

María José Villaverde Rico, *Tocqueville y el lado oscuro del liberalismo* (Madrid: Guillermo Escolar, 2022), 408 pp.

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It is a sad fact that the people who believe in political ideologies rarely live up to the ideals of those ideologies. It seems safe to say that none of the countries that have tried to live by Marxism have lived up to the high ideals of that ideology. Unfortunately, the same can be said for other ideologies, such as liberalism. This book is an exploration of the later life, writings, and political activities of Alexis de Tocqueville, author of *Democracy in America* (1835-1840). In that book, he praised the equality and democracy that was emerging in North America and criticized the treatment of African slaves and Native Americans, earning himself a place in the canon of theorists of liberalism. In the following years, however, he became engaged in French politics, including holding a seat in the lower house of parliament from 1839 to 1851, and serving as Minister of Foreign Affairs for several months during 1849, generally associating with the moderate left, and even being one of the founders of the “Jeune Gauche”, the Young Left. One big issue in his time was Algeria, and Ireland and India were two more issues that tested his liberalism. He did not live up to the high ideals of liberalism on these matters.

María José Villaverde Rico’s book, *Tocqueville y el lado oscuro del liberalismo*, is an assessment of Tocqueville’s failure in this regard. It is an attempt to find a balance between those who criticize Tocqueville and liberalism as wholly racist and opportunistic, and those who defend him. She appears to have read all of the relevant literature, and walks us through his relations with contemporaries such as Arthur de Gobineau as well as the assessments of our own contemporaries of the last half a century. We learn a lot about his personality and psychology, who his friends were and what they thought, as well as about the political issues of the day.

In the first chapter Tocqueville’s trip to North America is traced, along with his criticism of North American treatment of slaves and native Americans. This sets up the background for the question why he was not so liberal when it came to Algeria and some other cases. The second chapter compares his criticism of American racism with his attempts in press and politics to abolish slavery in the French colonies of the Caribbean, which succeeded in 1848. There is a great deal of fascinating detail and nuance here. The third chapter brings out the paradox of his friendship and long correspondence with Arthur Gobineau,

one of the founders of modern racism, and concludes that Tocqueville never followed him on that. It is worth noting that this friendship demonstrates that it is possible for people with very different political positions to maintain civil and even caring relationships, since it seems to be so uncommon today. The fourth chapter reviews a wide range of writings and documents about his trips to Algeria and his support of French colonialism there. And the fifth and last chapter explores the the paradox of his nationalism and support for colonialism in contradiction to his liberalism.

One of Villaverde's most interesting observations is that one must distinguish between Tocqueville's more abstract theoretical writings and his political writings. In his articles for the press, engaged in actual political battles for change, he would often simplify and even distort the moral argument in order to make the political case. This raises a fascinating question about politics: should it track philosophy and morality in every way, or are there times when politics makes its own demands? That is, should we bring up all the nuances of moral ambiguities and epistemological uncertainties every time we talk politics? Or should we skim over various doubts and ambiguities in order to get to the point and get to a decision? Any successful politician will tell you that we have to make our ideas clear and as unambiguous as possible if we want to get anything done.

Politics is often also a matter of compromises, and about partial successes and limited achievements instead of total victories and idealistic revolutions. It is also a matter of multiple dimensions, some more morally pure than others. Thus, freeing the slaves in the Antilles could go hand in hand with the nationalistic project of projecting French pride and global eminence. When it came to Algeria, Tocqueville had to balance his political responsibilities as a member of parliament responsible for protecting French interests with his concern for the welfare of the colonized peoples. This is "strategic" thinking, which may be a way of saying it is thinking that is balancing several different and even opposing interests. Villaverde does an excellent job of bringing out all of the considerations that a political figure must balance, finding clues to them in Tocqueville's theoretical writings, newspaper articles, reports to the parliament, and personal correspondence. It is not helpful in understanding him to pick a sentence out of all of these materials and insist that it reveals an essential racism or excessive patriotism.

The story of Tocqueville's interactions with Gobineau is equally ambiguous. In their early correspondence he was more modern and liberal than Tocqueville, but he evolved in anti-Enlightenment directions toward a fatalism. Tocqueville was personally agnostic but believed in a role for Christianity in creating community and solidarity. Both opposed the growing materialism they saw around them. Their ideas braid around each other without convincing each

other. They might be considered an excellent example of intellectual interchange if such exchanges do not have to end with compromises and mutual agreement, but can end in disagreement. Villaverde brings out their interactions in detail and with great nuance.

The French conquest of Algeria began in 1830, and it became one of the most important issues in France for the rest of Tocqueville's life. As a member of parliament, he had to vote on numerous initiatives concerning Algeria, and had to explain in the press and in his correspondence what he was trying to do. At his best, there were good intentions here. The French could democratize and civilize the Arabs and bring them in to the modern world for their own benefit. He even wrote of a future blending of customs and of putting himself in their position to understand them and help them. He even called out the failure of the French claim to establish a liberal rule in Algeria. But at his worst, there was silence about the mass killing of women and children to root out enemy fighters, and justification of the sacking of cities and expropriation of land. The whole process was justified in order to prevent British domination of the world, to maintain French status among the other great powers, and to fight against the fanatics.

Perhaps one reason for the failure of liberalism in Algeria was the fact that the actual work on the ground was not carried out by the political idealists, but by all sorts of (mostly) men, including the most cruel. The soldiers and the colonists had none of the generous sensibility toward to Arabs of the liberal thinkers. Looking back, it seems obvious that the intentions of liberal treatment of the population would rarely appear on the ground. Tocqueville even wrote at one point that the best way out of the dilemma was for France to withdraw from Algeria. But he remained a supporter of what could have been a liberal rule in Algeria, often on highly idealistic principles. Villaverde follows his reasoning as it evolves in various letters, commission reports, other statements, and pamphlets. The detail is important for understanding his thinking.

The last chapter, fully 90 pages, explores the relation between Tocqueville's liberalism and his involvement in colonialism, nationalism, and imperialism. Things are not as simple as the usual denunciation of colonialism (and more recently, of liberalism) as all bad. There are many good intentions, and many good effects, which are unfortunately drowned out by the bad intentions and bad effects. Villaverde compares and contrasts the opinions of many scholars on all of these matters, and a nuanced and documented picture emerges. There is a fascinating discussion of his interchanges with John Stuart Mill. Remarkably enough, we find Tocqueville supporting British expansion in India and China. A reading of Villaverde's chapter might not change anyone's mind, but it will give readers a complex and nuanced appreciation of why and how Tocqueville said and did what he did. One thing seems certain: he was never cynical or

selfish, even if misguided. Villaverde concludes that the civilizing mission was the idealistic goal across wide swaths of Enlighteners, even if the results did not achieve the goal, and that even though Tocqueville knew enough to be skeptical of elements of that mission, he nevertheless counted on it to bring Enlightenment and liberty to the world.

One hopes that criticism of an author is a good thing, and evaluating the limits of a writer such as Tocqueville might at least have the benefit of never allowing us to become complacent and rest on the laurels of past thinkers. We should always keep a critical eye on them, and on ourselves, and be ready to recognize shortcomings. But it is one thing to say that by his own nineteenth century standards Tocqueville fell short; it is another thing to say that he falls short by our standards. The latter is a dangerous game for historians, and for general readers, because it seems likely that we will never find a figure from the past who lives up to our highest current ideals. Nor should we expect to find one if we accept, as most people do, the idea that we are or should be always making progress toward a better world. We should always be improving, but the only thing we gain by harsh judgments of figures of the past is a sense of our own self-righteousness. It is perhaps relevant to ask of past thinkers, what were the highest standards of their day, and did they live up to them, rather than ask if we would vote for them today. Maria Jose' Villaverde's book on Tocqueville is an excellent guide to the standards of Tocqueville and the other thinkers of Tocqueville's day, and to his interventions in the political issues of the day, many of which are just as important today as in his day.