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Alexis de Tocqueville's Reluctant "Democratic Language"

Salih Emre Gerçek

Abstract: Many readers of Alexis de Tocqueville have noted the ambiguity in his formulation of the term "democracy." This essay suggests that this ambiguity can be clarified by considering what Tocqueville calls "democratic language"—i.e., the use of generalizations, abstractions, and personifications in writing and speech. Tocqueville investigates these novel linguistic devices to understand the transformation of language in democratic times. More importantly, he employs them to appropriate the Doctrinaires' formulation of democracy and to criticize their legitimation of the July Monarchy's exclusive government. Yet Tocqueville's use of democratic language is a reluctant one. He finds that the tendency to use abstract and personified concepts obfuscates the political agency of citizens. Wary of the despotic effects of such obfuscation, Tocqueville argues that individuals must practice their concepts. In the context of the July Monarchy, this becomes a call for the extension of democratic rights and institutions.

"In France, no one writes a page better than M. Alexis de Tocqueville."[1] This is how one reviewer saluted the second volume of *Democracy in America* (1840).[2] Yet this compliment did not prevent the reviewer from complaining

Salih Emre Gerçek is visiting assistant professor in the Department of Political Science at University of Connecticut, 365 Fairfield Way, Storrs, CT 06269 (gercekemre@gmail.com).

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[1]Guillemon, "Sur le livre De la démocratie (Tome 3 et 4) par M. Alexis de Tocqueville," *L'Univers* 409 (1840).

[2]Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (New York: Library of America, 2004). Cited parenthetically in-text as *DA* hereafter. I use the bilingual, historical-critical edition when I discuss Tocqueville's drafts: *De la démocratie en Amérique / Democracy in America, Historical-Critical Edition*, ed. Eduardo Nolla (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 2010). I cite this edition in-text parenthetically as *DA-HC*.

about the ambiguity of Tocqueville's language: "Wanting to give his work a general character," Tocqueville "abstracts equality" to such an extent that he "incessantly talks about equality as though it is a person who rules everyone, does everything in democracy."[3] In the same month, John Stuart Mill made a similar point. In his otherwise laudatory review, Mill criticized Tocqueville for combining the "whole of the tendencies of modern commercial society" into "one abstract idea," into "one name—Democracy."[4]

Both reviews express a complaint that readers have repeated ever since: Tocqueville's concepts are notoriously ambiguous.[5] This is especially the case when we look at his use of "democracy." For one, Tocqueville never clarifies why he specifically chooses the term "democracy," nor why he sometimes uses it as a synonym for "equality of conditions."[6] Relatedly, Tocqueville's changing use of "democracy" ends up referring to a wide range of phenomena such as the abolition of aristocratic castes, class mobility, the people, the middle class, popular sovereignty, the majority, a way of being, and suffrage.[7] For this reason, scholars have debated whether Tocqueville's concept of democracy refers to a type of society or government.[8] There is also Tocqueville's formulation of democracy as a "providential fact." Why does Tocqueville choose this fatalistic language? Is it to appear as a neutral observer[9] or to appeal to the religious sentiments of his readers?[10]

[3]Guillemon, "Sur le livre De la démocratie."

[4]John Stuart Mill, "De Tocqueville on Democracy in America [II]," in *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, ed. John M. Robson, vol. 18 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977), 191.

[5]James Schleifer remarks that "perhaps the most disconcerting feature of Tocqueville's thought has always been his failure to pinpoint the meaning of *démocratie*." James T. Schleifer, *The Making of Tocqueville's "Democracy in America"* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980), 263. See also François Furet, *In the Workshop of History*, trans. Jonathan Mandelbaum (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 167–96; Sheldon S. Wolin, *Tocqueville between Two Worlds: The Making of a Political and Theoretical Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 277, 311–13.

[6]In contrast to *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville's historical writings suggest that "equality of conditions" emerged prior to democracy. *The Ancien Régime and the French Revolution*, ed. Jon Elster, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 82. Hereafter cited in-text parenthetically as *AR*.

[7]Schleifer, *Making of "Democracy in America,"* 263–74.

[8]Melvin Richter, "Tocqueville and Guizot on Democracy: From a Type of Society to a Political Regime," *History of European Ideas* 30, no. 1 (March 2004): 61–82; Cheryl B. Welch, "Tocqueville's Resistance to the Social," *History of European Ideas* 30, no. 1 (March 2004): 83–107.

[9]Marvin Zetterbaum, "Tocqueville: Neutrality and the Use of History," *American Political Science Review* 58, no. 3 (Sept. 1964): 611–21.

[10]Françoise Mélonio, *Tocqueville and the French*, trans. Beth G. Raps (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1998), 27.

This article suggests that these ambiguities inherent in Tocqueville's language and concepts, particularly the concept democracy, can be clarified by paying specific attention to what he calls "democratic language"—that is, the prevalent use of generalizations, abstractions, and personifications. In fact, Tocqueville openly mentions that these linguistic devices informed his own use of concepts: "I have frequently used the word *equality* in an absolute sense. I have, moreover, personified equality in several places, and I have said that equality did certain things or refrained from doing certain others" (*DA*, 552). This remark, however, has overwhelmingly been treated as Tocqueville's admission of guilt rather than a suggestion to his readers that they should pay attention to his performance of democratic language. Even scholars who have provided outstanding accounts of Tocqueville's rhetoric,[11] his "linguistic history,"[12] or his engagements with "literary debates"[13] have not paid sustained attention to Tocqueville's use of democratic language as one of the ways to understand his difficult formulation of democracy.[14] In the following, therefore, I engage an old debate from a novel vantage point. I do not claim to pinpoint a coherent Tocquevillian idea of democracy. Rather, I demonstrate how Tocqueville's ambiguous formulation of democracy stems from his interventions in the theoretical battle over the meaning of democracy during the term's revival in early nineteenth-century France.

More specifically, I argue that Tocqueville performs democratic language to appropriate the Doctrinaires' formulation of democracy and to criticize their

[11]Claude Lefort, "Tocqueville: Democracy and the Art of Writing," in *Writing, the Political Test*, ed. and trans. David Ames Curtis (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), 35–66; Cheryl B. Welch, "Colonial Violence and the Rhetoric of Evasion: Tocqueville on Algeria," *Political Theory* 31, no. 2 (April 1, 2003): 235–64.

[12]Richard Avramenko, "The Grammar of Indifference: Tocqueville and the Language of Democracy," *Political Theory* 45, no. 4 (August 2017): 495–523. This work provides an insightful reading of democratic language's tendencies to abstract, generalize, and personify. But I disagree with its suggestion that Tocqueville's own democratic language is a sign of failure in his writing. Situating Tocqueville's works in the context of the July Monarchy, I show the ways Tocqueville reluctantly develops his own critical version of democratic language.

[13]Lucien Jaume, *Tocqueville: The Aristocratic Sources of Liberty*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 193–247.

[14]Notable exceptions are Laurence Guellec, *Tocqueville et les langages de la démocratie* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2004), and Jaume, *Tocqueville*, 219–22. Laurence Guellec's work is perhaps the most comprehensive work on Tocqueville's analysis and performance of democratic language. I build on many of its insights, but I also advance one distinct point: while Tocqueville criticizes the proponents of the July regime (chiefly, the Doctrinaires) for manipulating language to legitimize their exclusive politics, he also locates a bigger problem that goes beyond the control of the Doctrinaires—namely, the tendency of the democratic language to create abstract and absolute agents that foment revolutionary or despotic politics. I also engage with Lucien Jaume's work by offering a modification to its characterization of democratic language.

legitimation of the July Monarchy's exclusive government. My argument proceeds in four parts. First, I situate Tocqueville in his context to demonstrate that his discussion of democratic language is both a theoretical and political project. Second, I consider Tocqueville's analysis of how people in democratic times develop a new language wherein they generalize, abstract, and personify ideas. Tocqueville discovers that these new linguistic tendencies can lead to the demise of political agency. Hence, his own use of democratic language is a reluctant one. As I show in the third and fourth sections, while Tocqueville effectively puts forward the Doctrinaires' argument that democracy progresses irreversibly, he also argues that individuals must practice their concepts collectively in order to establish a healthy democracy. In so doing, he contends that the Doctrinaires' self-proclaimed government of the "enlightened middle class" exacerbates the despotic tendencies of democratic language by excluding citizens from democratic practice. Overall, Tocqueville's analysis and performance of democratic language give us a new perspective on his relationship with the Doctrinaires as well as his commitment to participatory democracy.[15]

1. Democracy before *Democracy in America*

According to Tocqueville, one of the most profound effects of the dissolution of the social and political apparatus of the ancien régime is the transformation in how people think and express their thoughts. Tocqueville begins discussing this subject by mentioning his conversations with "educated Englishmen." These "Englishmen . . . often assured me that the language spoken by the Enlightened classes in the United States is notably different from that spoken by the same class in Great Britain." Tocqueville's English interlocutors complain that Americans bring together words that were "customarily kept apart" in England (*DA*, 547). For Tocqueville, this difference in language stems from another key difference between the two countries, namely, the "social state." While the "social state" in America is fully democratic thanks to the absence of an aristocratic past, in England, certain aristocratic hierarchies and distinctions are still alive. Tocqueville sees that the complaints of his English interlocutors stemmed from their "aristocratic pride" (*DA*, 661), their discontent with the weakening of aristocratic class structures and habits in England. "This revolution in the social state influences style and language" (*DA*, 551).

To understand what Tocqueville means by the "social state" as well as his general investigation of democratic language, it is essential to consider his

[15]There is a rich scholarship on the affinities and disagreements between the Doctrinaires and Tocqueville. See the works cited in notes 8, 13, and 16. However, this scholarship pays less attention to Tocqueville's use of the Doctrinaires' democratic language against themselves. One exception here is Guellec's work (see note 14).

intellectual influences, and the political debates in the last decade of the Bourbon Restoration that eventually led to the 1830 Revolution and the establishment of the July Monarchy. As several works have demonstrated, a distinct French "liberal" tradition emerged during the 1820s as a product of the "great debate" between the "ultra-royalists" and Doctrinaires.[16] As a response to the assassination of the duc de Berry, the only heir of the Bourbon throne, the "ultra-royalist" government introduced increasingly reactionary measures that censored the press, unfettered the police, and attempted to bring back aristocratic privileges.[17] These policies placed the Doctrinaires, the center-left "liberal" group of Restoration politics, in the stance of the main opposition. The Doctrinaires' opposition was built around one key argument: such policies to restore aristocracy were incompatible with the modern "social state" of France. Emphasizing "the distribution of property, education, and social mobility," the Doctrinaires offered a novel, "sociological approach to political theory"—an approach that based a study of politics on an investigation of the "social state" (*l'état social*) or the "social condition" (*la condition sociale*).[18] And, strikingly, they called the modern "social state" a *democratic* social state, or, simply, democracy.

This marks an important point in the history of democratic thought: "democracy" became a popular term in political debates for the first time in the modern era.[19] Revolutionaries of 1789 did not call themselves democrats, and the term was used as either a smear word by aristocrats[20] or an episodic slogan of the disillusioned radical groups and thinkers during the Directory.[21] Moreover, the term did not have much prestige in scholarly circles, often understood in its pejorative Aristotelian meaning—that is, the rule of the mob.[22] However,

[16]Larry Siedentop, "Two Liberal Traditions," in *French Liberalism from Montesquieu to the Present-Day,* ed. Raf Geneens and Helena Rosenblatt (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 5–35; Pierre Rosanvallon, *Le moment Guizot* (Paris: Gallimard, 1985); Aurelian Crăiuțu, *Liberalism under Siege: The Political Thought of the French Doctrinaires* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2003); Sarah Maza, *The Myth of the French Bourgeoisie: An Essay on the Social Imaginary 1750–1850* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), chap. 5; Annelien de Dijn, *French Political Thought from Montesquieu to Tocqueville: Liberty in a Levelled Society?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), chaps. 5–6.

[17]Maza, *Myth of the French Bourgeoisie*, 142.

[18]Siedentop, "Two Liberal Traditions," 18–20.

[19]Joanna Innes and Mark Philp, '"Democracy from Book to Life: The Emergence of the Term in Active Political Debate, to 1848," in *Democracy in Modern Europe: A Conceptual History,* ed. Jussi Kurunmäki, Jeppe Nevers, and Henk te Velde (New York: Berghahn Books, 2018), 16–34.

[20]R. R. Palmer "Notes on the Use of the Word 'Democracy' 1789–1799," *Political Science Quarterly* 68, no. 2 (June 1953): 207.

[21]John Dunn, *Democracy: A History* (New York: Atlantic Monthly, 2005), 123–26.

[22]Richard Bourke, "Enlightenment, Revolution and Democracy," *Constellations* 15, no. 1 (March 2008): 10–32.

with the "great debate," "democracy" emerged as a commonly used term to express antiaristocratic ideas. This oppositional character of the term was especially important for the Doctrinaires because it allowed them to position themselves against the reactionary Bourbon governments. Yet they were not republicans. They argued that a constitutional monarchy is the best middle way (*juste milieu*) between reactionary monarchism and revolutionary republicanism.[23] They celebrated the social and juridical victories (abolition of aristocratic castes and equality of rights, respectively) of the 1789 Revolution without endorsing its republican legacy—a legacy that they associated with the absolute sovereignty of people. Therefore, in the hands of the Doctrinaires, democracy expressed the demand for a fluid society (as opposed to aristocratic castes), the opening of suffrage to property-owning male citizens (as opposed to the privileges of the nobility), and freedom of discussion and association (to replace aristocratic, exclusive *esprit de corps* with public opinion and patriotism) without any demand for a *political* democracy.

Pierre-Paul Royer-Collard's parliamentary speeches gave the Doctrinaires' idea and language of democracy their classic formulation. In 1822, he told his fellow deputies that aristocratic social hierarchies were things of an obsolete past. Modern societies, he claimed, are fruits of a progressive historical movement: "for a long time, industry and property incessantly increased, elevating the middle classes [*les classes moyennes*]."[24] In formulating the rise of the middle class as a sign of social fluidity and progress, Royer-Collard echoed the narrative of civilizational progress that François Guizot constructed in his Sorbonne lectures in the same years: "the desire and tendency of society are in fact being governed by the best, by those who most thoroughly know and most heartily respond to the teachings of truth and justice."[25] Royer-Collard posited the middle class as the class of such "enlighten[ed]" individuals.[26] In other words, the transition from the aristocratic social state to the modern social state (i.e., a flexible class composition) meant an overall progress in industry, intellect, and morality. This historical framework also gave a rhetorical force to Royer-Collard's discourses. In the same parliamentary speech, immediately after his narrative of the rise of the middle class,

[23]Crăiuțu, *Liberalism under Siege*, 75–81.

[24]J. Madival and M. Laurent, eds., *Archives parlementaires de 1787 à 1860: Recueil complet des débats législatifs et politiques des chambres françaises*, series 2, vol. 34 (Paris: Paul Dupont, 1876), 131–34. Hereafter *AP*, followed by series/volume and page. The Doctrinaires often used the terms "middle class" and "bourgeoisie" interchangeably because they linked the emergence of the middle class to the emancipation of towns and burghers (Maza, *Myth of the French Bourgeoisie*, 131–60). As Crăiuțu observes, Guizot distinguishes the terms only when he wants to separate the middle class of his time from the historical bourgeoisie (*Liberalism under Siege*, 229). Tocqueville also follows this pattern.

[25]François Guizot, *History of the Origin of Representative Government in Europe*, trans. Andrew R. Scoble (London: Bohn, 1852), 66.

[26]*AP* 2/4, 133.

Royer-Collard stated: "This is our democracy, as I see it; and yes, it is in full spate in this beautiful France, more than ever favored by heaven. . . . The true work of wisdom is to observe and direct it."[27] Overall, the Doctrinaires not only gave a new meaning to the term "democracy" but also invented a rhetoric in which democracy figured as an agent.

Readers familiar with Tocqueville's formulation of democracy as "a providential fact" (*DA*, 6) would find Royer-Collard's image of democracy as a torrent in full spate conspicuously familiar. Before moving to Tocqueville's appropriation of the term and image, it is crucial to note that the Doctrinaires' definition of democracy became increasingly controversial after they established themselves as the governing group in the aftermath of the July Revolution of 1830. The fragile alliance between the Doctrinaires and republicans crumbled promptly. The Doctrinaires' antirepublican stance grew sterner as they started to claim that the progress of democracy was achieved with the July Monarchy—that is, the government of the enlightened middle class. Other than the repeal of the "ultra-royalist" electoral laws, and a small enlargement of the all-male electorate, they opposed any further extension of suffrage. For instance, in a parliamentary speech in 1837, Guizot particularly targeted the ideas of "political equality" and "universal suffrage." These are, he claimed, the ideas of an "envious, jealous, anxious, vexatious democracy, which wants to lower everything to its level." He clarified "what he meant" by the "words 'middle-class,' 'democracy,' 'equality,' and 'liberty'": "a government that guarantees the freedoms and rights of all through the active and direct intervention of a certain number of men" who are "genuinely capable of exercising political powers."[28] The July regime had already been acting on this definition of democracy in a way that closely resembled the Bourbon regime it toppled. By 1834, before Tocqueville published the first volume of *Democracy in America*, France had a parliament dominated by upper classes (including traditional landed elites), a censured press, and an oppressive surveillance policy on political associations and societies.[29]

2. Democratic Language

Both volumes of *Democracy in America* (1835 and 1840) are products of this theoretical and political battle to claim the term "democracy." As I have briefly shown, *à la* the Doctrinaires, Tocqueville starts his investigation of democratic language with an attention to the "social state." In aristocratic times, society is "divided into a certain number of classes, which see little

[27]Ibid.
[28]*AP* 2/110, 496.
[29]Pamela Pilbeam, "The 'Liberal' Revolution of 1830," *Historical Research* 63, no. 151 (1990): 162–77.

of one another and do not mix at all. Each of these classes adopts and clings to certain intellectual habits peculiar to itself and prefers certain words and terms that are passed from generation to generation like an inheritance" (*DA*, 550). Owing to the rigidness of class hierarchies, the language "inevitably" displayed a "general ambiance of repose": "If anyone did anything new . . . they would try to describe it using familiar words whose meaning had been fixed by tradition" (*DA*, 548). In democratic times, however, there are no longer regimented and permanent social positions—in other words, the conditions are equalized. "When men, no longer bound to their place in society, see and communicate with one another constantly, when castes are abolished and classes are replenished with new recruits and become indistinguishable, all the words of the language get mixed together" (*DA*, 551). Just as the "Englishmen" complained, the fluidity of social positions mixes linguistic traditions and changes the meaning of words.

Consider, for instance, the word "gentleman." In France, *gentilhomme* means the members of the noble caste, and this meaning is preserved because the word disappeared from common usage after the French Revolution (*AR*, 82). In England and America, however, the term is still used but with a different meaning. "Trace through space and time the fate of the word gentleman, which derives from the French word *gentilhomme*, and you will find that in England its meaning broadened as the gap between the two classes narrowed and noble and commoner began to mingle" (*AR*, 81–82). Consequently, "the word began to be applied to men somewhat lower down the social scale. Ultimately it travelled with the English to America and there it would be applied indiscriminately to all citizens. Its history coincides with the history of democracy" (*AR*, 82).

The correspondence between the social state and language is clear: when society was ordered around permanent castes, language was geared to express these differences in such a way that individuals knew their place, duties, and obligations vis-à-vis others (*DA*, 495–96, 550). When democratic revolution abolished aristocratic castes, it also reoriented language. "A person who lives in a democratic country sees around him only people more or less like himself. . . . Any truth applicable to himself seems applicable in the same way to his fellow citizens and fellow human beings" (*DA*, 496). While aristocratic language is oriented towards hierarchy and difference, democratic language is oriented towards equality and similarity.

For Tocqueville, this change leads to three interrelated tendencies in language: generalization, abstraction, and personification. It is not difficult to see why democratic people are drawn to generalizations. Since democratic individuals are not bound by class traditions, words, or jargon, they can "seek the truth for" themselves, and stretch their mind until it "embraces the whole of mankind" (*DA*, 496–97). In a sense, there is a tendency to universalism in democratic minds. "Repudiat[ing] traditions of class, profession, or family," democratic individuals "tend to base . . . [their] opinions on the very nature of man," or on a "few great causes, which . . . ac[t] in the same way on

each fellow men." This tendency inevitably leads them "to a large number of very general notions"—for example, humanity, reason, natural law, rights of man (*DA*, 497).

Generalizations also reflect how democratic individuals see themselves as living in constant "flux."[30] After rigid aristocratic castes, a democratic social condition emerges as a fluid and unsettled condition. Take, for instance, the idea of "human perfectibility"—one of the "chief ideas" of democratic times (*DA*, 514). "As new facts emerge and new truths are brought to light; as old opinions disappear and others take their place; the image of an ideal and always fleeting perfection presents itself to the human mind" (*DA*, 515). Another example is "equality"—the "first and most intense" passion of democratic people (*DA*, 581). "No sooner does full equality seem within the people's reach than it flies from their grasp, and its flight, as Pascal said, is eternal" (*DA*, 226). These examples signal that democratic individuals perceive themselves to live in social and intellectual flux. Generalizations not only align with democratic people's infinite intellectual horizon but also enable them to eschew particular phenomena that are seen as transient in the material and mental flux of the democratic age.

Concomitant with this tendency to generalize is the tendency to use abstract concepts. "The love of general ideas manifests itself in democratic languages through the constant use of generic terms and abstract words" (*DA*, 552). Tocqueville writes:

> A democratic writer will speak easily of "capacities" in the abstract rather than of "capable men" and will avoid going into detail about the things to which those capacities may be applied. He will speak of "actualities" to describe at one stroke everything he sees going on before his eyes at that very moment, and he will use the word "eventualities" to encompass anything that might henceforth take place anywhere in the universe. Democratic writers are forever coining abstract words of this sort, or else they use the abstract words of the language in increasingly abstract senses. . . . Moreover, they personify these abstractions and set them in action. . . . They will say things like "Circumstances require that capacities must govern." (*DA*, 552).

This passage contains two important points. First, democratic minds coin abstract terms such as "eventualities" to compress many events in one word without designating a specific place, time, or people. Along with generalizations, abstract words aid democratic minds to navigate their egalitarian and unsettled condition. As Tocqueville writes elsewhere, "democratic people are passionate about generic terms and abstract words because such expressions magnify thought and aid the work of the intelligence by allowing a large

[30]Laura Janara, "Commercial Capitalism and the Democratic Psyche: The Threat to Tocquevillean Citizenship," *History of Political Thought* 22, no. 2 (Feb. 2001): 326; Dana Jalbert Stauffer, "'The Most Common Sickness of Our Time': Tocqueville on Democratic Restlessness," *Review of Politics* 80, no. 3 (2018): 439–61.

amount of material to be compressed into a small space" (*DA*, 552). Or, they seek a single abstract notion as a "common source of all the other more specific ideas" such as "reason" or "natural law" (*AR*, 128).

This takes us to the second important point contained in the passage above: that abstract terms lead to personifications. Democratic people transfer the agency of "a capable man" to the general notion of "capacity," as if it were a real individual. Personifications are a perplexing linguistic habit, however. The abolition of aristocratic privileges should lead individuals in democratic times to locate agency in themselves. Why then do they still seek separate, abstract agents? Tocqueville's answer is that something of aristocracy remains in democratic times. In aristocratic times, political agency was identifiably personal—that is, exclusively belonging to the monarchs and noble men. Personifications reveal that such personal identification of agency persists in a counterintuitive way. As Lucien Jaume observes with reference to Tocqueville's discussion of public opinion, democratic individuals "depersonaliz[e]" power by replacing the visible and identifiable power of one person or caste with the anonymous power of public opinion.[31] Yet democratic individuals do not stop there. Personifications evidence that they "depersonaliz[e]" power (i.e., the dissociation of power from particular persons such as the nobles) only to transfer it to abstract notions. Tocqueville explicates: "In ages of equality, all men are independent, isolated, and weak. The actions of multitude are not permanently subject to any man's will. In such times, humanity invariably seems to chart its own course" (*DA*, 497). Put otherwise, the dissolution of the aristocratic *corps* means independence and equality, but also isolation and weakness. Democratic dissemination of agency creates a perception of powerlessness, and this perception leads individuals to seek agents that are superior to themselves such as the state, people, humanity, or history. Democratic individuals create personified terms at the expense of their own sense of power and agency.

This loss of agency can occur when independent individuals isolate themselves from social and political life. This is what Tocqueville calls "individualism": "As each class draws closer to the others and begins to mix with them, its members become *indifferent* to one another. . . . Aristocracy linked all citizens together in a long chain from peasant to king. Democracy breaks the chain and severs the links" (*DA*, 586, emphasis mine). In a sense, individualism entrenches itself when the negation of aristocratic differences turns into indifference; when independent individuals, no longer bound by aristocratic ties and obligations, withdraw into their own interests and material pleasures (*DA*, 818). Richard Avramenko explains that this "indifference" entrenches itself as language loses its "gathering-together force"—that is, the negation of the stable and hierarchical bonds of aristocracy fails to create new enduring and meaningful bonds in language.[32] While the linguistic tendency to abstract

[31]Jaume, *Tocqueville*, 220–21.
[32]Avramenko "Grammar of Indifference," 4, 16–20.

and generalize may weaken or sever the ties between individuals and their communities, this does not always mean that democratic language lacks the power to create meaningful bonds. In fact, the opposite can also be the case: democratic language can create strong but stifling bonds, especially when the concepts that express collective life become agents with "absolute" power (*DA*, 552).

Consider, for instance, "the people": "The people reign over the American political world as God reigns over the universe" (*DA*, 65). Why does "the people" acquire such absolute power? "As conditions in a nation become more equal, individuals appear smaller and society seems greater, or, rather, each citizen, having become just like others, is lost in the crowd, until nothing can be seen anymore but the vast and magnificent image of the people itself" (*DA*, 790). "The people" appears superior to the individuals that compose it. Individuals may feel threatened by such collective images, or they may develop a strong attachment to them. Thus, absolute and personified concepts show that democratic language does not necessarily lack the power to unite individuals across space and time. In fact, it creates social and political bonds, but these bonds may easily become despotic.

The concept of equality illustrates this point well. "When a long-threatened social hierarchy finally destroys itself . . . men swoop down upon equality as upon conquered spoils. . . . No use pointing out to them that liberty slips through their fingers while their attention is focused elsewhere: they are blind, or, rather, in all the world they see only one good worth coveting" (*DA*, 584). Stated differently, their attachment to equality can lead democratic individuals to forgo their political liberty, especially if they feel that their equality is threatened. It can also lead individuals to cling to other concepts (e.g., the people, or the state) at the expense of their political liberty and agency. Take, for instance, the state. One of the enduring legacies of the ancien régime in France, Tocqueville claims, is that people see the state as an immense power, and attribute to the state all the characteristics and rights of an absolute ruler. The 1789 Revolution discharged the monarchy only to transfer its absolute power to the state because the revolutionaries saw the latter as the main equalizer and reformer (*AR*, 143–51). The French state looked like a "single designated official charged with acting in [the people's] name without consulting it; to control that official, a public reason deprived of organs; to stop him, revolutions and not laws—de jure a subordinate agent but de facto a master" (*AR*, 147). Tocqueville claims that this personified and absolute image of the state is still alive. The acquisitive individualism of democratic people leads them to grant paternalistic authority to the state administration because they see the state as the primary facilitator of production, consumption, and infrastructure (*DA*, 801).

What most concerns Tocqueville is that personified and absolute concepts such as equality, the people, and the state can lead to "democratic despotism"—a "regulated, mild, peaceful servitude" that "gradually smothers" political action and liberty (*DA*, 820). Tocqueville finds it a particularly

sinister form of despotism because individuals who relinquish their political agency might still see themselves living in an ostensibly free and democratic government. "I have always believed that this kind of servitude could be combined more easily than one might imagine with some external forms of liberty, and that it would not be impossible for it to establish itself in the shadow of popular sovereignty itself" (*DA*, 819).

Overall, Tocqueville maintains one crucial point: democratic language—with its tendencies to generalize, abstract, and personify—may lead citizens to abandon their own political agency implicit in the democratic revolution. Individuals who are emancipated from aristocratic hierarchies develop a tendency to create superior concepts and attribute agency, if not absolute power, to these concepts rather than to themselves. Consequently, they can become indifferent to political and collective life. Or, by contrast, they can develop an unquestioning attachment to their concepts. They can see themselves as servants of their concepts and fail to understand their own agency even when they exercise it.

Given his fears of the loss of human agency and despotism, it is plausible to conclude that Tocqueville should avoid using generalizations, abstractions, and personifications. However, strikingly, he declares that he is a participant in democratic language:

> I have frequently used the word *equality* in an absolute sense. I have, moreover, personified equality in several places, and I have said that equality did certain things or refrained from doing certain others. The men of the age of Louis XIV would not have spoken this way. It would never have occurred to them to use the word equality without applying it to something in particular, and they would sooner have given up the word than consent to turn equality into a living being. (*DA*, 552)

These sentences sound like an admission on Tocqueville's part that his own language is "infected,"[33] or that he failed to "resis[t] the democratic tendencies of language."[34] I argue that such readings should be qualified because we should doubt that Tocqueville could or would wish to isolate himself from the linguistic habits that emanate from a profound mental and material transformation. As Tocqueville's investigation highlights, democratic language emerges as people search for ways to navigate their novel political and sociological condition. It is an attempt to grapple with what Claude Lefort calls "democratic indeterminacy," that is, the experience of a "fundamental indeterminacy as to the basis of power, law and knowledge and as to the basis of relations between self and other, at every level of social life."[35] Tocqueville wishes to understand democracy as a social condition,

[33]Ibid., 16.

[34]Jaume, *Tocqueville*, 204.

[35]Claude Lefort, *Democracy and Political Theory*, trans. David Macey (Cambridge: Polity, 1988), 19.

as a language with novel tendencies and vocabulary, and as a form of government because he is aware of this profound experience of "indeterminacy." Tocqueville cannot reject democratic language because it is constitutive of the very mental and material condition he endeavors to understand.

What Tocqueville can do instead is to show his readers that they can take control of their new linguistic habits in order to create a healthy democratic society and government. To this end, he can explore the potential benefits and the dangers of democratic language. As my discussion of the "great debate" in the previous section indicated, this exploration is ineluctably entangled in the political and theoretical struggle to settle the meaning of democracy in France. Hence, as I shall demonstrate below, Tocqueville's exploration and use of democratic language is a response to the Doctrinaires' definition of democracy.

3. Tocqueville versus "New Democracy"

Tocqueville opens his 1835 *Democracy* with a direct confrontation with reactionary circles in France: "The gradual development of the equality of conditions is . . . a providential fact. It . . . is universal, durable, and daily proves itself to be beyond the reach of man's power" (*DA*, 6). As mentioned earlier, Tocqueville here appropriates Royer-Collard's statement that democracy is "in full spate" and that any attempt to restore aristocratic social order is futile. Yet when he asks if "anyone think[s] that democracy, having destroyed feudalism and vanquished kings, will be daunted by the bourgeois and the rich" (*DA*, 6), he immediately implies that his book is not simply a confirmation of the Doctrinaires. In pitting democracy against the bourgeoisie, Tocqueville confronts the Doctrinaires' legitimation of the July Monarchy as the representative government of the enlightened middle class. This puts Tocqueville in a peculiar bind: How to use democratic language to formulate and defend a superior idea of democracy without contributing to the removal of political agency from democratic individuals?

Tocqueville never mentions the "great debate" or any of his Doctrinaire opponents in either volume of his *Democracy in America*. Yet his decision to publish a book on democracy and the United States in 1835 was in itself a challenge to the July regime because the United States was a "controversial model" and the French public's interest in America peaked during revolutionary times when the republican and democratic arguments were in full force—i.e., in 1830 and 1848.[36] Tocqueville's reintroduction of this topic in 1835 was therefore an untimely threat to the proponents of the regime. Thus, Tocqueville's reluctance to mention his targets neither detracted from his

[36]Mélonio, *Tocqueville and the French*, 27; Nestor Capdevila, "Democracy and Revolution in Tocqueville: Frontiers of Democracy," in *Tocqueville and the Frontiers of Democracy*, ed. Ewa Atanassow and Richard Boyd (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 42.

book's argumentative character nor sheltered him from the Doctrinaire attacks.

Responses to the 1835 *Democracy* followed Tocqueville's method of criticism via implication. Édouard Alletz published *De la démocratie nouvelle* (On new democracy) two years later.[37] Within the same year, Guizot published *De la démocratie dans les sociétés modernes* (On democracy in modern societies),[38] praising Alletz's work. More than just a play on Tocqueville's title, both responses aimed to defend the Doctrinaire formulation of democracy. Alletz argued that modern societies defy classic conceptions of democracy or aristocracy because of their novel class composition.[39] Building on Royer-Collard's and Guizot's narrative of historical progress based on a class conflict between aristocracy and the middle class, Alletz submitted that a theory of "new democracy" was needed. "Old democracy" was the "power of number," "the poor," and "the ignorant."[40] "New democracy" was the government of the middle classes who are the "daughters of industry and science."[41] Thus, Alletz's "new democracy" resembled aristocracy by its "riches and enlightenment" and democracy by its mobility.[42] Because it placed "quality above quantity, and intelligence above number," it meant the "sovereignty" of not a specific class or people but of "reason."[43]

Guizot's review supported Alletz's "new democracy." He asserted that the modern social state licenses not a political democracy but a government of the enlightened middle class which has the capacity to exercise the true principles of humanity: "the more a society is free and wants to be free, the more it must be placed under the influence of the tutelary principles" such as the "sovereignty of reason."[44] This rhetorical maneuver should be familiar to us now. Employing abstractions and personifications, both Alletz and Guizot claimed that the real governing agent in the "new democracy" was the absolute principle of reason.

Indeed, the Doctrinaires had employed personifications since the "great debate," but Tocqueville chose to pay closer and more critical attention to their language after their reaction to the publication of his 1835 *Democracy*. In a sense, Tocqueville's analysis of democratic language in his 1840 *Democracy* was his way of responding to his Doctrinaire critics. There are earlier signs that Tocqueville would take this specific route. As Laurence

[37]Édouard Alletz, *De la démocratie nouvelle; ou, des moeurs et de la puissance des classes moyennes en France*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Lequin, 1838 [1837]).

[38]François Guizot, "De la démocratie dans les sociétés modernes," *Revue française* (1837): 193–225.

[39]Alletz, *De la démocratie nouvelle*, ix.

[40]Ibid., viij.

[41]Ibid., 6.

[42]Ibid., ix–xiij.

[43]Ibid., viij.

[44]Guizot, "De la démocratie dans les sociétés modernes," 222–24.

Guellec highlights, in a letter to Royer-Collard in 1837, Tocqueville sarcastically refers to the parliament as "*pays légal*, as M. Guizot would say."[45] Tocqueville here alludes to a parliamentary speech Guizot gave in the same year. In order to discredit the demands for universal (male) suffrage as extreme and "revolutionary," Guizot referred to the July government as the *pays légal*" (legal country)—that is, the constitutionally ordered government of the higher principles (i.e., "true liberty, and justice, which is the true equality").[46] Tocqueville's ironical remark about *pays légal* expresses his discontent with the abstracted idea of a middle-class government. Also recall Tocqueville's examples when he discusses personifications: "a democratic writer will speak easily of 'capacities' in the abstract rather than of 'capable men'" (*DA*, 552). We now can clearly see that this is a reference to the Doctrinaires' formulation of the middle class. The other example: "Circumstances require that capacities must govern" (*DA*, 552). This is an allusion to the Doctrinaires' personification of the democratic social state, to their argument that it enables "capacities" to rise above class divisions and rule society in light of the principles of reason and justice. To Tocqueville, this is a dangerous combination of abstraction and personification. Although the Doctrinaires seem to eschew abstractions and personifications by linking the terms "capacity" or "reason" to particular agents such as the middle class, this linking ends up rendering "middle class" an abstract and absolute term, detached from exclusionary property requirements. Concomitantly, it renders extant class inequalities unclear or irrelevant. This is a serious inconsistency at the heart of the Doctrinaires' "new democracy." Instead of removing the barriers to the elevation of enlightened individuals above class divisions, it becomes the justification for the exclusive rule of one class.

Guellec comments that Tocqueville accuses the Doctrinaires of using a "wooden language"[47] that exploits abstract words to divert attention from class domination and political exclusion. There is evidence for this argument. For Tocqueville, the Doctrinaires' abstraction of the middle class is linked to their acquisitive class interests. In a letter to the newspaper *Le siècle* (1843), Tocqueville asks: "Who among us doesn't see that the dominant passion . . . has changed? Instead of political, it has become industrial. Who fails to see that our contemporaries are at present hardly concerned about liberties and government, and much more concerned about wealth and well-being?"[48] The Doctrinaire formulation of the middle class concealed this *embourgeoisement*—the decline of political virtues and the ascendance of

[45]Guellec, *Tocqueville et les langages*, 203. Tocqueville's letter can be found in *Œuvres complètes*, ed. André Jardin, vol. 11 (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), 33–36.

[46]*AP* 2/110, 494–95.

[47]Guellec, *Tocqueville et les langages*, 201.

[48]Letter to *Le siècle*, January 3, 1843, in *Tocqueville and Beaumont on Social Reform*, ed. and trans. Seymour Drescher (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), 195.

middle-class values such as acquisitive self-interest.[49] Tocqueville retrospectively notes this fact in his *Recollections*, contending that the French middle class treated government like a "private industry" and "each of its members thought much more about his own private business than public affairs."[50] He adds: "In 1830 the triumph of the middle class was decisive and so complete that all political power, all franchises, all prerogatives, the whole government, found themselves confined and heaped up within the narrow bounds of this one class."[51]

These sentences evidence Tocqueville's awareness of the gap between the Doctrinaires' abstracted discussion of classes and the actual class composition. But Tocqueville hesitates to go so far as to say that the Doctrinaires are in firm control of their language. "An abstract word is like a box with a false bottom; you can put in any idea you please and take them out again without anyone being wiser" (*DA*, 553). The Doctrinaires' abstract and personified concepts also undermine their own ability to uphold their exclusive rule. In other words, Tocqueville finds a deeper problem consistent with his warnings about democratic language's tendency to remove agency.

4. Tocqueville's Reluctant Democratic Language

Tocqueville's cautions about the removal of political agency play a key role in his criticisms of the July regime. He maintains that the exclusion of the majority of the population from self-government leads to dangerous personifications among the excluded classes in two senses. First, it instills revolutionary ambitions in the name of abstract concepts, and, second, it paves the way for a future democratic despotism.

Tocqueville's explanation begins with a comparison between American and French political ideas. "Americans exhibit a less lively taste for general ideas than do the French. This is especially true of general ideas relating to politics" (*DA*, 499). Tocqueville emphasizes that the limited political sphere in France leads to a stronger tendency to general and dangerous ideas. There is a historical antecedent: "When one studies the history of our [1789] Revolution, one finds that the spirit that guided it was precisely the same spirit that gave rise to so many abstract books on government: The same fondness for general theories; . . . the same contempt for existing facts; the same confidence in theory" (*AR*, 134). As I discussed earlier with the example of the state, the history of the 1789 Revolution teaches Tocqueville that when people are excluded from political power, they form a strong attachment to abstract terms. "Our social state led us to conceive very general ideas about government at a time when

[49]Kevin Duong, "The Demands of Glory: Tocqueville and Terror in Algeria," *Review of Politics* 80, no. 1 (2018): 38.

[50]Alexis de Tocqueville, *Souvenirs de Alexis de Tocqueville*, ed. Comte de Tocqueville (Paris: Calmann Lévy, 1893), 6–7.

[51]Ibid.

our political constitution still prevented us from correcting those ideas through experience and gradually discovering their inadequacies, whereas in America these two things constantly balance and naturally correct each other" (*DA*, 499). In short, abstract terms appear as distant but "absolute truths" (*DA*, 499), leading people to seek them blindly without having prior practical experience.

Once this attachment to abstract and absolute terms becomes strong among the excluded classes, it eventually penetrates the entire political language. This is again a lesson from the 1789 Revolution: from the royal edicts to the petitions of peasants, "all classes of the society" used "generalized expressions" and "abstract terms" (*AR*, 134). It is no surprise that the Doctrinaires also inherited this language. After all, they claim to realize the "true" principles of the 1789 Revolution with their "new democracy." Tocqueville writes in his *Recollections* that the July regime "appeared" like a "regular and peaceful machine" with "cogs of liberty" but "in fact" it produced a government that "bordered on despotism."[52] Yet this seemingly peaceful *pays légal* is also bound to fall when it goes up against the democratic language of the people. Tocqueville contends that the people will not entertain political ideas that exclude them for very long, and will soon attempt to realize their own ideas, or versions of ideas. But because they lack the practical experience of their political ideas, they will personify those ideas, paving the way for a despotic state.

Remarkably, Tocqueville chooses to use personifications when he explains the impending demise of the July Monarchy. Just as he pits democracy against the bourgeoisie (i.e., the middle class) in the 1835 *Democracy*, he pits "industry" against the middle class in the 1840 *Democracy*. Consider how Tocqueville expresses the increasing power of the state in industrial societies: "Sovereigns . . . increasingly appropriate the greater part of the new force that industry is creating in the world today and put it to their own use. Industry leads us, they lead it" (*DA*, 812). We know from Tocqueville's drafts that he wrote these sentences with the parliamentary debates on railroads in mind:[53] "What happened at the end of the [June] 1837 session for railroads, and the way in which nearly everyone fell into agreement that the government must take charge of everything, is characteristic and shows clearly the slope that carries us, friends and enemies of liberty, toward the centralization of all powers in the hands of the government and the introduction of its hand into all affairs" (*DA-HC*, 1239). In the same draft, Tocqueville specifically notes that the government and the "liberal and democratic opposition of the left" converge on this idea of the state-led industry (*DA-HC*, 1240). These notes explicate why Tocqueville chooses to write "industry leads us" instead of, say, "industrialists lead us." His personification of industry underlines that the industrialists, despite their establishment of rigid class

[52]Ibid., 12.
[53]*AP* 2/113.

hierarchies between themselves and workers, do not control industry and the political power that comes with it (*DA*, 649–52). As Sheldon Wolin observes, Tocqueville thinks that they are a "stunted class," a class without an *esprit de corps*.[54] As their turn to state administration evidences, the industrialists' "goal is not to govern . . . but to use [the workers and population]." They do not know "how to exert [their] will and cannot act" (*DA*, 652).

This personification of industry is an appropriation of the Doctrinaires' argument about social progress. Recall that Royer-Collard linked the ascendance of the middle class to the progress of industry, and Alletz claimed that the middle class was the "daughte[r] of industry." Tocqueville once again uses a reversal tactic: directing the Doctrinaires' idea of progressing industry against themselves by showing how the French middle class lacks the political agency to sustain their dominance. He reiterates that the middle-class attachment to commerce and industry can lead to the loss of political agency, to the relinquishment of all political activities to the state administration. "I cannot prevent myself from admiring the simplicity of those who believe that you can without disadvantage increase the civil rights of the government provided that you do not increase its political power" (*DA-HC*, 1240). While claiming to realize the "sovereignty of reason," the July regime fosters another sovereign that will lead to its demise—the despotic state. That is why Tocqueville warns of the looming danger of "democratic despotism" in France.

This forceful criticism rests on a personification. Akin to the people or public opinion, Tocqueville argues that the state is becoming the most powerful anonymous ruler, making all classes dependent on it. His drafts reveal his struggles to give a concrete shape to this despotic state. The clearest moments come when he differentiates this despotism from the "tyranny of Caesars"—that is, the "arbitrary and absolute government" of one person (*DA-HC*, 1245 note a). But in the democratic social condition, despotism emerges "in an entirely new fashion": "New society, regular, peaceful, ruled with art and uniformity, mixture of college, seminary, regiment . . . bureaucratic tyranny . . . but mild and regular, equal for all. A sort of paternity" (*DA-HC*, 1247 note d). If we try to surmise from this description who directs the state, we see a long list of possible agents: intellectuals, the church, the military, the bureaucracy. Indeed, there is also the bourgeoisie and majority: "As long as democratic revolution lasts . . . there is always one class in the nation, powerful by virtue of either numbers or wealth that is moved by special passions and interests to centralize public administration" (*DA*, 798–99). Overall, Tocqueville's language renders the agent behind the despotic state ambiguous.

Tocqueville is aware that this characterization of "democratic despotism" obfuscates democratic people's political agency. That is why his democratic language is reluctant—one that is used with reservations. While he

[54]Wolin, *Tocqueville between Two Worlds*, 347–48.

weaponizes abstract personified terms such as democracy, industry, and the state to undermine the so-called superior rule of the middle class, he also aims to ensure that such critical use of democratic language does not stifle human agency. Tocqueville wishes to perform democratic language not solely to indicate the inherent dangers of democratic times. He also wants to invite his readers to see and imagine the possibilities of democratic agency.[55]

To this end, generalizations are helpful. As mentioned above, they expand the meanings and potentials of concepts by bringing various phenomena together. "If the human mind undertook to examine and judge individually all the particular cases that came to its notice, it would soon become lost in a sea of detail and cease to see anything" (*DA*, 494). The virtue of general and abstract terms, then, is that they allow the human mind to bring many phenomena into sight and discover their relationship—unless their particularities are obfuscated or lost under absolute and personified terms. Consider, for instance, Tocqueville's treatment of "equality of conditions" throughout both volumes of his *Democracy in America*. He opens the 1835 *Democracy* by stating that the "equality of conditions" is "the focal point" that ties various phenomena together (*DA*, 3). The term gives him access to "public spirit" (e.g., the passion for equality), laws (e.g., the egalitarian "laws of inheritance"), "new maxims for government" (e.g., "popular sovereignty"), "distinctive habits in the governed" (e.g., "individualism"),[56] and, indeed, language (i.e., tendencies to generalize, abstract, and personify). It also allows him to see how terms may appear as agents in themselves. Owing to its relevance to almost every phenomenon, the "equality of conditions" appears "as the original fact from which each particular fact seemed to derive" (*DA*, 3). In the closing chapter of the 1840 *Democracy*, titled "General View of the Subject," Tocqueville tells his readers once again why he picks up a "focal point." With a final use of personifications, he indicates that the "equality of conditions" gives him an overarching view of democratic society as well as its inherent dangers and promises: "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*, 832).

The "general view" from the "focal point" therefore enables Tocqueville to see that democracy can take the form of "equality in liberty." Akin to the idea of "human perfectibility," democratic minds should use their perception of flux and progress to achieve this superior form of the equality of conditions. "One can imagine an extreme point at which liberty and equality touch and become one. Suppose that all citizens take part in government and that each has an equal right to do so. . . . This is the most complete form that

[55]Also see Welch, "Colonial Violence," 255.
[56]See respectively *DA*, 581, 55, 62–63, 583.

equality can take on earth" (*DA*, 581). Put differently, "complete" equality requires equality in political participation; it requires the combination of a democratic social condition and political democracy.

Tocqueville's emphasis on political participation is integral to his argument that democratic individuals need to practice their ideas. This practical experience is crucial because it allows democratic individuals to moderate the dangerous tendencies of their language, such as the creation of absolute and personified concepts. "On any subject about which it is particularly dangerous for democratic peoples to embrace general ideas blindly and overenthusiastically, the best corrective is to make sure that they deal with that subject in a practical manner on a daily basis" (*DA*, 500). Given Tocqueville's concerns with "individualism," equally important is that democratic individuals practice their ideas in a collective manner. Personified concepts such as industry or the state are helpful in highlighting how the middle class fails to think and act collectively. But to orient democratic individuals towards collective political action, their language needs to be blended with concrete political practices. Hence, Tocqueville argues for the extension of not only democratic rights but also institutions.

It is with this idea that Tocqueville celebrates political associations in the United States in his 1840 *Democracy*. "A political association draws a multitude of individuals out of themselves simultaneously. However inherently different they may be by the dint of age, intelligence, or fortune, the association brings them together and places them in contact" (*DA*, 605). Some scholars have argued that Tocqueville exaggerates the importance and power of associations.[57] This is true, but we must identify his reasons. Tocqueville's drafts show that he specifically targets the July regime when he identifies associations as instances of collective, democratic practices. Next to his sentence that democratic citizens can defend their liberty and resist against despotism if they learn the "art of joining with fellow [citizens]" (*DA*, 595), Tocqueville puts this note: "To finish associations there, to turn to G[uizot] against himself." Tocqueville here mentions Guizot's historical argument that the Germanic "barbarians" could destroy Roman civilization by making the Romans "like strangers to one another." Tocqueville concludes that the July Monarchy's exclusive *pays légal* fosters a similar estrangement: "If a government forbid citizens to associate or undertook to take away their taste for doing so, it would behave precisely as barbarians" (*DA-HC*, 896 note c).

Tocqueville's point here is that the July regime's hostility toward associations exacerbates the problems of "individualism" and despotism. He also signals that this hostility stems from the dangerous linguistic habits in France. As early as his 1835 *Democracy,* Tocqueville complains that the French people incorrectly see "freedom of association as nothing more than

[57]E.g., Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop, editors' introduction to *Democracy in America*, by Alexis de Tocqueville, ed. and trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), lxxii.

a right to make war on government" (*DA*, 221). This misconception is common because of the linguistic tendency to create abstract and absolute concepts of the people or majority. "In Europe, there is virtually no association that does not claim to represent, or believe that it does not represent the will of the majority." This claim to represent the majority often bases itself on a claim to speak on behalf of a "nation that cannot speak for itself" (*DA*, 222). Such claims do not exist in the United States because universal (male) suffrage and freedom of association together "promote competition among ideas," preventing parties from portraying themselves as the voice of a silent majority or as the representatives of the nation (*DA*, 220–21). Ultimately, Tocqueville argues that the French public misunderstands associations because they "lack experience in the exercise of freedom" (*DA*, 221). Associations enable democratic individuals to practice their democratic ideas, and collectively attain a healthy sense of democracy without succumbing to dangerous personifications and abstractions that lead to revolutionary conflict or despotism.

Tocqueville voices this point explicitly in his 1847 manifesto "On the Middle Class and the People."[58] He claims that there is a "deadly indolence" in the *pays légal*, whereas "a muffled agitation begins to appear in the lower classes, who, however, according to our law, must remain strangers to public life."[59] He cautions that the gap between the legal-institutional politics and public life is dangerous not only because it could lead to revolutionary passions among the excluded lower classes but also because it could create "a languor in the political world."[60] As a remedy, Tocqueville urges his French audience to "extend the circle of political rights so as to go beyond the limits of the middle class" and "to involve the lower classes in [public] affairs."[61] Tocqueville's point is clear: despite people's dangerous propensity for revolution and despotism, the best way to establish a free and orderly democracy is to let people exercise democracy. "[D]emocratic institutions, which force each citizen to be concerned with government in a practical way, moderate the excessive taste for general theories in political matters" (*DA*, 500). For Tocqueville, democratic participation plays a formative role. It not only brings otherwise isolated and hostile classes and individuals together, but also teaches citizens the meanings of their political concepts in practice.

5. Conclusion

A year after Tocqueville's manifesto, the French political sphere changed dramatically. The banquets of reformist deputies turned into a popular

[58]Alexis de Tocqueville, "De la classe moyenne et du peuple," in *Études économiques, politiques et littéraires*, ed. Michel Lévy (Paris: Michel Lévy Frères, 1866), 514–19.
[59]Ibid., 514.
[60]Ibid., 515.
[61]Ibid., 518–19.

insurrection and overthrew the July Monarchy among shouts of "down with Guizot."[62] The new republic established universal male suffrage and guaranteed freedom of association. But the alliance behind these principles was short-lived. The fierce struggle for determining the meanings of democracy, participation, and republic began as early as the first acts of the provisional government.[63] Tocqueville served as a deputy in the new republic until the coup d'état of the democratically elected president Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte in 1851. His *Democracy in America* became popular during the first days of the new republic. However, this time, the moderate and conservative republicans took up Tocqueville's work. Against the demands of the working class for direct participation and social reform, these republicans turned to the "American school" as a moderate and orderly blend of popular sovereignty and political liberty.[64] Tocqueville sided with them, but soon found himself marginalized when his proposals for decentralization, term limits on the presidency, and bicameralism received little support.[65] In a sense, Tocqueville's democratic language was still against revolution and despotism, but this time it confronted different *démocrates*: those who wanted a democracy with a strong centralized government and those who wanted to extend the democratic revolution toward socialism.

In the confines of this article, it is not possible to fully discuss Tocqueville's complicated relationship with the new republican and socialist appeals to democracy during and after the 1848 Revolution. However, there is one common view that bears mention: Tocqueville's disengagement with tumultuous French public life,[66] combined with his cautions against "democratic despotism," paved the way for the creation of the "Tocquevillian myth" in political theory—namely, an image of a politically apathetic, stagnant, and centralized France.[67] Therefore, an important question in the scholarship endures: Why did Tocqueville avoid taking a sustained interest in the public discourse and movements in France despite his call for an inclusive

[62]E. Lièvre, *A bas Guizot! . . . ou la mort* (1848), Bibliothèque National de France, Paris, https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b53013783v.item.

[63]Samuel Hayat, "The Revolution of 1848 in the History of French Republicanism," *History of Political Thought* 36, no. 2 (2015): 331–53.

[64]Mélonio, *Tocqueville and the French*, 49–52.

[65]Tocqueville, *Souvenirs*, 144–61, 238–86.

[66]For instance, Tocqueville did not attend the banquet campaigns that led to the fall of the July Monarchy (ibid., 22–36, 135–38).

[67]Sudhir Hazareesingh, *The Saint-Napoleon: Celebrations of Sovereignty in Nineteenth-Century France* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004) 13–14. There is another reason why Tocqueville depicts France as a stagnant society: his support for colonialism in Algeria. Tocqueville thought that a Napoleonic campaign into Algeria would rekindle political passions in France. On this topic, see Welch, "Colonial Violence and the Rhetoric of Evasion"; Jennifer Pitts, *A Turn to Empire: The Rise of Imperial Liberalism in Britain and France* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), chap. 7; Duong, "The Demands of Glory."

and participatory political life? I want to consider how my discussion of democratic language can give a Tocquevillian answer to this question. In his parliamentary speech against the "right to work," Tocqueville accuses the deputies of the left of muddling the meaning of democracy. "Long live the Democratic and Social Republic? What do you mean by these words?"[68] He tells the deputies that they need to look at the "country that is essentially democratic."[69] Tocqueville's primary aim here perhaps is to reassert his authority as an expert on democracy and the United States. It is noteworthy, however, that this argumentative maneuver is consistent with his warnings about the dangers inherent in using abstract concepts. For Tocqueville, socialist language is too abstract, so he appeals to the practical wisdom of the American democracy. He again emphasizes the importance of practicing concepts.

But here Tocqueville also contradicts his own stance about the potentiality of the democratic language and the importance of practicing ideas. We know today that the terms "democracy" and "association" inspired various (and often competing) practices and institutions in different social and political circles during the July Monarchy and the 1848 Revolution—for example, Christian philanthropic societies, savings banks, mutual-aid societies, and worker associations.[70] Certainly, contra his former adversaries like Guizot, Tocqueville, in his speech, does not argue for the exclusion of the working class from politics. Yet he attempts to establish the true meaning of democracy by forbidding the working class to use the term.[71] Tocqueville's effort to claim the term is also visible in his *Recollections*. Describing his first time in the Constituent Assembly, he writes that his "only goal" was to "defeat demagogy by democracy," to ensure that "the evident will of the French people triumphs over the passions and the desires of the Parisian workers."[72] Tocqueville's goals seem to have been achieved when the 1848 constitution declared in its first article that "sovereignty resides in the universality of French citizens."[73]

Here we see an ambivalent Tocqueville caught between two implications of his democratic language. On the one hand he wants to make the people, all citizens regardless of class, the basis of democracy. Therefore, he uses the inclusive potential of the general term "citizenship." On the other hand,

[68]Alexis de Tocqueville, "Discours prononcé à l'Assemblée Constituante dans la discussion du projet de Constitution sur la question du droit au travail," in *Œuvres complètes*, ed. André Jardin, vol. 3 (Paris: Gallimard, 1990), 169–70.

[69]Ibid., 174.

[70]William H. Sewell, *Work and Revolution in France: The Language of Labor from the Old Regime to 1848* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1980); Samuel Hayat, *Quand la république était révolutionnaire: Citoyenneté et représentation en 1848* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2014), 51–56.

[71]Capdevila, "Democracy and Revolution in Tocqueville," 48.

[72]Tocqueville, *Souvenirs*, 160–61.

[73]Hayat, "Revolution of 1848," 342–53.

such a move from the particularity of the working class to the generality of the people diverts attention from the demands of once-excluded classes to extend and practice democracy in political and social life.[74]

Where does this leave Tocqueville's democratic language and thought? As mentioned in the introduction, it certainly makes Tocqueville an ambiguous thinker and writer. But, as this article aims to demonstrate, such ambiguity makes Tocqueville's language a fascinating subject in the history of democratic thought. Tocqueville is one of the key nineteenth-century thinkers who struggled to claim and define the concept of democracy in a time of great social and political transformation. While he agreed with the Doctrinaires' argument that the modern social state was democratic in the sense that it defied aristocratic castes, he also unsettled their attempts to freeze the term in this solely sociological meaning. He aimed to give democracy political significance. Hence multiple connotations of Tocqueville's use of democracy: social condition, the people, associations, participatory citizenry, and an inclusive form of government.

Amid this multiplicity of meanings, there is an important insight to be gained from specific attention to Tocqueville's use of democratic language. In the nineteenth-century struggle to define and realize democracy, the concept acquired so much power that it became an agent in itself—one that reconfigured social and political bonds and realized modern aspirations such as equality, liberty, and progress. Tocqueville's appropriation of this language gave him a critical edge against his Doctrinaire adversaries. It also allowed him to warn his readers that the use of such captivating language should not come at the expense of their political agency. Thus, his overarching approach suggests that individuals must practice their concepts together in order to attain a healthy version of democracy. To fight against class inequalities and political exclusions today, we still often choose to make democracy an agent, claiming that its progress is still incomplete. Yet it is equally important to translate this language into action, to practice our concepts in an egalitarian and collective manner.

[74]Tocqueville briefly explores worker associations in his "Second Memoir on Pauperism" of 1837 ("Second mémoire sur le paupérisme," in *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Françoise Mélonio, vol. 16 [Paris: Gallimard, 1989], 140–57). Although Tocqueville's "Memoir" is inconclusive, his turn to associations is telling: instead of seeking market-based or administrative measures, he asks how citizens can solve their social problems through collective action. See Gianna Englert, "'The Idea of Rights': Tocqueville on the Social Question," *Review of Politics* 79, no. 4 (2017): 649–74.