Special Section

Tocqueville in Algeria Revisited

Introduction

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Can revisiting Alexis de Tocqueville help us better understand colonialism and imperialism today? Certainly his missions in Algeria not long after his celebrated American engagement need to be better known. The papers assembled here, first presented at the 2009 MESA conference, begin to reopen questions about this man and his missions, both in Algeria as a French agent, and in the U.S. as—possibly—a French agent.

Although Tocqueville's phase in Algeria is not unknown in the U.S., it seems to have been confined to a limited circle of scholars, and not to have stirred much controversy about his nineteenth century interpretation of U.S. democracy.

As for the dialogue on colonialism within Algeria, a dialogue which remains active among Algerians almost half a century after defeating France, Tocqueville's role in their colonization is another mystery. During a Fulbright year in Algeria, I noted how frequently dailies carried essays by scholars recalling their ugly and painful experience with France. The legacy is enshrined in museums, in annual memorials of massacres and victories, in countless seminars devoted to the resistance movement, in

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benefits to their resistance fighters. Yet one name was missing from those accounts I read and seminars I attended: Alexis De Tocqueville.

But when Simone Fattal sent me a copy of Selouma Luste Boulbina's 2003 *Tocqueville Sur l'Algerie,* an important collection of writings stemming from his short visits to the then newly-occupied North African nation, I found that he was well known. And detested.

Reading Boulbina's introduction and the candid letters by Tocqueville about how Algeria should be ruled, I understood why he was despised. First, he advocated the adoption of a deep reaching French colonial policy against Algerians. Second, he was in part responsible for their execution. This knowledge has special relevance for me: first as an American, I am regularly presented with quotes in our press from an acclaimed *Democracy in America;* then as an anthropologist, I marvel at his observational skills; third, as an observer of ongoing wars in the name of democracy, I am disturbed by the logic that the American public applies to justify foreign invasions and military occupations.

There is no disputing Tocqueville's role in recommending harsh treatment of the Algerian people and a strategic colonization policy on their land. His many writings on Algeria are explicit about this. He was unrepentant in his advocacy of what were essentially techniques of genocide. When confronted by this man's work for France in Africa, we may feel obliged to re-examine Tocqueville's view of American society. (On my part, I cannot view *Democracy in America* as I once did.)

The Algerian work can also help us better understand contemporary issues that concern scholars and policymakers alike, namely the logic of empire and military conquest. On the one hand, the media and the public seem sympathetic to the cultural values of a conquered people. On the other they rationalize the destruction as offering those conquered a greater good. Invasions rid them of their dictators, liberate their women, and protect the homeland against menacing neighbors.

Intellectuals' roles in the creation of images that serve imperial interests against indigenous peoples are well documented by critics of imperialism. Edward Said, in his *Culture and Imperialism* (Knopf, NY, 1993; Chapter VII, "Camus and the French Imperial Experience," pp. 169-185), speaks at length on the French presence in Algeria. Said notes how numerous French literary presentations of Algeria were part of "the shadowy discourse of colonial capitalism with its roots in liberal free-trade policies" (p. 167). On the subject of our collection of papers, Said notes: "Some, like Tocqueville, who sternly criticized American policy towards Blacks and native Indians, believed that the advance of European civilization necessitated inflicting cruelties on the

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Muslim *indigenes:* in his view, total conquest became equivalent to French greatness" (p. 182). Prominent intellectuals of a later century noticed the results. "Clearly," Said continued, "Camus's declaration that an Algerian nation never existed presumed that the ravages of French policy had wiped the slate clean" (p. 183).

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Alexis de Tocqueville, Democrat in America, Colonizer in Africa

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Alexis de Tocqueville was born an aristocrat, in the very conservative region of Normandy, in France in 1805. He was at the same time an admirer of the French Revolution, although due to his upbringing and family, he was unable to subscribe to all the principles inherent to that revolution. Tocqueville remains admirable on that score, as he lived under the counter-revolution and participated in the government of the new monarchy. His contradictions made him an observing outsider. He studied law and went into politics. He accompanied his friend, Gustave de Beaumont, who was sent by his government to the New Republic of America, to study the U.S. prison system for its eventual application in France. They cosigned the subsequent report.

Upon his return to France, as a lawyer Tocqueville published his own book, the famous *Democracy in America*. He was soon after elected a member of the French Parliament and as such was sent on a fact-finding mission to Algeria. Later he would become Minister of Foreign Affairs and was sent a second time to Algeria.

Tocqueville was initially sent to Algeria by the French government to study the situation on the ground. His first report would serve to advise his government on the best way to wage war against the Algerians. The major

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