

8TH EDITION

TOCQUEVILLE CONVERSATIONS
THE FUTURE OF OUR DEMOCRACIES
WHAT WOULD TOCQUEVILLE SAY?



June 26-27, 2026

Château de Tocqueville, Cotentin, Normandie



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If he was returning, Alexis de Tocqueville would discover a democratic Europe in a state of generalized crisis, with deep dissensions and disfunctions within its nations; a Europe on the brink of a war with Russia for which it is not prepared, But also struggling to redefine its relationship with its fast-changing American ally. He would also discover that the American Republic, which he admired so much, is in the throes of a deep democratic crisis, with its citizens starting to hate each other and a leader testing institutions and trying to bend the State in the name of greatness, efficiency, revenge against the elites and its personnel interest. A situation that Tocqueville had foreseen as a clear danger for the democratic regime. In Hungary it has led to what is now called “illiberal democracy”, before triggering a reassuring electoral reaction and a rejection of Viktor Orban’s authoritarian rule. Could this instrumentalization of democracy spread elsewhere, given the strength of the revolutionary mood sweeping our societies?

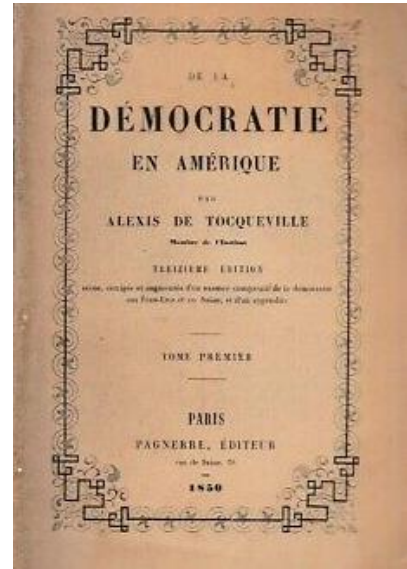
Tocqueville would note that he had been right in declaring that the modern age would be fixated on instituting equality, through a vast array of individual rights now guaranteed to every citizen. He would notice with concern the persistence of wide inequalities, the weakening of our various national compacts and the dangerous dissolution of the mediating institutions – families, churches, civic organizations – that generate the solidarity and trust that hold our nations together.

He would be alarmed by the growth of the administrative state, which he thought would increasingly behave as a gentle despot depriving society of its freedoms in exchange for increasing comfort. But he would also worry paradoxically, about the decline in the care the political class has for everyday citizens and everyday citizens have for each other.

He would be dismayed but not surprised by our flight into addictive and totalizing “imaginary worlds,” in which individuals now live in isolation on the internet. He was the first to see that in the democratic age , individuals would collapse into themselves and completely lose sight of their neighbors, becoming therefore more easily manipulated by the tyranny of the majority and potential tyrants. Tocqueville feared these lonely citizens would have no antidote against irrational passions and petty material pleasures.

Alexis de Tocqueville would certainly have observed with great worry the advance of computer algorithms and artificial intelligence, altogether entertaining and addictive, on the verge of erasing human competence altogether. The Normand philosopher would have warned against the formidable levers that Technology could provide to the Centralized State, authoritarian as well as democratic, to control society. Would he have conceded that the technology could also provide society with instruments to reinforce democracy as Techno-optimists argue?

Faced with the crisis of meaning throughout the West; Tocqueville would wonder whether the malaise could be cured without a revitalized Christianity. Unlike many nineteenth century thinkers, Tocqueville believed that religion was the font of every civilization, and that without it; human life would lose its grandeur and dignity, and nations would lose their animating spirit. He would have been however worried about the rise of religious fundamentalisms, that set the law of God against the freedom of human beings; and would have been concerned with Islamism in the West. Tocqueville expressed worries about Islam, which he thought, would struggle to be compatible with the Democratic age, notably because of a doctrinal global system unable to distinguish between the political and religious realm.



If he was returning, Tocqueville would observe that all European countries are shaken by the tremors of populism that led to the election of Trump in America. He would point at the impotence and greed of elites whose incompetence and denial are largely responsible for these angry eruptions. Human communities must be embodied and lived out in the confines of politically recognized and enforced borders between nations, he would have reminded us. For this man of action, analysis would inevitably call for the search for solutions. These would certainly involve the defense of law and public freedoms, a return to local democracy, the promotion of a renewed sense of civic responsibility, and the reaffirmation of Europe's Christian roots and cultural heritage. Looking at the larger geopolitical picture, Tocqueville would be vindicated in his view that the brewing confrontation of the US and Russia would become a defining issue of our time. He couldn't have anticipated the Chinese-American Thucydide trap, but as Trump seems to continue to dream about a grand deal with Russia, he would remind us that it was always an expansionist war-like power. He would be concerned that America has put its republican form of government at risk by choosing empire over remaining a middle-class commercial republic. Europe having been protected by the American security umbrella since the end of WWII, would Tocqueville now be concerned at the prospect of a war of revenge against the West, waged by a revisionist Russian dictator who still intends to dictate its own terms to Europe, with the support of China? *In the light of his observation that democratic nations do not easily go to war, what are the prospects that European nations will rise to the occasion and create, along with Ukraine, the military power they need to be at the table of the reconfiguration of the world? Or will Europe just be "on the menu" of a new Grand bargain between Great Powers? And where will America, now busy in Iran, stand ? With Russia and China? Or with democratic nations?*

Laure Mandeville
Senior Reporter, *Le Figaro*

Jean-Guillaume de Tocqueville
President of the Tocqueville Foundation

Friday, 26 June

10h30 – 11h00

Introduction

Jean-Guillaume de Tocqueville, President of the Tocqueville Foundation

Laure Mandeville, Senior Reporter, Le Figaro

Jean Morin, President of La Manche Department

Benjamin Haddad, French Minister Delegate for Europe

11h00 – 11h45

Opening Keynote

Boualem Sansal, Writer and Essayist;

followed by a conversation with **Yves Thréard**, Deputy Director of Le Figaro

11h45 – 12h45

Panel 1 - *Why Tocqueville Today ?*

What does Tocqueville tell us about the current dangers our democracies are facing?

Moderator: Perrine Nahum, Historian and Philosopher

Nicolas Baverez, Essayist and Writer

Joshua Mitchell, Professor of Political Theory at Georgetown University

Olivier Zunz, Historian and Professor at the University of Virginia

Lunch

14h00 – 14h20

Keynote - *The Universalism of Tocqueville's Thought and the Defense of Democracy*

Manuel Valls, Former French Prime Minister

14h20 – 15h30

Panel 2 - *Crisis of Trust Between Rulers and the Ruled*

In 1848, Tocqueville warned of the coming revolution when the trust disappears between the rulers and the ruled. Have we reached such a moment again? Why are national-populist movements and far-right parties advancing almost everywhere in the West? How can we understand the volcano of popular anger, on both the right and the left? What are the effects of uncontrolled immigration on social and political cohesion? Are we facing a profound democratic disaffection, capable of triggering revolutionary but also authoritarian and oligarchic temptations? Why is the questioning of the rule of law one of the key symptoms of this crisis between rulers and the ruled? Mostly, what are the remedies to this crisis of trust?

Moderator: Laure Mandeville, Senior Reporter, Le Figaro

Jérôme Guedj, Member of the French National Assembly

Sarah Knafo, Member of the European Parliament, Reconquête

Aquilino Morelle, Essayist, Former Political Adviser to President Hollande

Malcolm Offord, Leader of Reform UK Scotland

15h30 – 16h30 **Panel 3 - America at 250: Where is America Taking Us Next?**

What will Trump's legacy be? A "Great America" or an illiberal democracy? An authoritarian regime? Where will Trump's foreign policy lead us?

Moderator: Andrew Michta, Professor at the University of Florida

Donna Brazile, Former US DNC Chair

Roger Cohen, Columnist at the New York Times

Eliot Cohen, Professor and Former Advisor to the U.S. Department of State

Break

17h00 – 18h00 **Panel 4 - Free Speech under Threat**

Tocqueville was very aware of the tyranny of "right thinking" and dominant opinion in a democracy and underlined how difficult it was to "step outside the circle" of the accepted doxa. Do we face such a problem today? Has the "tyranny of the majority" described by Tocqueville been transformed into a tyranny of horizontal censors, triggering a massive rebellion?

What lies behind the question of free speech in polarized societies? How can we explain the deterioration of public debate and the rise of verbal violence? Why are our societies, in Europe and the United States, speaking about an imperiled freedom of speech? And why is each political side convinced the other side is the guilty one? Does polarization lead to the temptation of the erasure of the Other's speech? How do we ensure pluralism of information without giving weapons to the enemies of democracy? Besides, how do we tackle this question, in the challenging time of growing disinformation, conspiracy theories and growing difficulty to distinguish true from false? What can the press, that Tocqueville judged to be a vital pillar of democracy, do?

The United States and Europe battle over the question of free speech and the need for regulation. Who is right? And who is to say what is right and wrong, dangerous or acceptable? What is the weight of powerful new technological giants – the "new aristocracy of money," in Tocqueville's terms – but also of authoritarian states and bots, in reshaping public debate? How do we answer?

Moderator: Richard Werly, Paris Correspondent for the Swiss Media Outlet
Blick

Caroline Fourest, Journalist and Essayist

Catherine Jentile de Cancaude, Journalist and Member of the ARCOM

Charles Lane, Columnist at The Free Press

Richard Minitzer, CEO of Zenger Press

18h00 – 19h00 Panel 5 - Solitude of the Democratic Individual in the Age of the Internet and AI

What will the impact of algorithms, social media and AI be on our democracies? **Will it lead, like Tocqueville feared, to the triumph of an exacerbated and lonely self at the expense of the common good and social bonds? Do the imaginary worlds of the Internet** foster a culture of ego and an increasing fragmentation of the social body, or do they also have some positive impact? Are younger generations transformed, threatened or even destroyed by technological omnipresence? Are we facing a generational divide in the realm of values because of the Internet? Can this dominance lead to a technological Caesarism which will use individualism to bury democracy? How do we measure the coming impact of IA on the different political systems, democratic and despotic? What is the best way to face the challenge of IA? Can Europe catch up and influence the technological wave that will shape our world? Or is it condemned to alignment in the fierce competition that is emerging?

Moderator: Bérénice Levet, Philosopher

Gustavo Beliz, Former Minister of the Interior of Argentina and Author of The Atlas of Artificial Intelligence for the Human Development of Latin America and the Caribbean

Baptiste Detombe, Parliamentary Official, Essayist and Founder of the Media Gavroche

Michael Hochberg, Tech Entrepreneur, Geopolitician, Chairman of the Board of the MacKinder Forum

Edouard Tetreau, Advisor to Business Leaders and Columnist, Le Figaro

Saturday, 27 June

09h00 – 09h45 **Opening Keynote**

Dialogue between

Bernard Cazeneuve, Former French Prime Minister,

And **Enrico Letta**, Former Italian Prime Minister

Moderated by Anne-Elisabeth Moutet, Journalist, The Daily Telegraph

09h45 – 10h00 **Keynote - Tocqueville and Nature: An Environmental Philosopher?**

Gaspard Koenig, Novelist, Essayist and Philosopher

10h00 – 11h00 **Panel 6 - Local Democracy: A School of Civic Responsibility**

Tocqueville's work is a vast meditation on civic spirit. Human beings cannot fully flourish unless they are fully citizens. How can this sense of "public spirit" be restored and fostered? How can respect for the individual be reconciled with the requirements of citizenship?

Political education, the multiplication of associations, local democracy, and the broadening of political rights were the remedies Tocqueville envisioned. Freedom remains the central political principle from which other democratic principles drive.

Moderator: Britta Sandberg, Der Spiegel's Europe Correspondent

Fabien Aufrechter, Mayor of Verneuil

Monica Frassoni, Former MEP, President of EUASE and ECES (European Center for Electoral Support)

Vincent Maître, Member of the National Council of Switzerland

Bill O'Dowd, CEO and Founder, Dolphin Entertainment, Member of the United Way Leadership Committee

Break

11h20 – 12h30 **Panel 7 – Religion and Democracy**

Tocqueville believed religion to be a central pillar of democracy in America and in Europe. He would have been worried by its growing invisibility in our Western societies. Can Christianity rebound and can Christian heritage help our secularized societies find meaning and balance? How can a shared spiritual and cultural heritage be affirmed and transmitted within pluralistic societies? What challenges raises Islam - now the second religion in Europe, which doesn't establish a clear separation between politics and religion, for our democratic societies?

Moderator: Ana Palacio, Former Spanish Minister of Foreign Affairs

Ferghane Azihari, Essayist and Le Figaro Columnist

Marek Cichocki, Philosopher and Political Theology Scholar

Jean-François Colosimo, Historian of Religion, Essayist, and CEO of Éditions du Cerf

Bernard Rougier, Political Scientist and Specialist in Political Islam

Lunch

14h00 – 14h30 **Keynote - *Tocqueville, the Nation and Equality***

Jean-Louis Bourlanges, Former Member of the French National Assembly and Former Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee

14h30 – 15h15 **Conversation - *Passing on the Legacy of the Great Texts***

Why do we still read Tocqueville, Montesquieu, Arendt or Orwell? What do we learn from the Great texts ? Why is cultural transmission so crucial to the survival and success of our democracies? Is the society of immediate information in the process of destroying the society of knowledge? How can we transmit our intellectual heritage in the era of social media and artificial intelligence?

Moderator: Katja Gentinetta, Political Philosopher

François Xavier Bellamy, MEP, Les Républicains

Michel Onfray, Philosopher

Break

15h45 – 17h00 **Panel 8 - *Europe between the Imperative of Power and the Rule of Law***

While pointing to democracies' reluctance to wage war, Tocqueville believed nations must be ready to use power to defend their interests and prepare their people for war. As Europe is caught between Putin's war and American imperial unilateralism, the need for an urgent military build up and a common European defense capability has never been stronger. Europe must recognize the life and death test posed by war in Ukraine and the moral imperative behind it, by defending a just definition of peace. The case for a Europe-Ukraine military alliance and the need to build-up a common defense industrial base has never been clearer. How do we organize it urgently? How to maintain a pragmatic and balanced cooperation with the United States in the Trump era? What is the stake of the war in Iran for Europe? What link and interaction between the conflict in the Middle East and the war in Ukraine ?

Moderator: Céline Marangé, Researcher at the IRSEM

Camille Grand, Former NATO Assistant Secretary General

Gabrielius Landsbergis, Former Minister of Foreign Affairs of Lithuania

Robert Malley, Diplomat and Political Scientist, Negotiator of the 2015 Iran nuclear deal in Vienna (JCPOA)

Olexander Scherba, Ambassador of Ukraine to South Africa

17h00 – 17h30 **Conclusion**

Two Students' Perspectives on the Conversations

As Tocqueville himself observed, democracy cannot endure without the active participation of its citizens. Convinced that democracy is a living system sustained by civil society, and that democratic engagement must be learned, nurtured, and passed on, the Tocqueville Foundation places the transmission of democratic values to younger generations at the heart of its mission.

Entrusting the closing remarks of the Conversations to students gives tangible expression to this conviction. It is not about speaking on behalf of young people, but about ensuring that their voices are heard last, where it matters most. It serves as a powerful reminder that the challenges discussed throughout these Conversations do not belong solely to those shaping decisions today, but equally to the generations that will inherit their consequences tomorrow.