

Empire and Democracy: Tocqueville and the Algeria Question*

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It is one thing to defend one's fatherland, another to attack people who themselves have a fatherland to defend. The spirit of conquest seeks to confuse these two ideas. Some governments, when they send their armies from one pole to the other, still talk about the defence of their hearths; one would think they call all the places to which they set fire their hearths.

Benjamin Constant, *The Spirit of Conquest and Usurpation* (1814)

I have no doubt that we can raise on the coast of Africa a great monument to the glory of our country.

Alexis de Tocqueville, *Second letter on Algeria* (1837)

I. INTRODUCTION:

TOCQUEVILLE AND THE LIBERAL *VOLTE-FACE*

IN the closing years of the eighteenth century, a great intellectual and moral challenge to European empire was launched by many of the most innovative thinkers of the day, including Kant, Adam Smith, Bentham, Burke, Diderot, and Condorcet. They drew on a strikingly wide range of ideas to argue against empire: among others, the rights of man and the imperative of popular self-determination, the economic wisdom of free trade and foolishness of conquest, the corruption of natural man by a degenerate civilization, the hypocrisy required for self-governing republics to rule despotically over powerless subjects, and the impossibility of sustaining freedom at home while practicing despotism abroad. European explorers, wrote Denis Diderot in 1780,

arrive in a region of the New World unoccupied by anyone from the Old World, and immediately bury a small strip of metal on which they have engraved these words: *This country belongs to us*. And why does it belong to you? . . . You have no right to the natural products of the country where you land, and you claim a right over your fellow men. Instead of recognizing this man as a brother, you only see him as a slave, a beast of burden. Oh my fellow citizens!¹

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¹Diderot, *Political Writings*, ed. John Hope Mason and Robert Wokler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 177. This passage appeared in the *Histoire des Deux Indes*, 3rd edn (Neuchâtel and Geneva: Libraires associés, 1783), bk 8, ch. I.iv.

While Diderot's anti-imperialism was among the most radical and thoroughgoing, skepticism about both particular imperial ventures and the general project of unlimited expansion was, by the 1780s, almost received wisdom among liberal intellectuals. Just fifty years later, however, we find no prominent thinkers in Europe criticizing the European imperial project. Indeed, the greatest liberals of the nineteenth century, including J. S. Mill and Tocqueville, were avid imperialists. "Despotism," wrote Mill in a typical passage, "is a legitimate mode of government in dealing with barbarians, provided the end be their improvement."² Mill and Tocqueville were supported in their enthusiasm for empire by many of their liberal contemporaries as well as by other political thinkers of their age, including Hegel and even Marx to some degree.

This sea change in liberal opinions on empire during the short period from about 1780 to 1840 raises questions about the relationship between domestic and international politics, about shifting conceptions of international justice, about the relationship between political theory and political practice, and about liberal political theory. Liberalism in this context can broadly be understood as encompassing a commitment to the supreme value of freedom, equal human dignity, the rule of law, and representative democracy. One could claim that liberalism has always contained an imperialist core: that a liberal insistence on progress and establishing the rule of law at any cost has led liberals over and over again to support imperialist projects. In this view, nineteenth-century Britain and the French *mission civilisatrice* serve as typical examples of the imperialist logic of liberal political thought. Another argument might be that liberalism is inherently anti-imperialist, given its commitment to human equality and self-government: in this account, otherwise liberal thinkers who support empire merely reveal an illiberal side or smuggle illiberal ideas into their arguments.³ The first view cannot explain the wide range of thinkers rightly considered liberals who strongly opposed European imperialism, particularly in the eighteenth century. The second disregards the fact that many of the staple concepts of liberal political thought have indeed been mobilized in favor of the European imperial enterprise, and that European liberalism from Grotius onward was forged alongside, and deeply affected by, imperial expansion. Liberals—in different times and under diverse circumstances in the history of the liberal tradition—have been among imperialism's most prominent defenders and its sharpest critics. No explanation that rests on some set of basic theoretical assumptions in the

²*On Liberty* (first published 1859); in John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty and Other Writings*, ed. Stefan Collini (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 13.

³Jeremy Bentham, who wrote voluminous critiques of the French and Spanish empires, used this argument polemically when he wrote to the Spanish people that if they maintained their domination over their New World possessions, "in vain would you continue your claim to the title of liberals." Bentham was also critical of the British empire, accusing it of "denial of justice, oppression, extortion [and] despotism" and arguing that Britain should give up its colonies. See *Colonies, Commerce, and Constitutional Law*, ed. Philip Schofield (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), p. 225.

liberal tradition can possibly explain such flexibility on the question of empire: liberalism does not lead ineluctably either to imperialism or anti-imperialism. Rather, we must investigate the pressures and anxieties of certain historical moments to understand how thinkers whom we understand to exist within a broad but identifiable tradition could have disagreed so thoroughly about one of the most important political developments of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: the expansion of European colonial empires.

Post-revolutionary France offers a particularly stark example of anti-imperialism's retreat to the margins of political debate. In this essay, I examine the writings of Benjamin Constant and Alexis de Tocqueville to argue that nineteenth-century France's unstable and unsettling domestic regime led many liberals to embrace imperialism as a kind of national salvation. Indeed, thinkers across the political spectrum, from Louis Blanc on the left to François Guizot further right, changed their minds about empire at just this time, criticizing imperial expansion as immoral and destructive in the early nineteenth century, but by the 1830s and 1840s coming to support the conquest of Algeria as necessary for France, even in the face of the French army's extreme violence and cruelty.⁴ Indeed, even General Bugeaud, who oversaw the early occupation of Algeria and was behind the rash of murderous attacks on Algerian civilians, had, in an earlier incarnation, been a strongly anti-imperialist member of the French parliament.⁵ This rather desperate grasp at imperialism at a crucial moment of nation-building left its mark not only on the French nation—whose subsequent century and more of colonial rule and fight against decolonization would be considerably more violent than Britain's—but on French liberalism as well. The dominant strand of liberalism that was forged during this period was to be exclusionary and nationalist; and it would sit uneasily with the Revolution's apparent legacy of universal human equality and liberty.

Throughout the nation's succession of regimes following 1789—including Jacobin Terror, Thermidorian reaction, Bonapartist empire, right-wing and constitutional monarchies—liberal thinkers struggled with the vexed question of how France could build a stable national community in an increasingly democratic age. Tocqueville's entire intellectual and political career was devoted—quite single-mindedly if also with great variety and imagination—to this crucial problem of his era. He brought to the problem of liberal nation-building his own characteristic worry about the mediocrity, apathy, and narrow self-interest of his time and his contemporaries. Tocqueville held that the

⁴I discuss Guizot below; Louis Blanc, for his part, argued in 1844–45 that “to spread out, to overflow, is a duty. What France fails to get in heroic adventures she will get in popular risings. Her prosperity is a necessary guarantee against internal troubles.” Louis Blanc, *Histoire de Dix Ans*, v. page 504, quoted by Roger Soltau, *French Political Thought in the 19th Century* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1959), p. 98.

⁵See the biography by Antony Thrall Sullivan, *Thomas-Robert Bugeaud: France and Algeria, 1784–1849, Politics, Power, and the Good Society* (Hamden, Conn.: Archon, 1983), which includes a good account of Bugeaud's less well known early career.

country's history of powerful centralized government had weakened people's capacity for political autonomy—as they had demonstrated most clearly when the country had delivered itself to Napoleon on the Eighteenth Brumaire. He believed, however, that his contemporaries were in perhaps even greater danger than the Frenchmen of the previous generation. This judgment seemed to be vindicated in December 1851 when Napoleon's nephew, who had none of his uncle's political genius or charisma, carried off the coup that Marx would dub “the Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte.”⁶ That event would mark both the conclusion of Tocqueville's political career and the end of his involvement in Algeria.

Tocqueville's turn to Algerian colonization as a kind of solution for France's domestic political crisis—one that he clung to with sometimes desperate hope in spite of its clear moral and practical flaws—demonstrates his sense of crisis during the 1840s. It also illustrates certain ill-known contours of his liberalism: its susceptibility to the notion of national glory as a substitute for political virtue; its willing exclusion of unfamiliar peoples from moral consideration for the sake of national consolidation. Tocqueville's commitment to the colonial project, though unusual in the amount and level of scholarship it inspired, was typical of the period and was shared across an astonishingly broad political spectrum. Given the similarly widespread *hostility* to empire among political thinkers and actors of the previous generation, this new support for conquest and empire demands an explanation sensitive to historical context.⁷

Tocqueville's work finds an instructive contrast in Benjamin Constant's *On the Spirit of Conquest* of 1814, which might be seen as the last gasp of Enlightenment anti-imperialism. Though these thinkers shared quite similar political and sociological concerns about nation-building in a republican age, their work is separated by a great gulf—one that becomes perhaps most apparent when we consider their writings on empire. On the question of empire, each was in a sense representative of his age: for the political climate changed dramatically between Constant's drafting of his arguments against conquest and Tocqueville's vision of a French Algeria. Constant, who wrote as one following a strong tradition of cosmopolitanism and anti-imperialism, held that conquest by a republican nation was immoral and hypocritical, for it meant denying other peoples the freedom and self-government that the nation claimed for itself. Tocqueville, too, saw himself as an enlightened liberal; yet, in the political climate of his day, he could

⁶For some of the most celebrated nineteenth-century commentaries on this event, including Tocqueville's letter to the London *Times* defending his colleagues in the National Assembly, see *December 2, 1851: Contemporary writings on the Coup d'État of Louis Napoleon*, ed. John B. Halsted (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor, 1972).

⁷Tocqueville's writings on Algeria are collected, together with his writings on slavery and on the British empire in India, in Alexis de Tocqueville, (*Œuvres complètes*, ed. J. P. Mayer (Paris: Callimard, 1958–1998) volume 3,i (ed. J.-J. Chevallier and André Jardin); this edition will be cited as OC (M) and by volume, subvolume, and page number. No English translation of these writings has yet been published. I have translated and edited a broad selection of these writings, including newspaper articles, private essays and journals, and parliamentary reports and speeches, forthcoming from Johns Hopkins University Press as Alexis de Tocqueville, *Writings on Empire and Slavery*.

argue in favor of considerable violence against native Algerians without fearing that his center-left credentials would be tarnished. When Tocqueville began to examine the question of European empires in Asia and north Africa in the mid-1830s, anti-imperial arguments still existed, but it was left to fairly minor leftist politicians to expound them.⁸ Constant himself had died in December 1830, six months after France's initial capture of Algiers. Tocqueville, though determined to preserve his reputation as a center-left politician, was infuriated by the leftist deputies' anti-imperialism and considered a strongly imperialist position perfectly compatible with—indeed, indispensable to—his liberal political philosophy.⁹ Thus, despite similar sociological conceptions of modern Europe, similarly liberal political and philosophical beliefs, and strikingly similar judgments about the deep problems the Revolution had caused France, Constant and Tocqueville were driven to profoundly different views of empire because of their distinct understandings of what the modern nation signified and required, as I discuss further in section IV of this essay.

Every one of Tocqueville's works attests to his fear that French liberty was fragile, far more vulnerable than the liberty of Britain or America. This insecurity led to a deep ambivalence throughout his life about imperial aggression, so that he swung from an enthusiastic commitment to the domination of Algeria to moralistic warnings about the injustice of unleashing such violence in an enlightened age. Tocqueville's interest in Algeria had begun in the early 1830s, shortly after the French conquest of Algiers and his own return from America. Though he quickly dropped an early plan to settle in Algeria as a colonist, Tocqueville continued to study the country and its culture: he read the Quran for insight into the role of religion in Algerians' lives (and their conduct of warfare) and French bureaucratic records for what he hoped was an unbiased account of the young colony's progress. His first published writings on Algeria, written in 1837 as he sought a seat in parliament, envisioned an Algerian colony as a source of glory for France, but also expressed a hope for eventual intermarriage with Arabs and amalgamation of the two peoples into a distinct whole.¹⁰

⁸The most indefatigable among these was Amédée Desjobert, a disciple of J. B. Say and the British economists, a deputy in the Chamber from 1833 to 1848, and then a moderate member of the 1848 Constituent Assembly. For a decade Desjobert kept up an impassioned, if monotonous, stream of anti-imperialist publications: *La Question d'Alger* (1837); *l'Algérie en 1838*; *l'Algérie en 1844*; *l'Algérie en 1846*; *Algérie* (1847).

⁹As Tocqueville put it in 1841, "[t]he *liberal but not revolutionary* party, which alone suits me, does not exist, and certainly it is not given to me to create it. So I am almost alone and it only remains to me to express my individual opinion" (*Selected Letters on Politics and Society*, ed. Roger Boesche, trans. James Toupin and Roger Boesche (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), p. 156). In June 1842, he told his electorate: "I am a liberal and nothing more. I was one before 1830; I am still one"; Tocqueville, "A MM. les électeurs de l'arrondissement de Valognes," quoted by Seymour Drescher, *Tocqueville and England* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1964), p. 11. For a description of Tocqueville's annoyance at many leftists' anti-imperialism, see OC (M) 6,ii, 515.

¹⁰"Deux lettres sur l'Algérie," OC (M) 3,i 129–53. All the writings discussed in this and the following paragraph will appear in my forthcoming translation.

After his election to the Chamber of Deputies, Tocqueville came to be seen as the parliament's greatest expert on the colony. In 1841, the same year that the French began the total conquest and systematic colonization of Algeria, he made the first of his two visits to the country, for he considered direct observation crucial for an understanding of the colonial project. The essay he wrote in 1841 upon returning from his first journey shows Tocqueville at his most starkly pragmatic.¹¹ After endorsing the general goal of French domination of Algeria, Tocqueville defended the use of the most violent means as well: "I have often heard men whom I respect, but with whom I do not agree, find it wrong that we burn harvests, that we empty silos, and finally that we seize unarmed men, women, and children," he wrote. "These, in my view, are unfortunate necessities, but ones to which any people that wants to wage war on the Arabs is obliged to submit."¹² His visit had convinced him of the impossibility of racial integration; he now believed that French relations with indigenous Algerians would consist largely of violence, and he began to focus his energies on the legislation for, and administration of, the European colony. In 1847, after his second trip to the country, Tocqueville wrote two extensive parliamentary reports on Algeria to address the military's request for increased funds and forces.¹³ Tocqueville took these reports as an opportunity to outline his entire colonial policy. The colony was by this time far more secure than it had been several years earlier; the popular Arab leader Abd al-Qadir no longer posed so great a threat to French imperial designs, and French domination appeared secure. Tocqueville now allowed himself the luxury of compassion and moderation, where before he had advocated the most brutal means of subjection.

Let us not, in the middle of the nineteenth century, begin the history of the conquest of America over again. Let us not imitate the bloody examples that the opinion of the human race has stigmatized. Let us bear in mind that we would be a thousand times less excusable than those who once had the misfortune of setting such examples; for we are less fanatical than they, and we have the principles and the enlightenment that the French Revolution spread throughout the world.¹⁴

Despite such apparently humanitarian concerns, however, Tocqueville was as committed as ever at the end of his political career to maintaining French domination of Algeria.

Perhaps because of the admiration for and resentment of English success that competed within him, Tocqueville always displayed his most enthusiastically imperialist side to his English correspondents. These letters tend to be filled not just with requests for practical advice about maintaining an empire with a large

¹¹ This essay, written as a means of working out his thoughts on the "Algerian question," and in order to communicate them to Gustave de Beaumont, remained unpublished until 1962; many of its ideas, however, found their way into the speeches and reports Tocqueville made as a member of parliament. The essay is published as "Travail sur l'Algérie," in OC (M) 3, i, 213–80.

¹²"Travail sur l'Algérie," OC (M) 3,i, 226–7.

¹³OC (M) 3,i, 308–408.

¹⁴OC (M) 3,i, 329–30.

indigenous population, but also with the greatest enthusiasm about the European imperial project that Tocqueville expresses anywhere. As he wrote to Henry Reeve:

I can only rejoice in the thought of an invasion of the Celestial Empire by a European army. So at last the mobility of Europe has come to grips with Chinese immobility! It is a great event, especially if one thinks that it is only the continuation, the last in a multitude of events of the same nature all of which are pushing the European race out of its home and are successively submitting all the other races to its empire or its influence. Something more vast, more extraordinary than the establishment of the Roman Empire is growing out of our times, without anyone noticing it; it is the enslavement of four parts of the world by the fifth. Therefore, let us not slander our century and ourselves too much; the men are small, but the events are great.¹⁵

At the same time, British India stands out as the only non-French imperial project that Tocqueville did not condemn as cruel and barbarizing: he criticized the Romans and the Spanish in the New World, and he lamented the miseries created by the American settlers even if he celebrated the civilization built upon them.

Efforts to reconcile Tocqueville's widely divergent statements on politics and morality in the context of imperialism must ultimately fail.¹⁶ To dismiss the writings on empire as a mere anomaly in the context of his work as a whole, however, is to ignore important implications of his struggle, as a liberal political thinker, with one of the key questions of nineteenth-century politics. How were European societies to make the transition from the old autocratic regimes to republics without succumbing to anarchy or state terror? Tocqueville never explicitly claimed that this transition required the exploitation of non-European societies, that nation-building legitimated suspending principles of human equality and self-determination, or that French glory justified any aggression the nation could muster. Still, his writings on empire show, as no other aspect of his work does, the tremendous pressure French liberals found themselves under as they tried to carry out the work of refounding the nation in the post-Revolutionary age.¹⁷

¹⁵Letter to Henry Reeve, 12 April 1840. Tocqueville, *Selected Letters*, pp. 141–2. Tocqueville's use of the term "race" should not be interpreted as support for biological theories of European racial superiority, which he rejected explicitly. See his correspondence with Gobineau, especially OC (M) 9, pp. 201–4 (the same letter appears in translation in Tocqueville, *Selected Letters*, pp. 297–9).

¹⁶Indeed, Jon Elster makes a good case that Tocqueville is the most self-contradictory of all great political thinkers. Elster, *Political Psychology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 112.

¹⁷Recent work by scholars such as Charles Taylor and Shlomo Avineri has examined other exclusions produced by the process of democratization. Taylor, for instance, has argued that pressures to exclude vulnerable groups may be integral to the process of democratization. Both Taylor and Avineri point to the dangers that befell minority groups, especially Jews, after the break-up of the multinational Austro-Hungarian empire. Nineteenth-century France displayed another form of this homogenizing dynamic with its forced inclusion of peripheral groups such as the Basques and Bretons, a process that J. S. Mill, for his part, celebrated. Here the exclusion, as Taylor notes, is not of other people but of "other ways of being." The anti-pluralist dynamic, however, is similar. See Charles Taylor, "Dynamics of democratic exclusion," *Journal of Democracy*, 9 (1998), 143–56. Shlomo Avineri has discussed the repercussions for Jews of the downfall of the Austro-Hungarian empire in his work on Theodor Herzl ("Herzl's Diaries and Vienna Fin-de-Siècle" lecture at the Center for European Studies, Harvard University February 5, 1998).

II. NATIONS AND EMPIRES: THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The development of European countries' very self-understanding as nations coincided broadly with the expansion and consolidation of empires. In Britain, for instance, the joint processes of empire- and nation-building began with the gradual incorporation of Scotland into a British national identity following the countries' political union in 1707, and the far more partial incorporation of Ireland. The consolidation of the overseas empire noticeably furthered the assimilation of the Scots: the more ambitious Scotsmen found access to British power through stints in India, and the project of empire-building provided more of a common end than almost any other aspect of the countries' activities.¹⁸ The colonial enterprise—together with rivalry with France—thus contributed markedly to the development of a distinctly British, as opposed to English, identity. Britain was only one of the more dramatic examples of a European nation whose emerging identity as a nation was deeply bound up in its imperial enterprise. For nineteenth-century Frenchmen such as Tocqueville, the British example seemed to show that empire could help secure a sense of national identity and cohesion during difficult periods of political transition.¹⁹

At the time of the Revolution, France's own empire was at a low ebb: with the end of the Seven Years War, the French had lost their holdings in Canada to the British and relinquished their hopes for a substantial presence in India.²⁰ By the revolutionary period, France's colonial possessions in the new world were reduced to a few (commercially successful) islands populated almost exclusively by slaves. By 1790, it seemed to many that empires of vast territory and indigenous populations were a thing of the past; key revolutionary ideologues such as Sieyès and Robespierre left little indication of their views on the morality or prudence of non-European empire.²¹ By the time Benjamin Constant published

¹⁸Henry Dundas was the best known of this type, and Warren Hastings, though English, also was often accused of Scottish jobbery; the frequent English criticism of these men for *Scottish* favoritism indicates the very partial nature of the assimilation at that time. For a description of this phenomenon, as well as one of the best recent accounts of the role that empire played in the consolidation of the British nation, see Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707–1837* (London: Pimlico, 1992), pp. 117 ff.

¹⁹See Drescher 1964 for a discussion of Tocqueville's lifelong preoccupation with the example of England.

²⁰The British Empire also can be said to have encountered a crisis period in the 1770s and 1780s, with the loss of America, the precariousness of its rule in Canada, and the blocking of expansion in India by indigenous powers. See C. A. Bayly, *Imperial Meridian: The British Empire and the World, 1780–1830* (New York: Longman, 1989), especially pp. 89–99. To the rest of Europe, however, Britain seemed to have an astonishingly, and threateningly, vital empire.

²¹For several decades the French debate about empire essentially became a debate over the morality of slavery. See Anthony Pagden, *Lords of All the World: Ideologies of Empire in Spain, Britain and France 1500–1850* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1995), p. 143; and Yves Benot, *La révolution française et la fin des colonies* (Paris: Editions la Découverte, 1987). In *Black Jacobins*, C. L. R. James provides what is still one of the best accounts of the ambivalence of the French Revolutionaries regarding political independence and self-determination for the non-white residents, including mixed-race freemen, of the French colonies. Napoleon took charge of the situation, however, before Jacobin policy could be fully resolved; under Napoleon, colonial slavery and the slave trade were restored in 1802. See C. L. R. James, *Black Jacobins: Toussaint l'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*. New York: Vintage, 1963 [1938]), especially ch. 5; and Sue Peabody, "There Are No Slaves in France": *The Political Culture of Race and Slavery in the Ancien Régime* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), Epilogue.

his pamphlet *The Spirit of Conquest* in 1814, however, France (under Napoleon) had begun another round of conquests in Europe as well as a failed thrust into Egypt. Because of the political context, Constant's writings deal explicitly with the conquests in Europe. His quite sweeping arguments about the immorality of conquest and the ill effects of empire on the French national character, though, recall the more broadly anti-imperial writings of his eighteenth-century predecessors such as Diderot, Kant, and Herder.²² *The Spirit of Conquest* would be the last anti-imperial statement by a major French political thinker for decades to come.

If Constant's arguments were accepted in the France of 1814, humbled by its recent losses and preoccupied with its turbulent domestic scene, by 1830 many Frenchmen were prepared to reconsider empire. The 1830 conquest of Algiers presented the tempting possibility of an extensive new settlement colony to Frenchmen who, with considerable nationalist envy, had watched the consolidation of England's empire in India, and the stable national identity and European predominance that seemed to follow.²³ François Guizot, for one, had once decried the motiveless conquests he saw throughout modern Europe, writing that adventurers "leave their country, they abandon their proper territory, and plunge—some into Germany, others into Italy, others still into Africa—without any other motive than their personal fantasy." But by the 1830s and 1840s he was a firm supporter of the French possession of Algeria.²⁴

For his part, Tocqueville remained firmly convinced throughout his life that the colonization of Algeria was essential to France's reputation and interests. His deep concern for French reputation, and his frequent suggestions that the image of power is more important than economic solidity, recall earlier civic republicans' arguments for imperial glory rather than his Enlightenment predecessors or Constantian liberalism.²⁵ Tocqueville was not alone in his

²²Thanks to an Edinburgh education, Constant also was deeply influenced by the political and economic thinkers of the Scottish Enlightenment—Smith, Hume, Dugald Stewart—who largely opposed imperialism on free-trade grounds.

²³This was the case despite the haphazard nature of the original conquest of Algiers, which is generally (if implausibly) recounted as a hysterical response to a diplomatic slight rather than the product of any deliberate colonial project; for a succinct retelling of the flywhisk incident, the Restoration government's taking of the Casbah, and the July Monarchy's assumption of colonial "policy" shortly thereafter, see Charles-Robert Ageron, *Modern Algeria*, ed. and trans. Michael Brett (Trenton: Africa World Press, 1991), pp. 5–11. For a more critical account, see Benjamin Stora, *Histoire de l'Algérie coloniale, 1830–1954* (Paris: Éditions de Découverte, 1991).

²⁴François Guizot, *Histoire de la civilisation d'Europe* (Paris: Pichon et Didier, 1828), p. 18. In his memoirs, Guizot noted that by the 1840s although he sometimes balked at the violent methods of General Bugeaud, the man behind much of the Algerian conquest during its first two decades, "As to the necessity of completely subjugating the Arabs, and of extending French rule throughout the whole extent of Algeria, I agreed with the opinion of General Bugeaud." François Guizot, *Memoirs to Illustrate the History of My Time* (London: Richard Bentley, 1865), pp. 116–17.

²⁵On the connection between virtue and glory in the republican tradition, see J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1975). Tocqueville's position also closely resembles those of self-described conservatives such as Guizot, who saw order as his primary political objective and had no qualms about supporting the conquest of Algeria purely for the sake of French interests.

emphasis on national glory, and the faith his parliamentary colleagues placed in him as rapporteur for commissions on the Algerian question suggests a real shift in views by liberal politicians and thinkers even in the few decades that separate Constant's work from Tocqueville's. The following sections of the essay trace the development of liberalism in early-nineteenth-century France, as the anti-imperialist position, once dominant among liberals, retreated to the margins of French political debate.

III. CONSTANT: ENLIGHTENMENT'S LAST ANTI-IMPERIALIST

Although in some senses Constant eloquently encapsulated the Enlightenment case against empire, he brought distinctly nineteenth-century concerns to his work as well.²⁶ This combination makes him something of an historical anomaly, as well as a figure of importance in the story of the dramatic shift toward widespread support for imperialism. A preoccupation with the process of building a stable and cohesive liberal-democratic society in the wake of revolution saturated Constant's work just as, I will argue, it did Tocqueville's. For nineteenth-century liberals in France agreed that the greatest threat to political liberty was posed by a powerful centralized state ruling an atomized, apolitical population too weak and divided to resist.

We see a great shift, however, in views about how imperial conquest would affect this dangerous social dynamic. In 1814, Constant's hitherto consistent opposition to Napoleon took the form of a forceful assault on the emperor's militarism and expansionism in *The Spirit of Conquest and Usurpation*.²⁷ Constant's anxiety about state power merely offered him a new reason for opposition to empire, which he believed must increase the power of the state at the expense of the individual. His horror of social uniformity (shared by Tocqueville) also contributed to his anti-imperialism, for he perceived that the conquering military spirit destroys diversity just as a powerful central government does. To the army, he wrote, "laws are superfluous subtleties, the forms of social life just so many insupportable delays... Unanimity seems to them as necessary as it is for troops to wear the same uniform. Opposition, for them, is disorder."²⁸ Tyranny abroad was in fundamental contradiction with freedom at home, for men who had been corrupted by the inordinate power of

²⁶His "Enlightenment" arguments include the claims that empire is unprofitable and commerce a more efficient way of "possessing what is desired"; that conquest is driven by the narcissism of absolutist leaders and incompatible with modern republican regimes; and that it hypocritically denies other peoples the right to govern themselves.

²⁷The work was first published in Hanover in January, 1814; Constant had been in "semi-voluntary exile" since 1802 (see Biancamaria Fontana, "Introduction," Benjamin Constant, *Political Writings*, ed. Biancamaria Fontana (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 10.

²⁸Constant, *Political Writings*, p. 61.

colonial military rule would corrupt domestic politics in their turn.²⁹ To conquer others was to court despotism at home.

In Constant's work as well as in that of later anti-imperialists such as Desjobert, these concerns about blunt power were accompanied by a new interest in the ways that a powerful state could manipulate public opinion and manufacture support for projects they believed were fundamentally not in the public interest. As broader swaths of the population became politically active, how would their entrance into the public sphere affect political debate? Constant and Desjobert, though they favored extension of the franchise, both warned that this process could fuel French imperialism. Desjobert feared that the powerful interests of financial speculators in imperial expansion, combined with the weakness of the public, would drive national political discourse toward aggressive displays of national pride and muscle.³⁰ Constant skillfully predicted the direction the French debate would take when he suggested that the state would exploit the French people's insecurity as a nation with seductive talk of national honor:

Even whilst abandoning itself to its grandiose projects, the government would hardly dare to tell the nation: "Let us march to conquer the world!" The nation would reply with one voice: "We have no wish to conquer the world."

Instead it would talk of national independence, of national honour, of the rounding off of frontiers, of commercial interests, of precautions dictated by foresight, and what next? The vocabulary of hypocrisy and injustice is inexhaustible... It would talk of national honour, as if a nation's honour were injured because other nations retain their own.³¹

Here, as throughout *The Spirit of Conquest*, Constant, perhaps because he shared Tocqueville's sociological interest in the modern democratic nation and his understanding of its political dynamics, anticipated some of the very arguments Tocqueville would deploy in defense of the Algerian empire.

The connection between pluralism and anti-imperialism was clear, in Constant's view: just as French regions should preserve considerable cultural autonomy and local attachments in the name of political liberty, so, *a fortiori*, must nations be protected from conquest as well as from foreign efforts to impose

²⁹The claim that colonial despotism must come home to roost has been a standard theme of anti-imperial and related arguments, offered by thinkers from Cicero in the *Verrine Orations*, to Edmund Burke ("Speech on Fox's East India Bill"), to Hannah Arendt on American actions in Vietnam. Tocqueville himself would note the role that Algeria-trained officers and generals played in suppressing the 1848 revolution in Paris.

³⁰"The men who exploit Africa make up a powerful arm of public opinion," he wrote; "they have suggested that France is unanimous on the immense advantages that the conquest and colonization of Algiers presented, and they have dragged along two numerous classes of men who are always easy to persuade: those, in great number, who completely adopt an opinion when it flatters their vanity [*amour-propre*] without injuring their interests; and those who, finding themselves ill at ease in France, have seen in the brilliant promises and lies the end of their misery and a future of prosperity." Amédée Desjobert, *La question d'Alger: politique, colonisation, commerce* (Paris: Crapelet, 1837), p. 1 (my translation).

³¹Constant, *Political Writings*, p. 64.

“better” laws on them. National attachments had normative weight for Constant not only because they protected subjects against the crushing despotism of a centralized state and thus served liberty, but also because they were the source of a nation’s “sense of its own value and dignity.”³² Laws that are venerated as inherited from ancestors, he argued, have the greatest moral effect; thus the population’s regard for their laws is more valuable than the laws’ specific content. Constant maintained that this does not legitimate patent injustice: no argument from tradition would ever legitimate slavery or other practices that had clear victims.³³ On the whole, though, Constant’s line of argument placed him in sympathy with thinkers such as Pufendorf, Herder and Burke, whose estimation of custom made them wary of radical innovation (though by no means of reform itself), and by implication critical of the presumptions of “benevolent” conquerors.³⁴

Constant’s writings on conquest thus mark a peculiar but important moment in the development of nineteenth-century liberalism. Very much a believer in historical progress as tangible and measurable, Constant nonetheless did not invoke a theory of progress, as later liberals such as J. S. Mill would do, to justify conquest of less developed nations. Though concerned about the cohesion of the French nation under a form of government with which it was still inexperienced, Constant did not turn to foreign aggression, as Tocqueville would, to shore up the process of democratization at home. In the next section of the essay, I examine more closely the sociological concerns that Constant and Tocqueville shared about France’s state of transition. I then discuss Tocqueville’s writings on empire in an effort to explain how their somewhat different explanations of, and responses to, the social and political problems facing postrevolutionary France could have generated such divergent positions on imperial conquest and domination. Though Tocqueville worked with a sociological understanding of modern Europe largely similar to Constant’s, he came to entirely different conclusions about the sort of political structures and projects that conduced to modern liberty. These thinkers’ writings on empire offer what may be the most revealing lens through which to view the very different implications of their visions of modern European politics.

³²*Ibid.*, p. 74.

³³*Ibid.*, p. 75 n1. “Those who appeal to habit in order to excuse injustice,” he added, “remind me of that French cook who was reproached for making eels suffer when she skinned them. ‘They are used to it’, she said, ‘I have been doing it for thirty years!’”

³⁴Constant’s attention to the political role of local culture marks perhaps the greatest difference between his liberalism and that of J. S. Mill, who believed many local cultures would have to be effaced and local loyalties broken down in the service of a national state. Stephen Holmes, I believe, goes too far in his effort to strip *The Spirit of Conquest* of such pluralism, which he quite sweepingly terms “counterrevolutionary.” Stephen Holmes, *Benjamin Constant and the Making of Modern Liberalism* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1984), pp. 211 ff. For Mill, see *Considerations on Representative Government*, ch. 16.

IV. NAPOLEON'S SHADOW AND THE SOCIOLOGY OF MODERN FRANCE

As I have suggested, Constant's and Tocqueville's sociological analyses of Europe were animated by similar, distinctively nineteenth-century, concerns—most notably, a preoccupation with the possibilities for freedom under modern conditions and an interest in the implications of modern liberty for domestic political regimes. We will concentrate here on just two of their shared concerns. First, both Constant and Tocqueville feared the increasing power of the centralized state, especially in France. Second, they believed that the growth of commerce had driven modern individuals out of politics and into the private realm, the realm of commercial pursuits and family matters, leaving a political vacuum that the state would fill all too eagerly.³⁵

Although both Constant and Tocqueville recognized a threat to liberty in the modern state posed by people's more general retreat from common life, this worry was to prove paramount for Tocqueville in a way that it had not been for his predecessor. Constant greeted the rise of this modern individualism with a sort of resigned acceptance. For him, the modern citizen's detachment meant that the political structure must take account of people's new interests and needs, that an outdated understanding of freedom must not be forced on them, and that political leaders' ambitions for the state should limit themselves to suit the ambitions and ethos of the people.³⁶ Modern liberty was precisely the liberty of the individual beyond the public reach, and Constant sought to describe a political order that could accommodate the modern individual's desire to seek fulfilment in private rather than political affairs. Constant, though distressed by the individualism and apathy of his age, which he saw as ignoble, did not believe these were an inevitable prelude to despotism. He saw the problem of centralization, rather, as at root a technical one: the state had monopolized power and had the resources to isolate and bully the population. Constant's solution therefore tended to be rather technical as well: the classic liberal project of securing constitutional limits on state power. His anti-imperialism, as we have seen, followed quite straightforwardly from these views: for he believed that the increased budgets and armies that were raised for imperialist projects directly threatened liberty at home.

Tocqueville, by contrast, saw modern Europeans' retreat into the private as the root cause of despotism and so had little faith in Constantian constitutionalism.

³⁵For citizens to abandon political activity altogether was not only a great danger to basic liberties but also a form of moral debasement, both thinkers believed. "It is not to happiness alone, it is to self-development that our destiny calls us," said Constant in his famous speech on ancient and modern liberty; "and political liberty is the most powerful, the most effective means of self-development that heaven has given us" (*Political Writings*, p. 327).

³⁶He envisioned modern politics, famously, as relegated to representative governments that freed the people from political concerns to pursue their private interests, within nations that eschewed aggression in favor of peaceful, mutually profitable relations with other nations. See Constant, "The liberty of the ancients compared with that of the moderns," *Political Writings*, esp. pp. 318–21.

In Tocqueville's account, commercial interests and family attachments were undermining political community in his day and threatened political liberty and national self-sufficiency far more than mere force ever could. He was less hopeful than his predecessor that French communities still had the cohesion and spirit of independence necessary for them to be of use in resisting the autocratic state. Legal limits on state power would be of little use if the French people were incapable of concerted political action to exercise and protect their liberties. In his notes for a later, unpublished, volume of *The Old Regime*, Tocqueville described the France that Napoleon had so easily overridden in the same terms he often used to describe his contemporaries: "the increasing intellectual sterility of minds, the mental lassitude, the spiritual seclusion, the gradual disappearance of great personalities, the slow unfolding of an immense, flat human landscape in which very little was to stand out except for the colossal figure of the Emperor himself."³⁷ Fearing that French democracy was so weak that it could not be regenerated from within, Tocqueville turned to imperialism as one of the only means left of generating widespread enthusiasm for a common political project, of drawing the French population back into public life.

To be sure, Tocqueville saw American township politics as an appealing alternative model of modern democracy, in which central government power was counteracted by active, organized citizens.³⁸ While the *Democracy* is often read as a blueprint of Europe's future, it is, however, clear from Tocqueville's writings on France that he saw little reason to believe that his country could ever take the American route.³⁹ France was too heavily burdened with the entrenched legacies of an apolitical populace and greedy central power; equally importantly, France as a nation was hobbled by a uniquely deluded historical self-understanding.

While Tocqueville and Constant shared a suspicion of strong central power, then, their accounts of the evolution of such power were radically different, with significant implications for their judgments about empire.⁴⁰ If Constant feared

³⁷Tocqueville, *The European Revolution and Correspondence with Gobineau*, ed. John Lukacs (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1968), p. 144.

³⁸*Democracy in America*, ed. Bradley Phillips, trans. Henry Reeve (New York: Vintage, 1990), vol. I, pp. 59 ff.

³⁹Tocqueville's fascination with the imperial side of American history—his admiration for the men of the frontier and his moral revulsion at their treatment of the Amerindians, combined with his conviction that the natives' extermination was inevitable—suggests that although he did not believe France could take the American route in the realm of domestic politics, he was, from the beginning, drawing lessons about the political benefits of expansion. His first, hopeful, reaction on seeing Algiers in 1841 was that it was a place of "feverish activity," "Cincinnati transported onto the soil of Africa" (OC (M) 5,ii, 191). See *Democracy I*, p. 362, for his favorable impressions of Ohio industry. His reflections on American expansionism can be found in the final ("Three races") chapter of *Democracy I*, and more strikingly in his letters and notes from the voyage itself. See George Wilson Pierson, *Tocqueville in America* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996; originally published 1938), pp. 229–89 and 594–9.

⁴⁰Tocqueville's far greater suspicion of the private sphere of domestic and commercial relations suggests that the confidence Constant and his Enlightenment precursors had placed in the pacific international effects of commerce—*le doux commerce*, as Montesquieu had called it—was unavailable to him.

above all the sheer force of central power,⁴¹ Tocqueville was haunted by the thought that his age was one of pettiness and mediocrity, and that the French, in particular, were incapable of collective projects. “What strikes me most as I have more opportunity to see this population is how little it is occupied with political affairs”, he wrote. “it is a distressing and alarming spectacle to those who, like me, dread, in the future, oppression more than anarchy.”⁴² For Tocqueville, the France of his day was in particular danger of such oppression, and its vulnerability stemmed from many, deep-seated, sources: the legacy of apathy generated by *ancien-régime* absolutism, the passion for commerce and the myopic self-interest that he considered endemic in contemporary Europe, and France’s extremely unstable political situation, brought about by rapid, but incomplete, political transition—a problem not faced by Britain or America.⁴³

When, in 1814, Constant wrote *The Spirit of Conquest and Usurpation*, the Bonapartist threat was immediate. Constant himself must have felt it particularly strongly. When Napoleon returned to Paris for the Hundred Days shortly after the publication of Constant’s vehement denunciation of the aggressive Napoleonic state, Constant, at first in danger of imprisonment for his opposition, accepted instead the returning emperor’s invitation to draft a constitution, a decision criticized by his more steadfast contemporaries and subsequent readers.⁴⁴ Tocqueville, though possibly even more hostile to Bonapartism (he, after all, resisted Louis Napoleon’s pleas that he return to government in 1852), could, in the 1840s, study it from a greater distance. Indeed, Tocqueville appears to have learned more from Napoleon than perhaps he was willing to admit. He believed Napoleon had known, as later politicians did not, how to use glory and conquest to appeal to and to unify the French people. “This great man understood,” he wrote, “that some kind of high passion is always needed to revivify the human spirit, which otherwise decays and rots. It never would have occurred to him to make hearts and spirits concentrate merely on their individual welfare.”⁴⁵ Tocqueville’s position that the Algerian conquests could help France avoid the threat of future dictatorships by uniting the French

⁴¹The French people’s failure to condemn Napoleon’s conquests “is in fact simply the effect of the terror experienced by the French people” (Constant, *Political Writings*, p. 45).

⁴²To Royer-Collard, 15 August 1840 (*Selected Letters*, p. 144).

⁴³It should be noted that, optimistic as Tocqueville was about America’s perhaps unique potential for reconciling modern liberty and equality, he sounded a warning in his chapter on the country’s “three races” in *Democracy I* about the young nation’s treatment of both blacks (slave and free) and Amerindians. Americans had founded a feudal aristocracy in the South, and segregation and inequality reigned in the North. These, Tocqueville believed, could only damage the republic.

⁴⁴Constant’s startling and seemingly abject willingness to serve the man he had so lately denounced for authoritarianism has been explained by Napoleon’s charisma and Constant’s lack of alternatives (see Fontana, “Introduction,” in Constant, *Political Writings*, pp. 10–13). Dennis Wood holds that Constant did not abandon principle altogether (as his contemporaries claimed) but rather convinced himself that he could be instrumental in bringing about a liberal regime under Napoleon. Dennis Wood, *Benjamin Constant: A Biography* (New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 214.

⁴⁵*The European Revolution*, p. 150.

people behind a national cause and drawing them out of their narrow private interests was, after all, a rather Napoleonic strategy.

It is important to note, then, that Tocqueville's central concerns about French society and modernization in general lay behind his Napoleonic defense of French imperialism. Tocqueville's fear that centralized power posed the greatest threat to liberty in his day is too well known to need much rehearsing. This fear was the abiding preoccupation of his work on French politics, from its preliminary articulation in an 1836 essay to its fuller exposition in his last, unfinished work, *The Old Regime and the Revolution*.⁴⁶ Decades before he wrote *The Old Regime*, Tocqueville had worked out its *idée fixe*: the French state had been growing ever more centralized at least from the time of Louis XIV and probably even further back, and the revolution, far from overturning the old order as it claimed, had simply sped up the process. In the book's closing chapter, "How the Revolution came naturally from what preceded it," he wrote,

The government of the old regime had already taken away from the French any possibility, or desire, of helping one another. When the Revolution happened, one would have searched most of France in vain for ten men who had the habit of acting in common in an orderly way, and taking care of their own defense themselves; only the central power was supposed to take care of it, so that the central power, fallen from the hands of the royal government into the hands of a sovereign and irresponsible assembly, and changed from good-natured to terrible, found nothing which could stop, or even briefly slow it down. The same cause which made the monarchy fall so easily, made everything possible after its fall.⁴⁷

Excessive state power threatened liberty not through sheer might alone, but also because of two distinctly modern phenomena to which it contributed (and which in their turn fed the power of the state): the erasure of local loyalties in favor of national uniformity, and the increasing detachment of citizens from politics. In his inaugural speech to the Académie Française in 1842, which, as Melvin Richter has argued, illustrates the persistent hold that Bonapartism had on Tocqueville throughout his career, Tocqueville elaborated the role of Bonapartist despotism in the decomposition of French political life.⁴⁸ Napoleon's rule had extinguished the possibility for a national self-resurrection through political participation.

The diffusion of enlightenment and the division of property left each of us independent and isolated from all the others. From then on, only the interest of public affairs could momentarily unite our *esprits* and bring together our wills.

⁴⁶In the early essay, written at J. S. Mill's request, Tocqueville had presented most of the theoretical argument of *The Ancien Régime*; the later work filled in the archival details. See "The social and political condition of France," *London and Westminster Review*, April 1836, trans. J. S. Mill (the original essay in French is included in OC (M) 2,i).

⁴⁷Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the Revolution*, ed. François Furet and François Mélonio, trans. Alan S. Kahan (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 243.

⁴⁸Melvin Richter, "Tocqueville, Napoleon, and Bonapartism," *Reconsidering Tocqueville's Democracy in America*, ed. Abraham Eisenstadt (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1988).

Absolute power removed that unique occasion to think together and to act in common; and it would finally have cloistered us in that narrow individualism into which we are already far too inclined to enclose ourselves.⁴⁹

Tocqueville argued in his French Academy speech that the most disastrous aspect of Napoleon's rule was the very illegitimacy of such despotism in the eyes of the people. The French, who, as he noted elsewhere, had "spread throughout the world" the ideas of freedom and equality born of the French Revolution,⁵⁰ could never regain the kind of *ancien-régime* innocence in which absolutism was legitimate and therefore not degrading. Henceforth, when they lost their liberty, they also lost their honor.⁵¹

If the complex conjunction of the virtues of political participation, liberty, honor and self-respect were out of reach for the France of his day, then only something quite dramatic could serve as an alternative, and as a means of recovering the possibility of such virtue. If democratic self-government could not be resurrected from within, Tocqueville was willing to seek an external solution, one that required using weaker peoples as instruments. Tocqueville's hope that imperial glory might substitute for the nation's lost political virtue also seems to have overcome whatever liberal fears he had that rising military budgets and recruitment posed a threat to French domestic liberty.⁵²

In his speech to the French Academy, then, Tocqueville delineated the domestic context behind his writings of that decade on the Algerian and Caribbean empires. Greatness and liberty were mutually necessary: without liberty, glorious actions such as military victories would only elevate a dictator more securely over an abject population.

I believe firmly that our contemporaries can make us great as well as prosperous, but only on the condition that we remain free. Only under liberty can we share those powerful emotions which raise and sustain us above our individual selves. Only liberty can bring variety to our otherwise uniform conditions; only liberty can raise the level of our aspirations, relieve us from the domination of petty thoughts.⁵³

⁴⁹Speech of 21 April 1842 at the Académie Française, in OC (M) 16, p. 266.

⁵⁰See Tocqueville's anti-slavery articles, OC (M) 3,i, 88 ff.

⁵¹"The eighteenth century and the French revolution did not prepare us to submit to despotism with morality and honor. Men had become too independent, too disrespectful, too skeptical to believe sincerely in the rights of absolute power. They could see in it only a dishonest rescue from the anarchy they didn't have the courage to fight themselves. They would have judged it at once necessary and illegitimate, and, bending under its laws, they would have despised themselves in despising it." OC (M) 16, p. 266.

⁵²In particular, see Tocqueville's first parliamentary report of 1847, which directly addressed the government's request for an increase in troops and funds for Algeria. Tocqueville and his committee, though with some reluctance, approved the increase. In view of the colony's importance to France's power and reputation, he wrote, "undoubtedly the administration that controls matters in Africa should be armed with great powers; it must be able to move with agility and vigor; but at the same time, the country must be in a position to know what it is doing." OC (M) 3,i, 353.

⁵³OC (M) 16, pp. 266–7; quoted (and translated) by Melvin Richter, "Tocqueville, Napoleon, and Bonapartism," p. 131.

Without greatness, however, liberty would only mean the people's retreat and descent into privacy and isolation.

Given what he felt was the extraordinary absence of public virtue among the French, Tocqueville turned to military and imperial exploits both as a potential source of inspiration for the public and with the hope that glory might partly substitute for virtue. As he wrote to a friend in admiration of the French soldiers fighting in the Crimean War, "Are you not astonished with me, Madame, upon seeing spring from a nation that appears so devoid of public virtues, an army that demonstrates itself to be so full of virtue? So much egoism here, so much self-sacrifice there."⁵⁴ Although Tocqueville implied that pursuit of glory through conquest would generate the political dynamics of an involved citizenry and a strong nation, he never described the mechanism through which the empire would draw the whole population into collective political projects.⁵⁵ He never had a response to the claims of men such as Constant and Desjobert that empires were always merely the private fiefs of a few generals and speculators. This lacuna in his argument suggests that, in his writings on empire, Tocqueville was often guided by wishful thinking rather than by the careful sociological analysis, the scrutiny of specific causal mechanisms in politics, for which he was justly famous. Tocqueville often invoked this sort of glory as though it were merely a redescription of public virtue. We are left with the sense that Tocqueville was as satisfied by an appearance of grandeur as by real gains in political stability or even international power.⁵⁶

Indeed, in his more clear-sighted—we might say disillusioned—moments, Tocqueville himself recognized glory as merely an ideological shadow of public virtue. In an 1840 letter to Royer-Collard, he wrote, "I have always thought that the best thing our country has left is national pride, a pride which is often puerile and boastful, but which with all its absurdities and weaknesses is still the greatest sentiment that we have and the strongest tie

⁵⁴From OC (M) 15,ii, 263; quoted by Roger Boesche, *The Strange Liberalism of Alexis de Tocqueville* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1987), pp. 195–6. It is telling that the specific examples Tocqueville provides of such displays of public virtue in France often involve military action rather than domestic political efforts of the kind he applauded in America.

⁵⁵Tocqueville's interest in the political lives of French settlers in Algeria shows, I think, that he did struggle with this question. Having admired the deep engagement in local politics of the American colonists, he clearly hoped that a similar dynamic could be created in Algeria and even that it would stimulate a more engaged politics in France. He found the French colons he met there selfish and cruel, however, and they only corroborated his early fears that the French national character was unsuited to the creation of stable societies abroad.

⁵⁶Like the French nobility as he had described them in 1836, Tocqueville occasionally seems "more attached to the semblance of power than to power itself" ("The political and social condition of France," p. 142). Constant anticipated this "bread and circuses" argument and pleaded with national leaders not to bend to the temptation of staging imperial circuses: "When a government lavishes upon us great displays of heroism, of numberless creations and destruction, we are tempted to reply: 'The smallest grain of millet would better suit our business'. The most brilliant feats and their grandiose celebrations are only funeral ceremonies at which we dance upon the graves" (Constant, *Political Writings*, pp. 70–1; the quotation is from Jean de la Fontaine, "Le coq et la perle").

that holds this nation together.”⁵⁷ Glory, in this sense, must substitute for virtue during a nation’s most vulnerable moments. As he wrote several months later to J. S. Mill, apparently expecting agreement:

I do not have to tell you, my dear Mill, that the greatest malady that threatens a people organized as we are is the gradual softening of mores, the abasement of the mind, the mediocrity of tastes; that is where the great dangers of the future lie. One cannot let a nation that is democratically constituted like ours and in which the natural vices of the race unfortunately coincide with the natural vices of the social state, one cannot let this nation take up easily the habit of sacrificing what it believes to be its grandeur to its repose, great matters to petty ones; it is not healthy to allow such a nation to believe that its place in the world is smaller, that it is fallen from the level on which its ancestors had put it, but that it must console itself by making railroads and by making the well-being of each private individual prosper amidst peace, under whatever condition this peace is obtained. It is necessary that those who march at the head of such a nation should always keep a proud attitude, if they do not wish to allow the level of national mores to fall very low.⁵⁸

Mill, himself a defender of the British empire, though for very different reasons from Tocqueville’s, responded to Tocqueville’s confidence with a scolding. He felt that French politicians of their time—and he did not exclude Tocqueville—had offered the French public only “low and grovelling” ideas of what “constitutes national glory and national importance”; they had sacrificed good government and solid achievement for boisterous self-importance. Perhaps it was Mill’s own confidence in Britain’s reputation abroad—as well as a faith that the British people had loftier justifications for their empire—that made him capable of such condescension. Despite such warnings, and his own increasing worries about the violence of the French conquest and domination of Algeria, Tocqueville persisted, throughout the decade, in his political and literary efforts on behalf of a magnificent *Algérie française*.

V. EMPIRE AND NATIONAL GLORY

Tocqueville’s writings on empire have led some of his most able and sympathetic readers to believe that on this subject he simply deluded himself and contradicted all his most firmly held principles.⁵⁹ Certainly it is difficult to reconcile Tocqueville’s sympathy for the Amerindians and strong condemnation in America of the “pitiless instinct which animates the European race” with his

⁵⁷*Selected Letters*, p. 144. Letter of 15 August 1840.

⁵⁸Letter of March 18, 1841; in *Selected Letters*, p. 151 [translation modified]. Also in OC (M) 6,i, 335. Mill did agree reluctantly “that the feeling of orgueil national [national pride] is the only feeling of a public-spirited & elevating kind which remains & that it ought not therefore be permitted to go down” (OC (M) 6,i, 337–8).

⁵⁹“Tocqueville conspicuously failed to apply to the French action in North Africa the sociological insight and ethical awareness he had demonstrated in his study of the United States,” Melvin Richter has written in the best treatment of the subject, “Tocqueville on Algeria,” *Review of Politics*, 25 (1963).

own quite ruthless statements in favor of European conquest of Algeria and India.⁶⁰

Some of Tocqueville's explicit statements suggest that in theory he rejected claims that national imperatives justified the conquest and rule of other peoples. He held that international law and the dictates of equity place strict demands on state conduct and that foreign policy must be guided by moral reflection, at least within Europe and arguably everywhere.⁶¹ Though discussions of humanity or the rights of man are rare in his work, when he mentioned such topics he did so in a way that suggests he considered human equality and the rights of peoples to govern themselves as given, at least in the abstract. As he wrote in 1836 (during the period of his great interest in the Algerian enterprise):

The Romans believed that they alone of the human race were fitted to enjoy independence; and it was much less from nature than from Rome that they thought they derived their right to be free. According to the modern, the democratic, and, we venture to say the only just notion of liberty, every man, being presumed to have received from nature the intelligence necessary for his own general guidance, is inherently entitled to be uncontrolled by his fellows in all that only concerns himself, and to regulate at his own will his own destiny.⁶²

This discussion suggests Tocqueville's commitment in principle to the ability of all peoples to rule themselves: he never agreed with Mill that Europe's superior civilization legitimated despotism over those that Mill liked to call unimproving peoples. The passage also shows the extent to which Tocqueville was more categorical and less subtly historicist than Constant in his theoretical denunciation of imperialism. The notion of liberty that guided his judgment was not merely the modern one (as Constant would have it), but the "only just" one. The definitiveness of passages such as the one quoted above makes Tocqueville's defense of imperialism all the more perplexing, to be sure. Such statements should warn us, as I have argued in this essay, against efforts to find a neat *theoretical* resolution to the contradictions in his thought. Rather, we must look to the demands that the unsettling social and political situation placed on thinkers, such as Tocqueville, who sought both internal stability and an honorable international politics, in an effort to understand how a perceptive sociologist with a deeply moral understanding of politics could have produced such an implacable defense of empire.

⁶⁰It is important to note, however, that while Tocqueville lamented the fate of the Amerindians, he never opposed or argued against the Americans' westward expansion, either publicly or even in his journals.

⁶¹See the *Souvenirs [Recollections]*, where Tocqueville, in praising the Ottoman Empire's respect in one instance for the law of nations, suggested (paraphrasing the Turkish ministers) that "what was right on the left bank of the Danube should be so on the right too." The Ottomans had sheltered Polish rebels, in accordance with international law but to the indignation of Russia. Tocqueville's account of the episode attests to his belief that international politics should be guided by international law, a sense of equity, and a universal rather than selective application of principles. Tocqueville, *Recollections*, ed. J. P. Mayer and A. P. Kerr (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction, 1995), p. 255.

⁶²"The social and political condition of France," p. 166.

It is clear that a kind of nationalism underlay Tocqueville's support for aggressive and violent imperial expansion, but commentators have struggled with the relationship between his liberalism and his nationalism. Tzvetan Todorov has attempted a neat equation of the two: nationalism is simply liberalism applied to states. "Liberalism proclaims the right of the individual to do as she likes within certain limits established by the group; nationalism does the same for states, but on the basis of the observation that no such limits exist."⁶³ Though a fairly accurate description of the realist school of international relations, this claim thoroughly misreads Tocqueville's understanding of liberal principles, justice in the international sphere, and the nature of imperial conquest. Tocqueville never justified empire on the grounds that it is within the rights of states as sovereign individuals to conquer other states. To see his arguments in favor of conquest as claims about international right is to attribute to Tocqueville a consistency he himself never felt, and to ignore both the profound discomfort that infuses his writings on empire and the historical situation that produced this discomfort. Melvin Richter was closer to the truth when he wrote that "Tocqueville's stand on Algeria was inconsistent with the *Democracy*. When this issue forced him to choose, he placed nationalism above liberalism; the interests of 'progressive' Christian countries above the rights of those that were not."⁶⁴ This position, however, denies any connection between liberalism and nationalism. To dismiss the writings on empire as merely "self-delusion" as Richter does is to refuse to grapple with the nature, and the implications, of Tocqueville's broader ethical commitments and the strategies of exclusion he shared with other nineteenth-century liberals.⁶⁵ It is to ignore the role that imperial expansion played in shaping nineteenth-century liberalism.

After Constant's brilliant pamphlet on the spirit of conquest, French anti-imperialism retreated to the margins of French political debate. Tocqueville, in so many other senses Constant's rightful heir, repudiated the anti-imperialism of his fellow liberal and pluralist in the name of France. To build a cohesive, stable, and

⁶³See Tzvetan Todorov, *On Human Diversity: Nationalism, Racism, and Exoticism in French Thought*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 201.

⁶⁴Richter, "Tocqueville on Algeria," p. 364. This excellent article is ultimately unsatisfying, for rather than considering the implications of Tocqueville's sustained enthusiasm for empire for the ethical and political commitments expressed in Tocqueville's other writings, Richter in the end dismisses Tocqueville's imperialism as an inexplicable lapse. In addition, Richter's claim that Tocqueville placed greater value on the interests of "progressive" Christian countries may be misleading; while some support for the claim can be found in Tocqueville's letters to Englishmen, I believe that Tocqueville's considered view of the matter (in great contrast to Mill's) was that no nation can justify despotic rule over others on the grounds that its own social organization or civilization is more worthy or more progressive.

⁶⁵Uday Mehta first used the evocative phrase "liberal strategies of exclusion" in an article of the same name. See Uday S. Mehta, "Liberal strategies of exclusion," *Politics & Society*, 18 (1990) 427–54.

The other main commentator on the Algeria writings, André Jardin, dismisses altogether the question of a clash of principles, writing that Tocqueville "did not question the legitimacy of such a conquest, having none of the bad conscience on this matter that people of the twentieth century have." André Jardin, *Tocqueville: a biography*, trans. Lydia Davis (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1988), p. 318. It should be clear from the preceding discussion that criticism of empire on either moral or practical grounds is not a twentieth-century development.

liberal domestic political order after the collapse of the ancien régime, revolutionary upheaval, and continuing political turmoil was Tocqueville's self-appointed task as a political thinker and actor. The notion of a proud French presence in Algeria, a vibrant and glorious new America filled with prosperous farms and engaged settler-citizens, played an important if too often overlooked part in Tocqueville's nation-building project. Constant did not live long enough to face the real possibility of a French empire in North Africa, but it seems clear that his project to place representative government on a firm footing without recourse to expansionism or appeals to French glory had thoroughly lost favor with the French public by the time of his death. The liberal politicians who succeeded him proved unable to present a compelling vision of anti-nationalist cosmopolitanism, and the liberalism of Constant's most prominent successors in France and England turned once more to the exclusions that have marked so much of its history.

With this essay, I hope to have made two central points clear. First, though Tocqueville's views on empire constituted in an important sense a moral abdication, it would be a mistake to see the Algerian writings as merely an illiberal moment in Tocqueville's thought. Nor should his writings on Algeria be dismissed as merely a blind spot in the career of an otherwise enlightened liberal pluralist. Isaiah Berlin, for instance, who clearly was unaware of Tocqueville's Algeria writings, wrote that Tocqueville "opposed paternalism and colonialism, every form of rule by outsiders no matter how benevolent."⁶⁶ Such an extrapolation from Tocqueville's discussions of Europe and America suggests that to ignore Tocqueville's writings on empire is to misunderstand quite profoundly the implications of his writings on Western democracy. A reading of Tocqueville's writings on Algeria, India, and empire generally will, I suggest, lead us to read the better-known works—especially *Democracy in America*—differently. For Tocqueville's writings on empire demonstrate forcefully that the widespread concern about placing the modern republican nation on a secure footing drew nineteenth-century French liberals into an exclusionary and violent international politics that many of their predecessors would have seen as a betrayal of liberal humanitarianism. My argument is not that Constant, for example, was a more virtuous thinker than Tocqueville and his contemporaries, but rather that the political manifestations of liberal theory have undergone remarkable changes as the problems it was perceived to face evolved. We can understand the implications of liberal views for concrete politics only by taking liberalism's historical character into account.

Secondly, then, as a point of intellectual history, this essay insists on the importance of understanding liberalism as an historical phenomenon. Liberalism *as such* has never produced a definitive position on conquest or empire, notwithstanding the recent popularity of arguments about liberalism's imperialist

⁶⁶Isaiah Berlin, "The thought of de Tocqueville" (review of *The Social and Political Thought of Alexis de Tocqueville*, by J. Lively), *History*, 50 (1965), p. 204.

drive. John Gray's attacks on the Enlightenment project provide perhaps the best-known recent example of this argument for a monolithic liberalism.⁶⁷ Even very subtle accounts have made quite broad generalizations, seeking to identify some enduring element that might explain the support for empire of so many in the liberal tradition. In his recent book *Liberalism and Empire*, for example, Uday Mehta has told one important side of the story of liberal imperialism; but his liberal tradition is a rather static one, a tradition whose persistent blindness to the emotional power of territory, and whose commitment to a narrow conception of progress, have made it prone to imperialism.⁶⁸ That is, certain distinctly liberal ideas, in Mehta's view, lead directly to imperialism. But Mehta's account is unable to explain the wide range of thinkers, rightly considered liberals, who spearheaded opposition to European imperialism, especially in the eighteenth century. He draws our attention, rightly, to Edmund Burke's crusade against the British empire in America, India and Ireland, but he sees Burke more as an anomaly of sensitivity and insight rather than as an affirmation of a powerful but transitory period of anti-imperialism in late-eighteenth-century Europe. Burke's company included a wide array of thinkers we are likely to count as liberals of one sort or another—Kant, Diderot, Bentham, Adam Smith. In addition, too strong a focus on the British case alone in the English-language work on this subject has exaggerated the importance that a faith in progress played in nineteenth-century European imperialism and has led scholars to overstate the roles of both Christian evangelism and utilitarian theory in that history.

Prevailing accounts of liberal imperialism fail to capture the great shifts in attitudes toward imperialism and the non-European world that occurred between circa 1780 and 1840. This essay has discussed a key moment in the French side of this story.⁶⁹ It is clear that the arguments and resources of liberal political theory do not lead ineluctably either to an imperialist or to an anti-imperialist position. Given the astonishing diversity of views on empire that we find in thinkers who

⁶⁷See, for instance, John Gray, "After the new liberalism," *Social Research*, 61 (1994), 719–35. Reprinted in John Gray, *Enlightenment's Wake: Politics and Culture at the Close of the Modern Age* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

⁶⁸*Liberalism and Empire: A Study in Nineteenth-Century British Liberal Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999). The fact that Mehta overlooks Jeremy Bentham's anti-imperialism and misreads him as a member of a tradition of liberal imperialism suggests the pitfalls of an effort to locate such a tradition.

⁶⁹A similar story could be told of Britain. Jeremy Bentham, for instance, whose utilitarian theory would be exploited by subsequent generations as the theoretical bulwark of the British government in India, himself argued repeatedly against European empires, most notably in a barrage of pamphlets directed at the Spanish government with titles like "Emancipate your colonies!" and "Rid yourselves of Ultramarina!" It was only when later theories of progress had become dominant; only when a more narrow conception of nationality had taken root; only when both the British state and the East India Company perceived a need to solidify their rule with an appropriately "progressive" ideology, that Benthamite utilitarianism was transformed into the imperialist doctrine it is generally understood to have been. See *Colonies, Commerce, and Constitutional Law*. Bentham had first worked out some of his anti-colonial arguments in *Emancipate Your Colonies! Addressed to the National Convention of France, Ao [Anno] 1793, shewing the uselessness and mischievousness of Distant Dependencies to an European State* (London, 1830); collected in *The Works of Jeremy Bentham*, ed. John Bowring (London, 1843), vol. 4, pp. 407–18.

are often classed as liberal, we must pay greater attention to how these thinkers' understandings of their historical and national contexts drove them to reinterpret the imperatives of their liberalism. The domestic political pressures of democratization and nation-building, in particular, play a central and hitherto underexamined role in this history.