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Alexis de Tocqueville and Slavery

Sally Gershman

The strong revival of interest in the political and social thought of Alexis de Tocqueville has coincided with a renewed concern with the institution of slavery. However, although the question of slavery and abolition interested Tocqueville throughout his twenty years of public life, and indeed until his death, his thoughts on the subject have elicited little discussion. What comment there has been is limited to the period between 1839 and 1848 when, as a member of the Chamber of Deputies, Tocqueville was concerned with the abolition of slavery in the French colonies.¹

A charter member of the Société pour l'Abolition de l'Esclavage founded in 1835, Tocqueville opposed slavery throughout his public life. His carefully reasoned style and his deliberate avoidance of appeals to emotion foster the impression that his opposition to slavery was based only on its economic failure and other pragmatic concerns about the future of the French colonies.² But a careful reading of his published works demonstrates that beneath the pragmatic arguments lies a consistent philosophical position which is confirmed by his private correspondence. Briefly put, Tocqueville thought that the owning of one human being by another contradicted both Christian belief and tradition and the political philosophy of the rights of man which

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¹ Mary Lawlor, *Alexis de Tocqueville in the Chamber of Deputies: His Views on Foreign and Colonial Policy* (Washington, 1959), pp. 100-30; André Martel, "Tocqueville et les problèmes coloniaux de la Monarchie de Juillet," *Revue d'histoire économique et sociale*, XXXII (April 1954), 369-76. Richard W. Resh, "Alexis de Tocqueville and the Negro: *Democracy in America* Reconsidered," *Journal of Negro History*, XLVIII (Oct. 1963), 251-59, concerns comments on the American Negro rather than on slavery.

² Alexis de Tocqueville, *Oeuvres, papiers, et correspondances*, ed. J. P. Mayer (Paris, 1951—) (hereafter cited as *Oeuvres*), VI: *Correspondance anglaise*, i, 37, Tocqueville to Reeve, March 22, 1837; 47, Tocqueville to Reeve, Sept. 15, 1839; 326, letter from Tocqueville to Mill, Nov. 14, 1839; XI: *Correspondance d'Alexis de Tocqueville avec P.-P. Royer-Collard et avec J.-J. Ampère*, 79, Tocqueville to Royer-Collard, Aug. 8, 1839; 87-88, Tocqueville to Royer-Collard, Oct. 21, 1839.

had been spread in Europe by the French Revolution and was also part of the American creed.

On a more immediate pragmatic level he contended that the existence of slavery in America kept the South poor and divided the nation. In the French Antilles the continuance of slavery after the British had abolished that "peculiar institution" threatened not only the economic welfare of the colonies but also their very existence as French colonies. It was also a source of personal embarrassment to him and troubled his sense of national pride.

There are four major sources of evidence of Tocqueville's thinking about slavery: *Democracy in America*; his parliamentary reports and speeches; the six articles he wrote for *Le Siècle* on the necessity of abolishing slavery; and his private correspondence and travel diaries. These last are particularly important because not only do they provide the sources for his published works, but they also often contain his reasons for writing and his attitude toward his published work.

The story begins, as did so much else in Tocqueville's intellectual life, in America. The fame Alexis de Tocqueville and Gustave Beaumont were to achieve was still very much in the future when in May 1831 they landed in New York. Indeed the prospects for professional success at home appeared rather slim, and they were counting on the trip for more than a welcome escape from a troubled homeland. The two young aristocrats had barely begun a judicial career in France when the Revolution of 1830 made retention of their positions, much less advancement, appear uncertain. The future can scarcely have appeared very bright when Tocqueville, who owed his position as *juge auditeur* to his father's connections with the overthrown Restoration administration, was asked to take a second oath of allegiance to the new government and was demoted to *juge suppléant*.³ The young men's next move was both in the tradition of their background and their times. To take an interest in social problems, especially as distinct from partisan politics, was an honorable aristocratic tradition going back to the Old Regime. *Noblesse oblige* is, after all, French. To come to America to investigate what was new in the New World was in the spirit of the times; in the early nineteenth century the young North American republic played host to many curious visitors from Europe. Accordingly Beaumont and Tocqueville petitioned the minister of

³ *Ibid.*, VIII: *Correspondance d'Alexis de Tocqueville et de Gustav de Beaumont*, i, 106, Tocqueville to Beaumont, March 14 and March 21, 1831.

justice for unpaid eighteen-month leaves of absence and a commission from the new government to study the prison system in America.

Even before they disembarked the two men had plans to accomplish more on their trip than an investigation of prisons.⁴ Beaumont, in a letter written to his father while on board ship, suggested that a book on the history and character of the American people which analyzed their social conditions and rectified the errors of previous works was to be a joint project.⁵ On June 30, 1831, Tocqueville wrote that he and Beaumont were amassing a great deal of material and hoped to be able to write the book they had been planning for over a year.⁶ By November the project had been split in two, and Beaumont, always interested in the downtrodden, wrote a work on slavery which "ought to immortalize me," while Tocqueville went on to paint the broader picture of democracy in one country.⁷

It has often been noted that each of the friends carefully avoided publishing in areas he considered the province of the other, although they read each other's works before publication "in order to be sure that we place ourselves before the public as united in words as we are in our hearts."⁸ Indeed, when Tocqueville spoke of slavery he sent his readers to Beaumont's soon-to-be-published work "which has treated in depth a question which my subject only allows me to touch lightly."⁹ There is yet another reason why one would not expect to find much discussion of slavery in *Democracy in America*. Slavery "was American but not democratic and it was the portrait of democracy that I wanted to paint."¹⁰ It has been noted that Tocqueville deliberately drew his illustrations from the North and West because he did not consider the South truly democratic.¹¹

Although the position of the black man in America was scrupulously left to his colleague, the problem of slavery haunts *Democracy in America*. It is returned to again and again and finally appears as the

⁴ *Ibid.*, VIII, i, 12.

⁵ *Ibid.*, VIII, i, 18-19.

⁶ *Ibid.*, VIII, i, 17.

⁷ *Ibid.*, VIII, i, 19.

⁸ Seymour Drescher, *Tocqueville and Beaumont on Social Reform* (New York, 1968), p. 212; *Oeuvres*, VIII, i, 326, Tocqueville to Beaumont, Nov. 9, 1838.

⁹ *Oeuvres*, I: *De la Démocratie en Amérique*, i, 356.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, I, i, 331. Also see Alexis de Tocqueville, *Memoirs, Letters and Remains of Alexis de Tocqueville*, transl. by the translator of Napoleon's correspondence with King Joseph (Boston, 1862), and *Oeuvres*, I, 342, Tocqueville to M. de Kergorlay.

¹¹ Jack Lively, *The Social and Political Thought of Alexis de Tocqueville* (Oxford, 1962), p. 27. Also see *Oeuvres*, I, ii, 243n.

cancer eating away at the unity of the new democracy. In one of Tocqueville's notebooks, immediately after a short passage entitled "First Impressions" written four days after his arrival in the United States, is an untitled list of items which appear to be subjects he intended to explore. The fourth item on the list is "Slavery. Way of fighting it. Experience and cruelty."¹² The list probably predates Beaumont's decision to write a book on the subject. In *Democracy in America* appears a general title of "Position occupied by the black race in the United States" with a footnote leading the reader to Beaumont's work and the subtitle "Dangers that its presence creates for whites."¹³ Tocqueville's comments are largely of a descriptive nature and chiefly concerned with the diseconomies of slavery and its deleterious effects on the slave owner. However, a little digging reveals the roots of his philosophical position. For instance he says: "At the moment I am not looking for all the effects of slavery but only for those which concern the material prosperity of its adopters."¹⁴

Tocqueville's intent becomes clear a few paragraphs later when he states that "Christianity destroyed slavery only by insisting on the validity of the slave's rights; nowadays it can be attacked from the master's point of view: on this point interest and morality are in accord."¹⁵ If "interest" represents the master's economic situation then "morality" must represent the demands of Christianity. Slavery, therefore, is an affront to Christian morality.¹⁶ Tocqueville called slavery an "evil which was dropped like a cursed seed somewhere on the ground where it nurtured itself, spread without effort and grew naturally along with the society that had accepted it."¹⁷ He described Beaumont's book as one which "includes a great number of very valuable and completely unknown legislative and historical documents" that demonstrate "into what excesses of tyranny men may be pushed once they abandon nature and humanity."¹⁸ Slavery then is both unnatural and inhumane.

Long before he traveled to the South Tocqueville appears to have asked every American he met about slavery. His informants ranged from former President John Quincy Adams, with whom he dined one

¹² *Oeuvres*, V: *Voyages en Sicile et aux Etats-Unis*, i, 294.

¹³ *Ibid.*, I, i, 355.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, I, i, 364.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Oeuvres*, V, i, 225, for the comment that the same Americans who treat Indians with less than benign neglect go to church to hear that all men are brothers to whom the creator has assigned the duty of helping one another.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, I, i, 356.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

evening, to an unnamed farmer in Sandy Ridge, Tennessee.¹⁹ Often his questions, at least as he recorded them, appear to reflect an opinion of his own. For example, he asked John Q. Adams, “Do you look upon slavery as the great affliction of the United States?”²⁰

The information and opinions collected by Tocqueville were digested and incorporated into his book; he sometimes echoed his informants and sometimes refuted them. Adams’ affirmative reply that slavery was the root of both present troubles and future fears and his comparison of Southern society with an aristocracy in which the idea of work was shameful were echoed in Tocqueville’s use of the analogy of an aristocracy and in his emphasis on the abhorrence of physical labor by white Southerners.²¹ A planter from Georgia, a lawyer from Louisiana, and one from Baltimore all claimed that the climate in much of the South was such that whites could not work in the fields.²² Tocqueville took note of the notion and in *Democracy in America* stated that he did not think that this idea, “so favorable to the laziness of the Southerner,” was based on experience and suggested that the south of the nation was no hotter than the south of Italy or Spain.²³

The uneconomic aspects of slavery were suggested to Tocqueville by many of his informants and most tellingly by a young lawyer from Ohio who compared the prosperity in free Ohio with the stagnant situation just across the Ohio river in slave Kentucky.²⁴ Tocqueville adapted the idea and described a trip down the Ohio river between Ohio and Kentucky, between freedom and slavery, and stated that the traveler “had only to glance around in order to be able to judge which was better for mankind.”²⁵ Slavery not only prevented the white men from making their fortunes, but it even diverted them from wishing to do so.²⁶

Perhaps the reason for Tocqueville’s choice of an economic approach to slavery is to be found in the last sentence of his notes on Ohio: “Man is not made for slavery: *that truth is perhaps even better proved by the master than by the slave.*”²⁷

¹⁹ *Oeuvres*, V, i, 97, 134.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, V, i, 97.

²¹ *Ibid.*, I, i, 358, 363.

²² *Ibid.*, V, i, 87-88, 112, 135.

²³ *Ibid.*, I, i, 368. At the same time Tocqueville suggested that if one could not grow rice without the work of slaves, one could forego growing rice.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, V, i, 131. Interview labeled *importante*; Tocqueville’s italics.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, I, i, 361.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, I, i, 363.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, V, i, 284; Tocqueville’s italics.

Tocqueville saw no easy solution to the American dilemma. The very success of democracy made the eradication of slavery and race prejudice more difficult. This notion is of some importance because Tocqueville discussed it not only in *Democracy in America* but also in a letter to Jared Sparks in 1840 and again in the Chamber of Deputies in 1845.²⁸ His position was that a democratic society will not choose to rid itself of slavery and race prejudice because it is impossible for a whole society "to rise, as it were, above itself."²⁹ What is needed is someone who is master both of slaveowners and slaves.³⁰ He stated that a man can separate himself from the prejudices of religion, nation, and race and that if such a man were king, he could thus effectuate astounding revolutions in his society but that the same revolutions cannot be accomplished by the society itself.³¹ In this connection he noted that slavery was easier to eradicate in a colonial society because laws could be imposed by the motherland.³² In Tocqueville's view the problem was not one which resulted from American federalism but rather one which arose from the very nature of democratic societies and from the fact that in the United States slavery was a domestic rather than a colonial problem.

Before the second volume of *Democracy in America* was in the printer's hands Tocqueville was elected to the Chamber of Deputies and was immediately assigned to a commission charged with examining the abolitionist proposal of Destutt de Tracy. He was chosen reporter of the group. The commission's report, submitted to the Chamber of Deputies on July 23, 1839, was Tocqueville's first major parliamentary contribution.

Both the subject and the manner of treatment were suited to the new parliamentarian's interests and abilities. Tocqueville was concerned about his inadequacy as a public speaker³³ and wrote to a friend

²⁸ *Ibid.*, I, i, 372; Richard Laurin Hawkins, "Unpublished Letters of Alexis de Tocqueville," *The Romanic Review*, XIX (July-Sept. 1928), 206, Tocqueville to Jared Sparks, Oct. 13, 1840; *Oeuvres*, III: *Ecrits et discours politiques*, 113.

²⁹ *Oeuvres*, I, i, 372.

³⁰ Hawkins, "Unpublished Letters," 206, Tocqueville to Jared Sparks dated Oct. 13, 1840. "Il est presque sans exemple que la servitude ait été abolie par le fait du maître. Elle ne l'a jamais été que par l'effort d'une puissance qui dominait tout à la fois le maître et l'esclave. C'est ce qui fait que l'esclavage durera plus longtemps parmi vous que partout ailleurs, parce que vous êtes entièrement indépendants."

³¹ *Oeuvres*, I, i, 372.

³² *Ibid.*, I, i, 372n.

³³ *Ibid.*, VI, I, 57-58, letter from Tocqueville to Reeve, April 12, 1840. See also the introduction by J. J. Chevallier and André Jardin to *Oeuvres*, III, i, 8: ". . . he didn't have the art of rising to the tribune to improvise on whatever happened to be the subject, nor of dashing off a hasty article on a superficially understood problem."

that this report was “a fine opportunity to treat a great problem with a pen in hand.”³⁴ He took his task seriously for he told Reeve, his English translator and friend, that he had a mountain of documents to examine and that the task was comparable to writing a book.³⁵

The report advocated immediate, general, and simultaneous emancipation of all slaves in the French colonies. Again Tocqueville couched his argument in pragmatic terms: “Humanity and morality have often demanded, sometimes perhaps with imprudence, the abolition of slavery. Today it is a political necessity.”³⁶ The question considered was not “whether slavery is evil and ought to end, but when and how it can best be terminated.”³⁷ At least three times in his proposal Tocqueville stressed that abolition was no longer a theoretical problem but rather a practical one. The abolition of slavery in the British colonies of the Antilles, which were in sight of the French possession, made the continuance of slavery on the French islands impossible.³⁸ Tocqueville noted that even the colonial councils were aware that slavery must end. What the councils did not appreciate was that, since abolition was inevitable, the failure to face the problem bred uncertainty in the planters and thus impeded progress.³⁹

The main body of the report was directed toward refuting the arguments of those who would recommend gradualism either by postponing abolition until the slaves were prepared for freedom or by confining emancipation to some segment of the slave population. The first, Tocqueville contended, was impossible—a man cannot learn to conduct himself as a freeman while still a slave. He cannot become a diligent laborer so long as he does not work for wages. He can have but little regard for the institution of matrimony as long as he can exercise neither the privilege nor the duties of that state. Christianity is a reli-

³⁴ Lawlor, *Alexis de Tocqueville in the Chamber of Deputies*, p. 42, quoting a letter of Tocqueville to Louis de Kergorlay, July 3, 1839.

³⁵ *Oeuvres*, VI, i, 46, letter from Tocqueville to Reeve, July, 1839. See also *ibid.*, XI, 79-80, letter from Tocqueville to Royer-Collard, August 8, 1839, mentioning that he had not yet finished the report because he wanted it to be based on facts rather than on theories and had therefore studied in detail what had happened in the British colonies in the previous six years. He concluded that he hoped that the result of so much effort would be a useful report. M. C. M. Simpson, ed., *Correspondence and Conversations of Alexis de Tocqueville with Nassau William Senior from 1834-1859* (2nd ed.; New York, 1968), p. 21, mentions two letters written by Tocqueville to Nassau Senior between 1838 and 1841 which consisted of a series of questions on the measures taken by England concerning the emancipation of slaves.

³⁶ *Oeuvres*, III, 48.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, III, 42.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, III, 46.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, III, 47.

gion of freemen and is lost to the slave because as long as he is a slave the priest will be, in his eyes, a substitute for the master.⁴⁰

Each of the various forms of the second type of gradualism, that of releasing some slaves before others, created its own problems. If one allowed slaves to buy their own freedom, the young and strong would become free leaving the old and the weak as charges of the masters.⁴¹ If one granted freedom to the unborn an unnatural situation would develop endangering the family. Tocqueville considered this last notion as a "monstrous inversion . . . contrary to nature from which nothing useful or good can come."⁴²

Both forms of gradualism were also attacked in the report on the very practical basis that they were impossible to implement. Once liberty was promised the slaves would free themselves, and that would lead to disorder: "Slavery is one of those institutions which can last a thousand years if no one asks why it exists but is nearly impossible to maintain the day that question is asked."⁴³ However, in order to calm those who feared violence because of the memory of the insurrection on Haiti in 1793, Tocqueville reviewed the recent history of emancipation in the British colonies. He noted that the abolition of slavery did not give rise to any attempts at insurrection.⁴⁴

On the other hand Tocqueville saw some positive virtues in complete emancipation. He pointed out that the legal codes of slave and free societies differed in that the former did not have laws to protect the very young, the sick, and the old, nor did they have laws to control vagabonds. In such societies the master took on the role of lawgiver and judge. Therefore he suggested that along with emancipation should come a new legal code made up of general laws applicable to all in a free society. This could only be done if all slaves were freed at the same time.⁴⁵

However, having argued in favor of complete emancipation, Tocqueville went on to add a sort of limbo on the road to freedom.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, III, 44, 43, 45.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, III, 52.

⁴² *Ibid.*, III, 53. It is interesting to compare Tocqueville's words on this type of gradual emancipation with Montesquieu's on slavery. Tocqueville: "état contra nature, et dont il ne saurait jamais sortir rien d'utile ni de bon." Montesquieu: "L'esclavage . . . n'est pas bon par sa nature; il n'est utile, ni au maître ni à l'esclave." (Edward Seeber, *Anti-Slavery Opinion in France during the Second Half of the Eighteenth Century* (Baltimore, 1937), p. 33. The second quotation is from *L'Esprit des lois*, Book XV, chap. i.

⁴³ *Oeuvres*, III, 46.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, III, 58, 69.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, III, 49-50.

The slaves would indeed be freed, but for a time they would be obliged to become employees of the government, which would hire them out to the planters. A portion of their wages would be deducted to help pay an indemnity to the former slaveowners. Besides his wages the slave would also receive a piece of land sufficient to feed him and the guarantee of a five-day work week.⁴⁶

Tocqueville saw a number of advantages in the plan: the planters would become used to dealing with free labor; the link between the former slave and his master would be broken (unlike the British system which had apprenticed the ex-slave to his ex-master); the indemnity would be paid at little expense to France; the former slave would become accustomed to wages and would want to continue working after his obligation ended.⁴⁷ Notice that Tocqueville has interposed the state between the master and the slave.

Tocqueville's practical arguments in favor of emancipation were probably a reflection of his political awareness, his training, and his personality. However, it is unlikely that a charter member of the Société pour l'Abolition de l'Esclavage would be unaware of its late eighteenth-century parent organization. La Société des Amis des Noirs had depended on moral arguments and had ignored the political necessity of providing viable economic arguments. It had achieved nothing while its sister English association, which in addition to moral suasion had emphasized the diseconomies of the slave trade and slavery, had managed to get the former abolished by 1807 and had created enormous public support for the abolition of the latter, which was finally accomplished in 1833.⁴⁸

Again Tocqueville's view of slavery as inhumane and un-Christian underlies his economic argument.⁴⁹ He stated that Christianity was the religion of free men and that slavemasters had avoided exposing slaves

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, III, 73-75.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, III, 73-76.

⁴⁸ See Daniel P. Resnick, "The Société des Amis des Noirs and the Abolition of Slavery," *French Historical Studies*, VII (Fall 1972), 558-69, for a comparison of late eighteenth-century abolitionist societies in France and England. According to J.-J. Chevallier and André Jardin the nineteenth-century Société pour l'Abolition de l'Esclavage was a far cry from the mass religious movement in Great Britain. The tone was quite aristocratic, and the group was made up of economists, philanthropists, and politicians. Banquets were arranged and a review and brochures published. However the authors do consider the group effective in parliamentary and government circles. (*Oeuvres*, III, 9.)

⁴⁹ For Tocqueville's consistent preference for the "spiritual" over the "material" see Doris Goldstein, *Trial of Faith: Religion and Politics in Tocqueville's Thought* (New York, 1975), pp. 4-5.

to it for fear of awakening the instinct of liberty.⁵⁰ Slavery then is incompatible with true Christianity.

Tocqueville refused to consider the slave as property for which the owner should be indemnified as he would be for other property when it was seized by the state: "Man has never had the right to possess man, and the fact of possession has always been and still is unlawful."⁵¹ Since he went on to recommend indemnification, the above must be considered a pure statement of principle, and the law referred to must be divine or natural law. Tocqueville recommended that indemnities be paid to slaveholders because the government of France had encouraged slavery and the slave trade for over a hundred years and thus should share the cost of terminating it. He added that the assurance and added wealth of the landowners would ease the transition to emancipation.⁵²

Tocqueville was evidently pleased with the report because he sent copies of it to his friends. In the United States Jared Sparks' wife translated it.⁵³ It was published in Boston and received wide circulation—wide enough indeed that the French consul in New Orleans complained to his government about it.⁵⁴ The author apparently thought that he had successfully steered between the Scylla and Charybdis as his letters to John Stuart Mill and Henry Reeve demonstrate. He wrote to Mill that in the report he had: ". . . carefully avoided irritating colonial passions, which has not stopped their newspapers from insulting me. But you know colonials, they are all the same, no matter what nation they belong to; they become raving madmen from the moment one speaks of being just to their blacks. But try as they may, they will not succeed in irritating me or in making me discuss the problem in a violent manner which I think would be dangerous for the nation."⁵⁵ Two months earlier Tocqueville had sent a copy of the report to Reeve mentioning that although it demonstrated a great regard for liberty, he did not think that Reeve would find in it any of

⁵⁰ *Oeuvres*, III, 45. For Tocqueville's acceptance of Christian principles see Doris S. Goldstein, "The Religious Beliefs of Alexis de Tocqueville," *French Historical Studies*, I (Fall 1960), and Goldstein, *Trial of Faith*, pp. 379-93. For an earlier view see Joachim Wach, "The Role of Religion in the Social Philosophy of Alexis de Tocqueville," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, VII (Jan. 1946), 74-90.

⁵¹ *Oeuvres*, III, 54.

⁵² *Ibid.*, III, 55-56.

⁵³ Hawkins, "Unpublished Letters," n. 40. In his letter to Sparks, Oct. 13, 1840, Tocqueville mentions that he is very pleased that the report has been translated and that he hopes that it will make an impression on the South. *Ibid.*, 206.

⁵⁴ Drescher, *Tocqueville and Beaumont on Social Reform*, 98-99.

⁵⁵ *Oeuvres*, VI, i, 326, letter from Tocqueville to Mill, Nov. 14, 1839.

the revolutionary passions which were sometimes shown by his abolitionist colleagues.⁵⁶

However it was in a letter to his friend and mentor, Pierre-Paul Royer-Collard, that Tocqueville most thoroughly explained the style and tone of the report and by extension of his other writing on the subject: "You will see that I have avoided, to the point of *coldness*, all that smacks of harangue. Both my own natural penchant and the desire to avoid unnecessarily exciting the passions of the colonies led me to it. I wanted to be scrupulously just and moderate in an affair in which until now I think others have been violent even when they have been right. To do myself justice, I must admit that in working on the report I always thought of the success of the measure and never of the success of the report."⁵⁷

The report was never discussed in the Chamber of Deputies although Tocqueville attempted to force a discussion in January 1840.⁵⁸ Instead another commission—the third since 1836—was appointed to study the problem. The practice of postponing action by the appointment of sequential committees to study problems requiring legislation was common in both England and France at the time.⁵⁹ Its effectiveness can be deduced from its continued use in our own period.

In discussing Tocqueville's antislavery sentiments one cannot ignore the one instance which at first glance appears to belie his abolitionist position. After France finally abolished the slave trade in 1830 the government signed agreements in 1831 and 1833 with a number of European countries allowing each the right to search ocean vessels in certain waters. In December 1841 Great Britain attempted to extend the treaties. Anglo-French relations were still somewhat strained at the time, an aftermath of the Turko-Egyptian conflict during which France had been forced to back down and restrict her support for Egypt.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, VI, i, 47, Tocqueville to Reeve, Sept. 15, 1839. Mayer indicates that these remarks were cut out of the letter in the Beaumont edition.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, XI, 87-88, Tocqueville to Royer-Collard, Oct. 21, 1839. Italics in original.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, III, i, 10. See also *ibid.*, VI, i, 50, Tocqueville to Reeve Oct. 31, 1839. Tocqueville asked Reeve to get him the latest official documents on the export and import values to the British colonies from 1834 to the present so that he could be prepared to discuss abolition when it came up. *Ibid.*, VI, i, 58-59, Tocqueville to Reeve, April 13, 1840. Tocqueville mentioned that he had intended to go to London to study English abolition but now recognized that the question would not come up and therefore he would not make the trip.

⁵⁹ In England Select Committees of the Commons and Royal Commissions studied social legislation before it came to the floor of the House. Proponents of such legislation often considered this a delaying tactic on the part of the government. E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York, 1963), p. 337.

French public opinion was still very anti-English,⁶⁰ and when in late 1842 Guizot was willing to extend the right-of-search treaties, neither the electorate nor its representatives in the Chamber of Deputies were in agreement.

Tocqueville, a member of the opposition, spoke to the question and opposed the right of search for a variety of reasons.⁶¹ He believed that the treaties violated national sovereignty, raised important constitutional issues, and were ineffective as well as dangerous.⁶² To allow the armed forces of one nation to board the merchant ships of another and to allow the courts of one nation to judge another was injurious to the sovereignty of the nation. Tocqueville asserted that in a period of strained relations such actions would lead to war. He then quoted a British diplomatic official who had said that the slave trade was continuing to the tune of 300,000 Africans transported per year and noted that the conditions on slave ships had worsened because of the attempt to hide human cargo.⁶³

But it was on the question of the constitution that Tocqueville was most vehement. He argued for ministerial responsibility to the parliament rather than to the king. This he thought was the real issue. The government had negotiated a treaty which was never ratified because it became clear that a majority opposed it. Yet those responsible stayed in office. Although he agreed that the tribune of the Chamber was not the place to decide foreign affairs, he insisted that the foreign minister could not and should not flout public opinion. A reasonable interest in the attitudes of the French people would have avoided such a *contretemps* as had arisen over the right-to-search treaties. "You still don't know the people whom you want to lead," Tocqueville told the minister of foreign affairs.⁶⁴

⁶⁰ Anthony Wood, *Nineteenth Century Britain, 1815-1914* (New York, 1960), p. 165.

⁶¹ *Le Moniteur universel*, Jan. 29, 1843, pp. 162-64, Alexis de Tocqueville's speech in the Chamber of Deputies. Tocqueville kept in touch with his British friends on the right-of-search problem. On December 14, 1842, he asked Nassau Senior if a British cabinet minister who negotiated a treaty which Parliament prevented him from ratifying would be forced to resign. Simpson, *Correspondence and Conversations*, pp. 26-28.

When Lord Brougham attacked Tocqueville's speech in the House of Lords, both Mill and Reeve came to his defense. Mill wrote a public letter to Brougham over Tocqueville's signature which was published in the *Morning Chronicle*. Reeve wrote a letter to the *Spectator*. See *Oeuvres*, VI, i, 65. Tocqueville to Reeve, Feb. 6, 1843; 67-70. Reeve to Tocqueville, Feb. 9, 1843; 70-71. Tocqueville to Reeve, Feb. 20, 1843; 339-40. Tocqueville to Mill, Feb. 9, 1843; 340-41. Mill to Tocqueville, Feb. 20, 1843; 344. Tocqueville to Mill, March 12, 1843.

⁶² *Moniteur universel*, Jan. 29, 1843, pp. 163, 164.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 164.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 163, 164.

But what of the slave ships? Tocqueville had a solution which would make unnecessary the searching of one nation's ships by another, would be effective, and would achieve the goal of both France and Great Britain—an end to the slave trade. He argued that if the slave markets were abolished the slave trade would be forced to come to a halt.⁶⁵ No new slaves had entered the French colonies from the time that the markets ceased to operate. Thus Tocqueville's opposition to the right-to-search treaties was based on questions of national sovereignty, constitutionality, and political considerations and did not alter or contradict his position as an abolitionist.

In late 1843, despairing of government action on abolition without public demand, Tocqueville wrote a series of articles for *Le Siècle*, an opposition newspaper, popularizing the conclusions of the Broglie commission on which the author had also served. Léonce-Victor, duc de Broglie, was the president of the Société pour l'Abolition d'Esclavage, and Tocqueville considered the report a masterpiece. He told Beaumont that, "The whole work breathes a sincere love for the human race; that great and noble passion that the mummeries of the philanthropists have managed to make almost ridiculous."⁶⁶

Although Tocqueville thought that the *Siècle* articles read like the chapters of a book and that he lacked both the faults and merits of a journalist, the six articles do not resemble any of his own books.⁶⁷ They betray a definite effort to convince that "very small number of people" who were interested in the slavery question that emancipation was necessary and are much more enthusiastic than his other work. It is perhaps significant that the articles, which were published anonymously, were not mentioned in his published correspondence with his English friends, Reeve, Mill, and Nassau Senior, to whom he normally sent copies of his work. Nor is there any reference to them in his letters

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 163. "Ce n'est pas l'abolition de l'esclavage dont parlait tout à l'heure M. de Gasparin, c'est l'abolition du marché." This rather disturbing phrasing can be explained by the fact that Tocqueville had begun his speech by saying that the real problem of the moment was not slavery or the slave trade but Anglo-French relations. (*Ibid.*, p. 162.) If this represented a change of position, it would be difficult to explain why he sent copies of his own abolition report along with the "admirable" Broglie report to his friend Jean-Jacques Ampère sometime between March and July of the same year and wrote a series of articles the next summer for *Le Siècle* favoring abolition. (*Oeuvres*, XI, 166; III, i, 79-111.) The phrasing probably reflects the search for a possible and appropriate solution to the problem of strained relations between England and France.

⁶⁶ *Oeuvres*, VIII, i, 506, Tocqueville to Beaumont, Oct. 9, 1843.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

to Royer-Collard, Ampère, and Gobineau.⁶⁸ He told Beaumont, who wrote for the same newspaper, not to bother reading the series of articles unless it was to bring himself up to date on the subject.⁶⁹

Tocqueville introduced his subject by stating that the people of his day were so cowed by the great events of their parents' generation that they had not noticed that more than a million men had passed from death to life, from the extremity of servitude to complete independence.⁷⁰ Although he allowed himself to tweak the lion's tail a few times in the articles, he cautioned the French public that to assume that the British emancipated their slaves only to ruin the French sugar trade would be absurd.⁷¹

Although his pragmatic appeals to reason and his insistence on methods which would ensure the economic success of the colonies were no less cogently stated than before, Tocqueville also attempted to enlist French honor and patriotism in the cause of abolition. Thus he argued that France must follow the British and abolish slavery for two reasons: unless she did so France would lose her colonies either through war or financial disaster; and the honor of France demanded it.

Tocqueville saw the Caribbean as the Mediterranean of the New World and France's colonies there as some of her most precious possessions. As long as they remained slave colonies they would be unable to defend themselves because the slaves would certainly not fight against the free blacks of the British colonies.⁷² Black workers were essential to the financial success of the colonies; the proximity of the British islands where there was a shortage of labor and where blacks received good wages would ensure frequent and continuous escapes. He disposed of the colonists' objections by noting that at each stage the colonists had predicted a disaster that had never happened. They had argued that ending the slave trade would ruin the colonies. It did not. They had said that giving civil and political rights to free men of color would cause anarchy. It had not. Therefore Tocqueville could not agree when they said that slavery was necessary to the colonies. It was rather, he

⁶⁸ Correspondence search included the Mayer edition of Tocqueville's complete works, the Simpson edition of the Tocqueville-Nassau Senior correspondence, and the *Memoirs, Letters and Remains* edition of Tocqueville correspondence.

⁶⁹ *Oeuvres*, VIII, i, 506.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, III, i, 78-80.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, III, i, 82-83, 91, 99.

⁷² *Ibid.*, III, i, 83-84.

argued, the retention of slavery that would ensure the loss of the colonies.⁷³

To ensure the continued financial success of the colonies Tocqueville suggested the adoption of three guarantees from the Broglie plan: that an absolute date for emancipation be set and the colonists be given ten years to prepare for it; that France guarantee a remunerative price for colonial sugar after emancipation; and that an indemnity be paid the slaveowners.⁷⁴ To these guarantees Tocqueville added one of his own. Since the major problem the British had faced was the preference of some of the ex-slaves to stake out their own land rather than to work for others, Tocqueville suggested that upon emancipation former slaves be forbidden to buy land thus putting them in the same position as European laborers.⁷⁵ *Le Siècle* was not the journal nor Tocqueville the man to discuss wage slavery.

On the subject of the honor of France Tocqueville was most eloquent. He claimed that France's greatness and honor were at stake and that the English had only been applying French principles when they ended slavery.⁷⁶ For it was the French Revolution which gave practical meaning to the Christian idea that all men were born equal. Tocqueville asked if France, the democratic nation par excellence, was willing to be the only European country to countenance slavery. If so she must ". . . resign herself to passing into other hands the banner of modern civilization that our fathers were the first to raise fifty years ago, and finally renounce all claims to the great role she had the arrogance to claim, but not the courage to fill."⁷⁷

Tocqueville's efforts were to no avail, and the Broglie commission report met the same fate as the earlier studies. It was filed away with no action taken. In 1845 that Tocqueville again and for the last time rose in the Chamber of Deputies to discuss slavery. At issue were a series of laws to alleviate the conditions of slavery. The debate gave Tocqueville an opportunity to reiterate his position. He explained that he was voting for the laws not because he thought that they would have any great effect but because they were decrees which put France

⁷³ *Ibid.*, III, i, 84.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, III, i, 105-09.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, III, i, 104-05. See also Irving M. Zeitlin, *Liberty, Equality and Revolution in Alexis de Tocqueville* (Boston, 1971), p. 29, for the suggestion that for Tocqueville colonial interests took precedence over equality and freedom in this instance.

⁷⁶ *Oeuvres*, III, i, 88-89.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, III, i, 89.

in a superior position in relation to both colonials and slaves, and therefore in a position to dictate emancipation at a later date.⁷⁸ In answer to an abolitionist delegate who quoted some of Tocqueville's pessimistic comments from *Democracy in America* the author said that his views had not changed, that what was lacking in the United States was precisely a power which could impose its will on both sides.⁷⁹ He asked the legislators to remember those principles of liberty which had guided the revolutions of 1789 and 1830 and to recognize that it was only in accord with those principles that great designs could be accomplished.⁸⁰

The intervention in 1845 was Tocqueville's last public statement on slavery, but his continuing interest in the subject for the rest of his life is demonstrated by his comments in two letters to Charles Sumner, the American abolitionist.⁸¹ In 1857 he wrote that he was pleased to know that the citizens of Kansas had chosen liberty over slavery and expressed the hope that slavery would be conquered on that contested soil.⁸² In 1858, just a year before his death, he asked Sumner: "Will Kansas be condemned to the horrors of slavery or will she escape this destiny? As a friend of America and of humanity, I am extremely interested in your response to this question."⁸³

What then were Tocqueville's thoughts on slavery? Apparently, even before the trip to America, he considered slavery evil and in contradiction to both humanitarian and Christian principles. Although he detested the institution of slavery Tocqueville was never able to lay the blame on the slaveowner of his own day, whom he thought could not be blamed for accepting life as he had found it. He compared the blind spots of the slaveowner with those of the aristocracy of bygone days.⁸⁴ In speaking of slavery he always chose to emphasize the dis-

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, III, i, 113.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, III, i, 114.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, III, i, 125-26.

⁸¹ Drescher, *Tocqueville and Beaumont on Social Reform*, p. 206, notes that in 1848 Tocqueville's name appeared on a draft list for a committee on the indemnification of ex-slaveowners. There is no evidence that he served. Hawkins, "Unpublished Letters," includes a letter to Jared Sparks, July 15, 1857, inquiring about slavery. Two letters from Sparks to Tocqueville discussing the slavery problem can be found in Herbert B. Adams, "Jared Sparks and Alexis de Tocqueville," *Johns Hopkins University Studies in Historical and Political Science*, XVI (Dec. 1898), 563-611, Sparks to Tocqueville, June 13, 1853, 607; letter from Sparks to Tocqueville, Dec. 28, 1858. See also *Oeuvres*, VI, i, 207, Tocqueville to Reeve, Sept. 21, 1856, predicting civil war in the United States.

⁸² Hawkins, "Unpublished Letters," 215, Tocqueville to Sumner, Nov. 14, 1857.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 216, Tocqueville to Sumner, March 28, 1858.

⁸⁴ *Oeuvres*, III, i, 117, 1845 speech in the Chamber of Deputies.

economies of the institution and the pragmatic reasons why it must be abolished. He chided the slaveowner for saying that the slaves were happy and used birth and mortality statistics from free and slave societies to show that they were "miserable unto death."⁸⁵ The attempts at moral suasion by the Société des Amis des Noirs had been a total failure, and Tocqueville was always careful to argue for a solution which would sustain the economies of the colonies.

Thus Tocqueville's very real concern with the economic and colonial problems of slavery is consistently united with a firm conviction that the peculiar institution was inhumane, un-Christian, and unworthy of the French tradition of liberty.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, III, i, 119-20.