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## TOCQUEVILLE AS AN EMPIRICAL RESEARCHER

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Coming from a country where the liberal tradition has always been weak, it took me quite some time before I came to understand that Tocqueville is one of the great classics in sociology.<sup>1</sup> Two persons opened my eyes in this respect — one was Raymond Aron and the other Raymond Boudon. In a number of works Raymond Boudon has shown that Tocqueville is one of the sharpest and most creative social scientists who has ever lived. A few years ago, he also wrote a whole book on this theme — an excellent volume entitled *Tocqueville for Today* (Boudon 2007).

In this brief paper in honor of Raymond Boudon I wish to continue the exploration of Tocqueville as a sociologist. While Raymond Boudon has primarily emphasized how skillful Tocqueville was in his use of social mechanisms, my focus will however be different. What I would like to emphasize is that Tocqueville, contrary to the picture that many have of him, was *not* a great theoretician with a dubious relationship to empirical reality. Tocqueville, I will argue, was a great theoretician *and* an excellent empirical researcher. Tocqueville was convinced that in order to produce good social analysis you have to use good empirical data.

### NOT ONLY A MAN OF IDEAS

While it is clear that the work that went into *The Old Regime and the Revolution* shows that Tocqueville had mastered the skill of working in

archives, it is primarily to his study of the United States one has to turn in order to see what a first-rate empirical researcher Tocqueville was. It is common to regard *Democracy in America* as belonging to the genre of travelers' accounts, but this is misleading to my mind. Add to this that Tocqueville and Beaumont's study of prisons in the United States — which is of special interest from the perspective of empirical study — is usually passed over in silence.

It does not take much effort to establish that Tocqueville was truly obsessed in his efforts to collect facts on whatever topic he was studying; and that this obsession was closely related to his ambition to be an original thinker. Tocqueville wanted to do his own thinking, and for this to be possible, he early came to realize, he could not work with facts that had been pre-selected by other writers for their specific purposes. He had to collect his own.

Tocqueville's basic rule, when it came to the collection of data, seems to have been that *anything goes*. That is, any way to get together data was fine as long as it resulted in providing Tocqueville with the facts he needed. At the time when he worked on *Democracy in America*, social science was still in its infancy; and writers on social and economic issues had only the most rudimentary ideas about what material to use. As a result, Tocqueville had constantly to improvise and invent ways for how to proceed, which is also what he did when he traveled around in the United States. He interviewed people; he sent out questionnaires; he studied laws; and he poured over legal commentaries, government documents, different types of statistics and quite a bit more (e.g. Pierson 1938: 401–406).

Tocqueville also *observed* — listened with eyes and ears — whenever he could and wherever he was. Gustave de Beaumont, his good friend and travel companion, gives the following description of Tocqueville the Observer:

His mode of observation was peculiar. It is impossible to imagine the activity of mind and body, which, like a burning fever, preyed upon him incessantly. Everything was to him matter of observation (Beaumont, 1862, 1: 27).

Tocqueville eventually came to develop something like his own doctrine of observation during his travels in the United States. He soon

became convinced that the trick consisted in knowing exactly what to observe, concentrate on this — and ignore everything else. During the beginning of his trip, for example, he met a young attaché from the French Embassy whose account of England he found particularly brilliant. When he was told that the attaché had only spent one week in England, he was taken aback — how was it possible to develop a correct analysis in such a brief time? By the time that Tocqueville recorded this anecdote, however, he had changed his mind. “When one knows what to observe”, he now said, one can work very quickly (Pierson, 1938: 620).

As part of their attempt to observe and document, Tocqueville and Beaumont also put together what may well be some of the first questionnaires in modern social science.<sup>2</sup> This is a fact well worth emphasizing, both because the early history of the questionnaire is still little known and, to repeat, because Tocqueville is often accused of being a theoretician with a causal and irresponsible attitude to facts. Some inspiration in putting together these questionnaires may well have come from the tradition of “bureaucratic statistics” that had been initiated by the French state in the late 1600s, and which Tocqueville would later investigate and discuss in his study of the old regime.<sup>3</sup> Another source of inspiration was probably the positive attitude to social surveys that characterized the July Monarchy (e.g. Leclerc 1979, Rigaudias-Weiss 1975, Savoye 1994).

It may also be the case that the interest of Tocqueville and Beaumont in questionnaire had one more origin. This was their decision, after some time in the United States, to ask friends, relatives and experts they met to answer questions for them in writing. This often resulted in long reports, rather than in separate answers to specific questions, as in a modern questionnaire. Still, the basic idea is perhaps not so different.

One of the questionnaires that Tocqueville and Beaumont put together has been preserved in the Tocqueville Collection at Yale University. It takes the form of a letter that the two sent out to a number of superintendents and directors of prisons in 1831, as part of their work to document recent developments in the U.S. prison system. It contains a large number of questions, including questions about the number of convicts, their crimes, the length of their sentences, how many of them were Americans, foreigners, African American, Irish and so on. There were also questions about the moral state of the prisoners at the time of their

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release; if they had been truly reformed as a result of their time in jail or if they had just learned to obey the law; and the like.

Tocqueville and Beaumont had also included a number of questions that dealt with the economy of the prisons:

*How many officers are employed for the service of the prison?*

*What is their compensation?*

*What was the cost of the new prison? (if there be a new one.)*

*What is the annual expense for the management of the prison — including the salary of officials — clothing & food of the convicts etc.?*

*Does the produce of the labour of the convicts cover the whole expense?*

*What is exactly the financial state of the prison?*

*What trades etc are taught to the convicts?*

*Is their labor sold to a contractor?*

*What is the most profitable trade or occupation?*

*Do the convicts earn anything for themselves? If so, how much?*

*It is of great interest to us to have a statement respecting these questions for each year since the establishment of the Penitentiary system.*

*If any reports have been sent to the legislature and printed would it not be possible to procure a copy of them?*<sup>4</sup>

One can also see what importance Tocqueville assigned to the issue of collecting facts and analyzing them from the account that he gives of these activities in the introduction to *Democracy in America*. What Tocqueville says here is also of interest more generally for an understanding of the type of analysis that he wanted to make. It is here we find what may be called his methodological credo: “do not tailor facts to ideas; adapt ideas to facts” (Tocqueville 2004: 15).<sup>5</sup>

While Tocqueville’s phrasing of his guiding principle in doing research is somewhat awkward, the general thrust of his thought is clear enough. Priority has to be assigned to the empirical material, not to the ideas. Or in Max Weber’s more straightforward formulation of

the same idea: “theory must follow the facts, and not vice versa” (Weber 2001: 26–7).

Tocqueville then continues in the introduction to *Democracy in America* that when it has been possible to establish something with the help of documents, he has always tried to find the original text and include the reference in his study. In matters relating to “opinions, political practices, or remarks on manners”, Tocqueville says, he has tried to locate “the best-informed people” and interview them (Tocqueville 2004: 16). Reliability was handled in the following way: “on important and controversial matters, I did not rely on one informant alone but based my opinion on all the testimony taken together” (*ibid.*).

Tocqueville’s subtlety in gathering facts can also be illustrated with his attitude to confidential information. He was well aware that people often confide in strangers; “a stranger sitting at a fireside with his host will often hear important truths that might be withheld from a friend. With a stranger it is a relief to break an enforced silence”.<sup>6</sup> Tocqueville also addressed a modern concern when he added that he would not name the people who had confided in him (“these notes will never leave my files” — *ibid.*).

While it is well known that Tocqueville relied to a large extent on interviews in *Democracy in America*, he has not been given enough credit for the contributions that he made to social science research in this respect through his and Beaumont’s prison study. Tocqueville was, for one thing, the first student of prisons to conduct interviews with the prisoners themselves.

He was also among the first — maybe even *the* first — to use interviews in a systematic way in a social science study. The reason for not being able to be more affirmative on this point is that not very much is known about the history of use of the interview as a tool in social science.<sup>7</sup> It seems nonetheless clear that Tocqueville was the first social science thinker of stature to use interviews in a systematic way; and that he was to remain so for a long time.

The exact number of interviews that Tocqueville conducted is difficult to establish but it appears to be somewhere between two and three hundred.<sup>8</sup> Of the people he interviewed roughly one out of ten was considered an extra good informant. It would appear that Tocqueville only gradually developed his skill to ask questions, memorize the answers and write them down later; and this is one reason why it is hard to make a

proper count. While it is true that Tocqueville paid more attention to some categories of people than others, his credo was that “there is no man, regardless of where he is in society’s hierarchy, who does not have something to teach us” (Tocqueville 1998a: 100). He also provided another reason why he and Beaumont were so good at what they were doing: “since we know exactly what we need to know, the smallest conversations are instructive”.

Tocqueville made one more methodological contribution through his prison study. This was to realize the importance of taking the view of the actors into account in when you analyze some social phenomenon. Tocqueville, of course, did not formulate himself in this way, but this way of proceeding still pervades most of the research he did. He alluded to it when he said, a propos the prison study with Beaumont, that it is only by penetrating deeply into the social life of the prison, by “living in some way in the milieu of the prisoners”, that “a superficial view” of the prisoners and “errors” in the analysis can be avoided (Tocqueville 1984: 16).

It was Tocqueville and not Beaumont who insisted on, and also carried out, the interviews with the prisoners. All in all, he interviewed sixty-three inmates in the Cherry Hill Prison (or Eastern State Penitentiary) outside of Philadelphia in October 1831. The work took about two weeks, and parts of the result — some forty interviews — were included in an appendix in *The Penitentiary System* (Beaumont and Tocqueville 1970: 187–98).<sup>9</sup>

Tocqueville had prepared the questions in advance and was alone with the prisoner in the cell. He took “pencil notes of an abbreviated character” during the interview and then wrote out the whole conversation afterwards (Pierson 1938: 464).<sup>10</sup> As in his notebooks Tocqueville often wrote down his own questions (“Q”) and recorded the exact answers (“A”).<sup>11</sup> Why Tocqueville chose to include only some of the original interviews and not others in the appendix is not clear.

Some time after Tocqueville and Beaumont had left Philadelphia, Tocqueville tried to find the notes from his interviews but they were nowhere. To his dismay he realized that they were lost and that he would have to try to reconstruct them according to memory. He did this — only to find the original notes soon afterwards.

Having two sets of notes to compare makes it possible to see how effective Tocqueville’s memory was. Beaumont, who is the only one who has read both versions, writes:

On comparing his recollections with these notes it was surprising to see how they corresponded, and with what prodigious fidelity his memory had reproduced the whole that had passed. A few details only had been forgotten, but the leading thought was always there ... Alexis de Tocqueville had no memory for words nor for figures, but he possessed the strongest possible remembrance of ideas; when once grasped his mind retained them forever. (Beaumont 1862: 25–26)<sup>12</sup>

Tocqueville no doubt had the skills of a good ethnographer, but to argue that he should be viewed as an ethnographer of sorts, who basically relied on observation and interviews for his research in the United States, is no more correct than to say that Max Weber only drew on historical research and was an advocate of the subjectivistic approach in sociology. Just as it has been shown that Weber carried out surveys and used various quantitative measures, it can be shown that Tocqueville had a high opinion of what counted as statistics in his time and also used them in his work (e.g. Lazarsfeld and Oberschall 1965: 185–199). Again, it is to the prison study we primarily have to turn for exploring this aspect of his work, especially two of its appendices (“No. XIV, Statistical Notes” and “No. XV. Comparative Statistics on the [American] States” — Tocqueville 1984: 371–402).<sup>13</sup>

When looking at Tocqueville’s attitude to statistics, it should be remembered that he did his research on the United States in the early 1830s, at a time when the science of statistics was still in its infancy. While there was a rush of enthusiasm in France for numbers of all sorts from the 1820s and onwards, no-one knew exactly what to do with them. Amateurs collected them and novelists commented on them, but modern statistical tools such as regression analysis and correlation were still many decades away.<sup>14</sup>

The quantitative part of Tocqueville’s work can perhaps best be described as being part of the early and popular trend in French statistics that tried to say something about such social phenomenon as crime or suicide with the help of very simple and descriptive tables (“moral statistics”). Tocqueville essentially used averages, ratios and added and subtracted figures from each other. He calculated, for example, the cost for individual prisons (by subtracting “expenses of the prison” from its “produce of labour”), the average cost per year for a prisoner’s “food,

clothing and bedding” as well as “the surveillance of each prisoner (i.e. watching, salary of officers, &c.)” (Beaumont and Tocqueville 1970: 279–86). As these examples illustrate, Tocqueville was not only interested in moral statistics per se but also in their economic dimension. While he had no training in collecting statistics, he had studied some rudimentary mathematics in his youth, which now came in handy (Jardin 1988: 68).

That Tocqueville viewed the use of statistics as important is clear, among other things, from a letter he wrote to his father during the time when he was collecting information for the prison study. In this letter he notes, a propos his attempt to gather statistics on the economy of prisons, that “this [part of the analysis] is not based on theories but on figures that are proven and founded on documents” (Tocqueville 1984: 17). At another point he refers approvingly to “the mathematical demonstration of truth” (Tocqueville 194: 50).<sup>15</sup>

Another sign of Tocqueville’s positive attitude to statistics, including economic statistics, is the fact that the prison study is filled with tables that primarily Tocqueville (and not Beaumont) had put together. Tocqueville, as already mentioned, put “an immense labor” into the attempt to establish the exact incomes and expenses for the prisons they visited (Beaumont and Tocqueville 1970: 279). It should also be emphasized that he constructed his own tables and did not just reproduce those of others.

Also *Democracy in America* testifies to Tocqueville’s interest in using statistics, even if he could not devote as much time to each topic in this study as in the prison study. In this case it was also not “moral statistics” that he collected, but figures about society and the economy in general. Tocqueville mentions, for example, that he carried out “extensive research” on public expenditure in France and the United States (Tocqueville 2004: 248).<sup>16</sup> His attempt to locate the statistics (printed figures) on this particular topic ultimately failed, among other reasons because the U.S. state, as Tocqueville soon came to realize, produced very poor statistics. Tocqueville, who was used to the higher quality of statistics of the French state, made a note that this was a case where centralization worked very well.

But Tocqueville did not limit his search for statistics to economic phenomena. In order to better understand U.S. cultural life, for example, he tried to find out the exact number of books that appeared each year in “science, art, philosophy, religion, literature” (Tocqueville 1986: 60).



While this type of information was available for France, Tocqueville was ultimately unable to procure it for the United States.

That Tocqueville was thinking about more ways of using statistics in *Democracy in America* can perhaps also be inferred from one other fact. In 1835, when he and Beaumont were traveling around in England and Ireland, they attended a number of sessions on statistics at the meeting in Dublin of the British Association for the Advancement of Science (Drolet 2005: 451–71). The meetings of the statistical section of BAAS included lectures on the use of statistics in studies of India, the Netherlands, crime, education and much more — many of which were attended by Tocqueville.

Tocqueville was finally also well aware that it was possible to misuse statistics. He warned, for example, the reader of *Democracy in America* that “the mind is easily taken in by the false air of exactitude” (Tocqueville 2004: 248–50). It was therefore extra important, he said, with “rigorous and accurate calculations”.

In hindsight it is possible to argue that Tocqueville may have missed an opportunity when he decided not to draw more on statistics in *Democracy in America*. One reason for making this statement is that the idea of using statistics to analyze society was developing very quickly in the 1830s and offered new possibilities for someone with the ambition to explain social reality as rigorously as Tocqueville. At about the same times as *Democracy in America* was written, two pioneering works in social science with an innovative approach to statistics had just been published. In both of these statistics was used, not only as an illustration to some argument in the text but to explain some social phenomena.

One of these was a work that was to become a landmark in the history of statistics as well as in social science in general. This was *On Man and the Development of Human Facilities, An Essay on Social Statistics* (1835) by Adolphe Quételet. The second work is less known, but not without importance: *Essay on the Moral Statistics of France* (1833) by André-Michel Guerry (Guerry 2002; Quételet 1835).<sup>17</sup> Whether Tocqueville knew Quételet and his work is not known, but he was on friendly terms with Guerry (who knew Quételet) and had a very high opinion of his *Essay*.<sup>18</sup>

Tocqueville and Beaumont had wanted Guerry to participate in a review on politics and economics that they were thinking of starting in 1833 (Tocqueville 1957b: 119, 137; Jardin 1988: 192–93).<sup>19</sup> Tocqueville

is also reported to have said, a propos Guerry's *Essay* that "were it not a dishonour to be cast into prison, he would like nothing better than to spend his years locked up, condemned to study *une pareille chiffrierie*" (Hacking 1990: 77).

But it would also have been difficult for Tocqueville to use statistics effectively in *Democracy in America*, be it on economic or other topics. As already mentioned, official statistics in the United States were of a poor quality; and the federal structure made it a nightmare to produce figures for the country as a whole. The idea of representative samples did not yet exist, which also made it impossible for Tocqueville to use the method of interviews that he had pioneered at the Eastern State Penitentiary in a rigorous manner.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this brief paper I have tried to argue that Tocqueville was a pioneer in modern social science, not only through his sharp analytical thought but also through his use of interviews, and perhaps also through the way he tried to work with an early and rudimentary form of statistics. In doing so I have focused exclusively on Tocqueville's work, and disregarded the general state of social science during the early 1800s.

But in order to get a full picture of Tocqueville as an empirical researcher one also has to take this broader context into account. The first to be said about Tocqueville's time is that the early 1800s saw a fertility and creativity in social science that has rarely ever been matched. Precisely around the time when Tocqueville was developing his own way of analyzing society, the foundations of modern social science were laid by people such as John Stuart Mill, Saint-Simon, Karl Marx, Auguste Comte and many others.

Sociologists usually tend to focus on the second half of the 19th century when it comes to the development of sociology; and earlier thinkers are lumped together under the category of "predecessors". Tocqueville, however, points to the richness in social science ideas that existed already during the first half of the 19th century. Research would prove, I suggest, that a number of important steps were also taken in terms of empirical research during this time period, not least by Tocqueville himself.

## NOTES

1. For the non-reception of Tocqueville in Sweden, see Swedberg (2001).
2. Apart from the questionnaire that is discussed a few lines ahead, Pierson (1938: 405–6) also mentions a few others.
3. The old regime, according to Tocqueville had a “nascent taste for bureaucratic statistics”; and he mentions how “little preprinted forms were often sent to the intendant, which he merely had to have his subdelegates and parish syndics fill out” (Tocqueville 1998b: 139, 352). In this manner, Tocqueville continues, the controller general (finance minister) got information not only about the number of animals, types of land and the like, but also about certain social phenomena such as “the work-habits and mores of [the] population”. Tocqueville can be interpreted as having argued that just as the centralization of the state in France looked new in the 19th century, but in reality had deep roots in the time before the Revolution, so did administrative statistics. For the history of state statistics in France, see also Gille (1964).
4. Letter dated November 19, 1831, signed by Beaumont and Tocqueville, and translated by “some American copyist, presumably in Phil.” Emphasis added. See Yale Tocqueville Manuscripts, B.I.f. # 6 at Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. Cited by permission of Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.
5. Emphasis added; the wording has also been slightly changed from the original formulation (“I never gave in to the temptation to tailor facts to ideas rather than adapt ideas to facts”).
6. *Ibid.* This observation can also be found in Georg Simmel’s “The Stranger” (1908), and it was through this essay that it entered sociology.
7. According to the standard work on this question, social scientists did not start to systematically use interviews in their research until after World War I (Platt 2002). According to an e-mail from Jennifer Platt to the author dated August 25, 2006,

the problem is what counts as ‘the interview’. Something which might qualify was certainly used before the term was current in anything like the modern sense. (While in the 1930s it was often distinguished, as richer, more qualitative and less structured, from questionnaires, even if the answers to those were elicited by personal questioning.) Censuses, for instance, probably used some. However, for early work how data was actually elicited was often not treated as important, and so inadequately described. For early ‘surveys’ it was common practice for data on the working classes to be collected from people such as social workers who were in touch with them — but how did they get the data which they passed on?

It can be added that other French investigators who used interviews around the time that Tocqueville and Beaumont were traveling around in the United States include Alexandre Parent-Duchâtelet (1790–1836) and Frédéric Le Play (1806–1882). Neither of them, however, cited or recorded what their

- interviewees said, as Tocqueville did. See Parent-Duchâtelet (1836) and e.g. Le Play (1897).
8. Pierson has assembled a list of the “American acquaintances” of Tocqueville and Beaumont for the period “April 1831–Jan. 1835” (without specifying if they were the acquaintances of Tocqueville, of Beaumont or of both). Pierson gives the names of 220 individuals, and for eight of these he adds “& family” (Pierson 1938: 782–86). Pierson notes that Tocqueville and Beaumont spoke with individuals that belonged to various groups, such as “fur traders”, “Oneida & Seneca Indians”, “many Senators and Representative”, and so on. He does not, however, include prisoners in his list, such as the 63 prisoners that Tocqueville interviewed in the Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia. About 10 % of the 220 individuals that Pierson names are women and about the same amount qualify as key informants.
  9. While some interviews are summarized in a line or two, the longest is about two pages.
  10. The only thing that remains of these notes seems to be what can be found in the Beinecke Library at Yale University (see Tocqueville Collection B.I.f.2 # 16 — “Carnet de Notes sur les Prisonniers: Inédit. Conversations dans les prisons dont 17 pages de Gustave de Beaumont”). These notes consist of forty-eight pages of text in small size (10" × 16"), folded into a small notebook. From Pierson’s description of how Tocqueville went about the interviews, these notes appear to be the ones that Tocqueville made while talking to the prisoners. Why about a third of the notes are in Beaumont’s handwriting is unclear.
  11. Tocqueville’s notebooks from his trip to North America have been translated (Tocqueville 1959). For early drafts and additions to *Democracy in America*, see also Eduardo Nolla’s edition of *Democracy in America* (Tocqueville 1990). Tocqueville filled 15 notebooks with interviews, impressions and comments on various topics. One of these notebooks has been lost and two are devoted to legal topics. Tocqueville arranged some of his comments alphabetically under general headings, such as “Bankruptcy”, “Association” and “Jury”. For a description of the notebooks, see Tocqueville (1957a: 57).
  12. According to Tocqueville’s main biographer, Tocqueville had an “almost unrivaled memory” (Jardin 1988: 374). The only place where I have come across a case where Tocqueville’s memory failed him is in his notes from his trip to England in 1835. In the middle of an interview, Tocqueville has written, “I have forgotten all his answers” (Tocqueville 1988: 93).
  13. For Tocqueville as a statistician, see Drolet (2005); see also Perrot in Tocqueville 1984: 16–17.
  14. For “the avalanche of printed numbers” that started to appear in the 1820s in Europe, including France, see e.g. Hacking (1990). For an account of the almanacs, statistical manuals and the like that could be found in the United States at the time of Tocqueville’s visit, see Cohen (1982). Tocqueville does not seem to have known the first statistical manual that appeared in the United States, *Economica: A Statistical Manual for the United States* (1806). It has, however, been established that he knew the second, Timothy Pitkin’s *Statistical View of the Commerce of the United States of America* (1816). For the works Tocqueville

- used for writing *Democracy in America*, see “Ouvrages utilisés par Tocqueville” in Tocqueville (1990: 325–334).
15. The quote comes from a text co-authored with Beaumont.
  16. Tocqueville, *Democracy*, p. 248. For the statistical sources that Tocqueville used for *Democracy in America*, see Tocqueville (1990: 325–334). Eduardo Nolla’s list in the latter work contains items that Tocqueville cited as well as works that he used but did not cite, according to notes and other sources. Tocqueville used a handful of works that contained primarily statistical information on the U.S. economy and its population.
  17. André-Michel Guerry (1802–1866) is considered an important figure in 19th century statistics by historians of statistics; and his book, which contains many interesting cross-tabulations and graphs, was awarded a prestigious prize in statistics when it was published. Guerry says in *Essay* that Tocqueville and Beaumont have been good enough to supply him with a note from their work; he also refers to the fact that they have “collected ... criminal statistics” on the U.S. prison system (p. 98). For Guerry, see e.g. Hacking (1990: 73–81); Drolet (2005); Porter (1986: 49).
  18. Tocqueville, *Oeuvres complètes*, Vol. VI (Paris, Gallimard, 1991), Part 2, p. 66. Letter from Tocqueville to Nassau Senior, dated March 24, 1833. According to Michael Drolet, “he [Tocqueville] studied thoroughly the works of ... Adolphe Quetelet and A.M. Guerry” (Drolet 2003: 160). No source is given for this statement.
  19. Tocqueville remained on friendly terms with Guerry till his death; see e.g. Brogan (2006: 545). The journal never got off the ground.

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