Tocqueville and the Challenges of Democratic Politics
LDST 390-01 (24738)
Spring 2014
Mondays 3-5:40
Jepson Hall 107

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Course Description

This class will be devoted to a close and comprehensive reading of Alexis de Tocqueville’s Democracy in America, a work which is frequently looked to as authoritative by the left, the right, and the center, and whose observations about American politics in the nineteenth century have enduring relevance today. While we will remain mindful of the historical context in which Tocqueville wrote, our primary task this semester will be to re-capture his self-understanding. We will examine Tocqueville’s analysis of our politics and way of life in an effort to see what it can teach us about who we are today, and about how we should understand the modern, democratic world in which we live. We will consider Tocqueville’s somewhat peculiar understanding of what democracy is, as well as his analysis of its strengths and weaknesses and of what must be done to counteract the dangers (including those of its own creation) which it faces or is likely to face in the future. To this end, we will pay particular attention to Tocqueville’s assessment of the unique challenges of leadership that exist in democratic times.

Although our near-exclusive emphasis this semester will be on Tocqueville, where helpful we will supplement his work with that of other historical writers and statesmen who have reflected on similar problems. Some of the themes we will consider include: civic engagement and democracy’s tendency to foster withdrawal from political and social life; the place of religion in politics; the relationship between liberty and equality; the strengths and weaknesses of the U.S. Constitution; American foreign policy and the ability of a democracy to act on the world stage; capitalism, materialism, and inequality; Tocqueville’s account of race, slavery, and the treatment of Native Americans; the media and the freedom of the press; the family; and the relationship between men and women.

Prerequisites

While some prior knowledge of the history of political thought may be helpful for this course, there are no substantive prerequisites. Our goal throughout the semester will be
to read Tocqueville with fresh eyes and to meet him on his own terms. Accordingly, no prior knowledge of Tocqueville or any other thinker is expected or assumed.

**Course Requirements and Grading**

This is an upper-level seminar, and class sessions will consist of in-depth guided discussion of the reading. This means that the quality of the course, and what you get out of it, will be solely the result of what you put in to it. Students should therefore attend every class meeting and should arrive, not only having read (and, where necessary, re-read) the day’s assignment, but also prepared with notes, questions, and comments about it. (Please also be sure always to bring the text to class). You will be writing ten short papers over the course of the semester (about which see below), and one of the purposes of these assignments will be to facilitate your preparation by allowing you to focus in detail on one aspect or section of each week’s reading. You should, however, always come prepared to discuss the entirety of the week’s assignment.

Since class sessions will revolve around dialogue among the students and between the students and the instructor, it is essential that these discussions be both vigorous and respectful. As may be evident from the course description provided above, the questions which we will be taking up this semester are controversial. We may find some aspects of Tocqueville’s analysis disconcerting. Often we may think that what he has to say is somehow shocking or alien; still more often we may find that it is unwelcome because it hits too close to home. Because of this, it is crucial that class discussions be carried on in a spirit of collegiality and mutual respect—a spirit which understands that those who disagree most vehemently are in fact united by a common search for truth. For this same reason, however, it is also important to avoid the temptation to dodge these questions entirely, whether out of a sense of their inherent difficulty or out of a fear of giving offense. After all, Tocqueville also insisted that genuine friends of democracy will occasionally need to articulate and confront unpleasant truths (see the “Notice” to Volume II).

One of the main goals of this course will be to help you improve your expository writing. Your short papers and your term paper will therefore be graded with a view to both content and presentation—i.e. spelling, grammar, and clarity of prose as well as cogency and strength of argumentation. Plagiarism will result in an automatic F and will be referred to the Honor Councils.

**Final Grades will be calculated as follows:**

Ten 1-2 page papers (2% each): 20%.
Class participation: 40%.
15-20 page term paper: 40%.
Some further details:

**Short Papers:** Over the course of the semester you will write ten short papers that answer one study question from a list which I will send out via email after each class. These papers are due in my inbox at the email address listed above by the start of the next class. I will then grade them using MS Word’s comment function and return them to you via email (please submit them as a .doc or a .docx file, using your Richmond email address). Since there are twelve classes this semester after the first, you have some choice as to the weeks when you will write these essays (but note that you cannot replace a low grade with an extra paper). They should be 1-2 pages, double spaced, with 12 point font and reasonable margins. Anything beyond the second page will not be read.

These papers should be brief analytical essays that help to elucidate the way in which a portion of each week’s reading can help us to understand or address a particular problem or concern—i.e. they are not “reaction papers” or opinion pieces. Their purpose is to give you an opportunity each week to engage Tocqueville’s work with fresh eyes—i.e. to conduct your own independent analysis of his work, to help you understand him as he understood himself, and to assess his thought on that basis. Thus, you should not consult any secondary literature when writing them.

Note also that because these papers are meant to assist you with your preparations for our class discussions, they cannot be accepted late.

**Term Paper:** Your major assignment this semester will be a 15-20 page term paper on a topic of your own choosing. This paper should be an analytical essay that elucidates in depth some aspect of Tocqueville’s thought, or of a problem that he helps us to understand, in a way that goes beyond or deeper than what was covered in our class discussions. In other words, this is not a research paper. You are welcome to use secondary literature (properly cited), if it helps you to facilitate the development of your own independent analysis of the text, but the use of such literature is neither expected nor required. (I will distribute a list of recommended secondary literature at a later date).

Further details about this paper will be made available around Spring Break. Students are responsible for coming up with their own paper topics, and will be required to discuss potential topics with me at least three weeks in advance of the due date.

This paper should be submitted to me via email and is due in my inbox at 5pm on Monday, April 28th. No late papers will be accepted, and extensions will only be granted for medical or other serious reasons, in which case proper documentation should be provided.

**Attendance and Participation:** At the end of the semester I will assign each student a participation grade that reflects the quality (and not simply the quantity) of his or her contributions to the class. I will also keep a record of attendance. Since you cannot participate if you are absent, each class that you miss after the first will result in the loss of 15% of this portion of your grade (i.e. 6% of your overall grade). (Allowances will of
course be made for cases of illness, family emergency, university sanctioned activities, religious holiday observance, etc.).

**Grading Scale:** Assignments in this class will be graded numerically. At the end of the semester, grades will be assigned according to the following scale:

- 93+: A
- 90-92: A-
- 87-89: B+
- 83-86: B
- 80-82: B-
- 77-79: C+
- 73-76: C
- 70-72: C-
- 67-69: D+
- 63-66: D
- 60-62: D-
- 59 and below: F

**General Grading Standards:**

Both the short papers and the long paper will be graded according to following general standards (with some modification where appropriate).

An “A” paper will be well-written, well-argued, and will display an in-depth familiarity with the text—one that is attentive to its subtleties and nuances. It will clearly address the assigned question (or will clearly articulate the topic which the essay will address). It will explore issues of importance, and it will have a thesis that is clearly stated near the essay’s beginning. It will then substantiate that thesis through a close, careful, and judicious analysis of textual evidence (rather than personal opinion). It will effectively incorporate its evidence into its prose (e.g. quotations will be well-integrated into sentences), and it will show evidence of advanced preparation—i.e. it will have a clear introduction and conclusion, its arguments will be well-organized and to the point, and it will be organized in a way that reflects advanced preparation and outlining. Each of its paragraphs will perform an essential part of the argument, and each of its ideas will flow from one paragraph to the next, building upon previous sections of the paper. All primary and secondary works consulted will be properly and appropriately cited. Finally, an “A” paper will contain few if any errors of grammar and syntax, and it will be written in a style that is engaging and avoids overly florid or affected prose as well as jargon.

A “B” paper will display many of the above qualities but will suffer from occasional inaccuracies or errors of interpretation. It will contain occasional errors of grammar and syntax, but not so many as to render the argument of the paper unclear. Alternatively, “B” papers may be structurally sound and well-written but lack originality or depth of perceptiveness (i.e. an appreciation of textual subtleties and nuances), or they may simply fail to be persuasive.
A “C” paper will make a serious attempt to complete the assignment (e.g. it will be of the appropriate length), but it will contain substantial flaws, either of writing quality, textual interpretation, organization, or argumentation. It may contain a high number of grammatical and stylistic errors, so much so that the experience of the reader is disrupted, or it may contain so many awkward or garbled sentences that it is difficult for the reader to grasp the paper’s meaning. Additionally, “C” papers may display poor comprehension of the material (e.g. quotations taken out of context and used to make invalid points), or they may make contradictory or invalid arguments. They may struggle to articulate a clear thesis. They may rely heavily on statements of personal opinion which are offered without textual substantiation, and they may sometimes fail (though in good faith) to maintain basic standards of academic integrity (e.g. quotations may be slightly inaccurate, sources may be cited improperly, etc.).

A “D” paper will display a poor or merely cursory attempt to complete the assignment. “D” papers often fail to meet the minimum page length or contain substantial amounts of “filler.” The writing may be very poor, displaying evidence of procrastination or a lack of preparation. “D” papers will likely fail to articulate a clear thesis, and their analysis will often be loose and inaccurate. Quotations or textual references may be minimal or absent, and the evidence presented (if any) may be highly implausible. “D” papers may frequently substitute personal opinion for textual analysis, and they may display a thoroughgoing failure to maintain basic standards of academic integrity (though one which is merely negligent, not dishonest—e.g. quotations may be inaccurate, sources may be cited improperly or not at all, etc.).

An “F” paper will barely attempt to answer the question, will contain instances of plagiarism, or will display in other ways a failure to meet the basic requirements of the assignment.

**Required Texts:**

The following book been ordered by the bookstore. Please be sure to purchase this translation, and also to procure a paper copy of it to bring to class.


**Recommended Text** (available from Amazon and elsewhere):


**Other Odds and Ends**

*Awarding of Credit:* To be successful in this course, a student should expect to devote 10-14 hours each week, including class time and time spent on course-related activities.
Disability Accommodations: Students with a Disability Accommodation Notice should contact their instructors as early in the semester as possible to discuss arrangements for completing course assignments and exams.

Religious Observance: Students should notify their instructors within the first two weeks of classes if they will need accommodations for religious observance.

Honor System: The Jepson School supports the provisions of the Honor System. The shortened version of the honor pledge is: “I pledge that I have neither received nor given unauthorized assistance during the completion of this work.”

All of the work which you submit this semester must be your own. By submitting it and affixing your name to it, you are indicating its conformity to the requirements of the Honor Code. If you have questions about what constitutes plagiarism, cheating, or collusion, or about the proper way to cite passages, feel free to speak to me. Final grades in the course are at the sole discretion of the instructor.

Handing-in Assignments: All of your assignments this semester should be submitted electronically to my email address listed above. Please also be sure to save an electronic copy of each of your assignments until the end of the semester.

Technology: Please turn off your cell phones before class, and do not bring laptops, iPads, e-readers, or other electronic devices to class unless you have a special need for one (in which case you should explain that need to me). The reason for this has not only to do with the tendency of these devices to provide a temptation to distraction, but also because they tend to absorb one’s whole attention, divorce us mentally from the ongoing conversation, and therefore disrupt the seminar atmosphere of the class.

Contacting Me: I have scheduled office hours twice a week, but if those times do not accord with your schedule you should feel free to contact me to make an appointment. If you have concerns about the course material, the assignments, or your performance in the class, you should feel welcome to come see me to discuss your situation—of course, it is always better to do this sooner rather than later, and before a small problem turns into a big problem. Finally, you should think of my office hours not only as a forum for discussing the assignments, but as a continuation of class and an opportunity to discuss the course material in a greater amount of depth and detail than is possible in our regular meetings. The best kind of education often occurs one on one. If you have a question, if there is something you want to discuss or something you are puzzling over, feel free to come see me. You will be welcomed.
**Communication:** I will send out important announcements and weekly paper topics via email. Please be sure to check your Richmond email at least once per day.

**Schedule of Readings**

Please note: what follows is a tentative guide to our readings for the semester. I may on occasion add to, subtract from, or make other adjustments to this schedule. Please read each assignment *before* class on the date indicated.

January 13:  Course Introduction.

January 20:  MLK Day, No Class.

January 27:  Volume I, Introduction (pp. 3-15).  
             Volume I, Part One, chapters 1-2 (pp. 15-45).

February 3:  Volume I, Part One, chapters 3-8 (pp. 45-161).

February 10: Volume I, Part Two, chapters 1-7 (pp. 165-249).

February 17: Volume I, Part Two, chapters 8-9 (pp. 250-302).

February 24: Volume I, Part Two, chapter 10 (pp. 302-396).  
              Frederick Douglass, Fourth of July Oration

March 3:     Volume II, Notice (pp. 399-400).  
             Volume II, Part One, chapters 1-11 (pp. 403-443).

March 10:    Spring Break, No Class.

March 17:    Volume II, Part One, chapters 12-21 (pp. 443-476).

March 24:    Volume II, Part Two, chapters 1-9 (pp. 479-506).

March 31:    Volume II, Part Two, chapters 10-20 (pp. 506-532).

April 7:     Volume III, Part Three, chapters 1-14 (pp. 535-581).

April 14:    Volume III, Part Three, chapters 15-26 (pp. 582-635).  
              Abraham Lincoln, “Lyceum Address.”

April 21:    Volume IV, Part Four, chapters 1-8 (pp. 639-676).  

**FINAL PAPER DUE MONDAY APRIL 28, 5PM**