America and Algeria: Tocqueville's Observations

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Americans know the name Alexis de Tocqueville from his work on *Democracy in America*, which recounts his observations of the fledging United States in the mid-to-late 1830s. But towards the end of the decade and into the 1840s, Tocqueville was writing about an area closer to his home: Algeria, the newest colony of the French.

Scholars have continuously put the two works into conversation with one another, arguing as to whether his writings of Algerian imperialism and colonization are consistent with the liberal democratic observations he made in America a decade earlier.[1] In the introduction to a compilation of Tocqueville's writings titled *Writings and Empire and Slavery*, editor Jenifer Pitts quotes Melvin Richter saying that Tocqueville was "inconsistent" across his writings, and that "he placed nationalism above liberalism."[2] On the other side of this debate, Pitts quotes Isiah Berlin's claim that Tocqueville's writings in America made Tocqueville an "anti-imperialist," evidenced by his lamenting of Native Americans continuously being expelled from their lands. [3]

Pitts provides a more nuanced take between these two extremes, stating that although Tocqueville believed American expansion proved to be cruel, he did not critique concepts of expansion and civilization of Native Americans. Like many 19th Century Western European thinkers, Tocqueville believed that imperialism and democracy went together and ultimately benefitted both colonists and native inhabitants (but the latter group needed to learn and understand it before they could benefit from it).[4]

Using Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, as well as translations and compilations of his letters and reports on Algeria and the Qur'an, this paper will examine the nuanced

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[1] Pitts in Alexis de Tocqueville, *Writings on Empire and Slavery*, ed. and trans. Jennifer Pitts (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), xiii-xiv.
[2] Richter in Pitts in Tocqueville, *Writings* (2001), xiii-xiv.
[3] Berlin in Pitts in Tocqueville, *Writings* (2001), xiv.
[4] Pitts in Tocqueville, *Writings* (2001), xiv-xvi.

consistencies within these writings and Tocqueville's political thought generally, as well as similarities and differences in the particular cases of America and Algeria. This will be done by examining the extent of relations between natives and European settlers in both nations, as well as the importance of religion and commerce in both writings. However, the biggest substantial differences lie in Tocqueville's depiction of Algerian religion, politics, and commerce—as well as the relationship among them—in a more negative light than their American counterparts. Lastly, this paper will present an argument in the purpose of each writing. Particularly, Tocqueville's American writings focus on what France can learn and apply to the nation's domestic affairs, while his Algerian ones are on what France can "teach," or what further actions can be taken to elevate France domestically and internationally.

In America, Tocqueville examines the relationship between the Native Americans and the European (later American) settlers; meanwhile in Algeria, he examines the relationship between the Algerian Arabs and the French. Tocqueville dedicates the last chapter in his first volume of *Democracy in America* to "The Three Races That Inhabit the United States." As it relates to Native Americans, Tocqueville makes several remarks on their state of civilization, or lack thereof in his eyes. Tocqueville talks about Native Americans, before and during their initial contact with Europeans, being in a state of savagery, "governed only by opinions and mores," and existing "at the extreme limits of freedom."[5] In his view, the Native Americans have intense pride, submit to no authority other than their own, admire hunting and power, and do not appreciate the value of work or art.[6] Their nomadic lifestyle of following the living animals for

[5] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. and trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 305.
[6] Tocqueville, *Democracy* (2000), 305, 314.

their food sources does not make them prone to civilization because they do not settle and farm the lands.[7]

Tocqueville uses very similar language of savagery and vanity in his "First Letter on Algeria." In it, he writes that the Algerian Arabs "honor power and force above all else. Putting little stock in the life of men, and scorning trade and the arts… they love war, pomp, and tumult above all."[8] Tocqueville says that although they are more sedentary, they still retain nomadic elements and dispute the boundaries of land, with which Tocqueville bestows the moniker of "half-savage."[9]

Following from these singular descriptions, Tocqueville elaborates on the contact between these native groups and the European settlers. European conquests of American land, according to Tocqueville, have left Native Americans "more disordered and less civilized than they already were…"[10] Despite attempts to "enlighten" the Native Americans with the European religion and mores, the Native Americans' "savage" lifestyle made any attempts useless, and worsened when attempts at "civilization" were made.[11] Nevertheless, the Natives' trading patterns changed when contact was initiated. As Tocqueville writes, when the Europeans introduced new goods and weaponry, "While contracting new tastes, the Indians did not learn the art of satisfying them," and could only offer fur.[12] He continues, writing, "[The Indian] no longer pursued the beasts of the forest only to nourish himself, but in order to procure the sole objects of exchange that he could give us."[13]

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[7] Tocqueville, *Democracy* (2000), 313.
[8] Tocqueville, *Writings* (2001), 10.
[9] Tocqueville, *Writings* (2001), 7, 10.
[10] Tocqueville, *Democracy* (2000), 305.
[11] Tocqueville, *Democracy* (2000), 313.
[12] Tocqueville, *Democracy* (2000), 308.
[13] Ibid

These experiences with the Native American tribes in some ways informed Tocqueville's strategy for contact and interaction with the Algerian Arabs. Tocqueville begins his "Second Letter on Algeria" with a lambasting of the French forces for destroying Ottoman land records during their conquests, comparing it to a hypothetical scenario of the Emperor of China doing the same to France.[14] Among the many negative effects Tocqueville describes, the removal of Ottoman apparatus made Algeria descend "into appalling anarchy," which gave rise to anticolonial opposition led by Abd-el-Kader.[15] Besides these observations, he provides a course of action of governance being in line with French individualism and property guarantees without supplanting the mores of the Arabs.[16]

Another common feature in Tocqueville's works is the importance religion and commerce hold to the people of both America and Algeria. Tocqueville noted that an overwhelming number of Americans engage in commerce and industry– including with Native Americans as mentioned earlier– as they are not guaranteed to inherit wealth and, with the equality of conditions, are able to attain more.[17] As a result, both rich and poor Americans unite in the pursuit of commerce, "not only because of the gain it promises them, but for the love of the emotions it gives them."[18] This commerce is a means of attaining material well-being, but left unchecked, it can give way to individualism, selfishness, and a baseless fulfillment of desires. Tocqueville provides religion as an antidote, which "teach[es] men the immortality of the soul," and provides a safeguard against excessive love of material well-being.[19] He also says in an earlier chapter on religious practices,

[14] Tocqueville, *Writings* (2001), 15.
[15] Tocqueville, *Writings* (2001), 14-18.
[16] Tocqueville, *Writings* (2001), 23-25.
[17] Tocqueville, *Democracy* (2000), 527-528.
[18] Tocqueville, *Democracy* (2000), 528.
[19] Tocqueville, *Democracy* (2000), 519.

"I would not be surprised if mysticism did not soon make progress in a people uniquely preoccupied with its own well-being."[20]

There are some similarities on the commercial end in Tocqueville's writings in Algeria. His initial writings discuss how Algerian Arabs, are neither fully agricultural nor commercial.[21] However, as French colonial endeavors continue and Abd-el-Kader continues to gain supporters, Tocqueville elaborates on the Arab commercial practices further. He says in his "Essay on Algeria" that were was "considerable commerce" along the coast, where "The Arabs sold wheat, livestock, hides, wool, wax; in exchange they bought European goods, although in small quantity."[22] Tocqueville also writes about how commerce is the best method the French have of controlling Algeria, as he had heard complaints of Abd-el-Kader suspending trade, which had hurt Arabs in the interior.[23] To do the same as a means of subjugation, Tocqueville says, would be the "greatest harm," as "the people would [suffer] from this state of things."[24] Although commerce seems not as emotional to Arabs as to Americans, it is still critical for their survival. Tocqueville also makes numerous observations about Arab religious practice, specifically within the Arab aristocracy. In his "First Letter on Algeria," he describes the aristocratic "marabouts" who are widely respected "men of religion and of science who feel or affect a great detachment from… this world."[25] Tocqueville also describes that these marabouts live near the tombs of their ancestors.[26] Tocqueville is arguably describing an Arab aristocracy made up of Sufis, which is a mystic movement within Islam stressing the importance of detachment and the personal

[20] Tocqueville, *Democracy* (2000), 511.
[21] Tocqueville, *Writings* (2001), 7.
[22] Tocqueville, *Writings* (2001), 65.
[23] Tocqueville, *Writings* (2001), 71.
[24] Tocqueville, *Writings* (2001), 65.
[25] Tocqueville, *Writings* (2001), 9.
[26] Ibid

relationship with God.[27] That these marabouts are highly revered is an indication of the importance the Arabs place on religion and of commerce, which possesses some similarities to the American attachment for commerce and religion. However, Americans seem to hold the two as interconnected, while Algerian Arabs see them as somewhat distinct.

While Tocqueville's writings provide some consistencies in his thought, there are several differences in the particular cases of Americans and Algerians. One of the biggest differences Tocqueville presents is related to the relationship between religion and politics in America and Algeria. In America, he praises the separate relationship between church and state, and Christianity's ability to support democracy; meanwhile, he criticizes Islam's combination of the two and its support for despotism in Algeria. In *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville dedicates several sections of the book to the role faith (Christianity in particular) has in preserving American democracy. This in part, Tocqueville writes, stems from the Puritan "point of departure," where democratic processes combined with religious freedoms and practices during their settlement of the Americas in the early 17th Century.[28] Two-hundred years later, although slightly more secular, Americans still hold Christianity in high regard. The strength faith holds in Americans' hearts, Tocqueville writes, because it is not tied directly to the government (there is no state religion).[29] To combine religion and government results in a situation where, "religion increases its power over some and loses the hope of reigning over all."[30] Christianity only holds direct force in the social sphere and not the civil or political spheres, which provides it strength.[31]

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[27] Vernon O. Egger, *A History of the Muslim World to 1750: The Making of a Civilization* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2018), 132-136.
[28] Tocqueville, *Democracy* (2000), 32.
[29] Tocqueville, *Democracy* (2000), 280.
[30] Tocqueville, *Democracy* (2000), 284.
[31] Tocqueville, *Democracy* (2000), 418-419.

Meanwhile, Tocqueville is highly critical of Islam and the role it plays in the lives of Arabs in Algeria, and the Islamic world in general. Particularly, he is critical of the lack of separation of church and state that is innate within the faith. Tocqueville actually writes about Islam in *Democracy in America*– for the purpose of establishing a comparison to the superiority of Christianity– where he says that "Mohammad had not only religious doctrines descend from Heaven and placed in the Koran [sic], but political maxims, civil and criminal laws, and scientific theories…[it] cannot dominate for long in enlightened and democratic times…"[32] He elaborates on these ideas in his notes before his first voyage to Algeria, where he writes, "The high priest is necessarily the ruler, and the ruler the high priest," and that because of the combination of religious and political maxims in the Qur'an, the education is the same.[33] He says in his notes, as well as in a letter to his contemporary, Arthur de Gobineau, that Islam is responsible for the "decadence" of the Muslim world, as well as a despotism and social immobility in line with Tocqueville's descriptions of aristocracy.[34]

On the ground in Algeria, he notes in his Essay that Abd-el-Kader is able to amass a following against the French because of his ability to appeal to religion, which makes him a "Muslim Cromwell" in Tocqueville's eyes.[35] All of this said, Tocqueville's ideas of colonization in Algeria does not involve converting the Algerians to Christianity; rather, he seeks to keep most of the structures in place, only putting them under French control. His rationale behind this is that Islam as a faith does not present an immediate threat to Christianity or the French colonial project, and that imposing French laws on a population not used to them would only drive the

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[32] Tocqueville, *Democracy* (2000), 419-420.
[33] Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Tocqueville Reader: A Life in Letters and Politics*, ed. Olivier Zunz and Alan S. Kahan (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 2002), 228.
[34] Tocqueville, *The Tocqueville Reader* (2002), 228-229.
[35] Tocqueville, *Writings* (2001), 64.

native population into further revolution.[36] He suggests in his first report, "Let us not force the indigenous peoples to come to our schools, but help them rebuild theirs… and create men of law and men of religion, which Muslim civilization cannot do without, more than any of our own can."[37] These last points, although more enlightened compared to some of his French contemporaries, nevertheless are indicative of a difference in Tocqueville's thoughts between the role of religion and governance in America compared to Algeria.

The content of Tocqueville's writings and his style ultimately indicate the purpose behind the writing of each of these works. Both sets of writings are focused ultimately on applications to and for France. However, his writings in *Democracy in America* are focused on what France can learn, while his Algerian writings are what France can teach to others. Tocqueville's introduction of the first volume of *Democracy in America* prefaces not only the "equality of conditions" he saw in America, but also a history of France's cyclical history of revolution and social structures.[38] He believes that given the tide of French history, they will arrive at an "equality of conditions" similar to those present in America, and thus Tocqueville states the purpose of these books is "to find lessons from which we [the French] could profit."[39] When Tocqueville recounts his personal observations, the translations indicate usage of past tense or passive voice– i.e., "I am astonished…," "I encountered…," etc.[40] This reflects Tocqueville's observatory purpose in coming to America, as he cannot actively dictate American policy, but can appeal to his Frenchmen to recognize and work towards applying some of his observations.

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[36] Tocqueville, *Writings* (2001), 22-28.
[37] Tocqueville, *Writings* (2001), 142.
[38] Tocqueville, *Democracy* (2000), 4-6.
[39] Tocqueville, *Democracy* (2000), 12.
[40] Tocqueville, *Democracy* (2000), 47, 347.

In contrast to his American writings, his writings about Algeria take a lot more agency and activity. Upon his return from America, Tocqueville served as a member of the parliaments of the July Monarchy and Second Republic until Napoleon III's proclamation of the Second Empire.[41] In his capacity, he had a greater ability to influence the French course of action in Algeria, and his writings and observations reflected that. The translations indicate Tocqueville's usage of more present and future tense and active and imperative voice– i.e., "We must aim…," "We absolutely must not…," "It would…be as dangerous as it would useless...," etc.[42] His agency (and desire for it) is especially evident in his 1841 "Essay on Algeria," which he starts, "I do not think France can think seriously about leaving Algeria," and continues with the courses of action France should take to achieve colonization and domination.[43] He also suggests in the essay that African and Muslim civilizations have "entered into… the civilized world and will never leave it," and despite this, should focus not on co-opting governance and gradually intermingle the French and Algerian populations in order to hasten civilization and Christianity's advancement, but at a gradual pace that does not disrupt the mores of the Algerians and Muslims.[44] These writings and their style in Algeria are indicative of Tocqueville's agency, and idea that France can teach the Algerians and get them to benefit from the colonial endeavor.

[41] Pitts in Tocqueville, *Writings* (2001), x-xi.
[42] Tocqueville, *Writings* (2001), 22, 61, 142.
[43] Tocqueville, *Writings* (2001), 59-61.
[44] Ibid

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