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Tocqueville and the Spirit of American Capitalism

by

Richard Swedberg

rs328@cornell.edu

Cornell University

Department of Sociology

Uris Hall 328,

Ithaca, NY 14853-7601

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Abstract

This paper argues that *Democracy in America* contains an important but neglected picture of the U.S. economy, in which the role of cultural factors (“spirit” in Max Weber's terminology) plays a central role. While *The Protestant Ethic* discusses the spirit of American capitalism in the 18th century (as exemplified by Benjamin Franklin), *Democracy in America* contains an analysis of the situation in the United States some time later, namely in the early 1800s. From a theoretical perspective, Tocqueville can be said to have complemented and updated Weber's general picture of the spirit of capitalism. Similar to Weber, Tocqueville emphasizes the positive attitude to work (each and every job is seen as “*honorable*” in the United States) as well as the penchant for entrepreneurship (“*audacity*” and “*boldness*” in business). While Weber stresses the methodical and ascetic dimensions of the spirit of capitalism, however, Tocqueville points to the restlessness of the economic actors (“*restiveness*”) and their desire for ever more goods (“*taste for material well-being*”). Finally, Weber emphasized that it was commonplace to argue that there was a positive relationship between certain types of Protestantism and modern capitalism; and Tocqueville's work gives further support to this opinion.

Democracy in America has for a long time been regarded as a classic in the United States, and there exists a huge secondary literature on what Tocqueville has to say about various aspects of American life, especially its politics, religion and organizational life. What Tocqueville says about the U.S. economy has, in contrast, rarely been singled out for special attention. At the most individual aspects of his analysis have been scrutinized, such as Tocqueville's observation that wealth was as quickly made as it was lost in the United States, and his prophecy that if a new aristocracy is ever to come into being in a democracy, it will be in the form of an industrial elite (e.g. Pessen 1971, 1982; Drescher 1968:73 ff.).

It is the purpose of this paper to show that Tocqueville's analysis of economic life is a subject worthy of its own interest and that Tocqueville, contrary to what has been suggested, did have a coherent view of economic matters.¹ Tocqueville, as I will attempt to show, had a very original and suggestive way of looking at the economy, that was part of his more general analysis of society; and this analysis is well worth paying attention to (cf. Hereth 1977). Tocqueville "painted to a considerable extent in economic colours", as Joseph Schumpeter elegantly put it *History of Economic Analysis* (Schumpeter 1954:820; emphasis added). This comes out in his analysis of the United States and the French revolution as well as in some of his minor writings, such as his famous memoir on pauperism and his less known writings on the French railroads (e.g. Tocqueville [1835] 1997, 1995). In this paper, however, I will limit myself to *Democracy in America*, and I shall try to make the following two points: (1) that Tocqueville's analysis may help to improve the status of the concept of the spirit of capitalism, which is currently very low in the social sciences; and (2) that Tocqueville can also be of help in further developing this concept so that we better understand what a vigorous spirit of capitalism means.

Finally, as part of making these two points, I will show that Tocqueville established a direct link between the strength of U.S. capitalism and Puritanism. In this

¹According to what I consider to be the most substantial analysis of Tocqueville's view of the economy, his ideas on this topic can be described as a mishmash of internally inconsistent views (Drescher 1968:51-87).

context I also want to remind the reader very strongly that in Weber's days it was common to point to the positive relationship between Protestantism and capitalism. Since this is not the case any longer, and Weber's thesis in *The Protestant Ethic* is often presented as unique and at odds with historiography, it can be mentioned that Weber cited quite a few historians and writers that saw a positive link between Protestantism and capitalism: Macaulay, Thomas Carlyle, W.J. Ashley, Eduard Bernstein, Eberhard Gothein, William Petty, H.T. Buckle, E.T. Rogers, Manley, Temple, Montesquieu, Matthew Arnold, John Keats, Heine, Heinrich Wiskemann, Doyle, Cunningham and Hermann Levy.² To Weber's list one may also add the names of such 19th century economists as Karl Marx and Alfred Marshall (e.g. Marx [1867] 1906:792-93, 825-26; Marshall 1895:36-9).

In referring to the low status of the concept of the spirit of capitalism, I have first of all in mind the fact that the great majority of social scientists do not use the this concept (or some identical term). One important reason for this is that they reject the so-called Weber thesis that the spirit of capitalism ignited the Western economy and turned it into modern capitalism, largely as a result of the activities of the ascetic Protestant sects. Mainstream economic historians, in brief, have found no evidence that there was an important link between Calvinism and similar religions, on the one hand, and a change in economic mentality, on the other. What further adds to the uncertain status of the concept of the spirit of capitalism is Weber's argument that the impact of ascetic Protestantism on capitalist mentality was a onetime affair and of no further historical consequence once

² Weber makes several times the statement that it was commonplace in his time to see a positive relationship between Protestantism and capitalism (e.g. Weber [1904-1905] 1958:191:23, 280:86; Chalcraft and Harrington 2001:117). From this we may conclude that the burden of proof in Weber's days was rather on *disproving* this link. For a useful discussion of Weber's views on this issue, see especially Bendix 1967 (cf. e.g. Käsler 1988:75). See also Bendix's statement that "my colleague Neil Smelser informs me that that similar comments [on the positive relationship between Protestantism and capitalism] occur frequently among English writers of the early nineteenth century who discussed the development of trade and industry" (Bendix 1967:300, 305).

religion had been dethroned from its central position in the Western universe. This last point, it should be added, represents to my mind a misreading of Weber, who devotes a full chapter in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* to the non-religious spirit of capitalism that could be found in 18th century America, as illustrated by the writings of Benjamin Franklin. Nonetheless, the impression that the spirit of capitalism only played an important role in modern capitalism during a very brief historical period still remains.

The U.S. Economy at the Time of Tocqueville's Visit

Let us now turn to Tocqueville and his analysis of the United States. The 26 year old Tocqueville spent about nine months in the United States, where he arrived on May 10, 1831, and travelled around till February 20, 1832 when he left the country. The first volume of *Democracy in America* was published in 1835, and the second in 1840; and both were primarily based on information that Tocqueville had gathered during his trip to the United States, even though he also added to his knowledge during the years he spent writing up his study. Tocqueville, as we know, paints a full picture of life in the United States in *Democracy in America*, and this includes its economy.

Before taking a close look at what Tocqueville has to say about the American economy, I would like to stop for a moment and say something about the U.S. economy at the time of Tocqueville's visit, as seen by economic historians. In doing so, I shall primarily rely on a well-known study by Douglass North on the U.S. economy during its formative period, *The Economic Growth of the United States, 1790-1860*. According to North, the years from the end of the 18th century to the mid-1800s were absolutely crucial for getting the U.S. economy going in an entrepreneurial direction. The first steps towards the creation of a national market were taken during this period, and to explain this North refers primarily to price differentials. The three main regions of the Republic now slowly began to merge into one huge market. There was, first of all, the South, which mainly produced a few plantation staples for export. Then there was the East, which was the centre for manufacturing, banking and commerce. And finally, there was the West, which supplied the East and the South with food, thanks to its surplus production of grain and livestock. What made the economy so dynamic during this

period, according to North, were primarily the cotton trade and the migration westwards. The former brought in income as well as capital from abroad; and migration opened up new land and new opportunities.

The time in the 1830s, when Tocqueville visited the United States, was particularly important in creating an entrepreneurial American economy. North writes:

The twenty years between the trough of the precipitous depression of 1818 and that of the even more severe depression following 1839 were a critical period in American economic growth. *If one were to date the beginning of acceleration in the economy's growth and the years when industrialization began, it would be during this period.* (North 1961:189; emphasis added)

During the nine months in 1831-1832 that Tocqueville toured the United States, there was, according to North, “a surge of economic activity [that] was evident on all sides and in all regions” (North 1961:194). North notes in particular “the quickening pace of economic activity [that] was evident in 1831 and 1832” (*ibid.*).

The American Spirit of Capitalism and Its Defining Features

What role did what Weber termed “the spirit of capitalism” play in these economic events in the United States? North, as is clear from what has just been said, finds no room for concepts of this type, and it is here, I suggest, that we may learn from *Democracy in America*. If we define the spirit of capitalism as the mental propensity of economic actors for dynamic market behaviour, we quickly note that Tocqueville has quite a bit to say on this topic. *Democracy in America* contains, in fact, a vivid and detailed picture of the American spirit of capitalism in the early 1800s, which Tocqueville describes as *the restless activity of Americans to make a profit by working hard*. Tocqueville, of course, uses his own terminology to what may be called the spirit of capitalism in the United States; and in order to give a precise account of his ideas on this score it is important to use the exact terms that are used in *Democracy in America*. One reason for this is that Tocqueville’s terminology differs quite a bit from the terminology that is used in modern economics and social science. Proceeding in this manner also makes it easier to highlight the differences between Tocqueville’s type of analysis and that of conventional economic and social science analysis.

Before introducing Tocqueville's views on the spirit of capitalism, it can be noted that his terminology is considerably closer to that of Weber in *The Protestant Ethic* than to mainstream economics and social science. In particular, the Weberian term "spirit" (*Geist*) is frequently used in *Democracy in America*, including when it comes to the economy (*esprit*).³ Tocqueville speaks, for example, of "the spirit of enterprise" (*l'esprit de l'entreprise*) in the United States (Tocqueville [1835-40] 2000: 154, 364, 388, 390, 394; 1959:75). He writes at one point in his notes for *Democracy in America* that "what distinguishes the North is the *spirit of enterprise*; what distinguishes the South is the *spirit of chivalry*" (Tocqueville 1959:75). It should also be noted that while the term "spirit", with its associations to religion, came natural to Tocqueville in the early 1800s, it already seemed a bit strained to Weber - and it has today an odd and quaint tone. Tocqueville's portrait of the spirit of capitalism in *Democracy in America* differs on certain points from the description of the spirit of capitalism in *The Protestant Ethic*, even if the two are similar enough to be seen as variations of the same species. According to Tocqueville, the Americans (except in the South) are characterized by the following traits, in their economic lives: (1) "*restiveness*", (2) a "*taste for material well-being*", (3) *work regarded as "honorable"*; and (4) "*audacity*" or "*boldness*" in business (Tocqueville [1835-1840] 2000:384-90, 506-09, 511-14, 525-29, 594-95). Just as Weber, Tocqueville sees a direct link between the spirit of capitalism and religion. As opposed to Weber, however, Tocqueville emphasizes the close link between the spirit of capitalism and political behavior.

It is also clear that Weber as well as Tocqueville view people's attitude to work as part of the spirit of capitalism. One may nonetheless be justified in singling out "*restiveness*" (*inquiétude*) as especially important to Tocqueville's portrait of the American spirit of capitalism, just as the ascetic attitude to work was at the heart of Weber's description of the early European spirit of capitalism. In the United States, Tocqueville says, restiveness takes the expression that people often want to move, that they are about to move, or that they are in the process of moving. While in an aristocracy

³ The term "spirit of capitalism" is usually attributed to Werner Sombart who used it in 1902 in *Der Moderne Kapitalismus*. Sombart's use of this term, however, differs from that of Weber, who discussed the spirit of modern rational capitalism and how it has its roots in ascetic Protestantism already in 1897 (Halcraft and Harrington 2001:62).

everything has a fixed place and no one moves anywhere, in a democracy it is just the opposite. The United States, according to *Democracy in America*, is “a community...where all the citizens are on the move” (*ibid.*, p. 596). People are “excited, uncertain, breathless, ready to change will and place” (*ibid.*, p. 616). Some people move in a physical sense and others in a social sense. It is not only immigrants who move on to their final destination, once they have arrived to the United States; also those who have been in the country for a generation or more often decide to leave their homes and join the movement Westwards. And those who do not move in a physical sense, change their behavior or their ideas. Nothing is stable, everything is fluid; “all that is solid melts into air”, as Marx and Engels famously put it in *The Communist Manifesto* (Marx and Engels [1848] 1978:476).

The desire to move and to change things, Tocqueville argues, cannot take much of a political expression in the United States since its political structure is poorly developed and there are few political jobs. In the area of the economy, in contrast, there are plenty of opportunities. “When public offices are few, poorly paid, unstable, and when, on the other hand, industrial careers are numerous and productive”, we read in *Democracy in America*, “it is toward industry and not the administration that the new and impatient desires born daily of equality are directed” (*ibid.*, p. 605). The “vast hopes” that appear once aristocratic barriers have been removed, are therefore primarily directed at the economy – at making money and at buying new things (*ibid.*, p. 513). People “dream constantly of the goods they do not have” (*ibid.*, p. 511).

Always ready to tackle new economic tasks and challenges, Americans become impatient and move from one economic activity to another, in the hope of doing better. One of the key passages about the American spirit of capitalism reads as follows:

In the United States, a man carefully builds a dwelling in which to pass his declining years, and he sells it while the roof is being laid; he plants a garden and he rents it out just as he is going to taste its fruits; he clears a field and he leaves to others the care of harvesting its crops. He embraces a profession and quits it. He settles in a place from which he departs soon after so as to take his changing desires elsewhere. Should his private affairs give him some respite, he immediately plunges into the whirlwind

of politics. And when toward the end of a year filled with work some leisure still remains to him, he carries his restive curiosity here and there within the vast limits of the United States. (*ibid.* p. 512)

The aggregate result of all this restiveness is a beehive of economic activity, where something new has barely been finished before it is replaced by something that looks more promising. This leads to a situation that Tocqueville describes as a “secret restiveness”, which adds to the general restiveness. This secret restiveness is due to the fact that what people want are material objects, and consequently not of lasting value (*ibid.*, p. 512). There is also the fact that infinite dreams and infinite needs can by definition not be satisfied; everybody strives constantly for more, and final consummation therefore eludes them. Both of these phenomena, Tocqueville says, help to explain why there is “a sort of cloud” hanging over the Americans, and why they display such a “singular melancholy” (*ibid.*, p. 511, 514). People are “grave and almost sad in their pleasures” (*ibid.*, p. 511). The end result, Tocqueville says, is a “spectacle” – a “useless pursuit of complete felicity” (*ibid.*, p. 512). “This *is* Tocqueville, not Galbraith”, as Robert K. Merton points out (Merton 1973:125).

The second defining feature of the American spirit of capitalism, according to *Democracy in America*, is “*the taste for material well-being*” (*le goût du bien-être matériel*), which is described as “the care of satisfying the least needs of the body and of providing the smallest comforts of life” (*ibid.*, p. 506). Tocqueville notes that this taste is “violent” and he also refers to it, perhaps more fittingly, as a “passion for material well-being” (*la passion du bien-être matériel*) and a “love of material enjoyments” (*l’amour des jouissances matérielles*; *ibid.*, pp. 506, 508). What makes these last expressions interesting is that they explicitly refer to the role of emotions in economic actions, something that is rarely done in mainstream economic thought. In *The Passions and the Interests* Albert O. Hirschman has classically described how modern economics from its very beginning assumed that emotions and economic analysis do not belong together, and how this meant that an important dimension of economic life was ignored. *Homo economicus* is rational, but has no emotions whatsoever (e.g. Persky 1995).

Tocqueville, who wrote his work on the United States around the time when the idea of *homo economicus* was being formulated, instinctively avoided taking the route

of John Stuart Mill in this regard, and this may well be one of the reasons why Tocqueville (but not Mill) gave such a good picture of the economic atmosphere in the United States.⁴ To this should be added that through his analysis of the taste for material well-being, Tocqueville also makes an early contribution to the study of consumerism, which he discovered to be an integral part of American economic life. On this last point Tocqueville differs from Weber, who does not see consumerism as part of the spirit of capitalism in *The Protestant Ethic*, but only asceticism and the tendency to reinvest.

The taste or love for material well-being is “universal” in American society, Tocqueville says, and can also be found among the poor (*ibid.*, p. 507). He refers to the role that “imagination [of material comfort]” plays among the poor and how they cast “a glance of hope and longing” at the goods of those who are more fortunate (*ibid.*). While hope for material well-being is characteristic of the poor, the rich fear that they will lose what they have. This has to do with the fact that the rich in the United States have had to make their own fortune and therefore know what it is like to live without material wealth. This also goes for the rich who have inherited their wealth, Tocqueville says; also they are well aware of the fact that they may one day lose their riches.

At this point of his discussion of the taste for material well-being, Tocqueville makes a brief comparison between the attitude to well-being that can be found among the elite in an aristocracy and the one that can be found among the rich in a democracy. Aristocrats, he says, do not think very much about wealth or their possessions, which they take for granted. They display “haughty scorn” and “high-minded disdain” for material objects (*ibid.*, pp. 506, 507). To illustrate their attitude in this regard,

⁴ As an example of John Stuart Mills’ failure to understand the significance of the spirit of capitalism in the United States, and how this failure was rooted in his distaste for its entrepreneurial and profit-oriented atmosphere, one may cite *Principles of Political Economy* (1848). Mill here expresses quite a bit of contempt for the “dollar-hunting” of American men and the “breeding [of] dollar-hunters” of American women (Mill [1848] 1987:748, n. 1). According to Mill, it was only in “backward countries” that there is an interest in “increased production”; in advanced countries the main issue is “a better distribution” (*ibid.*, p. 749). Roger Boesch’s discussion of “Tocqueville’s [aristocratic] distaste for bourgeois society” for its “obsession with wealth” in *The Strange Liberalism of Alexis de Tocqueville* falls in the same category as Mills’ comments - and similarly fails to grasp the significance of Tocqueville’s description of the American spirit of capitalism (Boesche 1987:85 ff.).

Tocqueville uses the example of revolutions. Drawing perhaps on information from members of his own family, he notes that “all revolutions that have troubled or destroyed aristocracies have shown with what facility people accustomed to the superfluous can do without the necessary, whereas men who have laboriously arrived at ease can hardly live after having lost it” (*ibid.*, p. 506). Tocqueville’s ideas on this topic, it may be added, go well with the observations of Bruno Bettelheim from his stay in a German concentration camp in the 1930s (Bettelheim 1943). The closer that people held on to their material goods and conventional status, Bettelheim says, the harder it was for them to be stripped of these, when they entered the world of the concentration camp.

Tocqueville similarly notes that the group that has invested the most of itself in material objects is the middle class:

the passion for material well-being is essentially a middle-class passion; it grows larger and spreads with this class; it becomes preponderant with it. From there it reaches the higher ranks of society and descends within the people. (*ibid.*, p. 507)

More generally, Tocqueville regarded the middle-class as central to democratic society and its economy already in the 1830s.

But even if the passion for material well-being is universal in a democracy such as the United States, Tocqueville says that it can nonetheless best be described as a “contained passion”, which has little in common with the grand passions of the aristocrats (*ibid.*, p. 508). What drove the typical American in the early 1800s was not a desire for castles or to surround himself with luxuries, but to create what Tocqueville terms “*comfort*” – which represented a considerably more modest ambition. While luxury was a symbol for the life of the elite in an aristocracy, comfort was the equivalent for the life of the successful in a democracy (for the invention of the concept of comfort, see Crowley 2003). The difference between luxury and comfort is clearly outlined in the following quote:

[In a democracy] it is not a question of building vast palaces, of vanquishing and outwitting nature, of depleting the universe in order better to satiate the passions of a man; it is about adding a few toises to one’s field, planting an orchard, enlarging a residence, making life easier

and more comfortable at each instant, preventing inconvenience, and satisfying the least needs without effort and almost without cost. (*ibid.*, p. 509)

Just as Tocqueville saw the restiveness of Americans as having a dark side to it, this was also the case with their taste for well-being. The love or passion with which material objects were being pursued in the United States, he argues, was threatening to slowly undo their concern with the important things in life. “These objects are small,” he says, “but the soul clings to them: it considers them every day and from very close; in the end they hide the rest of the world from it, and they sometimes come to place themselves between it and God” (*ibid.*). Consumerism, in other words, was on a collision course with religion - a theme that Tocqueville was to return to in his analysis of the role of religion in the American economic life.

The third feature of the American spirit of capitalism is *work*, and here one can find similarities as well as differences between Tocqueville’s analysis of the situation in the United States, on the one hand, and, Weber’s analysis of the situation in Europe, on the other. In the United States, we read in *Democracy in America*, everybody has to work for a living, and every type of work is considered honorable, including work for profit. Even the U.S. President, Tocqueville notes with raised eyebrows, gets paid for his job. And while the work of, say, a servant is considered as totally menial in an aristocracy, it is seen in a much more positive light in a democracy. One reason for this is that the servant knows that one day he or she may become a master and vice versa.

The very special way in which people in a democratic society regard work comes out with the most clarity in *Democracy in America* when it is compared to work in an aristocracy. In a democracy everyone feels compelled to work, and this includes those who can afford not to do so. It is seen as dishonorable *not* to work, and for this reason also the rich feel compelled to work, to get involved with politics or in some other way keep busy. Wealthy Americans who want to do nothing, Tocqueville says, have to go to Europe, which still contains enough “debris of aristocratic societies” to make leisure and inactivity an honorable occupation (*ibid.*).

A very important feature of U.S. society is also that work to make a profit is seen as an honorable activity. “Equality not only rehabilitates the idea of work, it uplifts

the idea of working to procure lucre” (*ibid.*, p. 525). Aristocrats, in contrast, despise those who work for to make a profit and pretend to be beyond this type of contemptible activity:

In aristocracies, it is not precisely work that is scorned, but work with a view to profit. Work is glorious when ambition of virtue alone makes one undertake it. Under aristocracy, nevertheless, it constantly happens that he who works for honor is not insensitive to the lure of gain. But these two desires meet only in the depth of his soul. He takes much care to conceal from all regard the place where they unite. He willingly hides it from himself. In aristocratic countries there is scarcely a public official who does not claim to serve the state without interest. (*ibid.*)

While all types of work in a democracy are honorable, people prefer nonetheless to work in certain sectors of the economy than in others. Agriculture, for example, is seen as much less promising than commerce and industry. Only rich people can make a good profit from agriculture, Tocqueville says. To the extent that ordinary Americans do get involved in agriculture, however, they invest it with “industrial passions” and “the spirit of trade” (*ibid.*, p. 529). The result is that the United States has no peasants, only farmers.

Commerce and industry are the two areas where one can make a quick profit the easiest, and which therefore attract the most people. Tocqueville was full of admiration for the enormous progress of the United States in these two areas. He sums up his view as follows:

In the United States the greatest industrial enterprises are executed without difficulty, because the population as a whole is involved in industry and because the poorest as well as the most opulent citizens willingly unite their efforts in this...Americans arrived only yesterday on the soil they inhabit, and they have already overturned the whole order of nature to their profit. They have united the Hudson to the Mississippi and linked the Atlantic Ocean with the Gulf of Mexico across more than five hundred leagues of continent that separate these two seas. The longest railroads that have been made up to our day are in America.

But what strikes me most in the United States is not the extraordinary greatness of a few industrial enterprises, it is the innumerable multitude of small enterprises (*ibid.*, pp. 528-29)

While Tocqueville has often been criticized for his failure to visit any factories during his trip to the United States, the passage that was just cited makes clear that he nonetheless was well aware of the importance of industry.⁵ The same is clear from his famous statement about the way that industrial development will polarize democratic society in the United States into two antagonistic groups, workers and capitalists. On the one hand, there are the workers who will become ever more ignorant because of the division of labor (“brutes”). On the other hand there are the factory owners, who get to plan more and more of economic life thanks to the same division of labor, and who therefore will become increasingly powerful and sophisticated (*ibid.*, p. 530). Tocqueville famously concludes his analysis of workers and capitalists with the statement that “if ever permanent inequality of conditions and aristocracy are introduced anew into the world, one can predict that they will enter by this door” (*ibid.*, p. 532).

Finally we come to the last defining feature of the American spirit of capitalism, namely the attitude of “*audacity*” or “*boldness*” that exist in business (e.g. *ibid.*, pp. 384-90, 594-95). This phenomenon, it deserves to be pointed out, is related to, but not identical to risk-taking. Tocqueville essentially argues that “chance” will always be important in a democratic society and, as result of this, business will be seen as a “lottery” (*ibid.*, p. 594). To some extent Tocqueville means by this that democratic societies tend to develop a distinct “opportunity structure”, to speak with Robert Merton

⁵ In writings about the analysis of the economy in *Democracy in America*, it is often pointed out that Tocqueville did not visit the textile factories in Lowell, Massachusetts and more generally that he did not understand the U.S. economy since he was blind to the process of industrialization (e.g. Drescher 1968:51-87). To this may be answered that Tocqueville nonetheless succeeded in capturing the spirit of American capitalism, and that this spirit had not yet found a full institutional expression - a bit like the situation in Massachusetts in the 1600s according to *The Protestant Ethic* (“the spirit of capitalism...was present [in Massachusetts] *before* the capitalist order”, Weber [1904-05] 1958:55; emphasis added). During his trip to England in 1835, which took place before Vol. 2 of *Democracy in America* had been completed, Tocqueville nonetheless caught a glimpse of industrialization in action.

(e.g. Merton 1995). Tocqueville similarly notes the element of rational calculation and risk-taking that is involved.

But Tocqueville's argument about the audacity and boldness that is characteristic of American commercial culture goes beyond what we today mean by rational decision-making and risk-taking. There is also, for example, a distinct emotional element involved. "Those who live amid democratic instability", Tocqueville writes, "constantly have the image of chance before their eyes, and in the end the love all undertakings in which chance plays a role" (*ibid.*, p. 528). He concludes: "they are all brought into commerce, not only because of the gain it promises them, but for love of the emotions that it gives them" (*ibid.* emphasis added; cf. pp. 270-71). "They love the sensation as much as the gain" (*ibid.*, p. 271).

Tocqueville supplies one detailed example in *Democracy in America* of what accounts for this boldness that is so important to "the commercial greatness of the United States", and this is shipping (*ibid.*, p. 384, cf. 384-90).⁶ The Americans sail much faster across the Atlantic than any other people, and this means that they can transport goods at a cheaper price. Tocqueville devotes several pages of his study to possible explanations for this phenomenon, which he regards as an example of the "maritime genius" of the Americans (*ibid.*, p. 385). One possible reason could be that ships are cheaper to build in the United States than in other countries, and Tocqueville notes that this is marginally the case. On the other hand, the wages of the sailors on American ships are higher than the wages on non-American ships. American ships are furthermore not as well constructed as other ships, and they do not last as long. Tocqueville concludes that "one would seek in vain the causes of this superiority [of the Americans] in material advantages; it is due to purely intellectual and moral qualities" (*ibid.*, p. 386).

These intellectual and moral qualities Tocqueville also refers to as "*a sort of heroism in the manner of doing business*" (*ibid.*, p. 387; emphasis added). The real cause why Americans can sail faster across the Atlantic than anyone else and keep such low prices is explained as follows:

⁶ The Americans' indulgence towards bankruptcy (as compared to that of the Europeans) is perhaps related to commercial boldness and audacity as well (*ibid.*, pp. 587-88, 595).

The European navigator ventures on the seas only with prudence; he departs only when the weather invites him to; if an unforeseen accident comes upon him, he enters into port at night, he furls a part of his sails, and when he sees the ocean within the approach of land, he slows his course and examines the sun.

The American neglects these precautions and braves these dangers. He departs while the tempest still roars; at night as in day he opens all his sails to the wind; while on the go, he repairs his ship, worn down by the storm, and when he finally approaches the end of his course, he continues to fly toward the shore as if he already perceived the port.

(*ibid.*, p. 386)

It deserves to be underlined that what is involved here is not only conventional risk-taking but also something else: "the American, in acting [in this way], not only follows calculation, he obeys, above all, his nature" (*ibid.*, p. 387).

Before leaving Tocqueville's description of the American spirit of capitalism, it deserves to be added that he also discusses the attitude to time among the Americans, and how this is related to the economy. The past means little to people in a democracy, we are told, as opposed to the situation in an aristocratic society where the past means everything. Democracies similarly tend to discredit the importance of the future, which according to Tocqueville is the realm of religion. What remains is the present; and this is the only dimension that interests the Americans: "they are disposed to act as if they will exist for only a simple day" (*ibid.*, p. 523).

The Role of Religion in the American Spirit of Capitalism

Tocqueville visited the United States during a period of great revival among the Protestant sects, known as the Second Awakening.⁷ Similar to Weber, Tocqueville saw a general and important link between economic life and religion, but there also exist differences between the two. Tocqueville's view of religion in the United States was not

⁷According to Doris Goldstein, who is the author of the standard work on Tocqueville's relationship to religion, Tocqueville failed to understand what was going on in American religious life during his visit. She also notes that authors such as S. M. Lipset, Robert Bellah and Daniel Boorstin do not share this opinion (Goldstein 1968:19-27).

only related to his analysis of the crucial role that Puritanism has played in the United States (which will be discussed later), but also had deep roots in his own personal conviction that a life without religion was destructive and ultimately untenable. While Tocqueville's private relationship to religion is complex and difficult to capture in a few lines, his public attitude, as expressed in his books and political speeches, is quite different (e.g. Goldstein 1968). In private, Tocqueville expressed doubt and sometimes also stated that he was not a believer. In public, on the other hand, he firmly supported religion and especially Catholicism; he also argued that religion had an important moral role to play in society at large.

What Tocqueville says about the relationship between economics and religion in *Democracy in America* draws on his general view of life. Human beings, according to Tocqueville, do not only have to attend to the needs of the body, through material goods, but also to the needs of the soul, through immaterial goods. "The human heart is vaster than one supposes; it can at once contain a taste for the goods of the earth and a love of those of Heaven; sometimes it seems to give itself over frantically to one of the two; but it is never long before it thinks of the other" (*ibid.*, p. 520). What differentiates humans from animals, according to Tocqueville, is not their material desires – these are essentially the same – but the fact that by having a soul, human beings can use reason and not only instinct to provide for themselves. "In men, the angel teaches the beast the art of satisfying itself" (*ibid.*, p. 521).

Human beings are consequently able to provide for other needs than their most primitive ones. This, however, is only the case on condition that they attend properly to their souls; if not, their productive powers will decline, with poverty and destitution as a result. Since democracy tends to encourage materialism, religious countermeasures have to be introduced into democratic countries if the economy is to do well. "Materialism", according to Tocqueville, "is a dangerous malady of the human mind in all nations; but one must dread it particularly in a democratic people because it combines marvellously with the most familiar vice in the heart of these peoples" (*ibid.*, p. 519).

Tocqueville not only establishes a positive link between religious behavior and economic behavior in his study, he also presents the general mechanisms through which they interact with one another. First of all, religion has the capacity to prevent human

desires for material goods from being endless. Religion puts a limit to these desires, which means that they can be satisfied. Thanks to Christianity, we read in *Democracy in America*, “the human spirit never perceives an unlimited field before itself; however bold it may be, from time to time it feels that it ought to halt before insurmountable barriers” (*ibid.*, p. 279). On this point Tocqueville sounds very much like Emile Durkheim, who in *Suicide* discusses “economic anomie” and how people suffer when there are no limits to their economic desires (e.g. Durkheim [1897] 1951:246, 259).

The second mechanism that turns religion into a positive factor in economic life, according to Tocqueville, is that religion teaches individuals to become regular, methodical and concentrated in their pursuit of various goals, including economic ones. Through religion, Tocqueville explains, individuals learn to ignore the many temptations in everyday life and instead keep their eyes on the much more important awards in the next life. This way of behaving comes in very handy in economic life, Tocqueville explains. “Men are therefore...accustomed naturally, and so to speak without wanting it, to consider for a long succession of years an unmoving object towards which they constantly advance, and they learn by insensible progressions to repress a thousand little desires the better to succeed in satisfying the great and permanent desire that torments them” (*ibid.*, p. 522). This mode of behavior is then used for economic matters: “when the same men want to occupy themselves with earthly things, these habits are found again” (*ibid.*). Tocqueville concludes that “this explains why religious peoples have accomplished such lasting things” (*ibid.*).⁸

This view of the relationship between religion and economic life is then applied to the situation in the United States in *Democracy in America*. In general, Tocqueville found Americans to be very religious, and he states that the United States was the most

⁸ Tocqueville’s analysis of how the methodical character of religion is transmitted to economic behavior shows obvious parallels to Weber’s argument in *The Protestant Ethic*. This is something that Seymour Drescher misses in his discussion of the relationship between the key argument in *The Protestant Ethic* and *Democracy in America*: “At times Tocqueville in his notes [on the United States] almost glimpsed the Weber thesis on the relationship between Protestantism and capitalism, but his overriding conception of religion as ‘spiritual’, and economics as ‘material’ realms of human activity kept his focus on the inhibiting potentials of religious values on economic behavior” (Drescher 1968:69).

genuinely Christian country that existed in his days (*ibid.*, p. 273). “On my arrival in the United States it was the religious aspect of the country that first struck me” (*ibid.*, p. 282). Tocqueville is also very careful to point out that religion must not be involved in politics, if it is to have a positive impact on the economy and on a country more generally. He considered it a disaster that the Catholic Church had been so closely involved with the king and the aristocracy in France before the Revolution, and felt that this was the main reason why the Catholic Church was not more popular in his home country. Tocqueville was adamant not only that the state must be separated from the church but that the church should keep out of politics. “I would rather chain priests in the sanctuary than allow them to leave it” (*ibid.*, p. 521). He similarly argued that one of the main reasons for the positive impact of religion on social and economic life in the United States was precisely the fact that the preachers kept out of politics.

The general mechanisms through which religion had this positive impact have already been presented: it sets limits to people’s behavior and it introduces regular and methodical habits into people’s lives. But Tocqueville also introduces another factor into his analysis of the situation in America which deserves to be highlighted, and that is women. In the United States it is women, Tocqueville says, who are the most religious, and “it is women who make mores” (*ibid.*, p. 279). Women are much less susceptible to materialism than males since they spend more of their time in the home and do not participate in public life and the official economy. The key role that a strong and healthy family life plays in a successful economy, according to Tocqueville, comes out very well in *Democracy in America*:

When...the American returns to the bosom of his family, he immediately meets the image of order and peace. There all his pleasures are simple and natural, his joys innocent and tranquil; and as he arrives at happiness through regularity of life, he becomes habituated to regulating his opinions as well as his tastes without difficulty. (*ibid.*)

A final factor that helps to account for the close and positive relationship between religion and economic behavior in the United States, according to Tocqueville, has to do with the special outlook on secular and economic matters that one can find among American priests. While priests in Europe exclusively focus on the rewards in the next

world, it is different in the United States, where the priests also promise rewards in this world. They are interested in industry and in general have a positive relationship to the material dimension of modern life:

In the Middle Ages priests spoke only of the other life; they scarcely worried about proving that a sincere Christian can be a happy man here below. But American preachers constantly come back to earth and only with great trouble can they take their eyes off it. ...It is often difficult to know when listening to them if the principal object of religion is to procure eternal felicity in the other world or well-being in this one. (*ibid.*, pp. 506-07)

American priests, as Tocqueville puts it in his notes for *Democracy in America*, are “entrepreneurs of a religious industry” (Tocqueville 1959:185).

According to Tocqueville, there exists a set of ideas in the United States on how economic behavior and morality (including religion) belong together, and he refers to this as an “official doctrine”, “*the doctrine of self-interest (intérêt) well understood*” (*ibid.*, pp. 500-06). The Americans, Tocqueville says, do not have a public morality that they idealize and call beautiful, in the way that aristocrats do. Instead they pride themselves on having a public morality that is *useful*, along the lines of Benjamin Franklin.⁹ It is useful, more precisely, because it helps people to reach their material goals. The key idea in the doctrine of self-interest well understood, in brief, is that Americans are honest, keep promises and so on because it helps them to accomplish what they want - not because this behavior is virtuous in and by itself. “They therefore do not deny that each man can follow his interest, but they do their best to prove that the interest of each is to be honest” (*ibid.*, p. 501). Religion is part of this way of proceeding; and it is consequently useful for the average persons to be religious.

The doctrine of self-interest well understood is “marvellously accommodated to the weaknesses of men”, according to Tocqueville, and the reason for this is that it does not assume that people are driven by lofty ideals but only that they will

⁹ The reader may recall that Benjamin Franklin is the central figure in Weber’s account of the modern spirit of capitalism in Ch. 2 of *The Protestant Ethic*. The same idea is present in the statement “Honesty is the best policy”, cited by Weber in “The Protestant Sects and the Spirit of Capitalism” (Weber [1920] 1946:313)

attempt to realize their interests (*ibid.*, p. 502). The term “*intérêt*” is usually rendered as “self-interest” in the translation of “*la doctrine de l’intérêt bien entendu*”, but it would perhaps be better to simply translate it as “interest” since this term does not give as strong associations to greed and avarice.¹⁰ This qualification is necessary to be aware of if one, for example, is to understand Tocqueville’s statement that “religion [in the United States] makes use of interest to guide people” (*ibid.*, p. 505). Interest, in other words, can be used to connect people’s material needs to their religious needs, similar to the way that desires for material goods and the needs of the soul should meet in the human being. That Tocqueville’s doctrine of self-interest well understood is not cynical is also clear from his observation that Americans tend to overplay the extent to which they do good because it serves their interests. It is not at all uncommon, Tocqueville says, that Americans perform acts out of pure altruism (*ibid.*, p. 502).

The Role of Politics in the American Spirit of Capitalism

As opposed to Weber in *The Protestant Ethic*, Tocqueville pays considerable attention to the political dimension of the spirit of capitalism or, more precisely, to the political conditions under which the spirit of capitalism can exist as part of a dynamic economy. In presenting Tocqueville’s ideas on this topic, it is necessary to first look at the basic conceptual scheme of *Democracy in America* and establish what role the economy, including the spirit of capitalism, plays in this. Similar to Adam Smith in *The Wealth of Nations* (which Tocqueville knew well), he was careful to point out that

¹⁰There currently exist four translations of *Democracy of America* (plus a retranslation of the first translation by Reeve, made by Bowen). George Lawrence and Arthur Goldhammar translate *intérêt bien entendu* as “self-interest properly understood”; Henry Reeve prefers “self-interest rightly understood”; and Harvey Mansfield and Delba Winthrop “self-interest well understood” (Tocqueville [1835-40] 1994:525, Tocqueville [1835-1840] 1945, 2:121, Tocqueville [1835-1840] 2004:610; Tocqueville [1835-1840] 1000:500-506). To this may be added that Albert O. Hirschman suggests “enlightened self-interest” for “*intérêt bien compris*”, and that the term “enlightened self-interest” is often used to characterize the ideal during the Enlightenment (Hirschman 1986:49).

the economic sphere has to be independent of the political sphere, but that they nonetheless are closely connected in a capitalist economy.¹¹

In order to understand Tocqueville's way of approaching the relationship between economics and politics, it is convenient to start with the conceptual scheme of *Democracy in America*. This consists of two interrelated ideas: (1) that society is moving away from what Tocqueville terms aristocracy and towards democracy, and (2) that democracy can be either despotic or characterized by freedom (cf. Furet 1981). An aristocracy, Tocqueville states, is a society in which a tiny minority controls all the economic, social and political resources, while a democracy is a society in which this monopoly has been decisively broken, and where resources are spread out among different groups and individuals. How to steer society's general evolution towards democracy in a positive political direction constitutes, according to Tocqueville, "*the great political problem of our time*" (ibid., p. 298; emphasis added). Whether this problem is handled in such a way that it will result in despotism or freedom, will also have dramatic consequences for the development of economic life. Despotism, in all brevity, leads to a stagnant economy, and a free democratic society to a dynamic economy (see Fig. 1).

/Fig. 1 about here/

Tocqueville was convinced that there exists "a tight bond and a necessary relation between these two things: freedom and industry" (ibid., p. 515). He states that "I do not know if one can cite a single manufacturing and commercial people, from the Tyrians to the Florentines to the English, that has not been a free people" (ibid.). The mechanisms that would explain how freedom and economic growth are related in detail are unfortunately not made explicit in *Democracy in America*. Tocqueville has, on the other hand, quite a bit to say about the impact that despotism has on the economy in a democratic society. Democracy, he explains, has a natural tendency towards despotism,

¹¹Tocqueville studied economics before, during and after his trip to the United States. Before he completed *Democracy in America* he read Adam Smith and Jean-Baptiste Say and also had conversations with Nassau Senior. Tocqueville, as already noted, was not attracted to the analytical type of economics that would emerge in mid-19th century England and later overtake economics more generally. For Tocqueville's knowledge of economics, see in particular Schleifer 1980:283-84, Steiner 1998:162-83.

and if this is not decisively countered, politics and economics will suffer. When a society becomes democratic, according to Tocqueville, this often means that various intermediary aristocratic organizations have been removed, say as a result of a revolution. This means that there is only a huge number of isolated individuals in democratic society, on the one hand, and a centralized power, on the other. And when this is the case, it is easy for some form of “democratic despotism” to emerge, such as the absolute monarchy that was introduced in France after the July Revolution in 1830. When this happens, the economy will react very positively at first, but then decline and eventually come to a halt. The reason for this is that the state will increasingly interfere in various small details in the economy, something which has a paralyzing effect on economic life. The state will similarly prevent many economic initiatives from being taken, simply by its presence.

While the creation of an absolute monarchy in a democratic society (as in France between 1830-1848) shows that society is somewhere between aristocracy and democracy, Tocqueville argues that a pure democratic society (such as the United States) may also be overcome by despotism. In this case, however, despotism will be of a different type: less dependent on force but more intrusive. Tocqueville describes the pure version of democratic despotism in a way that shows some parallels to Foucault:

It is absolute, detailed, regular, far-seeing, and mild. It would resemble paternal power if, like that, it had for its object to prepare men for manhood; but on the contrary, it seeks only to keep them fixed irrevocably in childhood; it likes citizens to enjoy themselves provided that they think only of enjoying themselves. (*ibid.*, p. 663)

People in a democracy, Tocqueville says, are typically fond of order; they have a deep fear of disorder, and freedom typically comes with a certain amount of disorder. There is also the fact that since all individuals in a democracy are isolated from one another, they have great difficulty in accomplishing anything on their own. And this has as a consequence, in its turn, that if something is to be done, you have to turn to the state. The process of industrialization means that the state will increasingly interfere in society through various regulations; it will also be in charge of creating a new infrastructure.

There is finally a strong tendency towards “*individualism*” in democracies (*ibid.*, pp. 485-88). When Tocqueville uses this term in *Democracy in America*, however, it has a different meaning than the conventional one. Individualism, we are told, means that the individual decides, in a calm and rational way, that it is more sensible to withdraw to a small circle of family and close friends than to get involved in politics. Individualism, Tocqueville emphasizes, differs from selfishness, which is a passion and has little to do with reason and contemplation. Tocqueville’s theory of individualism is an outgrowth of his personal conviction that only a politically active people can take charge of things successfully – including the economy.

According to Tocqueville, it was crucial for a democratic country such as France to opt for freedom and steer free of despotism. This is exactly where his intense interest for the United States came in, because this country had shown one way in which this could be done. The Americans had accomplished this feat primarily by relying on a new type of political system and the creation of so-called “secondary powers” in between the individual and the state (*ibid.*, pp. 642-50). The free press had played a role as well, and so had the American system of justice with its juries, elected judges and judicial review.

It is necessary to realize, according to Tocqueville, that no democratic society can operate effectively without a certain amount of political centralization. “Governmental despotism”, as he puts it, is necessary to deal with problems that all citizens have in common (*ibid.*, p. 82). But it is equally important to realize that the state must not intervene in cases where people can handle the problems themselves, by cooperating locally. This situation (which today is referred to as subsidiarity) is termed “administrative centralization” by Tocqueville (*ibid.*, pp.82-93). American federalism, which in the 1800s rested on a foundation of townships, was according to Tocqueville a brilliant example of how “governmental centralization” can exist without “administrative centralization”.

The second key element in the successful American solution to the political dilemma of democratic society, as Tocqueville saw it, has often been referred to in the debate about social capital, namely the creation of organizations (e.g. Fukuyama 1995, Skocpol 1996, Skocpol, Ganz and Munson 2000). Tocqueville’s view on

organizations in the United States in the 1800s is close to that of Weber on the United States in the early 1900s; “Americans...constantly unite” (Tocqueville) and “[America is] the association-land par excellence” (Weber) (*ibid.*, p. 489; Weber [1910] 1972:20; cf. Weber [1920] 1946).

What has been discussed less often in the literature on Tocqueville and social capital, however, is the role that economic organizations, as opposed to voluntary organizations, play in democratic society. By being politically active, Tocqueville argues in *Democracy in America*, people in the United States learn how to create organizations for specific purposes, and this knowledge is then used in economic life. Here as elsewhere the fact that a number of individuals joins together, means that they can accomplish far more than single individuals. By filling the gap between the individual and the state, organizations also block the state from unduly interfering in various economic activities – and thereby make it easier for the spirit of capitalism to flourish.

On the Origin of the American Spirit of Capitalism

Weber attributes much importance to the question of the origin of the spirit of capitalism in *The Protestant Ethic*, and this is also true for Tocqueville in *Democracy in America* (*ibid.*, pp. 18-44, 264-302). “I saw in the origin of the Americans, in what I called their point of departure,” Tocqueville says, “the first and the most efficacious of all causes to which the current prosperity in America can be attributed” (*ibid.*, p. 266). He also argues that while it is true that you always have to go back to the origin of a nation, in order to understand its later development, this is often not possible because the lack of historical records. For the formative period of a young nation such as the United States, however, there is plenty of information.

In trying to establish what caused the spirit of capitalism to flourish so strongly in the United States, from Tocqueville’s perspective, one may first of all note that aristocracies are inhospitable to this spirit. Aristocratic countries are by definition agrarian economies, in which the spirit of profit-making is looked down upon. As commerce and industry begin to develop, however, so does democracy - but not necessarily the spirit of capitalism. If a democracy is despotic, as has already been noted,

its economy will soon become stagnant. Democracy, in brief, is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for a vigorous spirit of capitalism.

Tocqueville also discusses the possibility that the American spirit of capitalism might be due to geographic features. He writes in a nearly lyrical way about the rich and wonderful nature of the United States: “It presents, as in the first days of the creation, rivers whose source does not dry up, green and moist solitudes, boundless fields that the plowshare of the laborer has not yet turned” (*ibid.*, p. 268). But Tocqueville also notes that the nature of South America is much richer than that of North America, and South America has failed to develop. From this observation he draws the conclusion that geographic factors cannot be the primary cause of the wealth of the United States. It is a contributing factor – but that is all.

Tocqueville addresses the question of what has made the United States into such a rich country in a central section of *Democracy in America* entitled “That the Laws Serve to Maintain A Democratic Republic in the United States More than Physical Causes, and Mores More than Laws” (*ibid.*, pp. 292-95). Here he states that even though geographic factors have played a role in the emergence of the United States, “physical causes...do not influence the destiny of nations as much as one supposes” (*ibid.*, p. 293). Tocqueville similarly rejects the idea that laws or the legal system would be the main cause of its flourishing state, and illustrates this by pointing out that even though Mexico has adopted the same laws as the United States, it has failed to develop in a similar direction. Laws, as Tocqueville puts it, are more important to the way that a country will develop than its geographic conditions – but they are also less important, in their turn, than mores. His general conclusion is as follows: “it is...particularly mores that render the Americans of the United States, alone among all Americans, capable of supporting the empire of democracy; and it is again [mores] that make the various Anglo-American democracies more or less regulated and prosperous” (*ibid.*, p. 295).¹²

¹² Tocqueville often uses the term institution (*institution*) in *Democracy in America* (e.g. *ibid.*, pp. 53, 130, 165, 280-1, 344, 536, 618). The exact meaning of this term, however, is somewhat unclear. My own sense is that Tocqueville sees institutions as the result of the three main forces that account for the evolution of a country, namely (1) geographical conditions, (2) laws and (3) mores. I base this interpretation on the section that comes after the section entitled “That the Laws Serve to Maintain A Democratic Republic in the

What Tocqueville means by mores (*moeurs*) in the United States is close to what Weber means by “the spirit of capitalism” in Europe and which Weber also refers to as *Lebensführung/Lebensstil* or approximately lifestyle (e.g. Weber [1904-05] 1958:55, 58-9). Tocqueville gives the following definition of mores: “I understand by this word the sum of the intellectual and moral dispositions (*dispositions*) that men bring to the state of society” (*ibid.*, p. 292, n. 1). Mores include, among other things, “habits”, “opinions”, “usages” and “beliefs” (*ibid.*, p. 295). Tocqueville also distinguishes between mores that are emotional in character (“*habits of the heart*”) and those that are intellectual (“*habits of the mind*”) (*ibid.*, p. 275; emphasis added).

What accounts for the dynamic prosperity in the United States, Tocqueville suggests, is precisely the special character of its civilization or mores:

Anglo-American civilization...is the product (and this point of departure ought constantly to be present in one’s thinking) of two perfectly distinct elements that elsewhere have often made war with each other, but which, in America, they have succeeded in incorporating somehow into one another and combining marvellously. I mean to speak of the *spirit of religion* and the *spirit of freedom*. (*ibid.*, p. 43)

While the first settlers, who went to Virginia, were single men and adventurers looking for quick profits, the settlers in Massachusetts were religious people, driven by religious ideals and not by a desire for material wealth. The settlers also came with their families and were eager to establish order and good morals. “I see the whole destiny of America contained in the first Puritan who landed on its shores, like the whole human race in the first man” (*ibid.*, p. 267).

The first settlers also brought along mores of freedom from England. This made them start their new lives in America in freedom and reject despotism. Furthermore, England did not supervise its colonies in a very strict way, according to Tocqueville, and this allowed freedom to flourish as well. The Americans finally also developed local autonomy in the form of townships, which became a veritable school in

United States More than Physical Causes, and Mores More than Laws”, which is called “Would Laws and Mores Suffice to Maintain Democratic Institutions Elsewhere than in America?” (*ibid.*, pp. 296-98; cf. pp. 292-95).

freedom for the settlers. By participating in these townships, the settlers acquired independence and freedom as well as political sophistication.

Tocqueville repeatedly notes that what is remarkable about the United States, and what also constitutes the main cause of the spirit of capitalism in this country, is that it has succeeded in uniting a sense of freedom with religion. On the one hand, “religion sees in civil freedom a noble exercise of the faculties of man; in the political world, a field left by the Creator to the efforts of intelligence” (*ibid.*, p. 43). On the other hand, “freedom sees in religion the companion of its struggles and triumphs, the cradle of its infancy, the divine source of its rights” (*ibid.*, pp. 43-44). Tocqueville sums the whole thing up as follows: “*the Americans are a Puritan and a commercial people*” (*ibid.*, p. 465; emphasis added).

Concluding Remarks

It is now time to return to the main concerns of this paper, which were set out at the beginning. They were (1) to attempt to improve the status of the concept of the spirit of capitalism with the help of Tocqueville; and (2) to also show that we may add to this concept, by drawing on *Democracy in America*. As to the first concern, I hope to have removed some of the unease that is associated with this concept, by having presented a new and important empirical example of the existence of the capitalist spirit of capitalism, namely the United States in the early 1800s. It also deserves to be noted that Tocqueville, just as Weber, pinpoints Puritanism or ascetic Protestantism as one of the key ingredients in this spirit. Tocqueville’s American example is also much more straightforward than the example in *The Protestant Ethic*. Finally, the reader may want to recall once more what I said at the outset of this article, namely that in the 19th century the idea that there was a close link between Protestantism and capitalism was rather common.

As to the empirical quality of Tocqueville’s example, it should first of all be emphasized that Tocqueville was at the very forefront of empirical social science in his time (if we allow ourselves to interpret this time in terms that differ substantially from those in which it preferred to cast itself). Tocqueville’s use of interviews, note taking and printed material for the analysis in *Democracy in America* is exemplary for the early

1800s, and no doubt qualified him as one of the masters of sociological research (cf. Aron 1968).¹³ Tocqueville's general conclusion about the U.S. economy in *Democracy in America* – that it can be characterized as a truly dynamic and entrepreneurial economy – has also been confirmed in later research by economic historians, as exemplified by Douglass North's study of economic growth in the United States that was mentioned at the beginning of this paper (North 1961). North emphasizes that it was precisely during the time period that Tocqueville visited the United States, as well as the preceding ten to fifteen years (1818-1839), that the American economy started to accelerate and that industrialization began. Tocqueville's analysis helps us to look at other dimensions of economic life than North – the reality that, for example, led to the historical emergence of the two expressions “self-made man” and “businessman” in the 1830s (e.g. Boorstin 1974:115, Huntington 2004:70).

The many shrewd observations on the American spirit of capitalism that one can find in Tocqueville's study must naturally be submitted to empirical tests. It nonetheless seems to me that many of these observations (as well as Tocqueville's explanations and terminology) can add to the current discussion of what accounts for the dynamic economic growth that has characterized the United States since its founding.

It is furthermore my opinion that Tocqueville not only has added another important historical example to the literature on the spirit of capitalism, but that he also has helped to further develop this concept, compared to its formulation in Weber's work. He has done so in primarily two ways: by adding an explicitly political dimension to it, and by suggesting that a dynamic spirit of capitalism is not something exceptional in the history of capitalism, which only existed for a relatively short period and then disappeared forever, but that it can be a *common* (if not continuous) feature of the economy. It should also be mentioned that Tocqueville, as opposed to Weber, made room for consumerism in his concept of the spirit of capitalism, through his ideas about the search for material well-being in the United States.

¹³ As an example of how Tocqueville used empirical evidence, one may take the concept of restiveness. At least two of the people whom Tocqueville interviewed mentioned this phenomenon; he also discusses it in an early sketch on the theme of “[The] National Character of the Americans” (Tocqueville 1959, pp. 59, 97, 182).

Tocqueville's addition of an explicit political dimension to the concept of the spirit of capitalism needs little elaboration beyond what has already been said. A dynamic economic atmosphere can only exist for a relatively short period if the state interferes too much in the economy, according to Tocqueville. For economic progress to be continuous, some kind of solution to the problem of how to construct a centralized power - but not a too powerful centralized power - has to be found. One solution to this problem, Tocqueville says, is federalism of the U.S. type, complemented by a system of townships of the type that could be found in Massachusetts.

Secondly, in *The Protestant Ethic* Weber portrays the spirit of modern capitalism as a unique phenomenon, limited in its existence to a relatively brief period in the history of capitalism and whose invigorating and one-time impact on economic life was soon replaced by a new set of continuously operating institutions. Tocqueville, in contrast, views the spirit of capitalism as a much more ordinary and continuous phenomenon, with its own special place in the structure of the economy, next to what sociologists today would call institutions and organizations. By portraying the spirit of capitalism in this manner Tocqueville, I argue, raises the important question if the spirit of capitalism should really be understood as subordinate in importance to institutions and organizations or if it cannot be seen as equally important as these two "structural" features. Or, to phrase the problem at a more general level, have contemporary sociologists perhaps exaggerated the importance of institutions and organizations at the expense of ideas, norms and everything else that make up the spirit of human undertakings?

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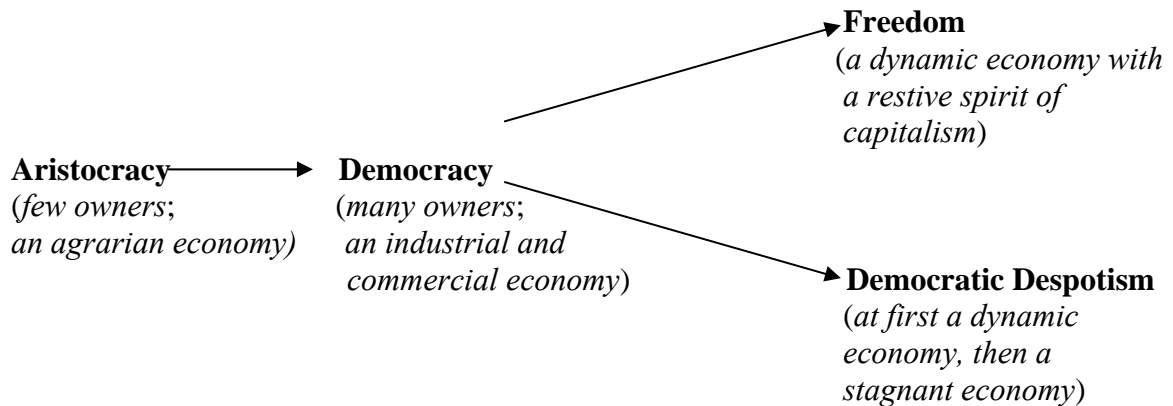
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Fig. 1: The Basic Conceptual Scheme of Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, with Special Emphasis on the Economy



Comment: While a static and agrarian economy characterizes what Tocqueville terms an “aristocracy” in *Democracy in America*, a much more differentiated economy comes into being with the levelling of economic, political and social conditions of the type that Tocqueville has in mind when he uses the term “democracy”. With freedom in a democracy also comes a dynamic economy and a vibrant, restive spirit of capitalism. If the general trend in modern society towards democracy is handled poorly, it will end in despotism (“democratic despotism”) - and this, in its turn, will lead to a stagnant economy. Tocqueville speaks of conventional despotism (such as under Louis-Philippe during 1830-1848) and mild despotism (of a future kind).