political philosophy, and as a source of insights into the history of antebellum America. Thus, Tocqueville's appeal reaches across disciplinary lines as well as geographic boundaries.

Tocqueville and his works have not always possessed such currency among scholars, and the current vogue of Tocqueville has been a relatively recent development. Tocqueville's reputation suffered an eclipse from the late nineteenth century until the 1940s—especially in France. The 1940s marked the start of a revival of interest in Tocqueville. American scholars took the lead in the Tocqueville revival, and after World War II, his own countrymen followed suit. This revival has resulted in a vast body of scholarship, and, while this scholarship includes

a number of biographies, most of the recent work on Tocqueville examines only selected aspects of his life and career.[1]

As a comprehensive analysis of Tocqueville's life, Andre Jardin's *Tocqueville: A Biography* is a welcome and valuable addition to the scholarship on this subject. Jardin's research is impressive and thorough, and he draws on unpublished archival material to enrich his analysis. Jardin's biography is valuable not only because it considers Tocqueville's life and work as a whole, but also because it takes a historical approach to its subject. A recurring theme in much of the scholarship on Tocqueville is his relevance to the present, and the prophetic character of his observations about democracy.[2] Scholars have dwelled on the question of whether or not Tocqueville was right—about the nature of antebellum American society, and more generally, about the character and implications of democracy. In contrast, Jardin focuses on placing Tocqueville's ideas in their political and social context, rather than on assessing their validity.

Throughout the biography, Jardin emphasizes the essential consistency and continuity of Tocqueville's

thought and career. According to Jardin, the same basic concerns run throughout Tocqueville's different activities—as commentator on democracy, as politician, and as historian. For Jardin, the most important of these concerns was a deep commitment to civic activism and public service. This ideal was important to Tocqueville on both a personal and a philosophic level. The desire to serve the public was the guiding force in Tocqueville's own life and actions. More generally, Tocqueville thought that it was necessary for society as a whole to develop and maintain this kind of public spirit. Liberty, Tocqueville believed, was only safe in a society whose citizens were politically conscious and active.

Jardin traces the sources of Tocqueville's devotion to public service back to Tocqueville's early years. Jardin argues that this sense of civic obligation was rooted in Tocqueville's aristocratic family heritage. More specifically, Tocqueville inherited this ideal from his father, the Comte Herve de Tocqueville. Although the two men differed in their political sympathies, the Comte Herve, like his son, dedicated his life to public service.

This same belief in civic activism informed both the content and purpose of Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*. Jardin makes the *Democracy* central to his analysis, devoting about a third of the biography to this work. Jardin does not just confine himself to the ideas presented in the *Democracy*. He also offers a detailed account of Tocqueville's travels and experiences in America, as well as of the reception for the *Democracy* after its publication.

Even while emphasizing the continuities in Tocqueville's thought, Jardin displays a sophisticated recognition of how Tocqueville's ideas evolved and developed over time. According to Jardin, both parts of the *Democracy* proceeded from the same assumption and addressed the same question—whether an egalitarian society could preserve liberty. At the same time, however, Jardin points to the differences of emphasis and tone between the two volumes of the *Democracy*. Thus he notes that the first volume was more optimistic than the second. Impressed by the patriotism and civic-mindedness of Americans, Tocqueville expressed optimism in the first part of the *Democracy* that liberty and equality could coexist with one another. This same concern explains the darker tone of the second part of this work, which attributed to democracy a dangerous tendency to political apathy. Fearing that such apathy would lead to tyranny, Tocqueville identified this tendency as the greatest threat to liberty. Despite such fears, Tocqueville did not abandon a faith in democracy. Just by writing the *Democracy*,

Tocqueville expressed a hope that it was still possible to preserve liberty. His purpose in writing the *Democracy* was to warn against the dangers of political apathy. By doing so, he hoped to awaken a sense of civic activism in his fellow citizens before it was too late.

Although Jardin gives the *Democracy* a prominent place in his biography, he does not limit his analysis to that work. One of the strengths of the biography is the way in which Jardin places the *Democracy* within the larger context of Tocqueville's other writings and activities. Jardin's detailed account of Tocqueville's political career is especially useful. After the publication of the first volume of the *Democracy*, Tocqueville went into politics by serving in the Chamber of Deputies. According to Jardin, Tocqueville's entrance into politics was consistent with the principles he advanced in the *Democracy*. In seeking political office, Tocqueville was simply trying to put his belief in civic activism into practice. And through this role, he sought to effect the political program of the *Democracy* and to instill the same sense of civic virtue in the rest of the nation. Although sympathetic to his subject, Jardin maintains a critical perspective in his treatment of Tocqueville's political career. Accordingly, he balances his admiration for Tocqueville with a recognition of his limitations as a politician.

Paradoxically, the strengths of Jardin's biography are also the source of its weaknesses. Jardin goes into such detail about Tocqueville's political and social context that the reader sometimes loses sight of Tocqueville himself. And while Jardin provides a comprehensive portrait of Tocqueville's ideas and activities, he is less successful in conveying a sense of what Tocqueville was like as a person. Jardin begins by analyzing the influence of Tocqueville's family and friends on his early intellectual development, and near the end of the book, includes a brief chapter on Tocqueville's private life. In the rest of the biography, however, Jardin makes only occasional allusions to Tocqueville's personal character and relationships. Instead, Jardin concerns himself mainly with Tocqueville's public life. Although Jardin's approach is true to his own subject's preoccupation with the public realm, further attention to Tocqueville's private life—and to the intersection between Tocqueville's public and private concerns—would have enriched the biography and made it even more compelling. In placing so much emphasis on Tocqueville's public life, then, Jardin's work raises larger questions about the province of the biographer, and about the relationship between public and private.

Such questions, however, are beyond the scope of Jardin's biography. Overall, Jardin has written an important, detailed, and balanced account of Tocqueville's life that will be indispensable to future studies on this subject.

[1]. For other biographies of Tocqueville, see Larry Siedentop, *Tocqueville* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994); J.P. Mayer, *Alexis de Tocqueville: A Biographical Essay in Political Science* (New York: Viking Press, 1940); and Hugh Brogan, *Tocqueville* (London: Fontana, 1973).

[2]. For an insightful analysis of this tendency, see Daniel T. Rodgers, "Of Prophets and Prophecy," in Abraham Eisenstadt, ed., *Reconsidering Tocqueville's Democracy in America* (New Brunswick, NJ.: Rutgers University Press, 1988), 192-206.

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Citation: Eileen Ka-May Cheng. Review of Jardin, Andre, *Tocqueville: A Biography*. H-Ideas, H-Net Reviews. August, 1999.

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