

# 1 “The Key to Almost the Whole Work”

AFTER OPENING *Democracy in America* with a description of the “physical configuration” of North America, Tocqueville commences his work of social analysis.<sup>1</sup> This he does by introducing an analogy that proves central to the book’s general portrait of postaristocratic democracy. The trope consists of a vivid comparison between the birth of a human child and its development into a man, and the emergence and development of nations:

When a child is born, his first years pass unnoticed in the joys and activities of infancy. As he grows older and begins to become a man, then the doors of the world open and he comes into touch with his fellows. For the first time notice is taken of him, and people think they can see the germs of the virtues and vices of his maturity taking shape.

That, if I am not mistaken, is a great error.

Go back; look at the baby in the mother’s arms; see how the world is first reflected in the still hazy mirror of his mind. . . . Only then will you understand the origin of the prejudices, habits, and passions which are to dominate his life. The whole man is there, if one may put it so, in the cradle.

Something analogous happens with nations (D, 31).

In this chapter, Tocqueville lays the groundwork for the text’s developmental and familialized presentation of emergent democracy. Indeed, he asserts that “this chapter provides the germ of all that is to follow and the key to almost the whole work” (D, 32). In it he crafts an analogy between humans’ ontogenetic development and the phylogenetic development of human society—a parallel later explored by Freud and other psychoanalytic theorists. Tocqueville argues that early influences and environment mould not only a human individual but also the character of nations: “Peoples always bear some marks of their origin. Circumstances of birth and growth affect all the rest of their careers.”<sup>2</sup> He

hereby establishes that the portal through which he examines peoples, nations, and their development, is these early formed “prejudices, habits, and passions.” Through the subsequent pages of *Democracy in America* Tocqueville returns time and again to this man-nation analogy, asserting “that nations, like men, in their youth almost always give indications of the main features of their destiny.”<sup>3</sup>

Tocqueville specifies this man-nation analogy to suggest that, like a child in its “mother’s arms,” a young nation’s subsequent development is influenced by its earliest experiences. Chapters 2 through 5 of the present work investigate how the idea of a child struggling to grow up in relation to an affecting point of departure structures *Democracy in America*; making democracy healthy means, in the text, helping it to grow up well. In this narrative, emergent democracy—or more precisely, Tocqueville’s French and U.S. democracies—are themselves signified as the children in question. Valuing as he did intergenerational and other social ties, Tocqueville posits these young democracies as historical beings emerging in relation to very particular sites of origin. If, as Tocqueville says, an emergent people or nation, like an infant, is irretrievably shaped by what it first sees in the “still hazy mirror of its mind,” European aristocracy looms large in both French and American democracy’s imaginations. Harvey Mitchell is correct to suggest that for Tocqueville, democracy cannot be understood without attention to aristocracy, as he aims to convey “how the values of the new transformed, yet emerged in some sense from, the old.” Pierre Manent similarly sees Tocqueville presenting aristocracy as an originary point against which he works to “elaborate upon the ‘generative principles’” of democracy.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, throughout *Democracy in America*, the reader encounters aristocracy as an immense fixed entity hovering in the shadows of the recent past, a past out of which democracy has emerged. But while Tocqueville is famous for configuring aristocracy as democracy’s point of departure and Other, what has not been explored is how he familializes and genders this relationship. In Tocqueville’s text, aristocracy is maternalized, and young democracy’s experiences with this mother-world are the “origin” of its “prejudices, habits, and passions.”

Tocqueville turns to youthful America to study democracy because there, he believes, one can readily retrieve the story of a democratic nation’s birth and growth. Building his man-nation analogy, he says that “the taste for analysis comes to nations only when they are growing old, and when at last they do turn their thoughts to their cradle, the mists of time have closed round it, ignorance and pride have woven fables round it, and behind all that the truth is hidden.” The U.S. is “the only country in which we can watch the natural quiet growth of society and where it is possible to be exact about the influence of the point of departure on the future of a state” (D, 32). Of course, two decades later in *The Ancien Régime* (1856), ignoring his own advice, Tocqueville attempts to discover

the complex circumstances surrounding the birth of French democracy. But this is because he remains committed to his earlier theme, arguing that the French Revolution of 1789 will “ever remain in darkness to those who do not look beyond it; it can only be comprehended by the light of the ages which preceded it.” It is out of that history that the revolution is born, driven by the new “passion” that seeks equality “with obstinate and often blind ardour, willing to sacrifice everything to gain it.”<sup>5</sup> Although the revolutionaries of 1789 aimed to “open a gulf between their past and their present,” Tocqueville writes that he has “always suspected that they *unconsciously retained most of the sentiments, habits, and ideas which the old regime had taught them, and by whose aid they achieved the Revolution*; and that, without intending it, they used its ruins as materials for the construction of their new society.”<sup>6</sup> Though shattered, this old world leaves its mark on the new, having inspired passions and educated wills. As such, only once “having drawn from the portrait of the old regime” its “laws, its faults, its prejudices, its suffering, its greatness,” can one “understand the conduct of the French during the sixty years which have followed its fall.”<sup>7</sup> So, to return to *Democracy in America’s* mother-child metaphor, if democracy is a developing child, to understand that child and its potentialities, we must consider its mother.

Where in the text do we find this mother? Though Tocqueville’s English translators are often imprecise in conveying the gendered and familialized nature of Tocqueville’s ideas of homeland, founding, country, and ancestors, his original French is marked by a distinctive and telling pattern. Overwhelmingly in the text, almost too many times to document, Tocqueville conjures up the “social state” of old Europe from which the European-Americans have fled as *la mère patrie*.<sup>8</sup> (Much less often, to refer to the old country as a legal state, he uses the linguistically gendered but conceptually gender-neutral term *la métropole*.<sup>9</sup>) Coinciding with this maternalization of the aristocratic European social state is the textual production of democracy’s emergence as a birth. Over and over, Tocqueville describes the new colonies as coming to birth (*naître*) and growing (*grandir*), sometimes they do so in a new cradle (*berceau*). Often the U.S. and French Revolutions are birthing processes and, time and again, the new French and U.S. democratic social states are posited in states of infancy, childhood, or adolescence.<sup>10</sup> Such metaphorical language underscores the mother-child analogy Tocqueville explicitly deploys to characterize the development of nations. To refer generally to nations and countries, Tocqueville sometimes uses *la nation* and *le pays* but also, significantly, *patrie*, whose familial tone derives from the Latin root, *pater, patris*, as well as the Greek, *pater, patros*, for father(s).<sup>11</sup> Tocqueville almost always uses this term when he refers not to aristocracy, but to the new republic of the United States and generically to republican states (though also exceptionally to historical France, which in his mind had republican periods).<sup>12</sup>

That is, while motherhood is linked in the text to aristocracy, fatherhood is associated with republics. Still, the notion of fatherhood is most frequently tied to ancestors as human agents (*pays de leurs ancêtres* but also *les pères, pays de leurs pères* and *les aïeux*).<sup>13</sup> Over all, Tocqueville produces through this array of terms a symbolic family context comprised of mother, child, and father figures. Aristocratic Europe is predominantly signified as maternal, individual historical actors in France and the U.S. and new republican states as fathers, and the new democracies themselves as infants or children in courses of development.

## FRENCH AND U.S. DISCOURSE

To understand the historical meaning of Tocqueville's imagery, it must be situated in the prevailing discourses of the contexts in question. As Tocqueville himself insisted, people never act or think in a state of complete historical suspension, nor break entirely with their past. Tocqueville was a Frenchman and traveler to North America; his habit of familializing and gendering historical events and processes in France and the U.S. reflects his participation in discursive habits popular in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century France and the U.S.—the residues of which continue to operate today. But in casting aristocracy as a maternal force and democracy's emergence as a birthing, Tocqueville both employs and shifts particular imagery prevalent in pre- and post-revolutionary French discourse and colonial and postcolonial U.S. discourse.

In eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe, gendered and familial symbolism came to dominate prevailing understandings of society and politics. Doris Kadish argues that this “had much to do with availability: familiar and omnipresent, at a time when class and other distinctions were uncertain, gender provided a convenient and universally understandable analogy to be used.”<sup>14</sup> In France the imagery took its own peculiar form, with the monarchy at the center of a constellation of familial images. By the end of the eighteenth century, Lynn Hunt observes, the French sought to “get free from the political parents of whom they had developed a low opinion,” and “imagined replacing them—the king and the queen—with a different kind of family, one in which the parents were effaced and the children, especially the brothers, acted autonomously.”<sup>15</sup> But with monarchical absolutism associated with the notion of a male Christian God and the patriarchal family, revolutionaries were preoccupied with metaphorical patricide more than matricide or even parricide. God was seen to impart power to the king as *male* head of all of France—a form of power called “*la puissance paternelle*”—which in turn trickled down to husbands/fathers who were thereby ordained as heads of family. The androcentric rule of primogeniture and Salic law underscored this male authority. Joan Landes thus notes: “The Great Chain of Being that stretched from heaven to

earth was an order of families, each ruled by a benevolent father,” and the “theater of absolutism raised the father-king from lord to central icon of the regime.”<sup>16</sup> Reacting against this paternalized monarchy, republicans chose Marianne as a female symbol for the republic in a gender-based effort to gain distance from the past.<sup>17</sup> However, reflecting the generative and eventually incoherent nature of gender, narratives rooted in gendered symbols are seldom wholly logical. While feminine Marianne signified the new republic, the Revolution was typically understood to require the overthrow of paternal and patriarchal, but not masculine, authority, making way as it was for *fraternal* democratic rule; it also meant the political exclusion of females.<sup>18</sup> Meanwhile, the leading male nobles of the Old Regime had apparently been un-manned by the increasingly absolutist king and were thus coded effeminate by revolutionaries, that is, ill-suited to what was widely understood as the “manly” task of fraternal republicanism.<sup>19</sup> French political discourse in the revolutionary era, reflected in paintings, sculpture and other art of the day, thus valorized republican manliness, signified by authority seized by symbolic brothers from a father.<sup>20</sup> The rapidly expanding number of novels written in this era often featured father figures in conflict with sons.<sup>21</sup>

Despite this widespread French preoccupation with paternal authority and the Revolution as a patricide committed by united brothers, *Democracy in America* does not focus on the monarchy. In *The Ancien Régime*, Tocqueville closely examines the French monarchy and its gradual leveling effect on society, a development, he argues, that helped produce the late-eighteenth century’s revolutionary consciousness. But while the monarchy was increasingly consolidating political power in France toward the end of that century, in *Democracy in America* Tocqueville casts his gaze over the “last seven hundred years,” focusing on long-term developments in the epoch of aristocracy.<sup>22</sup> So in Tocqueville’s earlier text it is aristocracy we encounter as democracy’s prolegomenon, characterized by Tocqueville as a longstanding, hierarchical class society and culture in which the upper classes held, with a sense of care and obligation, fixed hierarchical power over most members of their society.<sup>23</sup> In this earlier work, Tocqueville confronts both democracy and aristocracy as kinds of “social state,” a psychosocial cultural formation that involves not only political leaders but all political and social actors, their dominant “passions” and “mores,” and how these sensibilities play out in relation to institutions, social relations, and structures. This alternative vantage point frees Tocqueville to produce a textual family drama somewhat distinct from those that dominated eighteenth- and nineteenth-century French discourse. In Tocqueville’s version, aristocracy is coded maternal and, intuitively, from a modern perspective, this move is far from nonsensical: the involved, dependent, and hierarchical relations of care signified by aristocracy’s *noblesse oblige* do have a maternal air, given modern

Western understandings of motherhood. As a republican, Tocqueville also participates in the representation of civic republicanism as “manly” (in his words, *mâle*, *viril*, and the lack, *impuissance*), assessing not only democracy’s citizens but also France’s aristocratic nobles in relation to this quality of manliness. But in *Democracy in America*, the aristocratic social state itself, as a site of mores and a psychology of class dynamics, is marked off from manly republicanism as maternal. Because Tocqueville is more sweeping with history in *Democracy in America* than in *The Ancien Régime*, the symbolic family drama that frames *Democracy in America*, though not absent from the later text, is there fractured, particularly because the timeline of the child-developmental narrative is no longer relevant in the same way.<sup>24</sup>

So *Democracy in America*’s symbolic family drama evokes ideas of family and gender with which revolutionary and postrevolutionary France struggled, without always directly mirroring them. Tocqueville’s aristocracy/democracy: mother/child symbolism can also be seen to reflect the transition from aristocratic to democratic norms of family life itself. In Old Europe, parent-child relations were notably hierarchical, authoritarian, and controlling—what to modern individuals probably seems infantilizing. James Traer observes that under the French *ancien régime*, generally speaking, the *père de famille* held broad rights to correct a child and over a child’s property. A child was emancipated from such powers when he or she married or established a separate residence for at least a year.<sup>25</sup> In promulgating the ideas of the *philosophes*, the Revolution of 1789 worked to deinstitutionalize these rigid and hierarchical family relations (made that much more extreme by legislation of the monarchy in the eighteenth century), and institutionalize more fluid ones that reflected the new ideal of equality. Paternal authority over offspring softened, and children were released from legal minority at the age of twenty-one for purposes of civil rights and property holding. In 1790, a family court was created to replace the authority of the *père de famille* with a deliberative council of relatives, designed to regulate more democratically the relationship between parents and minor children. Parent-child relations were now more informal, intimate, and mutual, though also, as a consequence, more tension-ridden.<sup>26</sup> In portraying aristocracy as a parent and democracy as the developing offspring, Tocqueville evokes these changing family norms. While aristocracy’s structured and predictable parent-child hierarchy mirrors the structured and predictable class hierarchy of the broader society, democracy’s more permissive and mutuality-based parent-child relations mirror the more egalitarian and individualistic relations of democracy.

But given the patriarchal nature of aristocratic family relations, why not signify aristocracy as a father, after all? Tocqueville’s making aristocracy maternal may also reflect the transition to a new ideal of motherhood afoot in eighteenth-century France. Reacting to French Enlightenment thought,

society in this century began to value childhood as a peculiar stage of dependency, potentiality and, if treated rightly, development toward maturity. Enlightenment thinkers, Rousseau most notoriously, also explicated a supposedly companion notion of motherhood. In his day, middle- and upper-class mothers did not perform childcare nor breastfeed; such activity was considered coarse. With the Enlightenment, motherhood was for the first time depicted as a discrete identity and all-consuming activity, with the mother ideally selfless, doting, and singularly focused on her offspring.<sup>27</sup> In presenting aristocracy as a mother, *Democracy in America* may thus signal that that former world was coddling, like the new mother. Tocqueville imagines that, “Without regarding the poor as equals, [the nobles] took thought for their fate as a trust confided to them by Providence” (D, 13).

Moreover, even though prevailing cultural ideas are discernible in Tocqueville’s symbolic family drama, there is no reason to expect these influences to be reflected in Tocqueville’s imagery in a logical or coherent manner. Gender and family narratives embedded in cultural discourse are themselves typically inconsistent. As we shall discover, Tocqueville’s mother-child narrative not only adopts and twists prevailing familial narratives of the Revolution in France; his drama is also itself internally tension ridden. Such tensions and inconsistencies are not wrinkles to be ironed out or problems that undermine the point of a textual interpretation but are, rather, central material for the present analysis, as they speak fruitfully of gender’s tendency toward instability and incoherent categories. Moreover, these tensions suggest problems in the familial and gendered order upon which Tocqueville attempts to found democracy.

With this in mind, there is another sense in which Tocqueville’s maternalized aristocracy seems related to its historical backdrop. French aristocracy is partly known for the power of its women as patrons, property-holders, and figures of the *salons*. The eighteenth century most certainly adopted forms of antifemale sexism from earlier centuries, and women in classes other than the most privileged lacked power. But as James McMillan has remarked, “the eighteenth century was in many respects a good time to be a woman.”<sup>28</sup> Landes similarly sees the *ancien régime* symbolized by womanhood, even across classes. She writes that although its “central icon” was the father-king, aristocratic women in this period controlled property, participated in public debate, and influenced politics in ways that were foreclosed during and after the Revolution.<sup>29</sup> Lieselotte Steinbrügge likewise observes that in popular opinion, “woman” was a leading force in the *ancien régime*: “Legend has it that in France the eighteenth century was the century of women, and the facts would seem to substantiate this view”: in this century the intellectual elite met in female-led salons, an increasing number of females made their living as writers, and many corresponded with France’s great thinkers.<sup>30</sup> In fact, the advent of democracy in France

brought with it an evident diminishing of women's legal and political power, and a concomitant reduction of "woman's" stature in the popular imagination. As Landes notes, with the Revolution, women's political rights were denied, and all women's clubs and associations were deemed illegal.<sup>31</sup> The Napoleonic Civil Code of 1804 helped codify this new kind of inferior status as it abandoned the Roman-based laws of the *ancien régime*, undoing the status of wives as legal persons in their own right, and limiting the powers of single women.<sup>32</sup> Perhaps not surprising, then, as Doris Kadish observes, from the late-eighteenth into nineteenth-century France, females tended to be associated with allegiance to aristocratic traditions.<sup>33</sup>

Rather characteristically of the period, Tocqueville himself associated his mother with the Old Regime. More than his liberal father, Tocqueville's mother remained throughout her life stalwartly committed to the principles of aristocratic life. Upon her release from prison on the ninth Thermidor she resumed the traditional role of *châtelaine*, tending to the poor and sick; and she opposed a compromise with Louis-Philippe during his reign after the July 1830 revolution, forever an Old Regime royalist who awaited the resurrection of Catholic legitimist France.<sup>34</sup> André Jardin suggests that Mme. Tocqueville represented "a rejection of the present and a passion for a crusade that would restore everything to the way it was in the past."<sup>35</sup> During France's turbulent transition from aristocracy to a new epoch, Tocqueville's mother remained in his mind's eye, trained to the attitudes of the day, a symbol and signal of the former world.

The historical narratives surrounding Marie-Antoinette also resonate with the codifying of France's past as maternal and/or feminine. Lynn Hunt indicates that "when the king's death failed to establish the republic on firm grounds, republicans found an even greater culprit in their midst: the queen." While the revolution simply reduced the king to Louis Capet and took off his head, the revolutionary era is replete with extreme representations of Marie-Antoinette engaged in obscene acts, including as an incestuous mother.<sup>36</sup> Now, while a queen is more immediately associated with monarchy than with aristocracy, Marie-Antoinette's treatment exemplifies the fact that the idea of women's power in the Old Regime had stirred the French imagination deeply, perhaps in more complicated and clouded ways than the idea of men's power. Her vilification suggests that because the idea of woman loomed large for the French as a symbol of the Old Regime, part of the work of the revolutionary era had to be to diminish her. Within a couple of decades after the French Revolution, notions of womanhood, motherhood, femininity, and domesticity had been redefined. This new model marked the rigorous containment of the female, with her powers captured and harnessed in her new, delimited role as domestic wife and mother.<sup>37</sup> Nonetheless, being thus physically and



politically contained did not mean that her power over the culture's imagination was similarly limited.

So in many ways we can see traces, with some modification, of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century French discourse in Tocqueville's mother-child narrative. But Tocqueville's general aim in *Democracy in America* was to gain insight into the nature of French democracy through comparative study of the United States—its society, culture, and history. As such, it was not only French discourse in which Tocqueville was immersed. His hectic nine-month voyage through the United States (and Canada), secured under the guise of a study of the American prison system for the French government, was undertaken as a research opportunity to observe American life and talk to Americans both prominent and ordinary. Further, during what George Pierson has called Tocqueville's "second journey to America," Tocqueville embarked on an extended study of U.S. official texts, history, institutions, and society from his home in France, assisted by two American research assistants living in Paris.<sup>42</sup> One finds extensive evidence of this second journey in *Democracy in America*, where Tocqueville draws upon official state documents, the ideas of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and John Calhoun, as well as James Madison's, Alexander Hamilton's, and John Jay's "Publius" contributions to the federalist papers. Tocqueville employs such American sources sometimes to shore up or even undergird his own point, other times to illustrate American thinking.<sup>39</sup> Though it is hardly without blindspots, *Democracy in America* is the product of a thoughtful comparativist who strove to immerse himself in a largely alien context.<sup>40</sup>

So, Tocqueville was situated in United States as well as French discourse. Pertinent to his mother-child imagery is the fact that the metaphor of birth litters eighteenth- and nineteenth-century American narratives of the U.S. founding. Perhaps most famously today, Lincoln seized this enduring imagery for himself when he proclaimed that "four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth" the new nation. Gary Wills argues that Lincoln refers not to an introduction of something to North America "from abroad," but rather a "generation on the spot" that unfolded with the Declaration of Independence.<sup>41</sup> By the time Lincoln made it his own, such mythology had already occupied the U.S. imagination for a century, particularly in the form of the "American Adam," posited as the founder of a new civilization in the American "Eden." This story line likewise establishes the American founding as an "extraordinary birth, outside the processes of time."<sup>42</sup> Tocqueville, for his part, plays with and rejects such American myths of new beginnings. He does claim "I can see the whole destiny of America contained in the first Puritan who landed on those shores, as that of the whole human race in the first man" (D, 279, see 36–37). But that "first man" is not really first for Tocqueville. Imbued with the sensibilities of a European historian, Tocqueville could not imagine the United

States as an entity outside of time but rather unavoidably embedded in broader historical structures and processes. As Gita May argues, “Tocqueville stressed the continuity of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries” so that for him, despite popular views to the contrary, not even the American founding signified a historical rupture.<sup>43</sup> In *Democracy in America* and the related travel essays, Tocqueville portrays the United States as a new thing born on a distant continent, but born nonetheless of a specific historical lineage. The parent is Old Europe, especially England and, more specifically, is predominantly matrilineal: *la mère patrie*.

U.S. discourse illustrates the often contradictory nature of popular symbols and gendered narratives when, at the same time that eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Americans deemed the United States founding a break with the past, so too did they code England as their mother. Revolutionaries and loyalists alike commonly configured England as maternal and themselves as her children, either abused by or devoted to her.<sup>44</sup> This imagery persisted well into the nineteenth century. Lincoln himself, despite mastering the symbolism of America as a radical new beginning, posited the American Revolution as the “matter of separation of the colonies from the motherland.”<sup>45</sup> He also suggested it was “our fathers” on American soil who, having apparently seized maternal, natal powers from England, had “brought forth” the new nation.<sup>46</sup> Such discursive affirmation of male primacy reflects the loss of power and status actual colonial women suffered as the colonies gained their independence from England. Gerda Lerner illustrates that in the United States, revolution against England meant a gradual expansion of political rights for “white” males but not for females, and even meant the shrinking of economic opportunities women had known in the colonial period.<sup>47</sup> Indeed, despite their democratic rhetoric, neither the French nor American Revolutions signified advancement in the powers and freedoms of women, but rather, in many ways, the opposite.

Tocqueville’s mother-aristocracy and child-democracy also conjure up changes in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to parent-child relations in the United States. In the early colonial United States, parent-child relations shared some of the rigid and hierarchical authoritarianism exhibited by European aristocracy. These relations did not have the same complexity born of a longstanding evolved class society but, again, the father had extensive rights and duties regarding his children’s choice of spouse. Still, given the nature of the economy, childhood itself in the colonies lasted only until about seven years of age when boys and girls became productive; typically by their teens they lived away from parents to work as servants or apprentices.<sup>48</sup> By the time of the revolution against England, however, perhaps feeling the loss of their imperial “mother,” Americans, not unlike the French, began to enshrine in their culture an ideal of motherhood and childhood in family life. As John Locke’s attack on patriarchalism influenced the minds of revolutionaries,

paternal authority over children shrunk. At the same time, middle-class women were transformed into “homemakers” for the first time, and began devoting nearly exclusive time and energy to child rearing. These European American women appealed to proliferating advice books for guidance on how to raise children and make a home for their families. Womanhood, they prescribed, was to signify self-abnegation, comfort and nurturing, and childhood was to be a time for distinct individuals to receive constant maternal care.<sup>49</sup> One might say that, in this period, the now symbolically motherless Anglo-Americans guaranteed for themselves embodied representations of the new motherhood. This transvaluation, like the one in France, not only set into relief the family as the basic cell of society, it also drew special attention to the role of motherhood and experience of childhood.<sup>50</sup> In *Democracy in America*, while Tocqueville’s maternalized aristocracy reflects the *new*, doting, maternal practices of care, it simultaneously characterizes the historical *transition* from the aristocratic to the democratic milieu. His maternalized aristocracy speaks of the new gender order taking hold of the transformed social world, and also signals that child-democracy’s development hinges on its release from the controls of aristocracy’s old, parentlike hierarchy.

### INTERPRETING TOCQUEVILLE’S IMAGERY: A PSYCHOANALYTIC FRAMEWORK

Contemporary changes to the status of women, to the meaning of motherhood and childhood, thus reverberate through Tocqueville’s mother-aristocracy, democracy-as-offspring trope. In appropriating strands of the shifting, popular imagery of mother and child in his own way, Tocqueville produces through his textual symbolism a particular vision of maternalism. In his writings, mother-aristocracy emerges as a site of contradiction: secure and attentive, on the one hand, and rigidly hierarchical and controlling, on the other. Looking back at France’s history, Tocqueville characterizes the French aristocratic regime as a world “so fertile in contrasts, so extreme in its acts—more under the dominion of feeling, less ruled by principle; always better or worse than was anticipated,” as simultaneously “unchangeable” and “fickle.” Through the contradictions of its thickly layered social order, customs, and manners it became “at last a mystery to itself. . . . indocile by disposition but better pleased with the arbitrary and even violent rule of a sovereign than with a free and regular government,” both “fixed in hostility to subjection” and “passionately wedded to servitude.”<sup>51</sup> He writes that “no nation but such a one as this could *give birth* to a revolution so sudden, so radical, so impetuous in its course, and yet so full of missteps, contradictory facts, and conflicting examples.”<sup>52</sup> Aristocracy is, in the life story of democracy, the originating maternal world—a regime

of authority and control coupled with security and a guiding ethos of deep interconnection. In short, Tocqueville sees a double-edged, domineering and glorious, controlling and coddling world as the generative source of democracy. This maternal realm was the kind of regime “surest to inspire admiration, hatred, terror, or pity, but never indifference,” stirring contradictory passions difficult to resolve, especially since “our memories, thoughts, and habits” of that old world still linger.<sup>53</sup>

Running through *Democracy in America* is the theme of democracy’s birth as a passionate assertion of independence against a grand and oppressive world now lost but not forgotten. Tocqueville reiterates in *The Ancien Régime* that, “Never had the feudal system seemed so hateful to the French as at the moment of its proximate destruction.”<sup>54</sup> This old authority is one that has fomented in the hearts and minds of revolutionaries an ardent quest for equality and individual independence, as reaction against the oppressive hierarchy and unwavering structure that it signifies. Tocqueville thus presents democracy as a new autonomy-loving subject struggling to establish itself against the structured authority of maternal Old Europe. But so too does this subject feel anxious about the loss of the securities and comforts of the past, the reclamation of which would jeopardize its maturation. Tocqueville is at pains in *Democracy in America* to reveal democracy’s vulnerability to mediocrity, materialism, civic mindlessness, and uniquely democratic forms of despotism; he aims to indicate that democracy’s successful separation from Old Europe and subsequent maturation cannot be assumed. The symbolic family order he gradually builds for democracy performs in the text as a legitimate context that is to facilitate democracy’s healthy maturation. However, despite these foundations—what, as we shall see, prove to be a symbolic modern conjugal family order with attendant gender relations—democracy still has trouble resolving its relations with the past. Though driven by a genuine quest for autonomy amid equality, this young subject is also haunted by a subterranean fear of the new flux and indeterminacy and fragmentation that equality heralds, and a concomitant, unresolved yearning for the security and certainties once guaranteed by aristocracy. At the same time that democracy releases itself from aristocracy, so too is it haunted by its vital memory.<sup>55</sup> *Democracy in America* hereby tells a tale of a world-historical moment of separation anxiety. The fact that the text’s conjugal family narrative and its gendered terms prove unreliable to guide democracy well toward maturation is central to this critical rereading of the text.

Precisely as he recognizes how democracy transforms highly cohesive classes and chains of dependency into atomized individuals, Tocqueville appeals to the organic imagery of family to grasp this changed world. As he points to the new disconnectedness that social equality heralds, he reaches for the idea of family as a configuration of relations that signifies permanent ties among

people. In developing the story of child-democracy's struggle to grow up and away from its maternal, aristocratic point of departure—in attempting to direct democracy well—Tocqueville leans upon additional gendered, developmental, sexual, and familial metaphors, such as “adolescent,” “manliness,” “fathers,” and “brothers,” as well as ideas of marriage and androgyny. Such imagery is accompanied by a bevy of symbolic female figures—not only mothers and wives but also virgins and seductresses—in relation to which infant democracy attempts to develop. In all this, properly organized symbolic family and sexual relations are defined as the means through which democracy can successfully grow up.<sup>56</sup> As such, assessing the relationship between Tocqueville's mother-child analogy and prevailing French and U.S. discourses is only a first step in unearthing the meaning and implications of *Democracy in America's* symbolic family and developmental drama. Certainly a text so structured by gendered and familial symbols, by an author so preoccupied by with what he repeatedly calls “secret” passions, fairly begs a reading rooted in psychoanalytic theory.

Several works in political theory have blazed a trail for psychoanalytic interpretation of gendered and familial imagery in historical texts. In *Fortune is a Woman*, Hanna Fenichel Pitkin employs psychoanalytic categories to study Machiavelli's writings, demonstrating how psychological forces signified by gendered images inform and shape political theorizing.<sup>57</sup> Pitkin draws on both Machiavelli's biography and the history of Italian Renaissance gender and family relations to shed light on Machiavelli's political thought. Pitkin's methods are instructive, indicating that psychological interpretation of any text, produced as it has been in a particular historical context, must be anchored in social and cultural history; without such moorings, any interpretation is arbitrary. Pitkin also illustrates that the life of the author, as an actor located in the context in question, can, with other historical evidence from that period, inform an understanding of the context. With respect to present purposes, *Democracy in America* is the prime subject of investigation, representing Tocqueville's conscious analysis of modern democracy, and providing rich textual resources that undoubtedly exceeded his conscious intentions. On both of these levels, *Democracy in America* is interpreted in relation to standing historical discourses. The project is definitively, then, not one of psychobiography. Occasionally, Tocqueville's own life and family circumstances, exceptional though they were, are noted as they reflect the historical transition that he struggled to represent and understand in his work. He himself was a historical subject who, in an act of remarkable historical imagination, discovered himself and his society attempting the transition from aristocracy and democracy. As such, information about Tocqueville's life sometimes facilitates historically grounded interpretation of his textual imagery; in short, as he himself recognized, he is both analyst and subject of the historical context.

Linda Zerilli's *Signifying Woman* is thus also instructive for present purposes, investigating as it does on a textual level the symbolic feminine in the works of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Edmund Burke, and John Stuart Mill, in order to comment on tendencies in modern Western culture.<sup>58</sup> Particularly helpful for present purposes, she explores how psychological forces take on symbolic proportions in texts in ways that often exceed the intentions of the author but that nonetheless reveal something fruitful about the text's subject matter. As historical subjects, authors do not always realize what they say, and when they do not, they may very well say something revealing about their contexts. But post-Lacanian feminist psycholinguistic theory, which informs Zerilli's work, is not as well suited as other forms of psychoanalytic theory to the way that Tocqueville uses his metaphors.

Developing that trope of mother and child to which Tocqueville introduces us at the beginning of his analysis, one finds at the center of *Democracy in America*'s gender economy a particular kind of impassioned relationship between a symbolic mother and offspring, with the latter in a course of development. The psychological theory adopted must centrally address this sort of mother-child interaction and the related problem of human development from infancy to adulthood. More specifically yet, the interpretative framework must shed light on the psychological dynamics of attachment and loss, dependency and autonomy, and desire mingled with the fear and resentment evident in the narrative that frames *Democracy in America*. In short, it must serve an exploration of what Freud first called "separation anxiety." A genre of psychoanalytic thought known as "object-relations theory" is well suited to this end. Object-relations theory takes its name from its effort to transform psychoanalysis from a theory of singular subjects into a theory of human development, as a process embedded in human *relations*. It is primarily concerned with the infant subject as well as with the "objects" of this subjectivity, the child's parents. The parent is no mundane object, however; as a powerful agent, it is deeply significant for the subject who, ever so dependent upon it, internalizes images of it and weaves fantasies about it. The child subject—its subjectivity, sexuality and unconscious imagination—is thus understood to develop in the context of a complex relationship with the parental objects.

In *Democracy in America*, the dominant object to which Tocqueville returns again and again, the one that so preoccupies his and his democracy's imagination, is aristocracy. Strikingly, this force, which he maternalizes, exhibits in the text the kind of characteristics that have been associated in object-relations theory with a dominant first parent—the parent that in modern Western times is a female mother. It is in light of and against this shadow maternal realm that democracy, Tocqueville's infant subject, attempts to grow up. Object-relations theory explores the struggles a child endures to achieve maturity-as-autonomy,

an exploration that parallels Tocqueville's account of (and struggle with) the adventures of modern democracy, following its "birth." Like object-relations theorists, Tocqueville is fundamentally concerned with questions of human connection. He deeply values independence and individual autonomy, but at the same time recognizes these capacities as something that can be cultivated only in the context of full-bodied social connections. He therefore laments the loss of the bonds of mutuality that he imagines shaped the aristocratic social state. In effect, Tocqueville is very much a theorist of relations himself, and of the transition from the sort of tight bonds he symbolically associates with maternal care, to the sort of independence he symbolically associates with a child growing up. The object-relations approach thus impresses as a particularly appropriate interpretative framework for *Democracy in America*. Unlike individualistic, drive-based Freudian or linguistic-based Lacanian modes of psychoanalysis, object-relations theory is primarily concerned with differentiated relations between self and other(s) that "throughout life are renegotiated to recreate the sense of self and other in terms of connection, separation, and in between."<sup>59</sup>

In *Configurations of Masculinity*, Christine Di Stefano uses object-relations theory to interpret the works of Thomas Hobbes, Karl Marx, and John Stuart Mill. But interpreting the symbols of *Democracy in America* requires a strategy somewhat different from the one used by Di Stefano. While she discusses the common propensity of practitioners of psychoanalysis to underplay the instability of gender, she tends to leave this instability unexplored, working primarily within the binary produced by the construction of masculine identity in relation to the feminized mother.<sup>60</sup> However, one of the most exciting dimensions of the gender economy of *Democracy in America* is that it powerfully illustrates how gender's conservative drive to enforce binary order is bound up with a concomitant tendency to produce multiple and unstable, even incoherent identities and relations. Object-relations psychology can help us theorize gender as multifarious and unstable, and can thereby help us explore how, in gender's drive to proliferate, it may inspire fear of social and cultural chaos. And in so apparently signifying potential mayhem, gender therefore also tends to foment conservative efforts to corral people into binary categories or, as Di Stefano puts it, "into the specified categories of 'men' and 'women'."<sup>61</sup> This whole dynamic—the looming multiplication of gender into erratic categories, an ensuing fear of chaos, and the reactionary deployment of rigidly dichotomous gender categories—is precisely what is found in the symbolic subtext of *Democracy in America*.

In *The Mermaid and the Minotaur*, Dorothy Dinnerstein offers up an impressive psychoanalytic framework that is object-relations theory based, and well suited to support an expansive reading of the gendered symbols and family

imagoes in Tocqueville's text. Dinnerstein aims to uncover the emotional sources of historically prevailing sexual arrangements, that is, of the heavily and specifically patterned division of privilege, duty and opportunity according to sex. Dinnerstein argues that these arrangements are not natural and thus immutable, as they may appear, but neither are they the consequence of simple coercion exercised by one sex over the other. Rather, these prevailing sex arrangements—social, psychological probabilities transgressed occasionally rather than regularly—are sustained and naturalized by the psychological commitments of most women and men. Acquiescence to these dominant sex arrangements is thus due neither to hormonal dictates nor social force; rather, they are something to which most of us give a kind of unconscious “consent.” These sex arrangements are the psychological consequence of female-dominated child rearing, and are further shaped by their intersection with the innate human pleasure in enterprise.

Dinnerstein sets as her task a “*description* of psychological forces, rooted in mother-dominated childhood, which are widespread enough to make it possible for society to enforce a *prescription* about male and female adult behavior.”<sup>62</sup> She argues that while these behaviors seem natural, even fulfilling, they threaten human well-being. We tend to consent to them, however, for defensive, psychological reasons borne of two facts. First, women are almost universally in charge of infant and early child care so that females are typically a child's first point of contact with humanity, corporeality, mortality, dependency, and nature.<sup>63</sup> This fact combines fatefully with a second one: the human pleasure in enterprise and inventiveness and the spirit of mastery. This uniquely human inclination leads the individual, as it develops beyond infancy, to attempt to console itself for “the loss of infant oneness with the world—and to assert itself against a peculiarly human discovery—that the most important features of existence elude control.”<sup>64</sup> When the human inclination toward enterprise is combined with the social fact of female-dominated child care, plus the inevitable but painful recognition of mortality and mortal limits, the result is a particular, pathological network of gender relations. These relations are based upon a complement between women and men that divides responsibilities and concomitant sensibilities along male-female lines to the effect of undercutting the full humanity of each sex, rendering each sub-human. Dinnerstein draws upon the mythological half-human, half-beast figures of the mermaid and the minotaur to represent this heavily gendered state of sub-humanity.<sup>65</sup>

Dinnerstein's 1970's version of object-relations theory, despite fruitfully illuminating how gender and even sex and heterosexual identities are socially constituted, superficially fixes the categories of “woman,” “man,” “girl” and “boy,” “female” and “male,” and “sex.” Throughout her work, Dinnerstein maintains as bundled girl-woman-female and boy-man-male, indicating that she accepts



as coherent and fixed a gender-sex binary. However, given her account of how human qualities and character traits get constituted in sets of dichotomies in relation to a dichotomous interpretation of human sexes; given her insights into how, in turn, “woman” and “man” get posited culturally as natural and inevitable human configurations; and given her appreciation of how this general process yields two putatively “opposite” kinds of human beings and thereby structures and sustains compulsory heterosexuality, her theory is remarkably contemporary. In all this, it resonates with recent feminist theories that destabilize both the woman/man and female/male dichotomies, and expose how these dichotomies entrench as given heterosexuality. Furthermore, Dinnerstein helps illuminate that while this sex-gender system produces dichotomous notions of woman/man, so too is it prone to multiplicity and incoherence—an insight that invites further theorizing today. For instance, we will see in Dinnerstein’s analysis that the modern sex-gender system’s prescription for female-dominated child rearing, while leaning ineluctably on the woman/man dichotomy as natural, also produces the supposedly unitary “woman” as simultaneously multiplicitous: as goddess, whore, virgin, good mother, bad mother, and on and on. Not only would ending female-dominated child care transform the psychological, social, and political structures of male dominance, Dinnerstein’s argument indicates, it would also dissolve woman/female and man/male as binary, “opposite” genders/sexes as we know them—and thereby dissipate gender altogether.<sup>66</sup>

The historical dimensions of Dinnerstein’s theory also need clarifying. She claims that her framework is almost universally applicable, traversing history and culture because it points “to what are so far as I know very nearly universal human conditions: that women are the first parents, and that they and children coexist in primary groups with men.”<sup>67</sup> This suggests that the framework can be applied unproblematically to both Western aristocracy and democracy, as females were generally in charge of babies in both.<sup>68</sup> But this is not what we need the framework to do if it is to enable interpretation of *Democracy in America*. The whole point of *Democracy in America* is to confront a historical transition from one kind of society to another, from one type of human experience to another, from one characterized by hierarchical interconnection and dependency, to another that signifies an escape to individual autonomy. So, what critical purchase can Dinnerstein’s work gain on the historical transition from aristocracy to the very different world of democracy?<sup>69</sup> What makes Dinnerstein’s work useful is the fact that it is a theory of transition, theorizing human movement from a context of hierarchical care and authority to one of attempted autonomy. In *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville explicitly signals by way of his mother-child metaphor that the individual human’s transition (on the ontogenetic level) from being under the care and control of a female, into

attempted adult independence, mirrors—and thereby serves as a venue for interpretation of—the historical transition (on the phylogenetic level) from top-down care and control of servants and serfs in aristocratic hierarchy, to attempted mature democratic self-governance.<sup>70</sup>

Object-relations theory in general poses another problem that must be addressed. This variety of psychoanalytic theory, like others, has been intended primarily as a tool for understanding concrete individuals and their family dynamics. In this application, it typically assumes a family structure best reflected by historical “white,” bourgeois, conjugal families, and therein is biased.<sup>71</sup> With more justification, however, object-relations theory can critically assess the prevailing ideology of family—the dominant ideated form of family life—found in modern Western discourse. It is precisely the point that such discourse tends to assume the “white” bourgeois conjugal family. This heterosexual nuclear family ideal, replete with females as the dominant child rearers, has been and continues to be a deeply pervasive ideology in the modern West, even as many families have not conformed to it. Symbolic expressions of such normalized human relations, their notions of authority, care and autonomy, of femaleness and maleness, are encrusted culturally in the West, animating our collective unconscious. As such, object-relations theory can elucidate symbolic, modern expressions of gender and family that operate (largely unconsciously) at the level of discourse. Because these symbols get attached to all realms of human activity, object-relations theory can help illuminate how we think about citizenship, equality, liberty, and the state and other political, economic, and social matters. It is by way of its insights into the meaning of such culturally circulating imagery that Dinnerstein’s work can facilitate an interpretation of *Democracy in America*. In this way, the Dinnersteinian framework helps us recognize much of what in *Democracy in America* remains relevant for us today, and to position us critically in relation to it. (More on this at the end of the chapter, in the detailed exposition of Dinnerstein’s theory.)

The use of a psychoanalytic framework poses a final problem deserving comment. There is a danger that troubles both Tocqueville’s familial narrative and Dinnerstein’s theory of maternal fixation. Both invest heavily in the impact of an early maternal figure on subsequent matters. Ever so much of what Tocqueville finds in the democratic psyche seems attributable to democracy’s impassioned, though partly unconscious, response to the social security and hierarchy of the lost aristocratic mother-world. Likewise, Dinnerstein traces political and social power structures and military and capitalist extremities back to female-dominated infant care and the emotional disorder it produces. Both accounts are compelling, but edge toward over-determining the effect of the early mother.

Certainly using Dinnerstein’s work to interpret Tocqueville’s symbols fruitfully explicates gendered and familialized psychodynamics at play in *Democracy*

*in America*. But these familial psychodynamics represent broad forces and dynamics in democratic culture and society. Using Dinnerstein's framework in relation to *Democracy in America*, a text widely read for its commentary on modern democracy, enables a fresh view of the social structures that permeate modern democracy. Deploying psychoanalytic theory to grasp the psychic energies at play in the gender economy of Tocqueville's text is valuable for what it illuminates broadly about power, authority, and submission, as well as the quest for egalitarian self-rule in democratic culture and society. This is not to say that gender and family in the lives of flesh and blood humans are not profoundly implicated, because they are. But this study of the imagery in Tocqueville's text shows how his democracy is founded on particular *ideas of gender and family as a form of order for the entire society and culture*, for its politics, its civil society, its practices of intimacy.<sup>72</sup> Related to this discovery is the fact that Tocqueville provides a critical conception of maturity, as a human capacity to act responsibly amid flux. But as this book argues, this conception of maturity is not realized by the gendered, familial order on which Tocqueville founds his democracy. This failing is evident in the tensions and pathologies that inhabit *Democracy in America's* symbolic conjugal family order and its gender dichotomy.

### WHAT TOCQUEVILLE FEARS: DEMOCRACY'S THREE POTENTIALITIES

Tocqueville believes that the "gradual progress of equality" is fated by "Providence" such that the emergence of democracy is "universal and permanent."<sup>73</sup> But he is concerned that "while we can already see the ills it entails," democracy also offers goods that are as yet badly understood by Europeans (D, 13). In Europe, emergent democracy seems to produce political and social as well as psychic flux that for Tocqueville portends as a real possibility descent into some kind of chaos. He fears democracy could carry France over the brink into what he calls "the abyss."<sup>74</sup> Yet it need not do so. He is convinced that despite the determining hand of God in history, humans can act meaningfully when armed with knowledge.

But the French are reactive and immature, speeding into their democratic future without reflection or insight. A "new political science" is needed to comprehend democracy, Tocqueville asserts, but "it is just that to which we give least attention." Only recently released from the structured order of aristocracy, youthful French democracy remains mired in the disarray produced by its recent revolution. He laments that "French democracy," with its "disorderly passions," has overthrown everything it found in its path, shaking all that it did not destroy. It has not slowly gained control of society in order peacefully to establish its sway" (D, 16). "Working back through the centuries to the remotest antiquity, I see

nothing at all similar to what is taking place before our eyes. The past throws no light on the future, and the spirit of man walks through the night" (D, 703). In this tumult, religion has "lost its sway over men's souls" and "everything in the moral world seems doubtful and uncertain."<sup>75</sup> In the democratic social state, "new families continually rise from nothing while others fall, and nobody's position is quite stable. The woof of time is ever being broken and the track of past generations lost. Those who have gone before are easily forgotten and no one gives a thought to those who will follow" (D, 507). Amid this mental climate, both landlord and tenant "feel a sort of instinctive terror of long-term obligations." They are "afraid of themselves" and "they are right to feel this fear, for in ages of democracy all things are unstable, but the most unstable of all is the human heart" (D, 582). While emergent democracy "forced" nobles to "pay attention to their affairs and to their families" and gave them "a more rational and serious turn to their thoughts" that suggested "religious belief, love of order, and quiet pleasures," the "rest of the nation, which used naturally to have such tastes, was swept into anarchy by the sheer effort required to overthrow laws and political customs" (D, 600). "Where are we, then?" Tocqueville broods (D, 17). "Carried away by a rapid current," by the swirling fluidity of democracy, "we obstinately keep our eyes fixed on the ruins still in sight on the bank," still obsessed with the wreckage of that old world, "while the stream whirls us backward—facing toward the abyss" (D, 13).

For Tocqueville, this rapid current is "not yet so swift that we must despair of directing it; our fate is in our hands, but soon it may pass beyond our control" (D, 12). He urges the French to study democracy's dynamics in order to direct French democracy rightly toward the healthy republican potential Tocqueville sees in it. His intention is to facilitate this understanding, and he trains his eye on the United States because there, he writes, "this great social revolution seems almost to have reached its natural limits" without "experiencing the revolution itself" (D, 18). In his texts, revolution in France is both a glorious and bloody event that demolished a solid order and set in motion a state of turmoil upon the rubble of the past. In contrast, American democracy grows in a location distant from Europe's aristocratic past. Tocqueville sees the French as blinded by their crumbling past; but in the American wilderness, he claims, the governing "imagination, instead of going backwards to try and get back into the past, went rushing on ahead and got lost in an immense future."<sup>76</sup> This is at least partly because Americans have an easier time: they did not have "to destroy an ancient order or to overthrow the whole of a social structure" to build their democracy (D, 175, 113). But, expecting that France will eventually manifest similar equality of conditions, Tocqueville "seeks lessons" in the United States, to chart a road away from the abyss and toward healthy republicanism. He explains that "I selected of all the peoples