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Tocqueville Reinvented or 'Democracy in Brazil'

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Why reinvent Tocqueville?

There exists at least one formal reason for rereading the classic text *Democracy in America* by Alexis de Tocqueville: the recent commemoration of the bicentenary of his birth has revived the debate about democracy within the contexts both of the new and the old world, and has given rise to an anthology published under the title of *Tocqueville et l'esprit de la democratie* (Tocqueville and the Spirit of Democracy). Produced under the direction of Laurence Guellec, this special number of the journal *La revue Tocqueville/Tocqueville Review* has brought together contributions by François Furet, Raymond Aron, Claude Lefort, Olivier Zunz (President of the Tocqueville Society) and many others. In his introduction, Laurence Guellec speaks of a 'rediscovered' or 'relocated' Tocqueville, as though he had become lost over the two centuries which separate us from his birth on the 29th July 1805.

In his work *Étapes de la pensée sociologique* (Main Currents in Sociological Thought), Raymond Aron (1967) situates Tocqueville on the same theoretical and political plane as Marx, in the context of revolutionary 19th century thought which brought modernity to Europe. He admits there, however, that throughout his university career it was never necessary for him to read Tocqueville, something he did not turn to until taking up a chair in sociology at the University of Paris. Aron thereby bears witness to the little attention paid by 20th century French intellectuals to the classic works of Alexis de Tocqueville, something the *Grand Larousse* implicitly confirms by devoting only a meagre article of scarcely twenty-two lines to the author and his body of work. In contrast, the *Britannica Macropaedia* devotes six extensive columns to him, and it was the United States which saw the birth of a Tocqueville Society whose objectives included the discussion of his works and the publication of commemorative editions. Granted, it is a fallacy that the importance of an opus can be measured simply by the number of lines or pages that its commentators devote to it.

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Nevertheless, whatever the level of attention accorded to him, a dip into Tocqueville's writings would be sufficient to persuade anyone interested in the question of democracy of their supreme importance and actuality.

As Olivier Zunz (2005) pointed out, Tocqueville's notion of democratic freedom derived from three sources: his appreciation of the independence of the individual (an inheritance from his aristocratic ancestors), the idea of citizen participation (derived from the classical thought of ancient Greece) and the principle of equal rights for all – a legacy of Christian morality. In turn, François Furet (2005: 121), notes that Tocqueville's thought was sustained by influences of Pascal, Montesquieu, Madame de Staël and in all likelihood Rousseau and the Encyclopaedists. But the most powerful formative influence on the mind of this precursor of political science and sociology was the experience in democracy and republicanism which took root in the United States following the Declaration of Independence.

At the age of 25, Tocqueville had set out for the United States with his friend Beaumont on a semi-official mission to study the penitentiary regime of the new American republic, on which he was to present a long report to the French government. It is clear that over the nine months that they spent in the New World (between 1831 and 1832), the two travellers had the opportunity to study and assess the extent to which democracy had become embedded in American society, and to analyse its causes and consequences, its failures and its successes. The first part of his classic work *Democracy in America*, published in 1835, made Tocqueville famous in the United States, in Great Britain and in France, both for the exceptional qualities of his analyses as for his intuitions and for the admiration that he demonstrated with regard to the democratic structures of American society and its institutions. In 1840 a second volume appeared, though with a less enthusiastic tone, which was to be subsequently complemented by an evaluation of the Ancien Régime.

There is no doubt that, through his books and his political activity, Tocqueville strove to provide his contemporaries with a favourable impression of the nature of democracy. Those who sought better to understand the American political system based on republican and democratic values found in his book a sort of politically instructional road map for the implantation in other societies, including French society, (buffeted as it was by the Revolution of 1789, the Napoleonic wars and the aristocratic Restoration in the early years of the 19th century) of the principles of liberty, equality and democracy, while avoiding the possible risks and deviations that could ensue.

My intention in this article is to examine how applicable this road map has been in the context of Brazil, by examining the similarities and differences between the socio-political evolution of this southern colony and that of the great American colony of the northern hemisphere.

Tocqueville and Brazil

When I once again picked up Tocqueville's book, which was required reading in my sociology programme at the Free University of Berlin in the 1960s, I put a very specific question to myself: what does the work *Democracy in America*, written forty

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years after American independence, have to say to us who are living here in South America, more than 180 years after the independence of Brazil and more than 115 years after the proclamation of the Brazilian Republic? To what extent is the analysis developed by Tocqueville in relation to the United States applicable to the situation of Brazil? And how far might the risks and the potential consequences of the process noted by Tocqueville and Beaumont in the United States in 1831–32 serve as examples for avoiding errors and deviations in the construction and consolidation of a democratic society in Brazil?

One surprising observation is Tocqueville's declaration that equality is not a simple gift of providence, but a process that visibly moves inexorably forward and which nothing can stop. In the words of Emile Durkheim, we are confronted by a veritable 'social *factum*' that is coercive in nature and independent of our consciousness and of our will. But let us read the words of Tocqueville himself, in a 1966 American translation:

> No novelty in the United States struck me more vividly during my stay there than the equality of conditions. It was easy to see the immense influence of this basic fact on the whole course of society. It gives a particular turn to public opinion and a particular twist to the laws, new maxims to those who govern and particular habits to the governed (1966: 9).
>
> Therefore, the gradual process of equality is something fated. The main features of this progress are the following: it is universal and permanent, it is daily passing beyond human control and every event and every man helps it along. [. . .] Hence democracy has been left to its wild instincts; it has grown up like those children deprived of parental care who school themselves in our town streets and know nothing of society but its vices and wretchedness (1966: 12–13).

How can this surprising eventuality be explained? Among its causes, Tocqueville lists the act of emigration, the nature of the settlers and the native conditions of the new colony. The emigration of settlers from England to the New World was the direct result of religious persecutions orchestrated by the English crown. The first settlers, coming as the *Pilgrim Fathers*, arrived on the east coast of the future United States imbued with a strong religious outlook; they were poor and prepared to work hard on the land, of which there was plenty to be had in the new colony. Although they came from different parts of England, these pilgrims spoke the same language (English), held firmly to the same types of institutions (family, political association, religious denomination) and respected the same established laws. These immigrants upheld a concept of civil and moral liberty founded on the idea of union:

> It is a liberty for only that which is just and good; for this liberty you are to stand with the hazard of your very lives . . . (1966: 46)[1]

But Tocqueville admits that civil and moral freedom was not the fundamental driving force of the first settlers in America. Liberty was more than anything the means of reaching a state of equality, a value for which it was worth dying:

> It is not that peoples with a democratic social state naturally scorn freedom; on the

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> contrary, they have an instinctive taste for it. But freedom is not the chief and continual object of their desires; it is equality for which they feel an eternal love; they rush on freedom with quick and sudden impulses, but if they miss their mark they resign themselves to their disappointment; but nothing will satisfy them without equality, and they would rather die than lose it (1966: 57).

One can observe in Tocqueville's idealization of the democracy of the *Founding Fathers* a strict order of values: first and foremost is equality (the equality of social status) which guarantees that no person is socially ranked above another, for there are no rights of blood accorded by birth which grant to one settler a social status higher or lower than any other. Such a notion of equality has religious roots (the idea that all are equal before God) and was to occupy a fundamental place in the future constitutions of the American states. Well embedded in the law, equality would guarantee to every American citizen the same treatment, the same rights and the same duties before the law.

A comparison between the North American and Brazilian colonial processes, however, reveals more differences than similarities. In the 16th and 17th centuries, the population of Portugal was relatively small in relation to the size and extent of its colonies in Asia, Africa and South America. The coasts of Brazil swarmed with adventurers (one of the most notable of whom was the so-called Caramuru[2]), as well as with escaped prisoners, criminals and royal administrators (like Martim Afonso de Souza), all intent solely on laying their hands on the gold and silver of the new Portuguese colony in America and little disposed towards settling down with their families in the Brazilian territories to cultivate the soil and set up colonies derived from a religious concept of the world.

Reports of the existence of a fabulously rich native kingdom on the crest of great snowy mountains are thought to have encouraged King John III of Portugal to send Martim Afonso, a Portuguese noble who was his childhood companion, on an expedition to the southern coasts of Brazil in search of a path to this mythical mountain. It was believed to be located in a mysterious 'Sierra del Plata' (Silver Range) in the direction of the territory of the 'White King' – probably a reference to the Inca Empire (Bueno, 2006). It is known that Martim Afonso de Souza, after surviving a shipwreck in the River Plate estuary, had temporarily settled at São Vicente. After a fruitless search for the legendary empire at the head of a small expedition, his brother, Pero Lopes, decided to return to Portugal. Even though the king had granted them vice-regal authority over several 'captaincies' in Brazil, the two brothers preferred to sail back to Portugal and then to the Indies, where Martim Afonso would meet his death (Bueno, 2006: 17–67).

In her fine work *Sol e Sombras* (*Sun and Shadows*), Laura de Mello e Souza addresses the Portuguese administration of Brazil in the 17th century, and provides confirmation of the predilection for wandering and adventure of the Portuguese colonizers: isolated individuals and administrators for whom their record in history is due only to their roles as representatives of Portuguese interests in the various colonies (Mozambique, Angola, Brazil, India). One such was Rodrigo César de Meneses, who divided his time between the sea and the remote interior (where he searched for gold in the Mato Grosso and in the Goiás region), and spent alternate periods as an

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administrator in Angola and Brazil. It seems ironic that, while leaving Angola following a change of post decided by the King of Portugal, he succumbed to illness during the voyage to Brazil, where his body was received with all the ceremonial funeral honours due to his rank. On the map of Guanabara Bay are inscribed the fortresses of Santa Cruz and of São José, which were reported to have discharged volleys of cannon fire 'in salute of his mortal remains' (de Mello e Souza, 2006: 191 and 193). The documents examined by Laura de Mello e Souza reveal, in this specific case as in others, the ambiguity with which the contradictory figure of the administrator was clothed, often being at once a hero and adventurer, a noble and a thief.

If the principle of liberty was respected at least in form, the same could not be said for that of equality, such as had animated the American model from the beginning of English colonization there. Whereas the whole strategy of the colonization of North America was based around the pursuit of religious freedom, and incorporated the family as the essential agricultural unit, the colonization of Brazil was sporadic, non-systematic and built upon the ambition of bold adventurers who had no other ambition than to return to Portugal to enjoy the benefits of their new-found wealth. The economic substrates of the two colonies were thus profoundly different.

A difference may also be observed in relation to respect for the law. From the first, law was at the heart of the growing American society; all were equal before it and the law in turn served to strengthen and consolidate that equality. Brazilian society on the other hand never knew such a consensus around respect for the law. Whatever conceptions of legality that there were were articulated differently according to the social classes and power hierarchies from which individuals sprang – as is clearly indicated by a popular saying quite common in Brazil: 'For friends there's everything, for enemies there's the law'.

In his book *A casa e a rua* (House and Street), the anthropologist Roberto da Matta (1991) highlights another 'Brazilian exception' concerning the law: when a police officer has the audacity to question a judge or a celebrity whose car is illegally parked, he often hears himself being asked: 'Do you know who you are speaking to?' He is thus given to understand that the offender's rank in the social hierarchy is above the law.

Quite clearly, however, the conditions prevailing at the start of the colonial era changed considerably over the centuries, and there was a general similarity that developed between the forms of colonization that emerged in the southern states of the United States and those of the Brazilian North-east: both were based on plantation economies with export-oriented monocultures depending on labour provided by slaves. As regards the Brazilian situation, an excellent analysis was undertaken by Gilberto Freyre (1956). This type of colonization, which became established in Brazil in the 16th century and in North America from the 17th century, introduced the seeds of discord and inequality within their respective societies.

As they travelled through the United States, Alexis de Tocqueville and Gustave de Beaumont were eye-witnesses to the social inequality between the three racial groups which made up American society: the European, composed of immigrants from England, the native American, made up of nomadic tribespeoples who lived in the territories henceforth occupied by the immigrants, and the African, consisting of slaves introduced from Africa to work the plantations of the southern colonies. How

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then did Tocqueville reconcile this observation with his unshakeable conviction of the historical evolution towards the establishment and consolidation of equality among men?

Let us examine firstly the circumstances of the indigenous peoples. While on a journey to the Canadian frontier, the author witnessed the migration of the Choctaw, who were forced to abandon their original tribal lands and cross the Mississippi river one freezing winter in conditions to which these peoples were not accustomed. For Tocqueville, it was a shocking sight:

> [. . .] the snow was hard on the ground, and huge masses of ice drifted on the river. The Indians brought their families with them; there were among them the wounded, the sick, new-born babies, and old men on the point of death. They had neither tents nor wagons, but only some provisions and weapons.
>
> I saw them embark to cross the great river, and the sight will never fade from my memory. Neither sob nor complaint arose from that silent assembly. Their afflictions were of long standing, and they felt them to be irremediable (1966: 324).

Tocqueville, however, explains the totally legal character of this dramatic event, based as it was on the law of the white man, the law of farmers, cowmen and traders. These newcomers had learned how to buy land off the native Americans, applying their property laws in exchange for money or for pots and pans whose value the Indians were unable to assess. Despoiled and uprooted as a result, the latter were forced to move away towards the deserts of the interior of the continent and the Pacific coast. A number of these ethnic communities which the English had encountered early in the colonial period had already died out and the same fate was awaiting those who remained. Tocqueville's prediction as to their chances of survival was grim: either they would fling themselves into the sea, resigning themselves to extermination, or they would become integrated into the society being created by the whites by becoming subordinate to them.

> From whatever angle one regards the destinies of the North American natives, one sees nothing but irremediable ills: if they remain savages, they are driven along before the march of progress; if they try to become civilised, contact with more-civilised peoples delivers them over to oppression and misery. If they go on wandering in the wilderness, they perish; if they attempt to settle, they perish just the same. They cannot gain enlightenment except with European help, and the approach of the Europeans corrupts them and drives them back towards barbarism. So long as they are left in their solitudes, they refuse to change their mores, and there is no time left to do this, when at last they are constrained to desire it (1966: 338–39).

Fairly similar processes were adopted in colonial Brazil even after independence, both under the monarchy and the republic, by the great oligarchs and the mining industries. The great majority of the indigenous population was exterminated or confined to indigenous reservations, which have not ceased to be threatened right up until the present day by developers, settlers, gold-miners and landless whites, all of whom are better organized, and especially, better armed than they.

Let us turn now to what happened, and what could still happen, to the peoples of

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African descent (or 'negroes', to use Tocqueville's term) who were brought to live in the United States but also in colonial Brazil. The author notes how in the United States white prejudice against the blacks increased in proportion with the gradual abolition of slavery, introduced into the North American colonies in 1621. Tocqueville implies from the start that slavery is in itself an inherent evil, that it takes the form of an 'accursed seed' (340) which feeds upon itself, propagating itself without the slightest effort and quite 'naturally' in the heart of the society that has adopted it. The author recalls that early Christianity had abolished it, but had allowed its reintroduction in the 16th century as a sort of exception within its bosom. However, whereas the Greek and Roman slaves of classical antiquity were of the same racial origins and could even be more cultured than their masters, the renewal of slavery within white European society involved principally black peoples, brought from Africa under the pretext that the wound to humanity would be slighter – but without foreseeing that the wound would be infinitely more difficult to heal. For, even after the abolition of slavery in the United States, there would remain terrible traces of it: the prejudice of the 'master', the prejudice of 'race', the prejudice of 'the white' (1966: 342).

This observation by the author of *Democracy in America* is equally valid without proviso or great adaptation for the Portuguese colonies in Brazil. From the middle of the 16th century, these had adopted the practice of slave labour for the sugar-cane plantations and later for plantations of cacao and coffee, and for mining operations (gold and silver mining in the Goiás and Minas Gerais regions).

> Race prejudice seems stronger in those states that have abolished slavery than in those where it still exists, and nowhere is it more intolerant than in those states where slavery was never known (1966: 343).

> Thus it is that in the United States the prejudice rejecting the Negroes seems to increase in proportion to their emancipation, and inequality cuts deep into mores as it is effaced from the laws (344).

In his study of American society, Tocqueville established an interesting comparison between the opposite banks of the Ohio River: the state of Kentucky, on the left bank, founded in 1775, had allowed slavery, since its economy was based on the cultivation of tobacco, cotton and sugar; on the other hand, the state of Ohio, established in 1787, had outlawed slavery and had based its workforce around the white settler, directing its economy towards industry. In 1831, when Tocqueville visited the United States, Kentucky had 688,844 inhabitants and Ohio 937,669 (hence close to a million); the former still retained its plantation economy, whereas the latter was experiencing significant industrial progress and growth in wealth.

> On the left bank of the Ohio the work is connected with the idea of slavery, but on the right with well-being and progress; on the one side it is degrading, but on the other honorable; on the left bank no white laborers are to be found, for they would be afraid of being like the slaves; for work people must rely on the Negroes; but one will never see a man of leisure on the right bank: the white man's intelligent activity is used for work of every sort (1966: 346).

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Brazil certainly followed the American model of the abolition of slavery in stages: in North America this had begun in the State of New York. In the two countries the first stage was the prohibition on the further importing of slaves from Africa, followed by the 'free belly' law, by which any child born of a slave-woman was automatically free. But Tocqueville observed that the definitive abolition of slavery was not accompanied by any real de facto liberty. As they lost their means of subsistence, many former slaves migrated towards the south; Tocqueville draws attention to the fact that abolition tended to lead to a reduction in the black populations in the northern states in favour of white immigrants, coming from Europe to swell the ranks of free white workers there. These recent immigrants thereby posed serious competition for the emancipated blacks.

These trends observed by Tocqueville in North American society were also found in Brazil once the discovery of gold in Minas Gerais brought about a transfer of labour (slaves) from the *recôncavo* region of Bahia towards Ouro Preto and neighbouring areas. From there – on depletion of the gold seams – they moved on towards coffee plantations in the Paraíba river valley. When slavery was abolished by law in 1888, many newly liberated slaves were forced to migrate towards the cities, where, often unable to find work, they lived in the streets, giving rise to the *favelas* and slums on the outskirts of cities which continue to this day (Fernandes, 1965).

What future outcome did Tocqueville imagine for American society? For him there seemed to be only two possibilities: either the whites and the blacks would become ethnically mixed and would 'mingle completely', or they would separate (355). At the very least, following the probable course of events, the abolition of slavery in the South would only tend to increase the prejudice of the white population towards the black population.

> If the whites of North America remain united, it is difficult to believe that the Negroes will escape the destruction threatening them; the sword or misery will bring them down (1966: 358).

A third option, however, was initiated in 1820 when the Society for the Colonization of Free People of Color of America, more simply known as the American Colonization Society, established in Africa, in a territory located 7 degrees north of the equator, a country which they named Liberia, so beginning a new colonization of Africa and repatriating two thousand five hundred blacks. The intention was that a new, free society should be constructed there on the white American model.

Within this article so far we have drawn attention to the different points of departure which marked the establishment of the two societies under review: the American, as analysed by Tocqueville, and the Brazilian, through the works of authors such as Laura de Mello e Souza, Gilberto Freyre, Florestan Fernandes, Celso Furtado, Sérgio Buarque de Holanda and many others. We have observed that, in the final analysis, conditions were more favourable for the formation of a democratic society in the United States than in Brazil: the English settlers landing in the new colony were driven by the desire to live in religious freedom, to cut the ties with the old country and to leave behind all social and economic distinctions. Equality for all was their abiding passion. They found in America a favourable environment: there

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were lands freely available for occupation, the settlers did not have to face a particularly hostile nature, and they managed successfully to drive off the nomadic indigenous peoples that previously occupied the lands. They were not surrounded by enemies who threatened war or invasion upon them. Hence, the families of the first settlers were able to set out on the basis of equality and constructed a society of equals, legally underpinned by various separate colonial constitutions and eventually by a Federal Constitution. Within their midst these societies set up town councils, parties, associations and communities which operated according to these constitutional precepts, the fruits of a highly developed and culturally sophisticated European society.

We noticed, however, that subsequent to the founding periods a certain coming together occurred in the process of formation of the two societies, the American and the Brazilian. This convergence was the result of emerging differences generated within the white colonial matrix itself by the confrontation of the white settlers with the indigenous peoples and the descendants of the African populations imported to serve as slave labour. The 'similarity of differences' between the American and Brazilian societies becomes clear as soon as one brings together the roles played by the three constituent ethnic groups of these societies, which, by their simple existence, link difference to inequality, thus bringing into question the egalitarian model.[3]

Over the course of several centuries, the white immigrants to the North American territories built a system of administration and of political management which has come to serve as a model for the whole world. Even if the larger part of the ideas of the Enlightenment had been generated and debated in Europe, the Americans of the New World were the first to apply them to a republican and democratic political system largely adopted subsequently throughout the western world, and also by the South American colonies, including Brazil. This model was based on the separation of the three powers: legislative, executive and judicial. The Americans were the first to divide the legislature into two chambers: the Senate and the Assembly; to introduce universal (male) suffrage as a founding component of the republic along with the election of representatives to the two Chambers, to the executive and in part to the judiciary; to 'invent' the mode of elections of the presidents through an electoral college, and to confer plenipotentiary authority to them; finally, to create the idea of federalization, empowering decentralization through regional States. These latter took to themselves powers of government sufficient to direct the affairs of their States, but subordinate to a federal power which knew skilfully how to function as a common denominator for the general interests of the Nation.

> But when one examines the Constitution of the United States, the best of all known federal constitutions, it is frightening to see how much diverse knowledge and discernment it assumes on the part of the governed. The government of the Union rests almost entirely on legal fictions. The Union is an ideal nation which exists, so to say, only in men's minds and whose extent and limits can only be discerned by the understanding.
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> When the general theory is well understood, there remain difficulties of application (1966: 164).

No Portuguese colony in the world succeeded – by its sole efforts alone – in matching this achievement. Several reasons for this have already been mentioned:

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Portuguese (and Spanish) settlers initially had no interest in establishing true colonies – in the manner of the ancient Greeks and Romans – but rather in forging extensions to their territory in order to exploit the local sources of wealth for the benefit of the home country. It was only much later, when separatist movements began taking a lead from the former English colonists, that Spanish and Portuguese colonies began to copy, and even to entirely plagiarize, the laws, institutions and certain administrative practices that had been invented by the Americans. This imitation, turned to advantage by scientific and technological inventions, still persists. Sérgio Buarque de Holanda, in his book *Raízes do Brasil* (Foundations of Brazil), and Celso Furtado, in *Formação econômica do Brasil* (The Economic Formation of Brazil), had already pointed up these differences in their analyses of the Brazilian society of the first half of the 20th century.

There remains, however, a problem. If it was difficult for the Americans to live in strict conformity with their idealized conception of a new life in the New World, how much more difficult will it have been for Brazilians, little accustomed to living within self-managed rules, norms and laws (or copied on the American model): something which may explain the imperfections of the political, administrative and social institutions of Brazilian society.

Tocqueville himself, in the second volume of his classic work, drew attention to the types of problem that the United States democratic model could throw up and which could risk undermining the very foundations of its so carefully elaborated legal structure.

We therefore intend briefly to consider two of these problems: the danger that the power wielded by the majority (of equal citizens) might become the tyranny of the majority, and that the constitution might become corrupted through the possibility of presidential re-election.

Regarding the power and tyranny of the majority, Tocqueville discusses the principle of majority in general before turning to the form it took in American society. According to him, this principle rests on the idea that a body of people together can produce more knowledge and experience than any one individual, however endowed they may be with qualities or higher intelligence. In the same way, the number of judges assessing a case is a more important criterion than their individual competence:

> The moral authority of the majority is partly based on the notion that there is more enlightenment and wisdom in a numerous assembly than in a single man, and the number of legislators is more important than how they are chosen. It is the theory of equality applied to brains. This doctrine attacks the last asylum of human pride; for that reason the minority is reluctant in admitting it and it takes a long time to get used to it. Like all powers, and perhaps more than any other of them, the power of the majority needs to have proved lasting to appear legitimate (1966: 247).

The author then remarks upon the immense power possessed by the majority in the United States and spends a little time considering the extraordinary power of public opinion. Once a majority opinion becomes formed, it is very difficult to disassemble it: on the contrary, it tends to become consolidated and to tend towards hegemonic

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character. Tocqueville perceives only two forces that may be capable of modifying an opinion once it has been formed by the collective consciousness: experience and the counter-arguments of outsiders.

The opinion put about by the Bush administration that Iraq had been producing arms of massive destruction was taken up by the majority of intellectuals and of the American people. The harsh experience of the war, which has cost thousands of human lives, has taken years to convince the Americans of their misconception. They seemed impervious to what the international media were already broadcasting right from the start of the propaganda campaign undertaken by the Bush administration. Thus, we can declare that majority opinion is today intimately linked to the presence of the cultural and media industries, which do not limit themselves to disseminating information but to the construction of facts, both real and fictitious:

> In the United States the majority undertakes to supply a multitude of ready-made opinions for the use of individuals, who are thus relieved from the necessity of forming opinions of their own. Everybody there adopts great numbers of theories, on philosophy, morals and politics, without inquiry, upon public trust; and if we examine it very closely, it will be perceived that religion itself holds sway there much less as a doctrine of revelation than as a commonly perceived opinion (Tocqueville, 1953: 10–11).

Tocqueville's powers of prophecy become evident when he shows that the power of the majority, which is capable of turning to real tyranny, operates differently in a democratic republic and in a monarchy of enlightened despots:

> In democratic republics, that is not at all how tyranny behaves. [. . .] The master no longer says: 'Think like me or you die'. He does say: 'You are free not to think as I do; you can keep your life and property and all; but from this day you are a stranger among us. You can keep your privileges in the township, but they will be useless to you, for if you solicit your fellow citizens' votes, they will not give them to you, and if you only ask for their esteem, they will make excuses for refusing that. You will remain among men, but you will lose your rights to count as one' (1966: 255–256).

In such manner the Americans (and the citizens of any future democracy) are capable of giving up their reasoning, their free will, even their role as citizens for fear of being rejected by the majority and losing their own place within society. Their former moral and political strength as enlightened individuals becomes dissipated within the democratic mass of society, turning citizens into little more than sheep blindly following their leader, such as Rabelais described in *Le Quart Livre*. This discussion around the process leading to the formation of unidimensional political attitudes was taken up by the philosophers of the Frankfurt School and theorized by modernity through the concept of the 'cultural industry'. But it was already present in the reasoning of Tocqueville:

> I seek to trace the novel features under which despotism may appear in the world. The first thing that strikes the observation is an innumerable multitude of men, all equal and alike, incessantly endeavoring to procure the petty and paltry pleasures with which they glut their lives. Each of them, living apart, is as a stranger to the fate of all the rest; his children

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> and his private friends constitute to him the whole of mankind. As for the rest of his fellow citizens, he is close to them, but he does not see them; he touches them, but he does not feel them; he exists only in himself and for himself alone; and if his kindred still remain to him, he may be said at any rate to have lost his country (1953: 318).

It is interesting to note that the more despotic the power of the majority becomes against the individual, the more the latter, even should he be the President, becomes subordinate to the majority will. This can be observed in Tocqueville's reflections on the question of the re-election of the President, in relation to which the author formulates two critical points:

1. Given that the prospect of re-election begins to occupy minds from the moment a president's first term begins, it distorts his whole management and that of his government, thus exercising a 'corrupting influence'. Re-election tends thus to sap the political morality of the people, replacing this by patriotism (1966: 137);
2. The President, in order to ensure his re-election, turns himself into the docile instrument of the majority.

The principle of re-election, introduced as part of the Constitution, partly undermines the legal edifice constructed by the Constituent Assembly, which had conferred great power on the President, since the submission of the Head of State to the will of the majority takes away from him the wish to make use of this power:

> Reeligible (and this is especially true in our day, when political morality is growing lax and men of great character are disappearing from the scene), the President of the United States is only a docile instrument in the hands of the majority. He loves what it loves and hates what it hates; he sails ahead of its desires, anticipating its complaints and bending to its slightest wishes; the lawgivers wished him to guide it, but it is he who follows (1966: 138).

All it needs is to translate this text into Portuguese and to the Brazilian political context, substituting 'President of the United States' with 'President of Brazil', and we have clear proof of the actuality and clairvoyance of the intuitions of Alexis de Tocqueville concerning 'democracy in America', meaning in this case concerning democracy in Brazil.

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Notes

1. [*Translator's note*] Tocqueville is here quoting from Cotton Mather's *Magnalia Christi Americana*, first published in 1702. The reference Tocqueville gave was to Vol. 2, p. 13 of this publication. However, J. P. Mayer, editor of the 1966 American translation of *Democracy in America* comments in relation to this quotation: 'Tocqueville's reference is faulty. The passage is to be found in the 1820 Hartford edition, which Tocqueville used, Vol. 1, p. 116f.' Mayer further points out that the quotation is itself part of a speech made by John Winthrop, annually re-elected governor of the Connecticut colony from 1657 until his death in 1676.
2. Diogo Álvares Correia was a Portuguese sea-captain wrecked off the coast of Bahia, Brazil in the early 16th century. He was welcomed by the tupinambà indigenous people who gave him the name of

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Caramuru. He became a sort of resident agent for the European powers in the region, and many aristocratic families of Salvador de Bahia trace their origin to him (*Editor's note*).

3. Tocqueville no doubt rather idealized the democratic American society of the Founding Fathers. He can even be accused of a certain euro- and ethnocentrism. It is worth remembering however that Tocqueville was a French aristocrat and his fears regarding the possible deviant consequences of an excess of equality and of abuse of power by the majority were clearly obvious in the second volume of *Democracy in America*, published in 1840.

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