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Northern Lights Over Tocqueville

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Jon Elster: *Alexis de Tocqueville, the First Social Scientist* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009. Pp. x, 202. $22.99.)

Richard Swedberg: *Tocqueville's Political Economy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009. Pp. ix, 342. $35.00.)

Alexis de Tocqueville has recently come under the scrutiny of two scholars who, for all their resemblances, have produced strikingly divergent accounts. Both are Scandinavian by birth, both prolific writers, and both aim to show other social scientists how they might benefit from paying closer attention to Tocqueville. Each of these books might also shine a bright light on the other, for their authors approach their self-appointed tasks with fundamentally different mindsets. Jon Elster starts from what we now *know* and digs into the pages of the past to find prefigurations and anticipations. His Tocqueville proves to be a shrewd practitioner of the kind of social science analysis that Elster has long been advocating. Richard Swedberg is less inclined to plumb Tocqueville's depths for laws, mechanisms, or even firm conclusions. Instead, he *listens* in hope of learning how Tocqueville thought about the phenomena he came to observe. His Tocqueville is a persistent searcher and self-questioner—traits Swedberg would have us admire and emulate in our own work.

It is hardly news that writings rich in ambiguities and nuances should evoke divergent responses—all the more so in this instance. Tocqueville's singular blend of soaring generalizations and telling detail can sweep a reader along or leave one shaking one's head in disbelief. Nor is his political stance to everyone's taste. There is a controlled but palpable moral earnestness to Tocqueville's attempt to secure a place for liberty in a world obsessed with the delights promised by material comforts and the overturning of status. He runs counter to some powerful currents of the modern democratic age. Yet for all that, acute analysts keep returning to Tocqueville's writings, persuaded that they have much to teach. So readers are presented with multiple Tocquevilles to mix and match as they please.

The volumes under review demonstrate how much of what we observe is shaped by what we bring to the task. This has less to do with our peculiar delineation of the question to be posed than with the tonal register to which we are attuned. In each case, the author puts *his* question to Tocqueville, which, as a matter of course, entails narrowing the field of vision, sharpening the focus, and filtering out the irrelevant. The reader may always contest the shaping of an inquiry, but if he thinks he can do

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better, he should go ahead and write the better book! More fundamental (and hence fit for criticism) is the author's sensitivity to his subject's cast of mind. We want evidence that the analyst has grasped how Tocqueville meant to be understood. When, in an explicitly self-referential chapter on the democratic penchant for abstract language, Tocqueville cites his own use of the term "equality," he is sending up a flare in the night sky. "An abstract word is like a box with a false bottom: one puts in it the ideas one desires and one takes them out without anyone's seeing it" (*Democracy in America* 2.i.16 [Mansfield-Winthrop trans.]). Elster, Swedberg, and the rest of us are advised: *Caveat lector*!

Richard Swedberg's undertaking resembles Elster's at least in this respect: It is prompted by a desire to display a dimension of Tocqueville's thought that has been unnoticed or underestimated by contemporary social scientists. It attempts to come to grips with those features of Tocqueville's mode of presentation that made it easy for knowing students of his work to miss the concern with economic phenomena that runs throughout his writings. Some of those features dismay Elster, leading him to accuse Tocqueville of inattentiveness and worse. Swedberg, in contrast, is inspired to dig deeper in hopes of retracing the highly original ways in which the Frenchman formulated his research questions, gathered data, tested propositions, arrived at an *idée mère,* and ultimately composed his books.

Swedberg's title, *Tocqueville's Political Economy,* perhaps promises more than it delivers by way of persuading readers that Tocqueville is indeed a *political* economist. On more than one occasion, Tocqueville expresses his belief in the axioms of political economy, specifically the division of labor and the economy of scale (66, 330 n. 36). Yet there is considerable daylight between Tocqueville's use of these concepts and that of political economists both in his time and in ours. This difference becomes abundantly clear as Swedberg proceeds methodically through his author's notebooks, published works, essays, speeches, journalism, correspondence, and even conversations (as reported by Nassau Senior). "In all of his writings Tocqueville relies primarily on his own concepts and hypotheses when he discusses economic issues. The main reason for this appears to have been that political economy did not address the type of problems he was interested in, and therefore also lacked the concepts and ideas that he needed" (176–77). If anything, Tocqueville might better be called a *social* economist along the lines Swedberg has developed in his 1991 biography of Joseph Schumpeter and his 1998 study of Max Weber and the idea of economic sociology (2).

With exemplary clarity, Swedberg shows the ways in which Tocqueville stands apart from the approach developed by his friend and admirer, John Stuart Mill. In his effort to establish a *science* of political economy, Mill insists on abstracting economic phenomena from their social context and focusing on one motive—"the desire of wealth"—to the exclusion of everything else (122).

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> The point of departure in the analysis was to first establish the universal meaning of some economic phenomenon (say "price" or "value"), and then try to establish economic laws by linking this concept analytically to other, similarly derived concepts. When this had been done, one could work back out toward empirical reality.
>
> Tocqueville's way of thinking about the economy was in many ways exactly the opposite. He was not interested in searching for the essence of an economic phenomenon by moving inside it and then locking its meaning into place, along the lines of Mill. He wanted to work in the opposite direction—to link the concrete economic phenomenon and its meaning to other phenomena and their meanings. Tocqueville did not so much want to establish general economic laws as explain economic phenomena by analyzing them with the help of other phenomena in their general and concrete contexts. (123)

To engage in this kind of synthetic thinking, Tocqueville has to have very capacious notions of what sorts of facts might matter. Swedberg is persuasive in showing how broadly Tocqueville conceives of economic phenomena and of economically relevant phenomena and economically conditioned phenomena.

> The connection between something economic to outside phenomena assumes many different forms in Tocqueville's work. The link can be to the nature of the human being, to what people are like beyond their *homo economicus* part, so to speak. Or it can be to the institutional structure of society or to its mores, sentiments, ideas, and so on. Economic phenomena are in this way seen by Tocqueville as connected to the emotional life of people, to the structure of the family, to the organizational forms in society, to the general morality in society, to what happens in the political arena, and more. (274)

For all its resemblance to Max Weber's later project of a *Sozialökonomik* (Swedberg assures us), Tocqueville is neither a Weberian sociologist nor a modern sociologist. There is for him no separate sphere of the economy. Society is a whole and needs to be confronted in all its complexity and particularity. That means for Tocqueville "analysis *has* to be empirical" (275). In contrast to Mill, thinking about a society has to begin with facts. If Swedberg is correct in asserting that Tocqueville always has France on his mind, then analysis has to touch earth again at the end. "The ultimate task of the analyst, according to Tocqueville, is to help the ship of state to move in the right direction and to weather whatever storms it may encounter on its voyage. And for this empirical knowledge is indispensable" (276).

Academic studies of Tocqueville's works have long been preoccupied with asking, what did he know, and when or how did he know it? Demonstrable as well as imaginary lines of influence have been traced, an activity spurred on (one may suppose) by Tocqueville's notorious reluctance to cite his sources in his published writings. Swedberg engages in a fair amount of this archeology (79–99), but its utility and interest for the reader fade when the deeper theme

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of this book emerges in full light. Given that Swedberg regards Tocqueville as someone worth consulting in matters of economics as well as social science in general, predictably he should spend much time showing Tocqueville's acuity and prescience. Initially, Tocqueville may have been overwhelmed by the spectacle of America in the 1830s—by its geography, political system, and economy, by the sheer energetic cacophony of the place. Nonetheless, he strained to make sense of what he *observed*, and in the process captured as well as expressed "a complex and contradictory reality" (37). Swedberg would have us recognize Tocqueville "as the first social scientist of stature to have analyzed the emerging entrepreneurial economy in the United States, including the new phenomenon of mass consumption and the importance of a dynamic organizational culture" (69). Going back to his 1836 essay on the political and social conditions of pre-revolutionary France, Swedberg makes a case for regarding Tocqueville as "among the first to develop a full class theory as well as a sociology of property" (243). The adroit way in which Tocqueville (in *The Ancien Régime*) exposes the central role of taxation in bringing about the Revolution leads Swedberg to pronounce his author "a pioneer in fiscal sociology," anticipating some of Schumpeter's conclusions in the following century (252). Nor is that all. Swedberg rejects François Furet's judgment that Tocqueville's treatment of the physiocrats is deficient in that it ignores those economists' economic ideas and concentrates only on their political ideas. Precisely, Swedberg retorts! Quesnay's notion that only agriculture can produce economic value and similar economic ideas played no role in the Revolution, but the political ideology of these economists was another matter. In focusing on the political role of the ideas of economists, Tocqueville once again shows himself to be an innovator and exhibits "an approach that has become increasingly relevant in our own time" (261–62).

All this is part—but only a part—of the case Swedberg builds in accord with the theme announced by his book's title. At any number of places where he hovers over Tocqueville's passages dealing with some aspect of America and the Americans, he highlights the finesse that Tocqueville brings to the analysis. One example among many: The Americans' comparative advantage over Europeans in maritime commerce cannot be attributed to any "material causes." After inquiring into prices and wages, Tocqueville concludes that "Americans did not incur lower costs for their ships and sailors. The answer was elsewhere: … '[I]t has to do with purely intellectual and moral qualities.' Americans, he explained, had developed certain qualities of mind that served them well in enterprises of this type" (23). Readers who revisit those few pages at the end of the first volume of *Democracy in America* (1.ii.10, "Some considerations on the causes of the commercial greatness of the United States") may relish once again the richness of Tocqueville's depiction of a risk-taking jack-of-all-trades, infused with a spirit of adventure and innovation. However striking, these pervasive commercial mores were only one element in forming and sustaining America's

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economy. Also to be reckoned were the mass consumption of democratic goods, "life's little comforts" (19); the prevalence of commercial and industrial associations and the skills Americans gained through their participation in such organizations; and the role of the state in furthering communication throughout the union. Here was something new, "a truly entrepreneurial economy."

> But there was more to the democratic economy in the United States than this, Tocqueville realized. What looked like the result of one set of factors was actually the result of *two* sets of factors. Materialism, as he saw things, had been unleashed on an enormous scale in the United States—but it had also been countered by religion and other forces, especially the tendency of Americans to create political organizations at the local level. This had helped Americans avoid individualism, egoism, and other ills of materialism. They knew how to join together for purposes they chose themselves. (36–37)

The richness of Tocqueville's account says much for the method and way of thinking that produced it. By the same token, one may judge the reductive distortion (not to say mean-spiritedness) that led Mill, in his *Principles of Political Economy*, to acknowledge "the very favorable circumstances" attending the Americans' dynamic capitalist economy, while dismissing it with a sneer. "All that these advantages have done for them is that the life of the whole of one sex is devoted to dollar-hunting, and of the other to breeding dollar-hunters" (97–98).

What I have called the deeper theme of this book emerges only gradually. Rather than express frustration at Tocqueville's alleged inconsistencies and ambiguous language, Swedberg welcomes the opportunity that his author's multiple drafts and reformulations present "to follow the process of his thinking—it allows you to see how he develops different ideas in his attempts to approach a reality that was often contradictory and very hard for an observer from the outside to grasp" (7). One hundred pages into the book, the focus shifts from looking *at* Tocqueville to looking *with* him. The figure who emerges from Swedberg's efforts to reconstruct Tocqueville's "*way of working*" (101) is very much his own man. He is assiduous, almost obsessive, in seeking out facts and insistent on keeping his mind uncontaminated by the analyses and interpretations of others. "Tocqueville wanted to do his own thinking, and for this to be possible, as he saw it, he could not work with facts that had been preselected by other writers for their specific purposes" (108). Accordingly, Tocqueville is an early user of questionnaires, interviews, government documents, statistics, and other primary sources to collect data. He develops a method of comparisons "as a tool to better understand what had caused two groups, two countries, or two continents to go in two different directions" (108). In all this intense effort to gather facts, to clarify concepts, to establish causality, Tocqueville maintains an open mind but not an empty one. "One week, when one knows how to observe, is sufficient for

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many things."[1] As he confides in a letter to his father written shortly after arriving in America, "Since we know exactly what we need to know, the smallest conversations are instructive" (111).

Doubtlessly, Tocqueville is eager to formulate some grand explanation that will make sense of his heterogeneous data and observations, be they on America, England, Ireland, France, or Algeria. Faced with the difficulty of fitting some aspect of social reality into his conceptual scheme, he remains true to his observations and declines to ignore what does not fit (69–70). Based on Swedberg's survey of his author's works, the following assertion seems credible: "I do not know if I have succeeded in making known what I saw in America, but I am sure of sincerely having had the desire to do so and of never having knowingly succumbed to the need to adapt facts to ideas instead of submitting ideas to the facts" (introduction to *Democracy in America*).

The premise of Swedberg's study is that if you wish to understand Tocqueville's writing, you need to follow his thought-processes leading up to the writing (219, 277). The lasting value of *Tocqueville's Political Economy* has less to do with its careful and sympathetic reading of his economic analyses than with Swedberg's patient uncovering of how his author underwent the hard and painful process of generating ideas by a close study of facts (6). Swedberg says as much himself: "The greatness of Tocqueville ... is to be found more in his way of thinking than in his method and in his writings—in what happened *before* he settled on what he considered to be the correct solution to some problem" (281). In light of that assessment, one can only regret that the proper name of this important study is to be found not on its title page but at the head of its epilogue: "Thinking with Tocqueville."

Jon Elster, in his tautly written, plainspoken book, has undertaken no fewer than three tasks. He provides an analysis of Alexis de Tocqueville's social science as derived from three works: *Democracy in America*, the unfinished *Ancien Régime and the Revolution*, and the posthumously published *Recollections*. Next, he translates, so to speak, Tocqueville's insights into a language more congenial to today's practitioners and professors of social science. Finally, he attempts to persuade such readers that it would be worth their while to keep company with Tocqueville.

Some might wonder whether Tocqueville, of all people, stands in need of rhetorical support or endorsement in the twenty-first century. The appropriation of his name and words has been commonplace in America and Europe, especially after the onset of the Cold War, and this invocation persists even now both within and outside the academy. Yet, according to Elster's impression, contemporary social scientists largely dismiss or are simply

[1]"24 heures à la Nouvelle Orléans," in George Wilson Pierson, *Tocqueville and Beaumont in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1938), 620.

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ignorant of what Tocqueville has to offer. In part, this neglect may be owing to the fact that these scientists are preoccupied with formulating predictive laws, something Tocqueville neither offers nor seeks, and the search for which Elster seems to regard as misguided. Bucking the trends in every way he can, Elster insists that Tocqueville is indeed a significant social scientist who has mistakenly been neglected, *and* that he is by no means an important political theorist as some have presumed. The latter assertion is not so much argued as suggested. Rather than attempt to prove a negative, which in any case is subsidiary to his positive argument, Elster leaves us with an "indicator, that in the index to John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* there are twenty references to John Stuart Mill, but not a single one to Tocqueville" (1). In fact, Elster has more substantial grounds for reprimanding Tocqueville the political theorist, but these emerge in the course of the case he makes *for* "the first social scientist." In any event, citation indexes have limited utility: the index to James Coleman's *Foundations of Social Theory* leaves Tocqueville at the back of the pack, having only one citation compared to Marx's eight, Durkheim's nine, and Weber's sixteen. Elster makes it clear that the blame, if it lies anywhere, is in the contemporary faulty understanding of what constitutes social science. The bulk of this book is devoted to changing that understanding.

For decades now, Elster has been an especially energetic proponent of a different kind of social science research. Too much work, he believes, has aimed either too high or too low. The goal of establishing universal social laws (if X, then always Y), comparable to the physicist's law of gravitation, remains as elusive as ever in the human sciences. Yet settling for only narratives and descriptions is a bad bargain. We need, rather, to identify mechanisms or patterns, an intermediate mode of analysis capable of explaining *how* individual behavior or intentions, beliefs and desires, trigger certain social outcomes. This mode, to repeat, forgoes attempting to predict. In return, it gains a possibly rich insight into the mixed motives and countervailing factors that mark real-life human actions.

Oddly enough, Elster's exposition makes a plausible case for social scientists to continue ignoring Tocqueville. His author's many shortcomings are exposed with precision. But rather than consult or refer to others' efforts to make sense of the irregularities and peculiarities of Tocqueville's modus operandi, Elster prefers to leave all that to the side, "partly because responding to them would have broken the flow of the argument" (9). This is even more unfortunate since this impressively well-read scholar could have found academics of the past sixty years, academics with bona fide social science credentials and concerns, who mined Tocqueville's sometimes baffling prose and came back with gold. Let it suffice to mention David Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd* (1950), Marvin Meyers's *The Jacksonian Persuasion* (1957), Raymond Aron's *Main Currents in Sociological Thought* (1965), and François Furet's "The Conceptual System of *Democracy in America*" in his collection *In the Workshop of History* (1984). None of this is to suggest that Elster is indifferent to nuance; far from it (89). However, he has other intentions, and he clearly is

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annoyed—more than annoyed—by the manner in which Tocqueville develops and presents his arguments. That manner effectively hinders potential readers among the social scientists from recognizing the "steady stream of *exportable causal mechanisms*" that abound in Tocqueville's book on America (9, 187). Similarly neglected are his writings on the old regime and the revolution, "the most theoretically informed historical analyses ever written" (191). In any case, Elster is not overstating his intention when he claims to be offering a "rehabilitation" (2).

Perhaps some readers who, contra Elster, have long entertained the notion that Tocqueville is indeed an important political theorist may start at the notion that their author needs any rehabilitation at all. First, hear out Elster's litany. *Democracy in America* suffers from a "hugely incoherent structure" (1, 36); it is rife with ambiguities and vague language (3, 38, 57, 87); elsewhere too, Tocqueville's terminology is inconsistent (122, 132). "While often suggestive, his analyses are also elusive to a degree that explains why it is hard to grant him the stature of a great political theorist" (185). Regrettably, this engaging Frenchman sometimes drifts off. Elster notes "the highly speculative, almost sophomoric character of many parts" of the second volume of *Democracy* (4, 46, 116, 118). What is worse, confusion in the author passes over to confusion in the reader (29, 31, 67, 72, 115, 131, 185). Then there is the matter of contradictions. Elster partially retracts, but only after first reprinting his earlier (1993) judgment on Tocqueville: "'There is no point beating about the bush: There is no other great thinker who contradicts himself so often and on such central questions.' I now think I overdid it somewhat, by lack of exegetical charity and ingenuity." Yet the fact remains that contradictions put readers in a condition Elster italicizes: "On these core issues of the work *we simply do not know what he thought*" (4, 36, 50, 80, 146, 173). If an extenuation exists for such authorial behavior, it cannot be the one Elster proffers: "In defense of his contradictions, we might also suggest, tentatively, that they were a side effect of his intense concentration on the matter at hand, which sometimes caused him to forget what he had written a few pages earlier" (5, 26). Far from being a "defense," this ought rather to pass as an indictment. What grader of an undergraduate's term paper would good-naturedly gloss over such incompetence?

Another mode of interpretation seems to be called for, one open to the possibility that not every seeming contradiction *is* a contradiction. In fact, in the universe of self-contradictors, Tocqueville is far from being the most flagrant; compared to the author of *The Guide of the Perplexed*, he is an amateur. To be sure, Maimonides' reasons are not Tocqueville's; yet even in dealing with the irregularities and ambiguities presented by the Frenchman's works, we readers need all the ingenuity and modesty we can muster. It is to the credit of Elster's patient, careful unearthing of Tocqueville's "exportable causal mechanisms" that he provides us with new and convincing evidence that we are dealing with an author who knows what he is about, one who is possessed, moreover, of the arts to lead his readers to his well-deliberated conclusions.

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Since Elster quotes generously and frequently from Tocqueville before dissecting and recasting those passages in the language of social science, he, in effect, highlights the difference between a poetic and a prosaic sensibility. Perhaps his translation is better judged in terms of relative costs and benefits. When offering an instance of Tocqueville's "grasp of multifactorial social causality," Elster lists ten distinct paths by which equality might lead to despotism (147–49). Unlike Tocqueville, who chooses to leave matters dispersed and indulges in nonidentical reformulations of his thoughts, Elster labors to tie up loose ends, to emphasize sequences, to schematize preferences and choices (16, 63, 75, 82, 134, 182–83), and to bring clarity and order by insisting on careful distinctions (79 n. 2, 100, 111). Such efforts at helping readers through a Tocquevillean thicket deserve thanks. Elster's primary audience, at least, would be able to swallow without discomfort his resort to language such as this: "[A] mean-preserving increase in the variance of possible outcomes is associated with a preference change from the less risky option to the more risky" (16). In addition, he calls attention to Tocqueville's confusing the "synchronic" and "diachronic" versions of the paradox that subjective discontent and objective grounds for discontent may be inversely related to each other (162–64). Social scientific terms of art may grate on the ears of those unfamiliar with them, but that is no argument against their utility and economy when properly employed. Thus we encounter "adaptive preference formation" (91), "hypergamy" and "hypogamy" (124), "reactance" (142), "belief aggregation" (145), and "status consistency" and "inconsistency" (119, 168). This is not a case of an evangelist deigning to speak to the gentiles in their tongue. One need only recall that among the many aspects of Tocqueville's work that Elster finds praiseworthy, one of the more surprising sources of gratification for him was discovering "how close Tocqueville came to formulating (but not to formalizing) basic insights of game theory" (187).

Long-time students of Tocqueville, on the other hand, may well wish to know what is the "value added" to *their* understanding by Elster's approach to these texts. As with many things, the proof of the pudding is in the eating. In this respect, those hoping to find greater clarity through Elster's discussion of the causal role of equality in *Democracy in America* are in for some disappointment. He begins, as is his wont, with sharp distinctions.

> The main dimensions of equality are income and property, although political equality in the form of universal suffrage also matters. While the idea of political equality is relatively unambiguous, that of economic equality is not. Often, it involves *static equality* in the sense of equal income or property at a given moment in time. At other times, equality means *dynamic equality*, in the sense of a high level of de facto social mobility. This idea, of course, implies static *in*equality. Hence, the statement that "When conditions are almost equal, men change places constantly" is a non sequitur. (114–15)

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Who is guilty of mixing apples and oranges is not altogether clear. "Static equality"—understood as a preoccupation with equal economic outcomes—forms no part of Tocqueville's depiction of the Anglo-American's psychic landscape. "Dynamic equality"—understood as a social and psychological expectation at both the individual and collective levels that "yes, we can!"—is indeed central to Tocqueville's depiction. For Tocqueville this pervasive sense of open possibilities is a goad to the American democrat's frenetic seeking, uncertain enjoyment, and general restiveness. Many conclusions follow from this observation. Here is Elster's account:

> Static equality often serves as an independent variable in the explanations proposed in *DA*. In many cases, equality produces its effects by making citizens *equal and weak*. Many of the desire-opportunity-capacity explanations that I discussed [earlier] rely on equality as "the common cause." Equality is also said to "suggest" the idea of the perfectibility of man, an excessive taste for general theories, and "several penchants that are quite dangerous to liberty," notably lack of respect for forms and contempt for individual rights. At the same time, "equality naturally gives men a taste for free institutions." In some of the more extravagant chapters of the second volume, static equality is also said to favor certain sources of poetry over others, Catholicism over Protestantism, a bombastic style of expression, and so on. In many explanations, the dependent variables are bimodally distributed. Americans either produce big monuments or very trivial objects; their ideas are either extremely abstract or extremely concrete; their attitudes are either extremely materialistic or extremely spiritualistic [references suppressed]. I shall mostly ignore these armchair speculations. In other arguments, it is the *absence* of (complete) static equality that serves to explain behavior. As we saw [earlier], a number of Tocqueville's explanations hinge on the desire for static equality and the democratic sentiment or disease of envy. (115–16)

Very much is going on in this paragraph, and dealing with it in detail would exceed reasonable bounds. Yet a few points need to be raised. A dozen pages after having listed some of the phenomena that Tocqueville allegedly explained by recourse to "static equality," Elster allows that "dynamic equality" has greater explanatory force. The "static equality" that Americans enjoy or yearn for is closely related to "*envy and its behavioral manifestations*." "Dynamic equality" accounts for more important phenomena, especially the "*absence of class-consciousness and hence of class struggle* in the United States." Reflecting on the same social dynamics in America, Karl Marx could explain (without apparently committing a non sequitur) that "classes there 'continually change their elements in constant flux'" (127–28).

However much the marked mobility of Jacksonian America may explain, it is a certainty that Tocqueville, for one, even in his "more extravagant chapters," does not trace any of the aforementioned features of democratic life to the fact or desire for equal income or property. To reduce the astounding chapters that make up the first and second parts of volume 2 of *Democracy*

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in America to a matter of "static equality" is to substitute a studio photographer's cardboard prop for a vibrant reality—and then to dismiss it for being airy and insubstantial. Elster may be tricked into making this misstep by his overhasty assumption that he knows what Tocqueville thought. He quotes two famous passages in the book (1.i.3 toward the end; and 2.ii.1 toward the end), in which Tocqueville explores the difference between the democrat's "manly and legitimate passion for equality" and "a depraved taste for equality," and stresses the profound threat the latter poses to that same democrat's love of freedom. With these extended quotations as his point of departure, Elster launches into a lengthy analysis: "Although Tocqueville does not use the term 'envy' in these passages, it is clearly what he has in mind. The appeals to envy as an explicatory motivation are numerous and central in both *DA* and *AR*" (62). Elster's analysis of envy is interesting in itself (62–71), but its relation to "static equality" is never made explicit and its explanatory force as regards the claims in Tocqueville's "more extravagant chapters" is never addressed. Nor is this the only fuzziness in Elster's account. One must ask, envy of what? Far more than the Anglo-American's coveting his neighbor's possessions, Tocqueville's democrat envies and resents privilege and superiority in all their manifestations:

> One must not conceal from oneself that democratic institutions develop the sentiment of envy in the human heart to a very high degree. It is not so much because they offer to each the means of becoming equal to others, but because these means constantly fail those who employ them. Democratic institutions awaken and flatter the passion for equality without ever being able to satisfy it entirely. Every day this complete equality eludes the hands of the people at the moment when they believe they have seized it, and it flees, as Pascal said, in an eternal flight; the people become heated in the search for this good, all the more precious as it is near enough to be known, far enough not to be tasted. The chance of succeeding stirs them, the uncertainty of success irritates them; they are agitated, they are wearied, they are embittered. All that surpasses them, in whatever place, then appears to them as an obstacle to their desires, and there is no superiority so legitimate that the sight of it does not tire their eyes. (2.ii.5 "On the Choices of the People" [Mansfield-Winthrop trans.])

What can one *do* with such an observation? Social scientists, following Elster's example and urging, may be able to derive a few (or more than a few) "exportable causal mechanisms." Interestingly, this "first social scientist" proceeds otherwise. After depicting American democracy, warts and all, he utters a *Sursum Corda*! The picture, he assures us, is not totally bleak, for all its sundry unappetizing features.

> When I came to examine attentively the state of society, I discovered without difficulty that Americans had made great and fortunate efforts

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> to combat these weaknesses of the human heart and to correct these natural defects of democracy.
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> Their various municipal laws appeared to me as so many barriers that keep the restive ambition of citizens within a narrow sphere and turn the very democratic passions that could overturn the state to the profit of the township. It seemed to me that American legislators had come, not without success, to oppose the idea of rights to sentiments of envy; to the continuous movements of the political world, the immobility of religious morality; the experience of the people, to its theoretical ignorance, and its habit of business, to the enthusiasm of its desires. . . .
>
> The mores and laws of the Americans are not the only ones that can suit democratic peoples; but the Americans have shown that one must not despair of regulating democracy with the aid of laws and mores.
>
> If other peoples, borrowing this general and fruitful idea from America, without wanting in addition to imitate its inhabitants in the particular application that they made of it, attempted to make themselves appropriate to the social state that Providence imposes on men in our day, and thus sought to escape from the despotism or the anarchy that threaten them, what reasons do we have to believe that they would fail in their efforts? (1.ii.9 "Would Laws and Mores Suffice . . .?")

These words, from an author of whom Elster states categorically, "the simple idea of civic duty is absent from his work" (59).[2]

At the conclusion of the preceding section ("That the Laws"), Tocqueville delivers a one-sentence paragraph that focuses a reader's attention. "If, in the course of this work, I have not succeeded in making the reader feel the importance that I attribute to the practical experience of the Americans, to their habits, to their opinions—in a word, to their mores—in the maintenance of their laws, I have missed the principal goal that I proposed for myself in writing it."

Experience, habits, opinions, mores: *Tocqueville*'s exportable causal mechanisms do honor to that large-souled man.

Revisiting long-familiar texts and reconsidering them through another's interpretive mode can often be instructive and sometimes even gratifying. Elster and Swedberg, intentionally or not, offer those for whom Tocqueville is and remains an important political thinker an opportunity to look again and think again. They have different angles of approach and pry open some unusual apertures through which to view the work within. Granted, their concern is specific and selective, and it would be fatuous to fault them for not writing a comprehensive account. Yet one is reminded of those 78-rpm albums of yesteryear bearing titles such as "Great Moments from Verdi." However fine the segment, something vital was missing: the opera itself. Here, too, readers will look into these treatments with an eye to learning

[2]For Tocqueville on "the spirit of the city," see *Democracy in America*, 2.ii.6 ("On Public Spirit in the United States").

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something new and important not just about Tocqueville in some particular respect as a social scientist or as a political economist. We will ask—and be right to ask—how does this deepen our understanding of Tocqueville altogether, *tout court*? Here estimates will differ. Some will doubtless demur from my cost-benefit analysis of Elster's "rehabilitation." For all the fine details he sees, he loses the thinker in the process. Swedberg's modesty, in contrast, better serves him and his readers. Thanks to his convincing demonstration, we approach Tocqueville, not to be confirmed in what we fancy we already know, but to learn how to look and listen. In helping us challenge ourselves as Tocqueville challenged himself, Swedberg furthers Tocqueville's goal of forming a new and humane science of politics for a new world that sorely needs it.

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