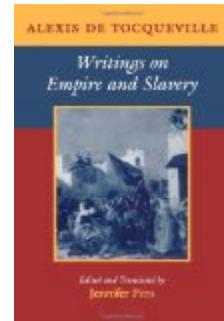


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Alexis de Tocqueville. *Writings on Empire and Slavery*. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001. xxxviii + 277 pp. \$25.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8018-7756-8; \$50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8018-6509-1.

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Liberal Imperium? Comparisons and Contradictions in a Colonial Age

Liberal Imperium? Comparisons and Contradictions in a Colonial Age

Jennifer Pitts's translation of Alexis de Tocqueville's *Writings on Empire and Slavery* brings together a series of essays, letters, and reports previously unavailable in English, tied together with a concise introduction by Pitts. The majority of the pieces represent Tocqueville's evolving thoughts on French ambitions in Algeria from 1833 to 1847, with a single piece advocating the emancipation of slaves tacked on to the end. The book's subject makes it most appealing for scholars of Tocqueville or of Algeria, specialists for whom a translation is probably not necessary. The collection of all of Tocqueville's evaluations of French empire in one place, and in English, does, however, make for an intriguing book premise. The collection provokes readers without Francophone specializations to consider an intellectual framework of colonialism while it offers valuable comparative material.

This volume makes contributions on many levels. It is clear from the introduction that Pitts herself is most interested in illuminating Tocqueville as a thinker and political practitioner. As such, the book is first and foremost an intellectual history, situating Tocqueville within currents of both liberal and imperial ideologies. A political scientist by training, Pitts is principally concerned with reconciling the apparent contradictions between Tocqueville's impassioned embrace of the liberal ideals that he found embodied in the United States with the ardent support for French imperial control in North Africa

that emerges in his writings. Thus a primary reading of *Writings on Empire and Slavery* is as a counterfoil to *Democracy in America*.

Starting from the biographical overview she provides, Pitts emphasizes the contemporary influences on Tocqueville's views of empire, exemplified by French military campaigns in and political claims to Algeria in the 1830s and 1840s. She argues that Tocqueville's support for French imperial conquest is not, in fact, at odds with the values of liberal democracy that he so prizes in his more famous work (pp. xiii, xv). The notion of rational governance is at the heart of Tocqueville's understanding of politics, and the extension of such perceived rationality over "primitive" and "tribal" peoples—as well as notions of revived French grandeur—inform his understanding of French colonial aspirations.

Since the bulk of this volume is a translated presentation of Tocqueville's views, terms such as "primitive" and "tribal" are not problematized. Nor is the teleological assumption of social development that characterizes Tocqueville's comparative politics challenged. As such, the individual essays afford the reader glimpses of nineteenth-century ethnography, both in the summarized descriptions of Berbers and Arabs contained in the 1837 "First Letter on Algeria" as well as in Tocqueville's own descriptions of French bureaucratic culture in Paris and North Africa. Thus an "against the grain" reading of the 1841 writings, "Notes on the Voyage to Algeria" and "Essay on Algeria," makes Tocqueville an unwitting

ethnographer of French colonial officials, including portrayals that are intentionally unflattering to the service of the motherland.

Tocqueville and his intellectual trajectory provide the backbone of this book, but it is informative at other levels as well. First, this collection provides a starting point for unpacking nineteenth-century colonial projects. Elements of social Darwinism (pp. 138-139), a civilizing mission (p. 26), and a search for the noble savage (pp. 6-7) all emerge in these chapters. Second, these essays force readers to recalibrate conventional colonial chronologies, firmly situating self-conscious imperial goals and preemptory strategies up to fifty years prior to the Berlin Conference.

Third, Pitts explicitly challenges readers to problematize both democracy and empire, thinking about these concepts as they were formulated by nineteenth-century policy makers responsible both for governing France and authorizing colonial expansion. In a similar vein, locating these ideas in the person of Alexis de Tocqueville forces a juxtaposition of colonization in Algeria and the United States. A Republic constantly reinventing itself throughout the nineteenth century, contesting ideals of individual liberty and representative government at home while sanctioning slavery in its Caribbean possessions and practicing ruthless military expropriation in North Africa, is no more contradictory than the slave labor and expropriation of indigenous land that underpinned the Republic that Tocqueville so admired in America.

The publication of these post-*Democracy in America* writings for the first time in English translation thus provides a valuable teaching tool for a variety of undergraduate classes, including political theory, U.S. history, African history, world history, and courses on colonialism, since it makes an important primary source accessible and affords comparative examples that help to situate U.S. history in a wider, global colonial context.

Considering these essays in the context of African history offers a way to incorporate North Africa within a narrative of colonial interactions that pays explicit attention to pre-colonial forms of social mores, political organization, and economic production—albeit through Tocqueville’s nineteenth-century European lens. The con-

cept for this volume is utilitarian and informative. Some aspects of the work, such as the juxtaposition of liberalism and colonialism, are decidedly provocative. But on the whole, the book is uneven, as collections tend to be. Pitts’s introduction provides valuable background information, as well as setting up the major theoretical contradictions between Republican sentiments and the quest for empire. Her editorial comments highlight translation subtleties and identify major interpretive debates about Tocqueville’s *oeuvre*. She provides detailed biographical sketches of the many people mentioned in Tocqueville’s reports, and takes pains to paint the historical debates and contingencies shaping Tocqueville’s world view at the time he wrote each section, making this a scholarly contribution rather than simply a reiteration of nineteenth-century texts. It is rather Tocqueville’s own words—or the editor’s choice about what to include—that raises questions.

The two parliamentary reports about conditions in Algeria (1847) provide detailed information concerning economic production, local governance, and colonial prospects for the French. Like the 1846 Debate on Special Funding, the tone of these chapters is functional. Together, these three sections comprise the greatest proportion of the book. But they are not the most engaging parts. Tocqueville’s impassioned arguments for emancipation (1843), his uncensored reactions in his 1841 travel notes, and the eloquent argumentation of his 1841 “Essay on Algeria” make for much better reading than the works prepared explicitly for government.

Pitts’s general introduction contains specific historical context and contemporary interpretation for each of the selections. These remarks might better have been placed at the beginning of each of Tocqueville’s texts, thereby facilitating the use of one or two pieces for undergraduate assignments, or for readers dipping into the selections most relevant to their interests.

The publication of these ten selections in English broadens the audience for a set of informative, provocative writings that will prove useful to scholars of comparative colonialism and in a wide spectrum of undergraduate teaching. For Africanists, this volume offers points of comparison north of the Sahara and valuable source material for considering European colonial motivations.

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