

# Tocqueville's Politics of Grandeur

Political Theory

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## Abstract

In his defenses of empire, Alexis de Tocqueville emphasized the need to achieve *grandeur* for France, and his writings on Algeria have shaped our understanding of his political career. In pursuing empire abroad as a remedy for weak politics at home, scholars maintain that Tocqueville abandoned the participatory politics of *Democracy in America*. This essay argues, however, that the focus on Tocqueville's international turn has obscured his interest in the greatness of domestic party politics. It demonstrates that Tocqueville championed a version of grandeur tied to the latent energies of the lower classes and distinct from the Bonapartism and aristocratic nostalgia that characterized his thoughts on empire. This version of grandeur was a political reclamation of disagreement and debate that supported great party opposition to counter the malaise of bourgeois rule. The essay concludes by comparing Tocqueville's attitude toward foreign others, whose freedoms had to be sacrificed to the cause of French nationalism, with his description of the lower classes within his own nation, whose inclusion in the franchise could foster great politics. This comparison enables us to draw modest lessons for interpreting political grandeur in the present day.

## Keywords

Tocqueville, empire, social class, political parties, grandeur

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From his fears about the leveling influence of democracy in America to his complaints about the pettiness of French politics, Alexis de Tocqueville made no secret of his disdain for all things mediocre. Mediocrity bred political apathy, and a society of apathetic individuals was no society at all. “What strikes me most,” he wrote of the French in 1840, “is how little [they are] occupied with political affairs. . . . It is a distressing and alarming spectacle” (Tocqueville 1985a, 144). He was hopeful that the Americans could offset similar tendencies with associations and religion, which in different ways approximated the binding ties of aristocracy for the democratic age. But France needed “great events” to overcome its citizens’ indifference, and Tocqueville wished to make France great again. This need for greatness manifested in his arguments for empire in North Africa and the Caribbean, framed in the language of *grandeur* that led at some moments to ambivalence toward colonialism and at others to a defense of violence in pursuit of French pride.<sup>1</sup>

Tocqueville’s use of *grandeur* in his writings on empire has received considerable attention, so much so that it has shaped our understanding of his political priorities in the 1830s and 40s. The Tocqueville of French politics has become inseparable from the “catechism” of national glory used to justify the Algerian enterprise (Duong 2018, 33).<sup>2</sup> For some scholars, this period of his career exposes the dissonance between his liberalism and nationalism (Richter 1963; Welch 2003; Boesche 2005; Pitts 2000; Pitts 2009). Others recognize degrees of coherence (for good or for ill) between his theoretical writings and support for colonialism, and resist drawing distinctions between moralist and politician or liberal and imperialist (Atanassow 2017; Kohn 2008; Boyd 2001; Todorov 1988; Dion 1990).

Amid these disagreements, one thesis is consistent: Tocqueville looked internationally to cure the malaise of domestic politics, or as Jennifer Pitts has written, to “substitute national glory for political virtue” (Pitts 2000, 298). In pursuing empire as therapy for languishing public life, he abandoned the attention to political engagement that guided his earlier work (Hereth 1985, 162). This move, scholars contend, was out of necessity. Having recognized that the self-governing American township was not an option for France, Tocqueville looked for a remedy on other foreign shores (Pitts 2000, 308; Duong 2018, 45). The renewal of active citizenship required that the French people unite behind great global undertakings, some involving the domination of distant others.

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1. As evidence of ambivalence, see Tocqueville (1983a, 151): “I think that we shall never do in Algeria all the great things of which we delude ourselves and that, all in all, we have there a rather sorry possession.”
  2. A noteworthy exception is Gannett (2006), which looks more completely at Tocqueville the politician.

This essay has two aims. First, I argue that the focus on Tocqueville's international turn—framed as the displacement of participatory politics for global glory—obscures his abiding concern to find grandeur in domestic party politics. There are good reasons to devote attention to his thoughts on empire in connection to grandeur, and this essay does not discount any of them. But on the eve of the 1848 revolution, he went publicly silent on the issue of empire and looked to another source for domestic rejuvenation: the political incorporation of the lower classes and the creation of the Young Left as the next “great party.”<sup>3</sup> In so doing, he championed a concept of grandeur distinct from the Bonapartist militarism and aristocratic nostalgia with which his international thought has been associated. Offered in the face of impending revolution, this was a democratic reclamation of political disagreement and debate that supported great party opposition.<sup>4</sup> It was also tied to the recovery of active, participatory domestic politics that never faded from Tocqueville's view, even as he sought to raise monuments to French glory abroad.

Second, by uncovering his political uses of grandeur, this essay surveys Tocqueville's descriptions of the French lower classes, an understudied part of his thought.<sup>5</sup> In the few existing interpretations of Tocqueville on class, scholars have focused on the *Recollections* to conclude that he was uninterested in the lower classes, specifically the plight of the urban workers, for most of his career, only to be disgusted by their actions in the streets of Paris (Melonio 1998; Jardin 1989; Brogan 2006b; Wolin 2003). By looking to his comments on class before 1848, I present his descriptions of lower-class energies against the stifling influence of the bourgeoisie. Tocqueville was *ambivalent* on the role that the lower classes could assume in French society, seeing them as potentially violent but also alert and active. This ambivalence allowed him to perceive the return of grandeur in great parties, a category he explained in the 1835 *Democracy in America* (hereafter, *DA*) and recovered for France just over a decade later.

I begin by contrasting Tocqueville's critiques of *embourgeoisement* with his calls for imperial conquest and review existing interpretations of his rhetoric of grandeur. Sections II and III reveal his interest in the lower classes as

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3. His last extended public discussion of empire was in 1847. See his “Second Report on Algeria” (Tocqueville 2001, 174–98). He revisited the subject of European imperialism again in 1857 in letters on the Sepoy Rebellion.
  4. I translate *grandeur* as grandeur and greatness interchangeably, retaining the original French when it helps to clarify the argument. There is precedent for this choice. See Kahan (2015).
  5. For important exceptions, see Drescher (1968) and Boesche (1983).

a redemptive force in French politics and highlight an alternative of grandeur in great parties. Section IV contextualizes Tocqueville's comments on great politics within debates of the period on the boundary between "the political" and "the social," including the arguments of his radical left contemporaries Pierre-Joseph Proudhon and Alexandre Auguste Ledru-Rollin. It does so to describe and to scrutinize Tocqueville's portrait of socialist aims as apolitical and materially motivated. The conclusion traces the concept of grandeur as a connecting thread between Tocqueville's liberalism and nationalism to contrast his descriptions of foreign others with those of the French lower classes. And because calls for national greatness resound in contemporary America, I draw modest lessons from Tocquevillian grandeur for the present day.

## **International Grandeur and Domestic Malaise**

Tocqueville's anxieties about the middling conditions of the democratic age took particular form in his critiques of the July Monarchy (1830–48). By the mid-1830s, he linked longstanding worries about France's centralized state and atomized citizenry to complaints about its regime, a "bourgeois pot of stew" responsible for pettiness that originated in the government and the Chamber of Deputies and spilled out on to the people (Tocqueville 1985b, 142). The ministers, too, were "walking, talking interests" who disguised their motivations for material gain as political ideals. The middle-class spirit had become the ruling one, "moderate in everything, except in its taste for material well-being, and mediocre." Louis-Philippe, a monarch without "discernment or grandeur," was "the accident that made the disease fatal" (Tocqueville 2016, 4, 5). As witnesses to the "sterility" of the monarch and the homogeneity of the Chamber, "the people fall more and more into indifference; it seems as if the rights which have cost them a dear price have ceased to be precious to them" (Tocqueville 1985c, 95).

In addition to his worries about citizen apathy, Tocqueville observed a regime rife with corruption. He accused the regime of assuming an "oligarchic physiognomy," as it resembled a private business for profit instead of a government for the common good (Tocqueville 1985e, 726). Reflecting on the government's practices of patronage, he decried "the desire for jobs" that motivated electors to choose their deputies and the deputies to court their electors (Tocqueville 1985d, 201; Selinger 2016). When the deputies' personal interests guided politics, it was no surprise that the rest of the nation mirrored the solipsistic attitude of its leaders.

Across his critiques, Tocqueville emphasized that this government, on display from the merchant-monarch down to the small-minded quibbles of parliamentary debate, was boring, immobile, and dispassionate. He claimed to remember its eighteen years in blurred outlines, comparing the time to a labyrinth with pettiness around each corner (Tocqueville 2016, 4). So all-encompassing was the government's timidity that it led him to self-doubt. At one moment, Tocqueville lamented that he had missed the era of great statesmen (Boesche 1987, 27); at another, he questioned whether his own character, "lazy, despondent," like the parliamentary *milieu* of the time, was up to the task of effecting political reform (Tocqueville 1998, 463).<sup>6</sup> In Louis-Philippe's France, he recognized many of the concerns he articulated about the leveling effects of American democracy, now seen through the particulars of French *moeurs*, a restricted *le pays légal* (the political class that had the right to vote in national elections), and a centralized state. "Full *décadence*" had so superseded the "great liberal cause that triumphed for a moment in 1789" that he questioned how his society could be repaired (Tocqueville 1985c, 95).

If France could repair itself, it would be through "great events" (Tocqueville 1967, 112; Tocqueville 1985e, 720). By showcasing its strength globally through empire building, the nation could unite all citizens behind a common venture to transcend the paltry disputes of parliamentary politics-as-usual.<sup>7</sup> Against those who believed that "the current epoch is not suited to remote enterprises [or] the execution of vast plans," he defended the colonization of Algeria and declared that "the future appears to be in our hands . . . and I have no doubt that we shall be able to raise a grand monument to our country's glory on the African coast" (Tocqueville 2001, 206, 24). His views on empire, then, were "not from a commercial, industrial, or colonial point of view" but "from an even higher perspective . . . of a political interest that dominates all others" (Tocqueville 2001, 92). This higher perspective of greatness abroad for domestic salvation shaped his proposals for the colony, including his shifting strategies from peaceful settlerism to brutal war.

Like his imperialism, Tocqueville's calls for grandeur sit uneasily alongside his liberal reflections on the inevitability of democracy. The thinker who wrote of a providential march toward the equality of conditions looked instead to the heights of human experience—to concepts that were *undemocratic* by his own definition of democracy as a leveled *l'état social*—as cures

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6. On his efforts at reform, see Drolet (2003).

7. Jardin (1991) suggests that empire was a way of uniting *le pays légal* (the political class) and *le pays réel* (the rest of the country).

for France's political pathologies. Seen in this way, his attachment to greatness has been interpreted as a branch of his noble roots, consistent with his standing as an "aristocratic liberal" who looked disparagingly on a bourgeois *ethos* (Kahan 1992; Jaume 2013). On this account, Tocquevillian grandeur was a conceptual return to the culture of the *ancien régime*, what Sheldon Wolin described as a "lifelong task of retrieving a receding aristocratic past" (Wolin 2003, 9).<sup>8</sup> Grandeur was thus premodern and undemocratic. Tocqueville's grand imperialism straddled two worlds to reclaim *ancienmeté* in answer to modern despotism (Boesche 2005).

However, we need not retreat as far as the *ancien régime* to find the greatness for which Tocqueville longed. He glorified many of the features of the First Empire and expressed nostalgia for the more recent past. This nostalgia, too, was at odds with his liberalism. Like Benjamin Constant, Tocqueville equated Bonaparte with a new despotism made possible by the Revolution and sanctioned by the popular will (Constant 1988; Richter 2004; Richter 1988). Still, Tocqueville found reason to praise the Bonapartist legacy, such that, as Richard Boyd has noted, Napoleon "can simultaneously appear as anathema and apotheosis of liberalism" (Boyd 2013, 265).<sup>9</sup> Tocqueville's Napoleon was not simply the usurper, but the "most extraordinary phenomenon to appear for many centuries . . . as great as a man can be without virtue," who created a "new society, better linked together and stronger" (Tocqueville 1989, 258). Unlike the politically aloof deputies of the July regime and their merchant-monarch, "it would have never occurred to Napoleon to make hearts and spirits concentrate merely on their individual welfare" (Tocqueville 1959, 149–150). In Tocqueville's eyes, public life under the First Empire was despotic yet vibrant, sustained by heroism at home coupled with the expansion of power abroad.

But the domestic vitality of First Empire politics was no longer an option for France.<sup>10</sup> It was as distant as the American township, a model that Tocqueville admired but never imported as a solution at home. The pursuit of *international* renown, however, remained an open possibility. According to much of the existing scholarship on his imperialism, Tocqueville's celebration of imperial grandeur marked an admission of *domestic* defeat for a nation that could not solve its own problems by its own lights.

8. Beecher (2021, 236) writes also of Tocqueville's praise of the "last hurrah of the rural aristocracy" in crushing the June 1848 insurrection.

9. On liberals' responses to the Napoleonic legend, see Hazareesingh (2005, 2006).

10. In the same speech in which he praised Napoleon, he suggested that his regime had ultimately exhausted the possibility for political renewal, rendering each citizen "isolated from all the others" (Tocqueville 1959, 266).

Though Tocqueville grew disillusioned with French society in this period, the following sections argue that he did not abandon the political projects that would renew the nation from within, and turned to political virtue as revolution approached. In writings and speeches spanning 1847-48 and in scattered statements in his *Recollections*, he spoke of an untapped source of grandeur, neither in aristocratic return nor at the Napoleonic heights of international spectacle, but in the political participation of the lower classes who stood in relation to the government as “strangers to public life” (Tocqueville 1985i, 735). The next section begins with Tocqueville’s arguments to extend the franchise to the nonpropertied lower classes, moments that have been dismissed as temporary concessions to circumvent violence rather than genuine calls for political incorporation. Tocqueville often had multiple aims in mind for a single argument; in these instances, avoiding violence was one of them. But his comments on the lower classes *before and after* insurrection point to a wider ambivalence about them. If left undirected, the latent energy of the lower classes could erupt in violence. If well channeled, it could fulfill society’s need for grandeur.

## Lower-Class Energies

We might be surprised by a thesis that associates anything like grandeur with Tocqueville’s views of the lower classes. While a disdain for all things bourgeois saturates his comments on French society, his attitudes toward the lower classes, particularly the urban workers, have been presented on a spectrum of indifference for most of his life to revulsion after witnessing insurrection on the streets of Paris.<sup>11</sup> Françoise Melonio captures one view: Tocqueville was uninterested in lower-class demands and addressed them only “by allusion” (Melonio 1998, 402). Other interpretations pit Tocqueville against Marx on the proletariat in European history, citing the former’s opposition to the “right to work” as evidence of his animus to social demands (Furet 1984; Elster 2009). The Tocqueville of the *Recollections* has been used to support the image of an aristocrat struggling with equality in all forms, as dismissive and sometimes terrified of the French lower classes as he was disdainful of the bourgeoisie—and expressing a liberalism reflective of such

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11. On Tocqueville’s revulsion, see Beecher (2021, 216): “An effort of understanding [the insurgents] is nowhere to be found in the *Souvenirs*.” What follows in this essay argues otherwise. Without erroneously making Tocqueville into a champion of the insurgents, it finds a thinker who is often of two minds on the motives of the lower classes more broadly.

prejudices (Wolin 2003; Kahan 1992; Brogan 2006a, 442–43). His comments on the lower classes have therefore not been compiled and rarely studied, and never alongside his imperialism or as a response to the country's political fatigue.<sup>12</sup>

Without overlooking Tocqueville's harsh descriptions of the Parisian insurrectionists in the *Recollections*, to which I return in Section IV, his reactions to the June Days ought not be taken as his only or his complete views on class. One episode on the eve of the February revolution reveals an alternative perspective, the origins of which are found in Tocqueville's earlier writings. In 1847, he authored two short draft manifestos in which he predicted revolution and spoke of the strained relationship between the July government and the French people (Tocqueville 1985f, 1985i). Portions of these drafts reappeared in his Chamber speech of January 1848, one month before the overthrow of Louis-Philippe. In the written texts and subsequent speech, Tocqueville located one source of the country's redemption outside of its ruling class. He urged the deputies to "slowly extend the circle of political rights, so as to go beyond the limits of the middle class; make public life more varied and more fruitful, and involve the lower classes in public affairs in a regular and peaceful manner" (Tocqueville 1985i, 737). Deeming this proposal "necessary and prudent," he offered it as a solution for a society plagued by political torpor that would lead inevitably to unrest.

He later confessed to engaging in hyperbole in these comments, at least on impending revolution. But his choice to repeat them when compiling his *Recollections* in 1850 suggests that his calls for electoral reform in this period were genuine. Attempts to revise national suffrage laws in 1842 and 1847 had failed, leaving in place the *cens* (200 francs/year direct taxation for the vote) that had been set during the first year of the July regime.<sup>13</sup> Writing in 1850, Tocqueville reiterated: "I believe in the usefulness of electoral reform and the urgency of parliamentary reform." He also linked reform to greatness by reviving his arguments from *DA* for the influence of *moeurs* over laws, "for great events come not from the mechanism of the law but from the spirit of government. Keep the laws if you wish. . . . But for God's sake, change the spirit of government" (Tocqueville 2016, 31). Tocqueville envisioned a role for those that had been denied the national vote to redefine that spirit. As we will see, they took center stage in his unfinished program for reform.

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12. The closest studies of these topics are in Boesche (1983, 2014), Drescher (1968), and Englert (2017).

13. Cole and Campbell (1989) estimate that 200,000 men out of a population of 35 million had the right to vote in national elections under the *cens* of 1831.



Why the lower classes? What did Tocqueville mean when he spoke of *les classes inférieures* (Tocqueville 1985f, 1985i)? One answer to both questions is that these classes were neither bourgeois nor aristocratic—that is, neither responsible for the enervating national life of the last eighteen years nor exemplars of a bygone age and its antiquated claim to authority. Tocqueville associated them with political estrangement. He described those who could not meet the taxation threshold for the vote and juxtaposed their political incorporation with a diversified, fruitful public life. This *separation* from the ruling bourgeoisie—divided along the fault line established by property ownership and codified in the *cens*—defined them as a class in Tocqueville’s analysis and put them in a position to embody alternative opinion. Their position against the ruling class mirrored that between the feudal aristocracy and the bourgeoisie at the end of the *ancien régime*, the two divided by “diversity of conditions . . . diversity of interests, of passions, and of ideas” that led to open disagreement. Under such conditions of separation—in fact because of them—there were great debates and great parties, for “there had to be” (Tocqueville 1985i, 735). Tocqueville likewise praised the “fertile reawakening of the public spirit” during the Bourbon Restoration (1814–30), when liberals challenged the aristocracy on the political authority of the large proprietors.<sup>14</sup> That was also the time when *le parti libéral*, though oppositional, had “the greatest influence in the country,” by which Tocqueville meant influence on the greatest matters and the greatest events (Tocqueville 1985c, 115).

The middle-class victory of 1830 had the opposite effect. It ushered in a political class unfit for a nation so “self-interested and vain” that it could never flourish under the government of any single class, especially one that insulated its interests with a narrow franchise (Tocqueville 2016, 31). The lower classes were valued as *an* alternative, a social antithesis to the bourgeoisie (themselves once the alternative, and stronger when they were). The bourgeoisie and the aristocracy clashed over the authority of property during the Restoration; property would again serve as the “great battlefield” between the next clash of parties, represented by those who possessed property against those who pushed for its abolition.

The lower classes were more than “not bourgeois.” Tocqueville knew what the bourgeoisie had become and of what they were capable—which, he suggested often, was not much. The lower classes, by contrast, represented experiment and possibility, their energies described by Tocqueville as “muffled” for being expressed outside of politics proper but still perceptible and

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14. On this period, see Craiutu (2003).

active (Tocqueville 1985i, 735; Tocqueville 2016, 8). If there was anything left of politics in France in 1848, and not on the coast of North Africa, Tocqueville associated it with what he identified as the lower classes. While those tasked with governing abandoned the common good for commercial pursuits and rent seeking, “in the lower part [of society] . . . political life had begun to manifest itself in the form of sporadic fevers” (Tocqueville 2016, 8). This feverish politics appeared at times as disorder but also as the exercise of judgment. “Can you not hear [these classes’] endless refrain, that those above them are incapable and unworthy of governing; that the present division of the goods of this world is unjust, and that the basis of property is unfair?” Tocqueville asked in the *Recollections* (Tocqueville 2016, 12).<sup>15</sup> He confessed feeling unease at hearing such demands. At the same time, he was hopeful for what they represented. In their expressions of injustice, their recognition of the incapacity of their ministers, even in their statements about the failures of the social order, the lower classes had begun to reawaken the political.

We might interpret these statements as Tocqueville’s modest concessions to social demands in light of coming revolution. He never abandoned “prudence and necessity” in his aims to avoid outright violence. But he made observations about lower-class dynamism in the years prior to 1848 and gestured toward some of the conclusions that he would reach in his Chamber speech. When he assumed control of the newspaper *Le Commerce* in 1844, a number of unsigned essays appeared in its pages that addressed the status of the working classes and proposed social welfare initiatives, and there is precedent for interpreting them as representative of his views (Boesche 1983). In a short piece on its aims, Tocqueville positioned himself as the intellect behind the newspaper (Tocqueville 1985g). In one of many critical pieces on the conservative Guizot government and the liberal oppositions led by Adolphe Thiers and Odilon Barrot (Tocqueville 1985c, 115–21), the arguments of *Le Commerce* explored a third way of working-class politics: “As for the contention that the least enlightened men will not find us the remedy for the evils that are troubling our society, this contention appears to us rather brazen, if one is applying the phrase ‘least enlightened’ to the laboring classes. In the last fifty years, we have learned what the French people are capable of” (Boesche 1983, 289). In *Le Commerce* in 1844, Tocqueville revealed a modest faith in the latent capabilities of the laboring classes to correct France’s ills where the ministry and oppositions had failed. Four years

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15. On the bourgeoisie’s claims to capable suffrage, see Kahan (2003) and Rosanvallon (2001).

later, after insurrection had begun, he echoed these sentiments in a letter to Nassau Senior: “We are in the most extraordinary position that a great nation has ever been thrown into. . . . My chief hope is in the lower orders. One encounters in them, to a degree that astonishes me and which would by its nature surprise foreigners: the sentiments of order, true love of country, and a very great sense of things about which they can judge by themselves” (Tocqueville 1985j, 208).

Though he rejected revolutionary violence along with the social interests that animated the lower orders to exercise it, Tocqueville continued to place cautious “hope” in the judgment and patriotism of the lower classes after the events of February. Theirs was not the charismatic grandeur of Napoleon, but it did not have to be. In presenting an image of political life revived by questions of justice and fairness that had been quieted under the July government—*social* questions about property and its distribution—these classes offered *an* energetic alternative to enfeebled parliamentary politics. As we will learn in later sections of this essay, Tocqueville had misgivings about these very questions. But before the onset of revolution, we can unearth Tocqueville’s objective to channel lower-class energies and instincts, as he sensed the possible reemergence of great parties unseen in France since before the political ascendance of the bourgeoisie. It was the confluence of rising lower-class passions with bourgeois-induced lethargy that created the right conditions for the grandeur of vibrant politics.

## Great Parties and *Partis*

As with France’s general lassitude, Tocqueville characterized the loss of great parties as the product of bourgeois uniformity, for “where the laws have narrowly confined the exercise of all political rights within a single class . . . one can hardly expect to find true parties, that is to say, either variety, movement, fecundity, or life” (Tocqueville 1985i, 735). His interest in true parties for France has been largely overlooked.<sup>16</sup> His name is not mentioned until the conclusion of J. A. W. Gunn’s work on party opposition in *When the French Tried to Be British*, and there only once (Gunn 2009, 464). In his excellent recent study of Tocqueville on corruption, William Selinger uncovers Tocqueville’s plan for a “public-spirited and publicly-supported parliamentary opposition” designed to counter practices of patronage (Selinger 2016, 92). By 1847, Tocqueville joined the goal of cultivating an opposition to his

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16. The same could be said of Tocqueville on parties in America. One exception is Bonetto (1981).

comments on class and revived the theme of “great parties” from *DA*. Tocqueville remained captivated by the subject of parties through the end of his life, writing to William Rathbone Greg in 1858 of his admiration for England’s great party organizations (Tocqueville 2003).

The lack of principled leadership during the July years prompted Tocqueville to outline his plan for an opposition party. The existing oppositional voices of the time did not constitute the public-spirited parties that he envisioned; in his view, they were loosely held together by “adjusting small interests.” Tocqueville did not join the national banquet campaign against Guizot led by the liberal united front of Thiers, Barrot, and Prosper Duvergier de Hauranne and joined by Alexandre Auguste Ledru-Rollin and Louis Blanc on the republican left, though the agenda fit his own in advocating for a wider suffrage to counter ineffectual Orléanist rule. To explain his reticence about the banquets, he criticized the radical republicans for inciting the attendees to violence; the liberal oppositions for yielding to a campaign they never wanted; and the conservatives in power, driven by minute calculations, for abandoning principles and “depriv[ing] the country of any hope of reform whatsoever” (Tocqueville 2016, 20). Ultimately, none of the parliamentarians were bold enough to do what a true party must: to “clearly reveal in what way their acts, if they were in power, would differ from the acts of their adversaries” (Tocqueville 1985i, 736).<sup>17</sup> Despite rhetorical gestures at disagreement, the bourgeois spirit had so penetrated all of politics that the opposition Tocqueville wished to see had not materialized. France needed what he termed “true” or “great parties,” not self-interested factions bearing promises of disagreement.

In his 1847 text and subsequent speech, Tocqueville defined great parties for France mostly in terms of their absence. Politics without them amounted to “morbid torpor” and “slumber.” He did offer one definition by association, linking “great public agitations” (though not violence) favorably with the renewal of parties, while reminding the deputies of the spirited debates of the Bourbon Restoration in which some of them had participated (Tocqueville 1985i, 736–37). In the 1835 *DA*, he also introduced true parties in terms of their opposites—those “small parties . . . [that] lack political faith” and “are stamped with egoism . . . their course timid and uncertain” (Tocqueville 2010, 280). He concluded that the United States had been without true parties since the dissolution of the Federalists after 1801. Instead, areas of the country

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17. See also Tocqueville (2016, 52): “the dynastic opposition had lived in deceptive intimacy with the republican opposition, taking identical actions for contrary reasons.”

were motivated by incommensurable, sectional *interests* rather than unifying *principles*, splitting the nation into “rival peoples.” The “parties that threaten the Union” were not parties in the true Tocquevillian sense, for they “rest not on principles, but on material interests”—tariffs favored by the North, free trade by the South, to take one example (Tocqueville 2010, 284). Tocqueville’s classification of parties depended on the binary of interests and principles he developed in America and later carried to France.<sup>18</sup>

For him, France occupied the opposite extreme. It had become so homogenous that the claims of its opposition merely reaffirmed those of its ruling class. In *DA*, Tocqueville foresaw how small parties could grow in such soil. When society appears to be “at rest . . . men think they have arrived at a final state” and “firmly seated on certain foundations, do not look beyond a certain horizon.” This state of affairs supports small-minded quarrels, clientelism, and personal “intrigue” (Tocqueville 2010, 280). In a paragraph that could have been drawn from his notes on the French banquet campaign, Tocqueville disparaged the small parties that “swarm” Jacksonian America—those sustained by shallow interests over “great objectives”—for being lifeless and withdrawn, though capable of damaging the nation by diffusing their timidity from government to the people (Tocqueville 2010, 281). These parties become so private that they verge on familial. Rereading Tocqueville’s 1835 observations on the profusion of small parties in America, we are reminded of his later portrayal of the French deputies, who behaved like “children of the same family, busy adjusting small domestic interests among themselves” (Tocqueville 1985i, 736).

Tocqueville held that such familial stagnancy would produce its own downfall as it crept from politics to society. Malaise would have to give birth to its opposite. Great parties did not reemerge when constitutional change was *inevitable* for the simple reason that they did not have to. They tend to grow in “other periods when the malaise is even more profound and when the social state itself is compromised” (Tocqueville 2010, 280). A nation at the point of profound *décadence* could witness the revival of great parties and great politics once the political had been so exhausted that it damaged society. Under these conditions, principle replaced egoism and introduced debates over general ideas instead of quibbles over specific wants.

In *DA*, Tocqueville noted that true parties are only possible when citizens enter politics from this point of view; that is, when they remain devoted to the

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18. His travel companion Gustave de Beaumont was critical of what he called this “arbitrary distinction” between interests and principles (Tocqueville 2010, 284).

common good ahead of private commercial ventures.<sup>19</sup> This brings to mind what Tocqueville tried to accomplish with a vivifying imperialism designed to capture the attention of an indifferent public. His arguments on parties in *DA*, coupled with his comments on the French lower classes, suggest another possibility for renewal. France had succumbed to selfish interests, but *through them*, it could arrive at a politics of principle. Tocqueville emphasized the need for a dynamic parliamentary opposition at least as early as 1843 (and found the liberal factions of Thiers and Barrot wanting), again relying on the distinction between principles and interests from *DA*, and entrusting the care of the nation's principles to its true opposition (Tocqueville 1985c, 115–17). His calls to establish a “true party”—what he described in *DA* as an “opposite party” formed *outside* of the government—grew more concrete and more emphatic as the regime's decline looked inevitable (Tocqueville 2010, 306–7). True parties could be fashioned out of the dust of national malaise.

Still, the inertia of *embourgeoisement* was not enough to support the growth of great parties. The new great party would also depend on the lower classes, possessed of passion to contest a “great idea” on the “great battlefield of property rights” that insulated France's nascent oligarchy (Tocqueville 1985i, 737). Tocqueville saw a possible force for challenging class domination through politics but outside of the current seats of power. Contra Guizot and the small parties that surrounded him and organized the banquets against him, the lower classes had the potential to act with great passion for great principles, rousing a slumbering nation in the process. Without returning France to the despotism of a Napoleon or to the singular mode of grandeur he exemplified, Tocqueville saw an opportunity to promote grandeur from within, this time in parties. The challenge was to direct the lower classes' energy *through* politics rather than against it and to “involve [them] in a regular and peaceful manner” (Tocqueville 1985i, 737). For Tocqueville wished to reintroduce passion into politics while avoiding popular uprising, toeing the line between a dynamic society and an unstable one. Channeling growing public spirit toward the end of ruling rather than revolting was the next step in realizing great parties instead of rival peoples.

By 1847, Tocqueville joined Jules Armand Dufaure to sketch a party program with these aims in mind. This was his plan for a true opposition, distinct from the leadership of Barrot and Thiers, and one that would avoid violence

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19. This is what the leaders of the banquet campaign that Tocqueville rejected had hoped to do. He disclosed that his attitude toward the campaign stemmed from a personal dislike of Thiers or Barrot. See Tocqueville (2016, 14–15).

from below. Though it began as an effort to reform France's financial system, Tocqueville believed that his plan would serve as an "energetic and practical reminder of political morality," enabling the nation to recollect the spirit it had lost (Tocqueville 1985h, 729).<sup>20</sup> It would accomplish this by addressing those economic and social issues that could not be ignored (Englert 2017; Drolet 2003) and introducing reforms to improve the lives of the lower classes. His short-lived Young Left included provisions for debt forgiveness, wage increases, a reorganized tax system "to lessen the burden on the poor," and the incremental extension of the suffrage (Tocqueville 1985i, 734). Tocqueville believed that his party would succeed where the dissatisfying banquets had failed; it would earn widespread popular support by addressing issues political, economic, and social without encouraging disorder. He described the agenda to Dufaure:

It embraces all the most important social and financial questions. It is both economic and political. To apply it wisely would be sufficient to render either a party or an administration illustrious. There are many other great advantages to be derived from treating it. It leads to a reform which would be very popular and yet not revolutionary. . . . The proposed plan would supply a want that is felt by the nation; which in these days is more interested in questions partaking of a social character than those which are purely political. (Tocqueville 1861, 81)

Drafting his plan in 1847, Tocqueville saw the necessity of channeling the lower classes, those who took interest in the social, to encourage political regeneration. Over roughly the next year, when he saw the lower classes directed toward the social question under the sway of socialism, Tocqueville lost faith in such classes and their aims. This lost faith motivated his oft-cited remarks about popular "madness" in the *Recollections* (Tocqueville 2016, 83). But many of his comments after revolution were consistent with his reasons for addressing the lower classes in the first place: their potential for great politics. In his condemnations of the revolutionaries, Tocqueville lamented that such potential had been seized by socialism and displayed in small parties and petty interests in new form. These remarks are instructive. First, they reveal consistency across Tocqueville's critiques of materialism from the personalities of the July Monarchy to his socialist contemporaries. Second, in those critiques, we hear Tocqueville's selective portrayal of socialist aims, as he sought to sever great politics from the resolution of the social question.

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20. This was meant to counter what Tocqueville described as the prevailing belief fostered by the July Monarchy, "that political immorality is the widespread, habitual atmosphere in which the world of politics moves" (Tocqueville 1983b, 239).

## Socialism as Materialism

When Tocqueville reflected on his January 1848 warnings about France's "slumbering volcano," he was shocked that his embellished prophecies had come true (Tocqueville 2016, 14). And when he observed the violence committed by the Parisian people over the following year, his comments were a far cry from the hope in lower-class dynamism we have seen in his prerevolutionary essays and speeches and at the start of insurrection. He reserved particularly scathing remarks for those who guided the lower classes to make revolutionary demands. In the same entry where he remarked enthusiastically on newly revived debate in the Constituent Assembly, he scoffed at the "stupidity of the revolutionaries" who could not secure seats for radicals even under universal manhood suffrage, a critique that captured the perceived failures of both the radicals and the insurgents they led (Tocqueville 2016, 70).<sup>21</sup> Despite breathing "more easily" after the overthrow of Louis-Phillippe because "political life could begin again," Tocqueville denounced the revolutionaries as "demagogues" (Tocqueville 2016, 58, 72).

Scholars have cited Tocqueville's attitude toward the revolutionaries as evidence of his true motivations concerning the French lower classes—that he took interest in their welfare to circumvent revolution and abandoned that line of thought once violence erupted (Swedberg 2009; Gannett 2006). Tocqueville wished that the nation could have avoided violence; his comments in the *Recollections* indicate how troubled he was by disorder and insurgency. But he was also reinvigorated by the events of February. Two or three of them, he admitted, even "had a certain grandeur" (Tocqueville 2016, 39). If we look at his dismissive, disparaging comments on the revolutionaries, we find that he was also insistent that the French needed grandeur and that the nation's materialistic tendencies, seen in the actions of the urban workers led by the radicals, had resulted in pettiness instead.

To clarify these arguments, we need to highlight the *consistency* of many of his central claims pre- and postrevolution. Though he condemned riots in the streets and the socialist designs he identified with them, he did not reverse his position on the franchise. He was a proponent of universal manhood suffrage in the Assembly in October 1848 and in 1851 (Tocqueville 2016, 241–42; Watkins 2003, 445–47). He also admitted to having been personally enlivened as he undertook a political campaign under universal manhood suffrage (Tocqueville 2016, 76). Though one might expect the Tocqueville

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21. Many of the seats in the Assembly were won by members of the dynastic opposition, not the republican left.



terrified of popular violence to exclude the lower classes from public debate, he was committed to moving beyond a restricted electorate.

Nor did Tocqueville simply denounce the lower classes after the February revolution. At one moment, he lashed out against “the people” (and the “academicians” who admired them from afar) for being “impatient, thoughtless, contemptuous of the law” (Tocqueville 2016, 49). Though he personally held on to such “indignation and rage,” he later described the “agitation of the people’s desires and thoughts . . . [the] needs and instincts of the crowd” as the “canvas” on which the events of that year had been sketched—a canvas still-worthy (as of 1850) of “the serious attention of philosophers and statesman” (Tocqueville 2016, 49, 54). He was not surprised that the poorer classes had acted to resolve the social question, for “how could [they], inferior yet powerful, not think of escaping their poverty and inferiority by making use of their power?” Once the people learned that the constitution contained no remedy for social ills, “it was only *natural*” to attack “the immutable laws that constitute society itself” (Tocqueville 2016, 54; emphasis mine). More emphatically than in his 1847 plan for the Young Left, Tocqueville acknowledged the “naturalness” of the turn to the social.

What he did condemn was the design of socialism. It was socialism that he associated with the “revolutionaries” and “innovators” who imprinted their image on the canvas of popular thought and action (Tocqueville 2016, 54, 70). He believed that socialism was the new face of materialism, presented as the fulfillment of basic needs and redirected to the subject of the worker. If the lower classes exhibited what Tocqueville labeled a “natural” anxiety about the social, socialism reduced nature to “a taste for well-being” that displaced the pursuit of political ideals. Such an appetite, he wrote, “can easily accommodate to *any* form of government as long as it is allowed to satisfy itself” (Tocqueville 2016, 56; emphasis mine).

Tocqueville articulated his views on French socialism most forcefully in the September 1848 debates over the right to work and in response to Proudhon, who had spoken in favor of the right before the Assembly that July. Proudhon’s speech contained complicated financial jargon and by most accounts, including those of his allies on the left, had been a failure.<sup>22</sup> However, one of Proudhon’s central points was simple: a right to work presumed a constant demand for labor, which had to be guaranteed by an increase in wages and a reorganization of national credit. These proposals would

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22. Ferdinand Flocon accused him of “killing” the right to work (Proudhon 1929, 200). For more on reactions to Proudhon’s speech, see Beecher 2021.

enable “unlimited consumption” (Proudhon 1938). When Tocqueville denounced socialism two months later, he defined it as an attack on private property and an affront to human liberty, referring to the eighteenth-century revolutionary Gracchus Babeuf and the thesis of Proudhon’s 1840 *Qu’est-ce que la propriété?* to do so. But he seized more immediately on the language of unlimited consumption, which he claimed to have heard repeated in the speech of another deputy earlier that day.<sup>23</sup> Tocqueville co-opted Proudhon’s financial point about guaranteed labor to legitimate an unflattering, narrow description of socialist goals. Using Proudhon’s own words against him, Tocqueville declared that “*the goal of the socialist system . . . is to secure unlimited consumption for everybody*. I am therefore right in saying, gentlemen, that the general and typical characteristic of all the schools of socialism is an energetic and continuous appeal to the material passions of man” (Tocqueville 1848, 964). By appropriating the term “unlimited consumption” from spoken defenses of the right to work, Tocqueville equated all of socialism with humanity’s appetitive impulses.

Building on this connection, he likened socialist aims to the worst tendencies of France’s bourgeoisie; each elevated material, self-interested sentiments over higher things. When citizens trade “love of country, virtue, generosity, disinterestedness, glory . . . great things” for “wages, well-being, limitless consumption, and the boundless satisfaction of physical needs,” mediocrity is the sure result (Tocqueville 1848, 965). He also mapped these values onto the revolutions of 1789 and 1848. The former “restored man to his individual, to his true greatness” in its glorification of political virtue and selfless patriotism; the latter, spurred by the socialists’ assurance of higher wages, formed a society “where the goal assigned to man is well-being alone” (Tocqueville 1848, 965). Though Tocqueville conceded that the socialist-led revolution originated in the impassioned demands of the many, he complained that it lapsed into a “popular languor” that surprised even him (Tocqueville 2016, 53). Devoted to material liberation, socialism had become another force behind French complacency.

In his view, socialism had altered the underlying society in another respect. As it united the Parisian workers under the banner of material-driven “envy,” socialism ensured that “the two principal parts of society had finally separated” so that “no bond or sympathy remained” (Tocqueville 2016, 51, 71). Having transformed revolutionary goals into economic goals, the socialists

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23. “What is at stake behind the amendment of the honorable M. Antoine-Philippe Mathieu, perhaps unbeknownst to him, is socialism” (Tocqueville 1848, 962). Mathieu would later interject, in vain, during Tocqueville’s speech.

created what Tocqueville described in *DA* as “rival nations,” dividing a society already under strain after eighteen years of inward-looking bourgeois rule. He accordingly wrote of the 1848 revolution as a “class combat” instead of a “political struggle,” likening its features to the divisions that characterized the *ancien régime* (Tocqueville 2016, 97; Tocqueville 1848, 966). In response, he wished to reclaim it as an undertaking both sacred *and* political and to redeem the republic as a political end-in-itself (Tocqueville 2016, 56). The February revolution “must be Christian and democratic,” Tocqueville concluded, “but it must not be socialist” (Tocqueville 1848, 967).

Tocqueville’s harsh description of the socialist agenda deserves further scrutiny. As we have seen, it had its origins in his personal aversion to paltry materialism and was developed further in reaction to the arguments of Proudhon and others in the Assembly. Conceptually, it depended on the strict separation of the social from the political. Tocqueville associated the former with socialism and material gratification, the latter with grandeur and the memory of 1789. This separation was the subject of a debate in its own right. The targets of Tocqueville’s critique, including Proudhon, Ledru-Rollin, and Victor Considérant, had helped to set the terms of that debate, as they sought to abolish the boundary between political and social questions on which his contemptuous picture of socialism relied. The political and the social “merge indissolubly in their spirit,” Ledru-Rollin wrote in 1844 (Ledru-Rollin 1879, 118). In uniting the two domains, he and others on the radical left wished to make a larger point about the nature of so-called “democratic” reforms. The “political emancipation” of electoral democracy, he maintained, was illusory unless accompanied by “material emancipation” (Ledru-Rollin 1879, 124). The right to vote meant little to those who faced threat of starvation.<sup>24</sup>

Still, material emancipation was not the socialists’ sole aim. In uniting the political with the social, they offered some of the nation’s most ardent defenses of popular sovereignty in the 1840s. Ledru-Rollin, Considérant, and others had long advocated for universal manhood suffrage.<sup>25</sup> It was central to the radical republican message in the banquet campaign, which, we will recall, Tocqueville declined to join. When Ledru-Rollin toasted “To the workers!” at Lille in November 1847 and unsettled the event’s moderate organizers, he proclaimed that “those who pay the taxes of blood and sweat and silver have the right to participate in the government which disposes of

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24. For an extended discussion of revolutionary electoral democracy from the left, see Duong (2020).

25. Considérant argued in favor of women’s suffrage, during a time when even few on the left would countenance such an idea.

all of these riches” (Baughman 1959, 9). Similar refrains appeared in his radical newspaper *La Réforme*, founded in 1843, earning him admiration as “The Father of Universal Suffrage” years before Tocqueville would urge the deputies to consider the political fate of the lower classes (Calman 1922, 572). And when the new republic conducted its first elections under universal manhood suffrage in 1848, Ledru-Rollin glorified its politics: “the science of politics,” he announced, “has been found” (Ledru-Rollin 1848a, 74).

It is ironic, then, that Tocqueville portrayed socialism as straightforwardly apolitical and materially motivated. Under the July Monarchy, when he rebuked his liberal contemporaries for producing a tepid nation insulated with a limited franchise, the radical left offered an impassioned *political* alternative. As Tocqueville did in 1847, the radicals looked to the suffrage to combat the corruption and dogmatism of the regime (Ledru-Rollin 1879). He thus had an unlikely (though unacknowledged) ally in these figures against Guizot prior to insurrection.<sup>26</sup> Yet in speech against the right to work, Tocqueville did not mention the position of the French socialists on the potential of the political. Instead, he branded their vision of “emancipation” as purely social and egoistic as a result. And in his reflections on the two revolutions—on the social character of the one and the political triumphs of the other—Tocqueville made no reference to arguments from the left on the unification of the two domains, or to Ledru-Rollin’s celebration of the republic’s newly discovered science of politics. As evidence of his lack of objectivity on the matter, we will remember that Tocqueville sought to combine (though not to unify completely) political and social issues in a party agenda that reached beyond the bourgeois governmental class. A year later, when referring to the socialists’ view of “the social,” he insisted that France had to make a choice—either the nobility of grand politics or the base instincts behind social demands.

In 1848, it was Ledru-Rollin who objected to his fellow deputy’s revisionism of the two revolutions and the characterization of socialism that followed. Ledru-Rollin reminded the Assembly that the right to work appeared in the speeches of Maximilien Robespierre, which Tocqueville had quoted moments earlier as proof that one could find great defenses of liberty even at the Revolution’s less-than-illustrious extremes. Ledru-Rollin referred to Robespierre to undermine Tocqueville’s distinction between high politics and ignoble socialism. The right to work could be found among the “grand principles of the French Revolution,” he countered, complicating his contemporary’s take on 1789 and 1848 and reclaiming grandeur for the union of the

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26. I do not intend to overlook points of disagreement between Tocqueville and the radical republican opposition in this period, but only to highlight some unrecognized similarities.

political and the social (Ledru-Rollin 1848b, 968–69). However polemical in their intent, Tocqueville’s attempts to define the socialist agenda remained consistent with his lifelong pursuit of grandeur for France. With his critiques, he (and his nation) had come full circle, from the July Monarchy’s politics of interest to the socialists’ ideology of “well-being.” This ideology, he held, was hardly the foundation of grand ideas. The desire for higher wages and material emancipation had emptied the French people of civic spirit, leaving the socialist revolution in much the same place as the bourgeois government that preceded it.

Though consistent with his repugnance to all things materialistic, Tocqueville’s denunciations of socialism do undercut one element of his own ideal of grandeur. Tocqueville never completely merged political with social questions as the radical left did. Still, his 1847 plan for the Young Left incorporated both categories of concerns, bringing him closer to the radical republican left in the year before revolution than he cared to admit. It was, after all, on the “great battlefield of property” that he hoped to witness the reappearance of great parties willing to contest the existing, unsatisfying state of affairs. But having thereafter tied “the social” to socialism and therefore to material need and unbounded consumption, Tocqueville expressed contempt for one of the sources of great parties and national rejuvenation that he had once identified. In the hands of the socialists, Tocqueville maintained that the social fell far short of the grandeur of principled politics.

## **Conclusion: Great Politics**

Tocqueville’s insights into the state of French society navigated the two poles of pettiness and grandeur, as he championed “great deeds” as therapy for modern mediocrity. The appeal of grandeur was a constant in his international thought and has become the primary explanation for his defense of empire. This essay identified an alternative of grandeur outside of his imperialism. By examining Tocqueville’s comments on social class and great parties alongside his critiques of materialism and socialism, we can recognize a domestic, participatory, and political version of grandeur, distinct from the militarism behind his imperialism and the aristocratic nostalgia that informed his reservations about democracy. Alongside his discussion of lower-class restiveness—an active, passionate, but potentially violent alternative to bourgeois rule—Tocqueville envisioned the return of “great parties” unseen in France since the Bourbon Restoration. This same impetus toward grand politics informed his scathing, if selective, account of socialism and of the materialist impulses that drove the events of 1848.

These episodes in Tocqueville's career allow us to distinguish his uses of grandeur at home from his preoccupation with great actions abroad. Internationally, he linked grandeur to martial glory; at home and during the waning years of the July Monarchy, grandeur was political and democratic, predicated on the renewal of political disagreement and debate that emerges in the context of true party difference. There are important and unacknowledged ways in which the two spheres are linked. Joined together under the imperative of grandeur, we can contrast Tocqueville's imperial aspirations with his arguments about French social classes. While scholars have compared Tocqueville's treatment of indigenous peoples across Algeria and America (Janara 2004; Street 2019), they have not done so with reference to the category of the excluded (those who fell below the *cens* for the vote) within France's borders. Tocqueville's discourses—international and domestic—pull in different directions, though they were united under the trope of grandeur that justified both the subjugation of foreign others *and* the political incorporation of the estranged classes in his own nation to receive the vote. Seen in this way, grandeur as Tocqueville conceived of it *reinforces* the distance between imperial subjects and French citizens. The former stand on the global stage, where the grand spectacle of French power had to be observed by all the world, while the latter contribute to domestic greatness through electoral politics. The liberty of foreign others could be sacrificed to the mother country's need for a unified, vibrant public sphere; the lower classes furthered national goals by means of their political inclusion within that same nation.

National greatness, as we know, is neither unique to Tocqueville nor to the debates of the nineteenth century. Though the call to Make America Great Again does not sound quite as loudly in 2021 as it did five years earlier, Americans continue to debate its meaning and merit. Here, Tocqueville's invocations of national greatness illuminate the concept's continued appeal as well as alert us to its dangers. This essay uncovered grandeur's alluring *democratic* direction, supportive of national unity, of an agenda of reform, and of working-class political participation. We have seen each of these features reemerge in the promise to MAGA that included a pledge to revivify a once-great country. Yet from the study of Tocqueville's grand imperialism, we have learned that the pursuit of national greatness is as likely to justify xenophobia as it is to support democracy, as likely to lapse into parochialism as to sustain a deliberative, unified public sphere. *National* greatness, then, comes at a cost. The two roads—domestic and foreign, inclusive and exclusive—traveled by Tocquevillian grandeur ought to make us reconsider whether greatness should serve as a guiding value for any liberal democracy.

For while we have yet to harness the unifying, democratic potential that Tocqueville found in grand politics, we, too, have succumbed to the exclusionary pitfalls of pursuing national greatness.

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