

Tocqueville's America

Professor Flagg Taylor
GO: 351A, Spring 2020
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Office Hours: Tuesdays & Thursdays 9-12 (and by appointment)

Course Description:

Tocqueville's classic work *Democracy in America* has been called the best book ever written about America *and* the best book ever written about democracy. This course will be devoted to an analysis of this great text but will also make use of Tocqueville's letters. We will investigate the nature of modern democracy as it emerged in America, focusing on Tocquevillian concepts such as equality of condition, popular sovereignty, tyranny of the majority, individualism, the science of associations, and soft despotism. Tocqueville is an unparalleled analyst of modern democracy because he fully understood its depth and power. As Pierre Manent has written, "Democracy is the regime most intrinsic to human nature when it is finally free to express its wishes, but democracy is also something that happens to human nature without its knowing or really wanting what happens. The greatness of Tocqueville was his capacity at one and the same time for promoting the clear hope that democracy entails while deepening a sense for its doleful secret."

Required Texts:

Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Mansfield and Winthrop, trans. (University of Chicago Press)
Alexis de Tocqueville, *Letters from America*, Frederick Brown, trans. (Yale University Press)
Harvey Mansfield, *Tocqueville: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford)

Course Outline:

Introduction to course: Wed., 1/22

- I. *Democracy in America*, Volume I, Part i
 - A. Introduction (Tocqueville's, not the translator's) (1/24)
 - B. Chs. 1-4 (1/29)
 - To Abbé Lesueur, May 28, 1831, *LA* (45-51)
 - To Father, June 3, 1831, *LA* (51-55)
 - C. Chs. 5-6 (1/31)
 - To Ernest de Chabrol, July 16, 1831, *LA* (118-122)
 - D. Chs. 7-8 (2/5)

- II. *Democracy in America*, Volume I, Part ii
 - A. Chs. 1-6 (2/7)
 - B. Chs. 7-9 (2/12)
 - C. Ch. 10 (pp. 302-348) (2/14)
 - D. Ch. 10 (pp. 349-399) (2/19)
 - To Father, December 20, 1831, *LA* (247-250)
 - To Mother, December 25, 1831, *LA* (251-256)

- To Eugène Stöffels, February 21, 1835 (hand-out)

III. *Democracy in America*, Volume II, Part i

A. Chs. 1-8 (2/26)

- To Louis de Kergolay, June 29, 1831, *LA* (86-99)

B. Chs. 9-15 (3/4)

C. Chs. 16-21 (3/6)

SPRING BREAK (3/7-3/15)

IV. *Democracy in America*, Volume II, Part ii

A. Chs. 1-4 (3/18)

B. Chs. 5-9 (4/20)

C. Chs. 10-14 (4/25)

- To Ernest de Chabrol, June 9, 1831, *LA* (66-69)

No Class Friday, 3/27

D. Chs. 15-20 (4/1)

- To Charles Stöffels, October 22, 1831, *LA* (218-220)

V. *Democracy in America*, Volume II, Part iii

A. Chs. 1-7 (4/3)

B. Chs. 8-16 (4/8)

- To Émilie, June 9, 1831, *LA* (70-72)

- To Édouard, September 10, 1831, *LA* (180-184)

C. Chs. 17-26 (4/15)

- To Mother, December 6, 1831, *LA* (241-244)

VI. *Democracy in America*, Volume II, Part iv

A. Chs. 1-4 (4/17)

B. Chs. 5-8 (4/22)

Last Day of Class, Friday, 2/24 TBA

Final Exam: Tuesday, May 5, 9AM-12:00PM

Course Requirements:

Response Papers: 5%

Discussion Questions: 5%

2 short columns/blog posts OR 1 book review: 20%

Textual Analysis: 20%

Thematic Essay: 25%

Final Exam: 25%

Response Papers:

These are short papers, 1-2 pages in length. I will ask you to explicate a short portion of a text, to respond to a pointed question about a particular passage, or to respond to a classmate's essay. In the case of the latter, you will provide one copy of your response to the author and one to me.

Textual Analysis:

This is an essay which will serve as a kind of commentary on the reading assignment for a particular day. These essays should uncover the logic of the argument of a particular portion of a text. If the class discussion of the selected text is to take place on a Wednesday, the author must email his or her paper to the class by Monday at 6pm. If the class discussion is to take place on a Friday, the paper must be received by Wednesday at 6pm.

Essays:

These are formal, thematic essays where you are expected to have an identifiable thesis with arguments to support it. They should demonstrate a command of the text at hand, and a thoughtfulness about the claims made therein. I will hand out topics approximately two weeks before the essays are due. These are not research papers and you are not required to read any secondary literature. I want you to engage these authors directly.

Book Review:

This is a review of a book on *Democracy in America* or Tocqueville more generally. A good review is able to accomplish two things: provide an encapsulation of the overall argument of the work and an evaluation of that argument. Here are some possibilities:

James Poulos, *The Art of Being Free: How Alexis de Tocqueville Can Save Us From Ourselves* (St. Martin's Press, 2017)

Joseph Epstein, *Alexis de Tocqueville: Democracy's Guide* (Eminent Lives, 2006)

Joshua Mitchell, *Tocqueville in Arabia: Dilemmas in a Democratic Age* (University of Chicago, 2013)

Leo Damrosch, *Tocqueville's Discovery of America* (Farrar, Strauss, Giroux, 2011)

Pierre Manent, *Tocqueville and the Nature of Democracy* (Rowman & Littlefield, 1996)

Column/Blog Post

A short essay (around 1,000 words) that uses a Tocquevillian theme to discuss a contemporary problem or phenomenon or is Tocquevillian in its mode of analysis. Some examples:

Brian Smith, "[Tocqueville and the Promise of Classical Education](#)" (*Law & Liberty*)

David Brooks, "[One Neighborhood at a Time](#)" (*New York Times*)

Richard Thompson Ford, "[The Outrage Industrial Complex](#)" (*The American Interest*)

Harvey Mansfield, "Democracy and Greatness" (*The Weekly Standard*)

Peter Lawler, "[Engaging and Knowing: The Cart and the Horse](#)" (*Law & Liberty*)

Peter Lawler, "[Where is Puritan, Middle Class America When We Need It?](#)" (*Law & Liberty*)

Final Exam:

This will be a comprehensive, essay exam taken during the exam period. You **must** take the exam during the assigned exam period. There are only two exceptions: (1) if you have two exams scheduled during the same time-period; (2) if you have three exams scheduled for the same day. Travel conflicts (e.g., "I already have a plane ticket home on December 13") do not constitute a legitimate excuse.

General Expectations:

You are expected to read the assignments carefully and reflectively, remaining open to the possibility that what you are reading is right. Your first duty as an attentive reader is to understand what is being said. This means grasping the argument of the author—identifying central claims and seeing how these claims are supported. When you encounter something you strongly disagree with, make sure you first understand the argument. You are expected to give reasons for your opinions.

You will be attentive in class and always display the demeanor of one who is interested in the material and respectful of others. You will take your share of responsibility for the quality of class time, coming prepared to discuss the assignments thoughtfully.

No laptops are permitted in class unless you have a medical problem that prevents you from taking notes by hand.

Please mute your cell phones and put them away during class. If your phone rings during class, you will be responsible for providing donuts for the entire class for the next meeting.

Attendance:

After two absences, each subsequent absence will bring your final grade down by three points.

Academic Honor:

I take violations of the honor code very seriously. At minimum, plagiarism will merit a “0” for that assignment, with failure for the course likely. In cases that I deem particularly egregious, I will seek to have you suspended or expelled from Skidmore College.