



UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

A post-colonial reading of Alexis de Tocqueville's writings on slavery and its aftermaths

Maussen, M.

DOI

[10.1177/14687968231192036](https://doi.org/10.1177/14687968231192036)

Publication date

2023

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

Ethnicities

License

CC BY

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Maussen, M. (2023). A post-colonial reading of Alexis de Tocqueville's writings on slavery and its aftermaths. *Ethnicities*, 23(6), 801-821. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14687968231192036>

General rights

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

UvA-DARE is a service provided by the library of the University of Amsterdam (<https://dare.uva.nl>)

A post-colonial reading of Alexis de Tocqueville's writings on slavery and its aftermaths

Ethnicities

2023, Vol. 23(6) 801–821

© The Author(s) 2023



Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

DOI: 10.1177/14687968231192036

journals.sagepub.com/home/etn**Marcel Maussen** 

Department of Political Science, University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, Netherlands

Abstract

This article develops a postcolonial and comparative reading of Tocqueville's writings on slavery. It argues, first, that Tocqueville analyzed the ending of slavery as a revolutionary social transformation involving changes in laws, social relations and mores, and second, that he employed the same analytical framework consistently to discuss processes of abolition in the United States and in the French Caribbean Islands. In the United States the process of abolition of slavery was deepening rather than ending racist prejudices, racial segregation and hatred between the black and the white populations. This would, so Tocqueville predicted, undermine democracy in America. In the plantation colonies he believed the French could draw lessons from the English experiences when organizing the abolition process. Only when legal changes and changes in mores developed in tandem there could be economic and political stability in the aftermath of slavery. This would allow the French to end slavery peacefully, which he deemed necessary if they intended to continue exploiting the colonies. The article argues that Tocqueville demonstrated a deep and critical understanding of the reprehensible, long-lasting role of anti-black racism and slavery in barring the emergence of democratic cultures based on equal standing and integration across racial difference. Yet, he combined this critical perspective on racist slavery with an accepted defense of European supremacy and with a sense of pessimism about the possibilities for Africans to ever become capable of self-government.

Keywords

Tocqueville, slavery, postcolonial, democracy, abolition of slavery, French colonialism, racism, plantation colonies, Democracy in America

Corresponding author:

Marcel Maussen, Department of Political Science, University of Amsterdam, Nieuwe Achtergracht 166, 1018 WV Amsterdam, Netherlands.

Email: m.j.m.maussen@uva.nl

Introduction

Alexis de Tocqueville is sometimes celebrated as an admirer of the emerging forms of democracy in the United States, but at other times he is criticized as a conservative who was mainly concerned about the dangers of popular sovereignty and feared a ‘tyranny of the majority’ (De Dijn, 2008). This ambivalence in the appreciation of the French aristocrat has been reproduced, if not amplified, within the rapidly growing scholarship on his writings on the colonization of Algeria and on slavery. Working within a post-colonial perspective that strives to give appropriate attention to the ways political thinkers constructed frameworks to legitimize European supremacy, some scholars conclude that not only was Tocqueville a reluctant democrat, he was also a ‘zealous colonizer’ and a racist who believed that Africans, Arabs and native Americans were not yet fully civilized.¹ Others have suggested that the dismissive portrayal of other civilizations and peoples mainly appear in Tocqueville’s political writings, and not in his scholarly work. His advisory reports and public interventions on Algeria and the Caribbean should be understood as political interventions by Tocqueville as a conservative parliamentarian, which he was from 1839 until 1848. As Jennifer Pitts has argued, Tocqueville believed that the foundation of a colonial empire would function as a kind of ‘national salvation’ that would restore French glory, inspire its citizens to rise above their mundane concerns, and divert attention away from the messy domestic politics of postrevolutionary France (Pitts, 2000, 2013). When he intervened in the discussions on the ending of colonial slavery in the Caribbean he wrote as a politician, so we are told.²

However, more recently, there are also interpretations that more positively evaluate what Tocqueville was writing about colonization and slavery. In *Democracy in America* for example, he insisted that slavery and racism undermined democratic culture in the United States (Hart, 2018: 22; Ikuta and Latimer, 2021). These kinds of observations by Tocqueville are said to ‘presage’ the theses of American critical race scholars in the 20th century, who place systemic racism and white privilege at the heart of US history and who often are pessimistic about the possibilities of American democracy to ever overcome the racial hierarchies that were co-constitutive of its creation (Tillery, 2009: 640). Ewa Atanassow, likewise has recently defended a far more appreciative reading of Tocqueville’s writings on colonialism and has insisted that Tocqueville was ‘a reluctant supporter and stern critic of French colonization’ (Atanassow, 2017: 84). Tocqueville only defended French rule, so she argues, because he thought that by invading and occupying Algeria, the French had pre-maturely forced a traditional and nomadic society onto the paths of modernization.³ France was now morally obliged to help Algeria become modern and developed.

My goal in this article is not to take sides in a debate about whether Tocqueville should be ‘canceled’ rather than ‘championed’ (Masoud, 2022). Instead, I want to further develop the postcolonial reading of his work by focusing on his writings on slavery, and more specifically, on the consequences of slavery and its abolition for the social and political futures of the societies in which it had existed. A postcolonial approach means, first and substantively, giving appropriate attention to the ways race,

racism, colonialism and European dominance figure in the work of political thinkers like Tocqueville, and refusing the postulate that these topics and themes were of marginal relevance to their oeuvre. It means, secondly and methodologically, teasing out the ways coloniality enabled 19th century political philosophers, writing in the context of a racialized and imperialist world, to simultaneously celebrate equality and freedom (like Tocqueville who considered the rise of equality a 'providential fact') and legitimize structural racism and the systematic exploitation and oppression of people of color. A post-colonial perspective thus means to explore the past complicities of liberal political thought with the colonial project, and thereby furthering the critical rethinking of central tenets of liberalism (cf. [Pitts, 2005](#); [Mills, 2015](#)). I make two overarching points: firstly, I will argue that the literature has failed to give appropriate weight to the fact that for Tocqueville the abolition of slavery was a social transformation of a comparable magnitude as the social and political revolutions in Europe, which were overturning feudal, aristocratic societies and pushing them to become more equal, democratic ones. Secondly, by comparing Tocqueville's discussion on slavery and its aftermaths in two different contexts – the French Caribbean Islands and the United States – it becomes clear that he systematically employed his broader theory of social change to reflect upon the ways diverging starting conditions mattered for what happened to societies when slavery was abolished.

In regards my second overarching claim, my contribution is to compare Tocqueville's ideas about slavery in America to his views on the abolition of slavery in the French plantation colonies, which is something that is relatively absent in the literature. Exceptions are pieces by Sally [Gershman \(1976\)](#) and Seymour [Drescher \(1968a and 1968b\)](#). Drescher's main focus was to compare Tocqueville's ideas about social reforms by juxtaposing his writings and those of his travel companion Gustave Beaumont on the abolition of slavery, on pauperism and on the reform of the penitentiary system. My goal is different, however, because I compare Tocqueville's writings on slavery in America and in the Caribbean in view of understanding his ideas about social transformations. More recently, Cheryl [Welch \(2006 and 2007\)](#) developed a perceptive comparison of the discussion of slavery in *Democracy in America* and the 1839 *Report on Abolition*. However, in my view, Welch insufficiently acknowledges Tocqueville's conceptualization of the abolition of slavery as a revolutionary change. To add to these discussions, then, I will situate the two texts by Tocqueville - *Democracy in America* and the *Report on Abolition* - primarily in the context of his political theory, focusing on analytical concepts and arguments.

This article is structured as follows: I begin by providing some of the relevant context to Tocqueville's writings on slavery, both historically and in the oeuvre. I proceed by discussing how he employed his conceptual framework of social transformations to analyze the abolition of slavery. I then turn to the main part of the article which consists of an analysis of Tocqueville writings on slavery in America and in the French plantation colonies. In the conclusion I elaborate on the crucial differences and what they can tell us about Tocqueville's ideas about race relations during and after slavery.

Tocqueville on racism and slavery⁴

Even if this article is not a work in history, I must begin with providing a bare minimum of context for the reader to roughly situate Tocqueville's writings in the context of the broader discussions on the abolition of slavery in the first half of the 19th century. In France, three main abolitionist associations existed consecutively: the *Société des Amis des Noirs* (founded in 1788 and active until 1793), the *Société de la morale chrétienne* (founded in 1821) that existed during the Restoration, and the *Société française pour l'abolition de l'esclavage* that was founded in 1834 and of which Tocqueville became a member. This society brought together notables and politicians, many of whom were members of Parliament or serving as Minister or even as Prime Minister. The main strategy was to persuade the 'like-minded upper class' to join the anti-slavery cause and to lobby the legislative assemblies and government (Jennings, 2000: chapter 3 and 4). French discussions on slavery and its abolition were dominated by intellectuals and politicians, who were maneuvering in the context of the limited political freedoms during the Restoration (1815–1830) and the July Monarchy (1830–1848).⁵

When the French were discussing slavery and abolition in the early 19th century, there was a relevant proximate history, connected to age of the French Revolution and the rule of Napoleon. In the context of slave uprisings in Saint Domingue, the National Convention had abolished slavery in the French colonies Guadeloupe, Saint Domingue and Martinique in 1794, but Napoleon had restored it again in 1802. The subsequent brutal war and defeat of the Napoleonic Armada in 1804 would give way to the independence of Haiti. Even though in the 1830s the memories of the Saint-Domingue slave revolts were alive, French colonial propaganda had been successful in creating an image of the Haitian revolution as an illustration of the ways abolition resulted in bloodshed, anti-white violence and great damage to French interests. Because of this French abolitionists 'rarely made mention of Saint-Domingue' (Jennings, 2000: 121).⁶ Actually, in the period in which Tocqueville was active in these discussions, the ongoing events in the neighboring British colonies in the Caribbean were perceived as of more relevance to French discussions.

Tocqueville had returned from his travels in the United States in 1831, but he worked primarily on the first volume of *Democracy in America* in 1834, at a time when he had already become more involved in discussions on abolition in France. He became a member of the Chamber of Deputies in 1839, serving until 1848. Together with his friend and travel companion Gustave de Beaumont, he had joined the French Society for the Abolition of Slavery in 1835. In 1839 he was installed as reporter of an important parliamentary commission advising on a trajectory towards the abolition of slavery. I will discuss that report in the second half of the article.

Tocqueville in a principled and consistent way objected to slavery. In *Democracy in America* he wrote: '[A]ll my hatred is reserved for those who, after more than a thousand years of equality, introduced servitude into the world once more' (DA, 419). To some extent his firm rejection of slavery on moral grounds must be situated in the context of the broader discussions about the slave trade and slavery.⁷ In the early 19th century the continued existence of slavery in the colonies was mainly defended on the basis of

economic and prudential considerations, which were argued and lobbied for by a powerful plantation class and their political allies in Europe (Drescher, 1968b: 157–158). Like his liberal and aristocratic contemporaries, Tocqueville considered the racism that helped legitimize slavery an affront to Christian morality (Gershman, 1976: 470). However, far more than many of his contemporaries Tocqueville reflected on the long-lasting consequences and on the ways racist prejudices and predispositions would outlive the formal abolition of slavery (Welch, 2006).

Tocqueville's identified three defining elements of slavery as an institutionalized social practice. First, the idea of ownership, whereby the white 'master' by law was made into the possessor of another human being. In the modern world this immoral idea was 'in the most disastrous way [combined] with the material and permanent fact of racial difference' (DA, 394). The second defining feature was that slavery institutionalized an exclusive and privatized authority of the 'master' over the slave. The enslaved person was owing complete obedience to the master who imposed himself as a private tyrant, standing between the enslaved person and other sources of moral, judicial, or spiritual authority and thereby obtaining a totalizing control over the life of the enslaved person.⁸ The master could use this absolute power to rob the enslaved persons from their attachments and familiarity with African language and culture, prevent them from living as a family with their children, from owning any property or being taught about Christian religion. Finally, slavery was characterized by the absence of a salary: 'the free worker receives wages; the slave receives an upbringing, food, care, and clothing' (DA, 400) and 'the absence of wages is the stamp of slavery' (RA, 133–34). The slave was forced to labor without monetary compensation and possibilities to accumulate wealth and attain independence were minimized.

For Tocqueville the comparativist and historian the main concern was to decipher the dynamics of the processes of abolition and to understand the impact of slavery and its aftermath on societies. It was clear to him that 'slavery distorted the economic and social progress of the entire society in which it was embedded' (Drescher, 1968b: 176). For Tocqueville the MP and advisor of the French government an additional question was what governmental interventions could help to maximize positive and avoid negative consequences of abolition.

Remarkably, despite the fact that he was simultaneously writing about slavery in the French plantation colonies and in the United States - in 1839 he was in actual fact working on the second volume of *Democracy in America* that came out in 1840 - there are few explicit cross references in his writings and correspondence directly linking discussions on slavery in both geographic contexts. Nonetheless, the focal point of this article is precisely to systematically compare Tocqueville's observations about these two settings, and as I will demonstrate, he believed abolition and the aftermaths of slavery were likely to develop in very different ways because the 'conditions of departure' were so different. So why did he not develop his comparative insights more explicitly? There are some plausible historical and political reasons why he kept these discussions so separate. For one, the 1839 report was written as an advice to the French government on how to go about with abolition in the colonies, but in *Democracy in America* Tocqueville was generally reluctant to advise the Americans on what to do and to interject himself in

debates on the abolition of slavery in the United States. Another reason was that linking the discussions on slavery in the United States to those about slavery in the colonies could damage the cause of antislavery in France. French abolitionists could, for example, argue that slavery was no longer viable in the plantation colonies for economic reasons, without thereby necessarily advocating that it should be abolished in other regions of the world, such as the United States. Also, in *Democracy in America*, as we will see later on, Tocqueville had predicted that the end of slavery would induce violence and a great war between the white and black population. Introducing the American case in the debates about abolition in the French colonies thereby risked fueling the planters outcries that abolition would result in anti-white violence and cruelty.⁹ Finally, Tocqueville insisted that the abolition of slavery in the French Caribbean islands presented itself in different terms, because it would happen in a colonial society where the motherland could impose laws from the outside, whereas in the United States the laws had to be developed from within the existing societal context (DA, 411, footnote 47; Gershman, 1976: 472). That observation will be further developed when I reconstruct and discuss the comparative perspective to which Tocqueville only indirectly alluded.

Tocqueville on the abolition of slavery as social change

The leading goal in all of Tocqueville's writings was to understand the causes, modalities and consequences of social change, most of all the transition from aristocratic to democratic social and political relations. One of the reasons his writings have kept their relevance and brilliance, is because of the consistent way in which the underlying conceptual framework was employed to study and compare the transformations that were 'revolutionizing' social relations and moving societies towards an era of modernity and equality. That framework informed his studies of the United States, England and France. However, few have understood that the same analytical grid informed his analysis of the abolition of slavery. In other words, Tocqueville's reflections on the configuration and development of postcolonial and post-slavery societies emanated from the same theoretical framework as his writings on the American and French revolutionary transformations.

Tocqueville analyzed societies and social change at three levels: the level of social relations, the level of laws and institutions, and finally the level of culture and mores (*moeurs*; ideas, beliefs and 'habits of the heart'). These three levels shape and constitute each other, but as Jon Elster has convincingly argued, the relations of causation (what shapes what) vary. They notably depend on whether a society finds itself in a phase of important transformations or whether it finds itself in a more stable configuration. Tocqueville insisted that not only social structures, but also beliefs and emotions ('culture') do not change easily. In periods of major transformations and social change, the chances are that the role of existing 'habits of the heart' will grow stronger, even if they go against the trend of social changes. It is these cultural habits that people will cling on to (Elster, 2009: 97; Meyer, 2003: 205).

This conceptual framework on the causes of social stability and social change was used by Tocqueville to analyze the abolition of slavery, which he also thought of as a revolutionary change. In *Democracy in America* he wrote that 'slavery is not an institution

that can endure in an age of democratic liberty and enlightenment' (DA, 419). In the parliamentary advisory report the colonies are portrayed as being in 'a transitory and stormy condition' because they are on the verge of a 'dreaded' and 'inevitable revolution' (RA, 104). In a series of articles in *Le Siècle*, written in 1843, he articulated the same idea: 'every reasonable man who is beyond the prejudice of color perceives this with the utmost clarity and sees that colonial society is, every day, on the brink of *inevitable revolution*.' (De Tocqueville, 2001: 201, my emphasis, MM).

It was crystal clear to Tocqueville that the abolition of slavery was necessary and imminent, not only because slavery was immoral but also because it existed in sharp contrast to the great and 'irresistible revolution' of democracy and equality (DA, 7). That made it even more shocking that the United States, where the equality of conditions had advanced the most, were at the same time fundamentally crippled in their democratization process because of having introduced slavery. Slavery had produced a distinctive social structure that, as Tocqueville very sharply observed, was racialized, hierarchical, segregated and antagonistic. In the colonies, however, the main reason for the continued existence of slavery was that African labor was deemed essential to the economy of the plantations. Importantly also, the colonists had effectively established themselves as 'one of the most exclusive aristocracies that has ever existed in the world' (De Tocqueville, 2001: 200). Nonetheless, their resistance should and would be overcome: it went against the 'general trend of the century' and it was becoming obvious that slavery was a major obstacle to France having economically and politically viable colonies. As he wrote in 1843: '... if there is a way for France to keep [its colonies], it will come only from the abolition of slavery' (De Tocqueville, 1968, 2001, 2004).

How slavery and racism undermined democracy in the United States

Tocqueville alluded to slavery several times in both volumes of *Democracy in America*, but it was taken up most elaborately in the paragraph 'Situation of the black race in the United States. Dangers to whites created by its presence' in the final chapter of volume one. He analyzed slavery in relation to the social structure and mores, and then more specifically discussed the possibilities for abolition in the Southern states.

Slavery had been introduced in many of the European settlements in the Americas, but the inequality and levels of segregation ran particularly deep in the United States where the English settlers introduced it in the early 17th century. For Tocqueville it was clear that the English were racist in the extreme, exemplified for example in the near absence of inter-marriage: 'Of all the Europeans, the English have been least inclined to mix their blood with that of the Negro' (DA, 411). The fact that slavery now had existed for such a long time explained how it left such a deep imprint on the mores of the white population in America. By now, these racist mores were firmly entrenched in 'prejudices and laws' (DA, 370) and because they were connected to visible differences and skin color it was extremely unlikely that social relations could swiftly be rearranged. The influence of slavery 'penetrates the master's very soul and imparts a particular direction to his ideas and tastes' (DA, 400). Men in the South had 'the tastes of idle men' (DA, 401) and slavery

had over two centuries resulted in ‘prodigious difference in the commercial abilities of southerners and northerners’ (DA, 401).

But 200 years of slavery had also fundamentally stamped the mores of the black population. In them it had produced dispositions of servility and feelings of humiliation (Cf. Elster, 2009: 98). Crucially also, and in sharp contrast to the native Americans, the enslaved Africans had been deprived by force of many of their cultural resources. Their captivation and enslavement had intentionally been organized so as to weaken possibilities to uphold and reproduce African culture, religion and language, and it violently obstructed possibilities for a family life. But at the same time opportunities to partake in the culture of the society in which they were forced to live and work were also systematically frustrated (Cf. Welch, 2006: 236). This experience of living in a cultural no-man’s land had, over several generations, shaped the mores of the African populations:

The Negro tries repeatedly to enter a society that wants no part of him. He bows to the tastes of his oppressors, adopts their opinion, and aspires, by imitating them, to become indistinguishable from them. He has been told since birth that his race is naturally inferior to that of the white man, and he is not far from believing it; hence he is ashamed of himself. In every one of his features he sees a trace of slavery, and if he could repudiate himself altogether, he would gladly consent to do so (DA, 368).

One cannot help but notice here how the French aristocrat expressed an awareness of the structural oppression of Africans in ways that resonated with the writings of African-American abolitionists who were his contemporaries (cf. Tillery, 2018). However, it also presaged the ways in which Frantz Fanon would write about the inferiorization of people of color in the colonial setting: ‘The feeling of inferiority of the colonized is the correlative to the Europeans’ feeling of superiority. Let us have the courage to say it outright: It is the racist who creates his inferior’ (Fanon, 1986: 93).

The second volume of *Democracy in America* that came out in 1840, was dedicated to describing the ways social conditions in America affected prevailing mores. Here also Tocqueville labeled slavery as one of the crucial institutions that had shaped American culture. This was clear, for example, when he discussed how the relations between servants and masters were different in aristocratic and democratic societies. In aristocratic societies, masters and servants belonged to ‘two classes of men’ (DA, 669). But in a democratic society the servants were no longer a ‘separate people’ (DA, 673). In a democracy an ‘imaginary equality’ existed between those who commanded and those who obeyed, and between those who were being served and those who served. Inequalities and relations of domination would still exist, because they were necessary and functional to any kind of social, political and economic organization, but they were experienced as fair and temporary and as resulting from ‘a contract’. The crucial shift was that ‘the aristocratic notion of subjection’ had been replaced by ‘the democratic notion of obedience’ (DA, 677). However, in the United States, the emergence of the necessary sense of self-respect among those who would ‘serve’ others was being deformed by racism. Despite the fact that slavery was legally abolished in the Northern states, the black servants (and the vast majority of servants were black) were not being recognized as

standing in equal, civic relations with their employers. In the United States, the shift from 'aristocratic subjection' to 'democratic obedience' therefore only happened among the Whites:

... in the same northern states, particularly in New England, one finds a substantial number of Whites who are willing, in return for wages, to submit temporarily to the will of people *like themselves*' (DA, 675, my emphasis, M.M.).

Importantly, 'people like themselves' in this fragment referred to persons similar as equal citizens, the main contrast with aristocratic societies, but also to people similar as being *white*. Only whites who became servants of other whites would have 'enough self-respect not to refuse to obey masters to whom they had freely promised obedience' (DA, 676). However, whites would never see the Africans as truly equal and would continue to look down at them with the same prejudices as during slavery. The whites would definitely not accept the Blacks as their superiors. And reversibly, given the profoundness of social hierarchies based on racialized differences, the Africans would continue to perceive the whites as the heirs of the illegitimate forms of exploitation and oppression that characterized slavery. They would never accept them as legitimate 'masters' (in a general sense, as rulers, as household masters, as magistrates, as upper classes, not as 'slave owners') but would always recognize the reproduction of the racist system. If democracy was based on citizens having equal standing, it was clear that the racist mores would be a major obstacle for it to develop.

At the time of Tocqueville's travels, the institution of slavery still existed in 13 states. Tocqueville insisted that racist prejudice had become more important in the North after slavery was legally abolished: 'Racial prejudice seems to me stronger in the states that have abolished slavery than in those where slavery still exists ...' (DA, 395). He concluded: 'Thus in the United States, the prejudice against Negroes seems to increase in proportion to their emancipation, and *inequality is enshrined in mores as it disappears from laws*' (DA, 397, my emphasis, MM). When the legal basis of segregation was lifted, the white population sought to strengthen all other modes of segregation: 'In the North, the White no longer clearly perceives the barrier that is supposed to separate him from this debased race, and he shuns the Negro all the more assiduously for fear that he might one day become indistinguishable from him' (DA, 396). By consequence, the intensity and pervasiveness of racial segregation had actually grown in the states where slavery had legally ended, there: '... the Negro is free, but he cannot share the rights, pleasures, labors, or sorrows – not even the tomb- of the person whose equal he has been declared to be' (DA, 396). States that had abolished slavery had made 'life troublesome for any free Negroes residing in them'. They thereby did not contribute to what was necessary for peaceful, let alone equal, future relations to emerge. Instead they created a reservoir of hatred towards the white population that would outburst once the institutional and social conditions changed and freedom would be introduced.

This process was strengthened by the fact that in the period when the Northern states had abolished the selling of slaves and had obstructed the 'importation' of enslaved people from the South, there was a commercial interest for 'slave owners' to try and to sell

‘their’ slaves in the South: ‘Hence the abolition of slavery does not result in freedom for the slave. It simply results in a change of master from northerner to southerner’ (DA, 404). In need of ‘free workers’, the Northern industries would recruit European laborers. For Tocqueville the demographic balance between the different groups, free Blacks and whites, was crucial in relation to the possibilities for new social relations. As we will see, this was also a major theme in his writing on the aftermaths of slavery in the Caribbean islands.

Tocqueville discussed at length the possibilities and dynamics of abolition in the Southern States in comparison to what had happened in the North. An important contingent factor was that abolition had happened earlier in the North. The black population, which already was larger in the South, had grown even further. In addition, there was no opportunity for the South to force black freedmen to move to other states. Tocqueville concluded that the chances were big that in the South, upon abolition there would be ‘a large number of free Negroes living alongside an almost equal number of Whites’ (DA, 410). He believed this would make it likely they would revolt. Tocqueville concluded that there were only two prospects for a future after slavery: the diasporic Africans and Europeans could blend together or they should separate. The ‘mixing’ of the Americans and their former slaves was impossible because of the racist prejudices among the whites. The most likely scenario was segregation.

As I have demonstrated above the ‘race factor’ and the abolition of slavery were central to Tocqueville’s study of the revolutionary transformations in the United States. Processes of social and institutional change unfolded in particular circumstances, which left their imprints and shaped path-dependent patterns. Emerging social relations were shaped by economic and geographic factors, which were quite different in the Northern and Southern States, but the race factor was a constant in the whole of the United States and slavery had left its nefarious impact on mores in the entire nation. Tocqueville was deeply pessimistic about American democracy’s ability to overcome this race factor and forge relations of equal standing. But it was not only democracy that would remain imperfect; the legacies of racist slavery threatened the United States as a whole: ‘The most redoubtable of all the ills that threaten the future of the United States stems from the presence of Blacks on its soil’ (DA, 392). Democracy and equality across color lines were doomed, legal changes would not be able to overturn the power of mores and America could only develop as a democracy by segregating the races. If it did not Tocqueville predicted prolonged periods of violence and war.

The abolition of slavery in the French plantation colonies

In 1839 Tocqueville was installed as reporter of a parliamentary commission advising the French government on how to proceed with the abolition of slavery. The official name of this commission was the *Commission chargée d’examiner la proposition de M. Tracy relative aux esclaves des colonies*.¹⁰ It had been created to examine the abolitionist proposal of Destutt de Tracy (Drescher, 1968b: 98). The report figured in a whole series of studies and reports on the matter that appeared during the July Monarchy. As Jennings writes (2000: 103) the issuing of reports was part of a broader strategy of the

administration to temporize on the slavery question. When the report was completed it was shelved and another commission was installed with a broader mandate that was chaired by the Duc de Broglie, and in which Tocqueville also participated. The report was completed in late July 1839 and drew on deliberations and hearings organized by its 9 members. One of the main topics was to examine what could be learned from the experiences of the British.¹¹ It would be inaccurate to pretend that the report exclusively contained ideas and propositions of its reporter, but Tocqueville did insist he had written it himself and figured as the author on the cover page.¹² It is possible therefore to focus on the ways analytical notions that are employed by Tocqueville in his scholarly works were also of relevance to the Commission's report.

In the political context of the first half of the 19th century, the abolition of slavery was framed as a subject of French imperial policy in the Caribbean and in the Indian Ocean. In 1802 some of the colonies were returned to France after having been under British occupation. Discussion on the abolition of slavery would re-emerge in full force during the second restoration under King Louis Philippe I of Orléans, which lasted from 1830 to 1848. At the time about 270,000 enslaved Africans worked on the French plantation colonies in Guadeloupe, Martinique and Guiana in the Caribbean and Bourbon (Réunion) in the Indian Ocean. What mattered foremost was to have a transition that could appease the planters, allow for post-emancipation labor control and ensure that Europeans could continue to exploit the plantations in a profitable way (Drescher, 1968b; Jennings, 2000). These Caribbean island societies were to a significant extent the product of colonization, first by the Spaniards, and later by the British, French and Dutch. The colonizers had decimated the local Taino populations and imposed a new economic, political and demographic reality (Walvin, 2022). In a way, so Tocqueville believed, this was an advantage, because it meant that in envisioning 'after slavery' the French could strive to create something entirely new, whereas in for example Algeria and North America there existed indigenous cultures and populations with their own social and political structures. Even if some of the larger Islands, and obviously of course the former French colony Haiti that became independent in 1804, were already striving to establish themselves as independent nations, for the Commission it was taken for granted that the plantation colonies would remain 'French possessions'.

The Commission acknowledged that the exact social structures of the different Caribbean colonies varied in relation to their size and demographic make-up and the relative size of the various groups (white Europeans, enslaved Africans, free people of color, indigenous peoples, Mulattos, indentured workers). Crucially, in all islands the social structure and the institutions were shaped by slavery. One major concern in discussing the prevailing mores in a slave society was the impact of slavery on the working ethos of Africans. The Commission began its report by explaining why it was unfair to suggest that black men lacked a desire to become free or came across as 'dissolute, idle, and improvident', resembling 'a depraved child rather than a man' (RA, 100). These mores and this stage of moral development were the product of slavery. The mores of the white population, on the other hand, were crucially stamped by the ways the planters exercised absolute authority over 'their' slaves. A cause for concern was the risk of a worsening of the relations between European colonists and Blacks in the immediate aftermath of the

abolition of slavery. In addition, the Commission noted that in slave societies the role of the law and public magistrates were limited:

‘Public authority is not needed to repress vagabonds and idlers, since the laborer is always retained in a certain place and kept at work. Society does not provide for the wants of children, old men, and the sick; these charges are attached to slave property. Most police laws are unnecessary; the discipline of the master takes their place. In slave countries the master is the lowest magistrate; and when the state has established, maintained, and regulated the usages of servitude, the larger part of its task is accomplished. The legislation of a slave country does not take into account the existence of a great number of men at once free, poor, and depraved. It makes no preparations to provide for their wants, to repress their disorders, and correct their vices’ (RA, 107).

The Commission believed that in order to be successful, the change away from slavery would demand that the colonist were given the time to change their ‘customs and their agricultural techniques’ (RA, 130). The densely populated island Antigua was cited as a positive British example to follow. Here the transition ‘from slave to free labor’ was accomplished with ‘astonishing ease’ (RA, 125). The planters on that island had ensured that abolition proceeded faster than the official scheme and they were able to reshape social relations and mores in the aftermath of slavery. The conditions for this had been created before and during abolition: In Antigua ‘slavery has always been particularly mild and the masters themselves have made great efforts to improve the character of the Negroes and to maintain their affection ... Men who are capable of such conduct towards their slaves prove they have been gentle and compassionate masters and one may easily believe that they have not been faced with rebellious freedmen’ (RA, 125–26). The Commission was convinced the French would also be able to engender this type of social relations after slavery, because the French, much like the Spaniards, were willing to mingle and mix with the African and indigenous populations.

One of the main ideas in the report was to have an immediate, general, and simultaneous emancipation of all slaves. The Commission argued that if the process of abolition was to start gradually, it would very quickly give way to a full emancipation: it was ‘impossible to have free black men living alongside enslaved people’ because this would result in more rebellions and in more attempts of the enslaved to escape.¹³ There was also a more principled argument: it was impossible for the black population to learn the virtues of liberty whilst living in slavery: ‘It would hardly seem reasonable then to believe that in slavery we can destroy those vices to which slavery naturally and necessarily gives birth ... It is only the experience of liberty – liberty long possessed and directed by a power at once energetic and restrained, which can prompt and form in man the opinions, virtues, and habits which suit a citizen of a free country’ (RA, 102). The Commission advised that also in the French colonies the abolition of slavery should be followed by a period of apprenticeship. During this period the Blacks would be free only 1 day per week, they would work on the basis of labor regulations installed by French authorities and receive a salary, but they would not have the right to purchase their own land. In the Tocquevillian framework of social change, the idea of a period of state-led apprenticeship made sense as

an opportunity for the government to steer the required changes and to produce supportive conditions for the reordering of social relations. A congruence between social relations, laws and mores was needed for stability and durable change, and the colonies provided a unique opportunity because for the black population culture and mores needed to be rebuilt 'from scratch' anyhow. Furthermore, by imposing the authority from the Metropole upon the post-slavery colonial society as a whole, the remnants of previous regimes of domination by the planters could be destroyed. A major threat to making good use of the apprenticeship was resistance by and racism of the Europeans, as was demonstrated by the British example.

Even if the British process of abolition had not resulted in major uprisings and violence and the economic interests of the planters had been secured, it was still the case that the British had made two major mistakes: they had introduced forced labor without genuine salary and they had recruited public functionaries among the white colonists (RA, 119). Thereby the colonists had succeeded in deforming several of the institutional changes and steer them away from the intentions of the Metropolitan legislators. For example, the Act of Emancipation 'had fixed the amount of compulsory labor time at 45 h a week, and the minimum of each day's labor at 9 hours' (RA, 123). But the white proprietors then made the 'freedmen' work 6 days a week during 7 h instead of the 5 days of 9 h that had been planned. By consequence, the 'freedmen' could not use the Saturday to work for themselves and build up some capital. The mores of the colonists had also deformed the newly established general system of criminal law and punishment. For example, in their capacity as officials the colonists inflicted cruel corporal punishments and continued to act as if they were exercising authority as 'slave owners' rather than as public functionaries. And even though only the magistrates appointed by the British authority would condemn freedmen to imprisonment sentences, it were the colonists who were in charge of those prisons and who would treat the black prisoners 'with great cruelty, contrary to the spirit of the Act of Emancipation' (RA, 123). Much like Tocqueville had observed in *Democracy in America*, the formal, legal abolition of slavery gave way to a deepening of racism because in a context of major societal changes, the mores were what the white Europeans clung to. These deficiencies should and could be addressed in the approach of the French. This was possible due to a set of starting conditions and because the 'apprenticeship' and state tutelage would allow to bring the mores more in line with the new institutional order 'after slavery' and with the new social and economic configuration that should establish itself.

So what should the French do? First, the transition to a society where law and order was maintained by public authorities should be quick enough and carried out in such a way that the former slaves would gain confidence in the ability of the new authorities to protect them. The right to discipline and punish should no longer be in the hands of the colonists. A new legal code was to be introduced immediately and it would consist of general laws applicable to all in a free society:

'With the abolition of slavery, an essential change should take place in the relations between the Whites and the Blacks. The bond which now exists between them should be entirely destroyed. The State should become the sole guardian of the enfranchised population; it

should grant the services of the Blacks to the planters on its own conditions, retaining in its own hands all the exercise of discipline. Labor should no longer be unpaid' (RA, 132).¹⁴

The goal of this way of proceeding was to 'immediately destroy every relation which has existed between the master and his slave, and to transfer the guardianship of the whole enfranchised population to the State' (RA, 133). Second, the aspirations of the former slave owners to continue as they had before should be crushed. As long as the white proprietors believed they 'owned' the black population they would reject interference by public authorities. The white, pro-slavery population was incapable of making a transition work without outside force: 'We may be certain that in many of the colonies, perhaps in most of them, apprenticeship will counter greater obstacles in the disposition of the masters than in that of the former slaves' (RA, 122).¹⁵ It was important therefore that both the former slaves and the colonists respected the state's authority. During the apprenticeship both groups would learn to adjust to a new reality with an independent public authority:

'The planter no longer rejects the hand of Government, and the Negro yields to its influence without difficulty and without regret. He does not yet see in the magistrate a master, but a guide and a liberator. It is the Government's most favorable moment to gain the control over the minds and the habits of the black population, and to acquire the salutary influence that will be necessary when they are entirely free.' (RA, 131)

If the first purpose of introducing an apprenticeship was for the free Blacks to learn to respect the authority of a system of public administration, the second motive was economic. The apprenticeship period and the state tutelage were needed to produce 'good working habits' in the black population (RA, 121). As a result of slavery the Africans tended to associate work with 'servitude' and if some slaves would be released sooner than others there was a risk that these freedmen would choose to live as 'vagabonds and idlers' (RA, 107). This problem could be avoided if the slaves were all emancipated simultaneously, were put under the 'sole guardianship' of the State (that would 'grant the services of the blacks to the planters on its own conditions'), and were then immediately put to work again as 'free workers' on the plantations (DA, 132). At the background of this was the ongoing dismissive perception and portrayal of African labor. Those discussions were also fueled by the ways the British introduced a system of indentured labor right after abolition, in part justified with racist ideas about Asians being better workers. For Tocqueville, that process resembled the replacement of Black laborers by Europeans in the Northern states of the United States, which he had discussed in *Democracy in America*. This could be avoided if only it was recognized that the vices associated with African labor were the result of slavery itself, and if the free black were given the chance to develop new habits.

These measures to foster a good labor ethos among the free Africans was but one of the aspects of a regime that served to secure the productivity of the plantation economy after abolition. The state should also prohibit in a first period the purchase of land by the freedmen, restrict their mobility and set a price for black labor. These would be temporary measures and there was to be a gradual progression in the colonies towards a more liberal

state and society (Drescher, 1968b: 189).¹⁶ In addition, during the apprenticeship time, a part of the ‘moderate wages’ of the ‘free’ black persons would be deducted to serve as a reimbursement to the state for the indemnification it would have paid to the planters with the aim of securing their support for emancipation and helping them bear the financial risks that would be inevitable in ‘the passage from one condition to another’ (DA, 112-115, 135). Four years later, in his 1843 essays, Tocqueville was inclined to follow the recommendations of the Broglie commission of which he was also a member. He now believed that equity required directly indemnifying the colonists for their loss of slaves, arguing that it was sensible to distribute ‘the costs of emancipation ... among all those who have an interest in the success of the measure, half the indemnity is furnished by the metropole, the other half by the labour of the Blacks, and the rise in price of labour is borne by the colonists’ (De Tocqueville, 2001: 224). This arrangement also seemed fair because: ‘If the Blacks have the right to become free, it is incontestable that the colonists have the right not to be ruined by the freedom of the Blacks. It is true, the colonists have taken advantage of slavery; but it was not they who established it’ (idem, 221).

Another important motive for introducing a period of apprenticeship after emancipation was to ensure there would be sufficient opportunities to teach the freed slaves: ‘The state, becoming the protector of the enfranchised slaves’ could install the necessary measures to ‘diffuse instruction among them, regulate their habits, and efficiently promote marriage’ (RA, 133). This was in the best interest of the black population also:

‘... that race oppressed and degraded by slavery which it is France’s duty and honor to civilize, enlighten, and moralize as well as to enfranchise’ (RA, 134).

In the Americas the institution of slavery had damaged African culture beyond repair, and this was in part what made this totalizing and cruel institution so ruinous. But it also created the opportunity to rebuild, with the additional advantage that of all nations on the earth the French were best equipped to do so.¹⁷

Tocqueville believed that under conditions of careful governance, the diasporic Africans would accept to continue working on the plantations and the black and white populations could continue to co-exist and live close to one another. France did not wish ‘to destroy slavery in order to observe the tragedy of ruined whites leaving the soil of the colonies, and the blacks relapsing into barbarism. She intends not only to bestow liberty on the enslaved, but to constitute civilized, industrious and peaceable societies’ (RA, 115). This could only be successful if the process was well managed and if the broader geographic, economic and social conditions would allow for it. It meant that the black population should not be given opportunities to become more genuinely independent: ‘If it be thought necessary to colonial production, and to the continuation of the white race in the Antilles, that the services of the enfranchised Negro be permanently available for the hire by the great proprietors, it is evident that we should *not* allow him a plot where he can easily live by laboring only for himself’ (RA, 129, my emphasis, MM). These conditions not only served to appease any concerns the planters might have about the free Blacks becoming self-sufficient and refusing to work for them, they were also in line with the overarching goal of the colonies existing for the benefit of France and not for the wealth of

their inhabitants and to the fact that no value was attached to the autonomy and self-directedness of the Africans after slavery.

Conclusion

The leading argument in this article has been that Tocqueville's writings on the aftermaths of slavery in the United States and in the French plantation colonies emanate from his scholarly theories on social change and democratic revolutions. And secondly, that by juxtaposing his ideas about the ways both societies were deeply imprinted by the legacy of slavery we obtain a more nuanced perspective on why he was both a 'pessimist' in fearing that in the United States the racism and inequality resulting from slavery risked undermining democracy in the long run, and somewhat more optimistic about the opportunities for the French to create stable and peaceful social relations in the plantation colonies after the abolition of slavery.

For Tocqueville, it was 'a providential fact' that modernization would bring equality of conditions to all societies on the globe and would result in the dismantling of systems of rule grounded in hereditary and quasi unchangeable hierarchies, including feudal aristocracy and slavery (Cf. [Atanassow, 2022](#); [Zunz, 2022](#)). In Tocqueville's framework, a country's pathway towards democracy was crucially shaped by the conditions of departure, but it was also shaped by the dynamic interplay between social relations, laws and culture, as well as by contingent events and human agency. History was not destiny, and his aim was to contribute to a 'new political science' for a world that was totally new (DA, 7). In view of furthering the understanding of social and historical processes, there was a need to analyze various interacting factors in their complexity and over time, which was possible with the methodology of systematic comparisons, both geographic and historical. The comparative angle could serve to identify causal processes and possible moments for interventions that might help to 'steer' societies towards prosperous and stable futures.

The legacies of slavery were massive, both in the United States and in the Caribbean Islands. In all of the Americas, slavery had damaged African culture 'beyond repair', leaving the Africans in a kind of no-man's land by being deprived of opportunities to meaningfully reproduce their original culture and brutally refused the participation in 'European culture'. Slavery had generated its own mores among the enslaved Africans, so Tocqueville believed. Slavery built on racist prejudice, but then deepened and solidified this racism so that it infected the whole of society and all its institutions like a virus (cf. [Pitts, 2013](#): 253 and 257). The mores of the white population were infused with degrading representations of Africans as inferior, as 'barely human' and as persons that could legitimately be exploited, humiliated and ruled by white Europeans. Even if the legalized institution of slavery was receding 'the prejudice to which it gave rise remains unaltered' (DA, 395). Segregation between groups defined by their skin color was crucial in hardening the abyss and animosity between them and the aftermath of slavery risked being one of violence.

Tocqueville's writings on slavery contain ample articulations of the dramatic impact of colonialism and African slavery on social relations and societal configurations. In some ways his observations anticipated the urgent discussions about slavery and structural

racism that over the past decades have been gaining in momentum across the world (Walvin, 2022: 331 ff.). Importantly also, Tocqueville observed that the ending of slavery and the introduction of more equal institutions risked being undermined and disfigured by the white racists. This in turn would trigger more revolts by the free Blacks struggling for genuine liberty. These were the general challenges the slave societies had to face upon abolition, but what would happen depended on their specific starting conditions but also on policies and the specific social dynamics that would unfold.

In the United States, slavery fed upon the vicious prejudices of the English and had deepened and nurtured them in such a way that individual attitudes were now sustained by cultural frameworks and institutions. Even if slavery and black oppression were legally ended, that did not mean they would be overcome. With the benefit of hindsight one cannot but conclude that Tocqueville's pessimism and his prediction of prolonged violence and conflict resulting from the legacies of slavery and racism were warranted. Indeed, much like 20th century critical race scholars he considered slavery and racism as co-foundational of American society and politics, and as leaving near to unsurmountable challenges for the forging of a society of equal standing.

With regard to the Caribbean Islands Tocqueville was slightly more optimistic. The conditions of departure were different: these were young societies with a demographic and economic reality that was the outcome of a violent process of European colonization. The structural attempts to destroy African culture among the enslaved, now created opportunities to build something new, under French civilizational guidance. The state could and should impose itself as an arbiter on the African and the European populations in the Islands, and in so doing it could prevent the colonists from continuing their racist practices in the aftermaths of slavery. Radical legal changes could be imposed from the outside and then the state could invest in efforts to align the mores of the black and white populations with the new social relations (see also Welch, 2006: 241). We must add that the future for these societies was not conceived as them becoming independent, self-governing nations, but rather to remain occupied lands to be exploited by France.

Despite rejecting racism at many occasions, Tocqueville continued to downplay the political agency and moral independence of Africans. The black populations of the United States and the Caribbean Islands were construed as 'non-political' Others, which obviously was what the colonial project had made them (Mills, 2015: 23). This was exemplified also by the fact that neither in the context of his studies for *Democracy in America* nor for his writings on colonial slavery did he take any notice of what Afro-Americans themselves had said or written about slavery and its abolition.¹⁸ This was despite the fact that at the time he was travelling in the United States or writing his studies, there was already a lively intellectual African American public sphere in the Northern states of the United States, and that many free Blacks were participating in anti-slavery advocacy movements and discussions, also in France (Shohat and Stam, 2012: 15; Sinha, 2016; Tillery, 2018). The parliamentary commission in which Tocqueville participated did not care to invite any 'free men of color' living in France at the time, or to include the perspective of the enslaved black persons in the colonies. The revolts of enslaved Africans were not recognized as legitimate protests but exclusively portrayed as possible threats to white interests. The total absence of a reflection on the significance of the Haitian

revolution in the work of the man who made the rise of democracy his lifework may stand out as a bitter illustration of this lacuna.

This article has demonstrate how Tocqueville conceptualized the process of the abolition of slavery by drawing on his theoretical framework about democratic revolutions. In so doing, he took notice of the ways the racial hierarchies that were connected to African slavery greatly mattered when it came to the formation of relations of equal standing, much like ascriptive hereditary inequalities had to be confronted in the bourgeois revolutions. He perceptively predicted that racist prejudices and ‘white privilege’ would hinder the emergence of relations of equal standing in the aftermaths of slavery. However, Tocqueville was also complicit with the colonial project by assuming European superiority and flagrantly refusing black agency. As Fanon would insist more than one hundred years later, only by reclaiming subjectivity people of color could overturn the structural and violent attempts to make them into ‘objects’: ‘I will compel the white man to acknowledge that I am human’ (Fanon, 1986: 98).

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my gratitude to Walker Haskins, Enzo Rossi, Anna Blijdenstein, Rosemarie van den Breemer, Veit Bader and James Brown for their comments on an earlier version of this article. I am also extremely grateful to the two anonymous reviewers who’s constructive criticisms and encouragements have helped to substantially improve the paper. I dedicate the paper to the memory of Meindert Fennema who passed away only weeks before it was finalized and with whom I wrote an earlier paper on Tocqueville published as Racism and Slavery in the writings of Alexis de Tocqueville. In: Bouma A and Kemper M (eds) (2022) *Socialism in one room. Studies in honor of Erik van Ree*. Amsterdam: Pegasus, pp.253–280.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iD

Marcel Maussen  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4175-0081>

Notes

1. For a discussion of these critical views of Tocqueville see Atanassow, 2017, 83–84.
2. In the late 1830s and 1840s Tocqueville spoke about the issue of abolition of colonial slavery several times in parliamentary debates and served as a member of two parliamentary commissions on the matter. After writing a number of essays on the ‘Emancipation of slaves’ in 1843 in the journal *Le Siècle* he stopped publicly intervening on the issue.

3. The French had invaded and conquered Algeria in the 1830s.
4. The two main textual sources for this article are *Democracy in America* (Volume I and II) for which I have used the translation by Arthur Goldhammer and the Penguin Random House edition that includes the first and second book, published respectively in 1835 and 1840, in one single volume with continuous page numbering. This source is referred to as DA. An English translation of almost the entire text of the Report on abolition is included in *Tocqueville and Beaumont on Social Reform*, ed. by Seymour Drescher (New York: Harper 1968). I will refer to this source as RA. To my knowledge this translation, which is an extensive revision by Drescher of the 1840 translation by Mary Sparks, is the only available translation in English. The 1839 report is not included in Pitts' collection *Alexis Tocqueville. Writings on Empire and Slavery* that was published in 2001. In Tocqueville's French texts and in early translations of his works, black persons and Afro-Americans are referred to as 'negroes/nègres'. When quoting from Tocqueville's texts I will follow the translations by Arthur Goldhammer, Jennifer Pitts and Seymour Drescher who use the term 'Negro'. In my own formulations I will use other terms such as 'Blacks', 'black persons', 'African-Americans' or 'diasporic Africans'.
5. For an excellent discussion see [Jennings 2000](#).
6. See [Geggus 1985](#); [Kwon 2011](#).
7. See [Jennings, 2000](#), chapter 1.
8. 'So long as absolute slavery exists, the master does not allow the public authority to intervene between him and his slave. His will is law, and the slave knows no other. This is the very essence of slavery' (RA, 130).
9. As Drescher writes, Tocqueville understood that '[f]rom a European abolitionist's viewpoint the less said about the American example the better' (1968b: 179).
10. Chambre des Députés. No. 201, Séance du 23 Juillet 1839. See [Jennings, 2000](#), chapter 5.
11. The comparative perspective on the British experiences was a constant in French discussions about colonial policy and also in the debates about the abolition of the slave trade and colonial slavery ([Drescher, 2014](#); [Jennings, 2000](#)).
12. In a letter to his English translator and friend Henry Reeves he wrote that he experienced his first major parliamentary contribution as a task that was 'comparable to writing a book' ([Gershman, 1976](#): 473).
13. This was evident from the experiences in the British colonies, so the Commission argued, and the English had been forced to abolish slavery far more abruptly than they had intended.
14. The Commission also mentioned that in terms of their administrative and political structure the French colonies would be more receptive to such an abrupt change enforced by the Metropolitan government than some of the British. The older British colonies, such as Jamaica, were 'virtually [an] independent state' and had a political assembly 'vested with the exclusive right of making laws', claiming 'to hold their rights, not from the English Parliament, but from the Crown of England alone' (RA, 118).
15. In a letter to Jared Sparks in 1840 Tocqueville believed this to be a comparative advantage of colonial societies were new laws could be imposed by the Metropolitan authorities and effectuate a revolutionary change, which was far more difficult for a society such as that of the United States to achieve by itself ([Gershman, 1976](#): 472).
16. Also in his intervention in 1843, which is after having served on the Broglie Commission, Tocqueville stresses the wisdom in a gradual transition. Again, the imperial interests of France

to keep its colonies and the need to protect the interests of the sugar industry were mixed with the more sociological argument that some time was needed ‘to facilitate the colonies’ passage from one social state to another’ (De Tocqueville, 2001: 220). Supposedly the transition period and the corresponding rules (such as maximum and minimum wages set by the governor, the temporary prohibition on landownership, and so on) were also in the interest of the African population (De Tocqueville, 2001: 220).

17. In 1843 he underlined that it was especially unacceptable for France to condone slavery because France had spread ‘these notions of freedom and equality’ across the globe (De Tocqueville, 2001: 207).
18. Gustave de Beaumont, when asked whether Bissette was a member of the Society for the Abolition of Slavery, is said to have exclaimed: “why! He is a colored man” (in Drescher, 1968b: 163).

References

- Atanassow E (2017) Colonization and democracy: Tocqueville reconsidered. *American Political Science Review* 111(1): 83–96.
- Atanassow E (2022) *Tocqueville’s Dilemmas, and Ours: Sovereignty, Nationalism, Globalization*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- De Dijn A (2008) *French Political Thought from Montesquieu to Tocqueville: Liberty in a Levelled Society?* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- De Tocqueville A (1968) Report on abolition. In: Drescher S (ed and transl) *Tocqueville and Beaumont on Social Reform*. New York: Harper Torchbooks, 98–136. Referred to as RA.
- De Tocqueville A (2001) The emancipation of slaves. In: Pitts J (ed and transl) *Writings on Empire and Slavery*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, pp. 199–226.
- De Tocqueville A (2004) *Democracy in America*, Volumes I and II, translated by Goldhammer A. New York: Penguin Random House. Referred to as DA.
- Drescher S (ed) (1968a) *Tocqueville and Beaumont on Social Reform*. London: Harper Torchbooks.
- Drescher S (1968b) *Dilemmas of Democracy: Tocqueville and Modernization*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.
- Drescher S (2014) Democracy, civil society and antislavery in Tocquevillian perspective. *Slavery and Abolition* 35(4): 561–593.
- Elster J (2009) *Alexis de Tocqueville, the First Social Scientist*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Fanon F (1986) *Black Skin, White Masks*, London: Pluto Press.
- Geggus D (1985) Haiti and the abolitionists: opinion, propaganda and international politics in Britain and France, 1804–1836. In: Richardson D (ed) *Abolition and its Aftermath: The Historical Context, 1790–1836*. London: Frank Cass, pp. 113–140.
- Gershman S (1976) Alexis de Tocqueville and slavery. *French Historical Studies* 9(3): 467–483.
- Hart WD (2018) Constellations: capitalism, antiblackness, Afro-pessimism, and black optimism. *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy* 39(1): 5–33.
- Ikuta JC and Latimer T (2021) Aristocracy in America: Tocqueville on white supremacy. *The Journal of Politics* 83(2): 547–559.

- Jennings LJ (2000) *French Anti-slavery: The Movement for the Abolition of Slavery in France, 1802–1848*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kwon YK (2011) When Parisian liberals spoke for Haiti: French anti-slavery discourses on Haiti under the restoration, 1814–30. *Atlantic Studies* 8(3): 317–341.
- Masoud T (2022) Cancel Tocqueville? *Journal of Democracy* 33(3): 172–176.
- Meyer HD (2003) Tocqueville's cultural institutionalism: reconciling collective culture and methodological individualism. *Journal of Classical Sociology* 3(2): 197–220.
- Mills CW (2015) Decolonizing Western political philosophy. *New Political Science* 37(1): 1–24.
- Pitts J (2000) Empire and democracy: Tocqueville and the Algeria question. *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 8(3): 295–318.
- Pitts J (2005) *A Turn to Empire: The Rise of Imperial Liberalism in Britain and France*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Pitts J (2013) Democracy and domination: empire, slavery, and democratic corruption in Tocqueville's thought. In Boyd R and Atanassow E (eds) *Tocqueville and the Frontiers of Democracy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp.243–263.
- Shohat E and Stam R (2012) *Race in Translation: Culture Wars Around the Postcolonial Atlantic*. New York: New York University Press.
- Sinha M (2016) *The Slave's Cause: A History of Abolition*. New Haven: Yale University Press
- Tillery AB Jr (2009) Tocqueville as critical race theorist: Whiteness as property, interest convergence, and the limits of jacksonian democracy. *Political Research Quarterly* 62(4): 639–652.
- Tillery AB Jr (2018) Reading Tocqueville behind the Veil: African American receptions of democracy in America, 1835–1900. *American Political Thought* 7(1): 1–25.
- Walvin J (2022) *A World Transformed: Slavery in the Americas and the Origins of Global Power*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Welch CB (2006) Tocqueville on democracy after abolition. *The Tocqueville Review* 27(2): 227–254.
- Welch CB (2007) Creating concitoyens: Tocqueville on the legacy of slavery. In: Geenens R and De Dijn A (eds) *Reading Tocqueville: From Oracle to Actor*. London: Palgrave/MacMillan, pp.31–51.
- Zunz O (2022) *The Man Who Understood Democracy: The Life of Alexis de Tocqueville*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.