Fragile democracy

By Richard A. Kauffman
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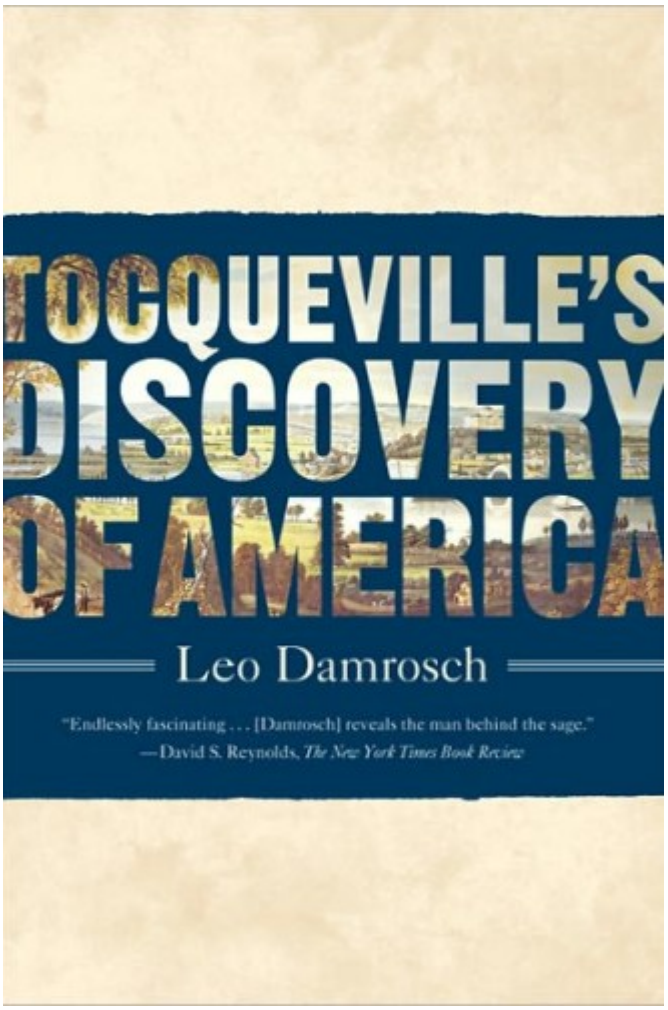
In Review



Tocqueville's Discovery of America

By Leo Damrosch
Farrar, Straus and Giroux

In 1831-32 two young Frenchmen, Alexis de Tocqueville and Gustave de Beaumont, traveled through the United States, ostensibly to study the prison system on behalf of the French government. But the prisons bored and often appalled them--Quaker-inspired prisons in Philadelphia being the exception--so they spent very little time in prisons.

Instead, like amateur anthropologists, they traveled through this relatively new nation, exploring its landscapes and mindset. Engaging in conversation with learned lawyers and simple farmers, they took copious notes. What resulted was Tocqueville's classic book *Democracy in America*, which is still worth reading today.

Randall Steven's review in the spring books issue of the *Century* inspired me to read *Tocqueville's Discovery of America* by Leo Damrosch. Damrosch, a Harvard literature professor, provides a riveting and provocative account of Tocqueville and Beumont's travels and their encounters with people along the way. What is so striking to me is how formed the "American character" was already by the 1830s--and how the issues the fledgling country was dealing with then are still with us today.

The great paradox of American society, Tocqueville discovered, was that it is a nation of individualists who, nevertheless, are deeply conformist. While all people are considered equal, and there is no true system of nobility, people are distinguished by the amount of wealth they are able to accrue. Americans had discovered good fortune, but not happiness--making Tocqueville wonder why they seemed to be so restless in the midst of their wellbeing. It was this restlessness that spurred the westward movement and drove the entrepreneurial engine of innovation and industriousness.

Tocqueville, an aristocrat himself, saw two distinct classes growing in the U.S.: the rich and the poor, which he construed as "two distinct nations within the same nation." He envisioned the emergence of a class of industrial capitalists who "lay down

the law" and are not committed to the welfare of their workers. By this time people were becoming convinced that assisting the poor encouraged them in dissolute living and irresponsibility.

Tocqueville
sensed a rapacious attitude toward natural resources, especially on the frontier. And Tocqueville and Beaumont were particularly put off by the genocidal treatment of native peoples, whom they saw as a noble people whose culture was being snatched from them. While Tocqueville was pessimistic about the prospect of radical change, he was dumbfounded by the scourge of slavery in the South and by racist attitudes in both the North and the South.

Captivated by
this American experiment in democracy, Tocqueville wanted to learn what he could that might apply back home in France. He saw how dynamic democracy is, yet how unstable and even fragile. He envisioned what has come to be called "soft depotism"--the power of democratic forces that doesn't break peoples' wills but softens and bends them, making them willing subjects, all the more so because they think they are actually free.

Perhaps there is
no greater instance of this soft despotism than during wartime. "There are two things that will always be difficult for a democratic people-to begin a war, and to end it," Tocqueville says. (Shades of Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan?) He saw the danger of the centralization of power, especially during war: "There can be no war that, in a democratic country, does not put liberty at risk... War doesn't always deliver people over to military rule, but it cannot fail to increase enormously the power of civil government."

The fragility and instability
of democracy as Tocqueville saw it brings to mind an anecdote about Ben Franklin from decades earlier. At the end of the Constitutional Convention in 1787, a woman supposedly asked Franklin, "Well, Doctor, what have we got-a Republic or a Monarchy?"

Franklin's
reply: "A Republic, if you can keep it." That's still the question: can we keep this democracy of ours?