

Taking Exception to American Exceptionalism

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Arthur Kaledin, *Tocqueville and His America: A Darker Horizon* (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 2011), xxxv + 440 pages, cloth \$65.00.

Frank Prochaska, *Eminent Victorians on American Democracy: The View from Albion* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2012), xiv + 169 pages, \$50.00 cloth; \$29.95 paper.

In September 2013, President Barack Obama spoke to delegates assembled at the United Nations about what he perceived as America's unique role in world affairs. The theme of his address had a familiar ring: "I believe America is exceptional," he proclaimed. "Furthermore, its special – perhaps unique – place in the family of nations gives it the responsibility and mandate to take a leading role in world affairs."

While the conclusion about America's responsibilities (and authority) to intervene in world affairs may be a twentieth-century extension of its meaning, the basic notion that the United States is somehow exceptional in the history of the world has been a doctrine held with almost religious fervor by many of its citizens since the ratification of the Constitution in 1788. The Puritan notion of Providential favor, translated into a kind of political axiom, has been as sacred to some Americans as the Ten Commandments are to followers of the Judaeo-Christian religious tradition or the Koran to Muslims. From the earliest years of the republic, Americans touted the uniqueness of their political model, and brooked little dissent from outsiders who challenged that claim.

Americans' disdain for outsiders who dare to question the doctrine of American exceptionalism has continued unabated in some quarters, particularly among political conservatives, but it was never more rampant than during the tumultuous nineteenth century when the nation was expanding its borders, redefining itself through bloody conflict, and rising to prominence as a world power. At the same time, foreign visitors to the United States and others who never left Europe expressed strong opinions about the qualities that were shaping this nation that, less than a century earlier, had been one of Great Britain's far-flung colonies. Some were impressed, others skeptical, but regardless of their judgments, their work has long been of value to scholars interested in America's political, sociological, and moral development. Two recently published studies focus on several important foreign commentators whose writings helped shape opinions of the United States. MIT emeritus professor Arthur Kaledin's *Tocqueville and His America* is a lengthy analysis of the work of the French aristocrat turned political scientist Alexis de Tocqueville, unquestionably the most important nineteenth-century commentator on American democracy. Yale and Oxford scholar Frank Prochaska's briefer *Eminent Victorians on American Democracy* provides sketches of the work of four influential British writers whose work also helped shaped attitudes about the United States during the century.

Kaledin's study of Tocqueville, which in some sense could be described as an intellectual biography, is organized topically rather than chronologically. He sketches the events of Tocqueville's life in a brief introduction before taking up topics he considers important to Tocqueville and the intended audience of his book – his French contemporaries. Part I of *Tocqueville and His America* is an extended analysis of Tocqueville's personality, an understanding of which, Kaledin says, is critical to understanding his approach to the subject that occupies him in both volumes of *Democracy in America*: the possibility that America's experiment with democracy may provide a model for other nations, especially ones that, like France, have moved beyond monarchy and aristocratic rule. In Part II, Kaledin examines Tocqueville's attitude toward politics, which he

considered a vocation and a duty for men like himself (*viz.*, those born into the upper classes). Part III focuses on Tocqueville's writing of *Democracy in America*, exploring his motives and methods. The final section – and perhaps the most intriguing for anyone not familiar with the genesis of Tocqueville's study – is a comparison of Tocqueville's notebooks with the published text and Tocqueville's musings on the prospects of success for the American experiment.

Some of Kaledin's observations may surprise those not particularly familiar with Tocqueville's work (especially those who know it principally through quotes used by both conservatives and liberals to justify perceptions about the United States that suit their political biases). First is his acknowledgment that Tocqueville's approach for gathering information about the fledgling democracy was not the most scientific. Most of those interviewed by Tocqueville were from the more affluent or well-connected segments (one hesitates to use the word "classes") of American society. He rarely spoke with working-class men and women. Kaledin believes Tocqueville accepted much of what he was told on face value, seldom stopping to verify information given to him by his sources. Also, Kaledin notes, Tocqueville was much more concerned with the benefits of liberty than he was with the notion of equality. In fact, he seems to have believed that some groups (again, one could read "classes") – those with better education, preparation for public life, and financial means to allow them to serve the general good rather than focus on their own and their families' subsistence – were more suited to govern. Such ideas would not have sat well with the average nineteenth-century American, but they seem to have disappeared over time from the American public's understanding of Tocqueville as he has been raised to the status of "Defender of the Faith" for American democracy.

Whether it was Tocqueville's genuine prescience or simply the inevitable conclusions an aristocrat might draw from contemplating the long-term effects of democratic governance, Kaledin says he feared the consequences of "the democratic disdain for formality and its chronic disregard for limits." The "age of equality" he discovered coming into its

own in the United States ultimately seemed to him to be “a time of moral uncertainty and expediency,” neither of which, he believed, boded well for the future of any nation. There may be other ways to read Tocqueville, but Kaledin makes a fairly convincing argument that this great champion of America’s experiment with democracy saw clearly that the political and social framework of the nation contained within it the elements that could easily lead to its demise.

Throughout *Tocqueville and His America* Kaledin places stress on the theme expressed in the subtitle of his study: Tocqueville’s “dark vision” regarding the future of democracy in America. The French aristocrat perceived an inherent weakness in the pursuit of the American Dream, at least as it was conceived and being lived out in the 1830s. Pursuing a better life and reinventing oneself without regard to the artificial boundaries of class that existed throughout Europe may have sounded appealing, but Tocqueville worried that the monomaniacal focus on self-interest would have long-term deleterious effects on the public good. That vision does not always square with received knowledge about Tocqueville’s groundbreaking study. For many he is the enlightened foreigner who realized, despite the biases that naturally come with aristocratic upbringing, that American democracy was, to use an anthropomorphic metaphor, “the coming Man.” Unfortunately, Kaledin says, a close reading of both volumes of *Democracy in America* puts the lie to such optimistic views. Unlike many who have appropriated Tocqueville for their own use, Tocqueville himself saw weaknesses in American democracy. He was specifically concerned about what he called the tyranny of the majority – the possibility that dissenting minority voices would be silenced by those who opposed their views. He was also concerned that the best and the brightest chose to avoid public service, leaving governance to a group that was either ill-prepared by education and intellect to handle the job or too focused on self-promotion or personal gain to be trusted with it.

In writing about the influence of *Democracy in America* among Tocqueville’s contemporaries, Kaledin makes special mention of the role the book played in shaping British political theorist John Stuart Mill’s views of

democratic governance. This theme is taken up by Frank Prochaska in a chapter of *Eminent Victorians on American Democracy*, which can be read as a kind of follow-on study that shows how the English, forefathers to Americans in more ways than one, viewed the development of this new form of government created by their former colonies. To many Victorians, Americans must have appeared almost fanatical in attempting to cast off any trace of Englishness and demonstrate that the United States was a new nation not only in its territorial boundaries but in its ideology.

Prochaska's study is briefer than Kaledin's and yet considerably wider in focus, concentrating on the writings of four men who were recognized by their contemporaries as leading intellectuals: journalist, essayist, and political writer John Stuart Mill; polymath editor of the *Economist* Walter Bagehot; distinguished legal scholar Henry Maine; and historian-turned-politician James Bryce. The four were all well respected in their own day, although only Mill still commands wide readership and scholarly attention. They are hardly a homogeneous group, either. Mill and Bagehot, and to a certain extent Bryce, were liberals, while Maine was a staunch conservative. Perhaps it is simply a characteristic of the Victorians to pontificate without benefit of direct experience, but it is a curious fact that three of the four men Prochaska profiles never set foot on American soil. Only Bryce spent any time in the United States. Inter-Atlantic exchanges were commonplace, of course, and documents were readily available, so it is not surprising that these men could formulate ideas about America. All four were influenced in some way by Tocqueville as well.

Prochaska prefaces his discussion of these four Eminent Victorians with a brief explanation of how the United States Constitution became a sacred text for Americans. At the same time that Americans were learning to venerate their founding document, British thinkers and political scientists (if the term can be applied retroactively to a group who may have never heard it), stung by the excesses of the French Revolution, retained a healthy skepticism for democracy as a concept – and especially for a supposedly democratic nation that maintained a system of slavery. Furthermore, many Britons – among them the four subjects of his study – had a hard time

thinking of Americans as little more than Britons abroad, and many saw in the U.S. Constitution the strong influence of English law as embodied in that country's unwritten Constitution.

Each of the four Victorians is the subject of a separate chapter in Prochaska's book. Much of his commentary is summative, describing the key points of each man's writings on America, or more specifically on the U.S. Constitution and laws emerging from it. In writing about Mill and Bryce, Prochaska does include some observations on their discussions of the larger issue of cultural democracy, but his critiques of Maine and Bagehot focus almost exclusively on matters of law. Prochaska attempts to encapsulate each one's position in order to differentiate them and identify their unique contributions to the Victorians' understanding of the practice of democratic government in the United States. For Mill, the distinction lies in his fear that democracy inexorably eliminates outliers and forces people to conform to cultural and political norms – what he described as “the tyranny of conformity.” Bagehot feared the “tyranny of the Constitution,” suggesting repeatedly that the written document would ossify government in an eighteenth-century straitjacket and make it difficult, if not impossible, for politicians of later generations to solve problems the likes of which the Founding Fathers could never have imagined. Conversely, Maine applauds the presence of a written Constitution in America, arguing that it is one way to slow down radicalism; if laws must pass Constitutional muster and the Constitution is difficult to change, it is more likely that the status quo will be preserved.

Bryce may be the closest of the four to Tocqueville in his understanding of American democracy in all its facets. Where others wrote treatises on democracy or articles about the United States based on second-hand information, Bryce spent a good bit of his lifetime in America, talking with Americans of all persuasions, teaching at an American university (Johns Hopkins) and visiting others, and serving as a diplomat in Washington. His treatise on the United States, *The American Commonwealth*, reflects his frequent visits. In retrospect, some might say it is too reflective and not critical enough, and, as Johnson said of *Paradise Lost*, none ever wished it

longer than the 1,500 pages that Bryce cadged together from his observations, interviews, and reading. The popularity of the work among American and British audiences, however, is unquestionable. The work went through several editions between 1889 and 1915, and sparked the publication of a study guide issued in 1903 for students using *The American Commonwealth* as a text.

What unites all four writers is their belief that the best of American democracy can be traced back to British sources. This partisan attitude should surprise no one familiar with Anglo-American relationships in the nineteenth century, and to his credit Prochaska avoids this kind of chauvinism in his own critiques. In fact, Prochaska, who holds dual citizenship in the United States and United Kingdom, seems uniquely qualified to assess the work of British writers taking America as their subject. Only occasionally in *Eminent Victorians on American Democracy* does he reveal his own bias in favor of some of the conclusions reached by all four of the men whose work he profiles. His views about the derivative nature of American democracy are more apparent, however, in an earlier publication, *The Eagle and The Crown* (2008), in which he explores Americans' fascination with the British monarchy.

It is hard to think of Prochaska or any of the men he writes about subscribing to the much-touted notion of American exceptionalism. And if Tocqueville seems to support such a notion, both Kaledin and Prochaska would claim he was writing about what he saw at a particular historical moment, not about an existential condition that can justify the actions of the United States on the world stage for all times and in all circumstances. For these nineteenth-century writers and the two scholars who present their views in these two books, exceptionalism is just one of several myths about America that deserve study and revision. In this light, Prochaska's stated purpose for his study might be taken as a thesis for both his and Kaledin's books: "This book will have served its purpose," he says in the Preface, "if it encourages readers to return to the writings of these exceptional thinkers, whose trenchant commentary on America punctures several modern-day myths."

I would like to conclude this review by turning to the broader issues of American culture about which Tocqueville, Mill, and Bryce had something to say and to which Bagehot and Maine allude occasionally. Both Mill and Tocqueville were concerned about the influence of material culture in America, fearing that the pursuit of wealth and comfort at the expense of service to the public good may eventually erode democracy and make it ineffective. Mill more than Tocqueville feared that the rise of cultural democracy would have deleterious effects on the governance of the nation. One cannot say that either warned specifically against the present status of American culture as a threat to democracy, but it is easy to imagine what they would have said about a society that reveres reality television stars and puts the latest bad behavior of celebrities on a par with the country's concern about civil war in Syria or the growing of entitlements that exceed the nation's ability to pay. Bagehot may have simply said, "I told you so," implying that any government that tries to deal with modern problems by relying on a document created more than two centuries earlier is simply getting what it deserves. Maine probably would have noted that focus on ephemera is not so bad if it keeps mob rule at bay – an attitude eerily reminiscent of the "bread and circuses" mentality that Roman leaders used with some success in controlling disgruntled citizens. Bryce, who thought that what was best about America could be traced to its British roots, might be the most exasperated, because the twenty-first century tendency toward celebrity-worship and instant gratification cannot be seen as isolated to America, since the trend may be even worse in twenty-first century Britain. The fact remains that, whether liberal or conservative, these foreign commentators have proven to be prescient about the democracy that has evolved in America – for good or ill.

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