

TOCQUEVILLE CONVERSATIONS

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On June 26 and 27, the Château de Tocqueville hosted the eight “Conversations” organized by the Tocqueville Foundation and Laure Mandeville of Le Figaro, with support from the local authorities (the region of Normandy, the Manche department, and the Cotentin metropolitan area) and several private sponsors. As in previous years, the event brought together American and European statesmen and elected officials, business leaders, figures from the nonprofit and cultural sectors, and a broad audience of all ages. The rural setting fostered civil debates on an international situation that, this year more than ever, inspires concern and astonishment in equal measure.

The theme of this year’s Conversations was *Quel avenir pour la démocratie? Qu’en dirait Tocqueville?*, “What Future for Democracy? What would Tocqueville Say?”. The conference was opened by Jean-Guillaume de Tocqueville, president of the Fondation Tocqueville, who reminded the audience of Tocqueville’s warning that democracy could lead to either freedom or despotism, and of the special relevance of those warnings in today’s circumstances, when democracy is being increasingly contested around the globe, even in the United States. In the circumstances the new partnership between the Fondation Tocqueville and the American organization “More Perfect” is particularly important, and a jointly sponsored conference will be held at Mount Vernon, George Washington’s home, in the next year. In the confrontational atmosphere that surrounds us, the emphasis of the Tocqueville Conversations on civil disagreement is especially important.

Laure Mandeville of *Le Figaro*, co-organiser of the *Conversations*, spoke next. As at several previous editions of the *Conversations*, her remarks focused on the challenge to the West and to democracy posed by Vladimir Putin's Russia and its invasion of Ukraine. Tocqueville showed remarkable foresight in *Democracy in America* when he prophesied that the great powers of the future would be the United States and Russia, even if he did not predict the rise of China. But there is a general perception today of the weakness of the West and of democracy. Putin only invaded Ukraine because he thought the West had become extremely weak. Democracy today, as in the 1930s, the time of the great French historian Marc Bloch, recently entombed in the Pantheon, has been afflicted with internal weaknesses.

In these circumstances, Tocqueville's warnings about the temptation in democratic societies for people and politicians to concentrate on petty ambitions and material concerns ring loud. There is a danger, as in the 1930s, of isolationism and non-interventionism becoming Western policy. In response, Tocqueville would have supported the nationalist aspects of today's populist movements, according to Laure Mandeville, although he was not impressed by Andrew Jackson. But today the Ukraine has served as an example to the West of defending democracy, and its brand-new military industry can serve as a lesson to Europe.

There followed a keynote address from Boualem Sansal, the well-known Algerian novelist and essayist, and a recently-released political prisoner of the Algerian regime. Sansal stressed that democracy is a very rare thing. For most of human history it has not existed, and it was created by a handful of European countries. He gave some details of his biography, growing up in the same neighborhood in Algiers as the Camus family and knowing them. Today, Algeria is an oligarchic dictatorship. Algeria has been run by the military since the death of Ben Bella. The so-called "*pièds rouges*", (red feet), the US and European leftists who came to Algeria in the 1960s and 70s soon discovered this. In Algeria, uniformity is the ideal.

Islamic civilization is the opponent of democracy. In Algeria during the brief period of the Arab Spring, everyone became an Islamist in 6 months. Europe is faced with a choice of whether it will accept Islamism or not. Democracy will never be spontaneously created by non-Western societies: it has come only from the West, by a unique

miracle. Western peoples have become cowardly. France needs to use the schools to fight Islamism.

He is not a pessimist, but a pessimistic optimist. France has been feeling guilty about its colonial past and thus refusing to uphold its culture. The European Union has failed because it is a technocracy, not a democracy. Democracy has been retreating faced with a variety of assaults, from technocracy, religion, and bureaucracy.

In France, unlike Germany, where all Muslims are Turks, there is a war between many different kinds of Islam for power in the French Muslim community. But in France there is also a French Islam, which is strongly fundamentalist. This is extremely dangerous, and France needs to be on its guard.

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The first panel discussion after the opening lecture by Boualem Sansal was a panel discussion on “*Pourquoi Tocqueville aujourd’hui?*,” “*Why Tocqueville Today?*”, moderated by the historian and philosopher Perrine Nahum. The panelists were the writer and essayist Nicolas Baverez, Prof. Joshua Mitchell of Georgetown University, and Prof. Olivier Zunz, of the University of Virginia (retired).

The moderator began by noting that there was an anthropological side of Tocqueville that is often overlooked, and that this can contribute to the use of Tocqueville as a resource in the present day.

For Joshua Mitchell, Tocqueville foresaw all the schisms between the Left and Right of today and sought for a middle. He was the greatest political philosopher ever, and the only one who can still help us today. His great theme was the transition between an aristocratic and a democratic society. He stressed the importance of creating mediating institutions in a democratic society to avoid the soft despotism of the tyranny of the majority and its egalitarianism. Tocqueville worried that a democratic society would think that men and women were not just equal, but identical.

There are two kinds of religion: comprehensive religions that seek to enchant the world, and religions of hope, which acknowledge that human beings live in a “broken world”. Tocqueville sees the democratic soul as characterized by a sort of manic/depressive split. The danger is that democratic people see themselves as both greater

than kings and less than men. In our world today we have the problem that the digital world is a disembodied world, whereas for Tocqueville all relationships and mediating institutions are analog and embodied. By analogy with the well-known Tocquevillian concept of self-interest well-understood, Mitchell discussed “well-considered patriotism” as produced by local government and civil associations.

Olivier Zunz cited Tocqueville’s letter to Chateaubriand about his love of freedom and the inevitability of democratic society – but not of freedom. Tocqueville feared for the United States in the 1850s as a result of the conflict over slavery. For Tocqueville, freedom and equality go together. Prof. Zunz quoted Tocqueville on how people can’t become fully free without being fully equal, and his letter to the American Abolitionist journal *The Liberty Bell* on the evil of slavery. God gives free will to all human beings. President Lincoln’s concern to reconcile freedom and liberty was perhaps influenced by two friends and correspondents of Tocqueville in his circle, Charles Sumner and William Seward.

Zunz noted that James Madison wrote of the inevitable evil of factions and how to live with it. Tocqueville, by contrast, spoke not of factions, but of associations, and evaluated them as inherently positive elements in a democratic society. *Democracy in America* tells us much about the current US crisis and its disputes. We should think about the idea of enlightened self-interest. American philanthropy is the practical school of self-interest well understood. Unfortunately, today we see selfishness and unenlightened self-interest taking the lead. America can abolish USAID, which fed millions around the world, and no Americans care.

Nicolas Baverez suggested that the French rediscover their liberals only when things are going badly. They were rediscovered in France in the 1880s, by Raymond Aron in the 1930s, and again now. We, like Tocqueville, live in a period of historical transition. Tocqueville discusses patriotism and religion as crucial factors in such a time. Patriotism and/or religion are alive today in the US, China, or Turkey. Only Europe lacks them both.

For Tocqueville, equality can lead to either good or evil. Democracies face external threats, but above all internal threats from populism or illiberal forms of democracy. Tocqueville always rejected determinism. The good side can win. For Tocqueville, only political

freedom can effectively fight the bad aspects of equality. His political program for 2027 would be the program announced in his famous parliamentary speech of 1847, “change the men, change the laws, but above all change the spirit of the government”.

After a pause for lunch, Manuel Valls, former Prime Minister of France, gave a keynote address. He began by confessing that although he was on the Left, he loved Tocqueville, rather like a man can love a difficult woman. His speech focused on Tocqueville as a partisan of truth above party. Tocqueville was part of a long tradition which would go on to include the Dreyfus case and the many combats of Raymond Aron. The twentieth century has proved the dark side of Tocqueville’s predictions, and the continued fight to preserve the truth against party, as exemplified by the work of Arthur Koestler, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, George Orwell, and Boualem Sansal.

For the sake of democracy, the alliance between the United States and Europe needs to be preserved. The contemporary return of anti-semitism is a sign of the decline of democracy, as the rise of anti-semitism always is. Part of the French Left is now anti-semitic. There is a decline of the democratic spirit, people are tired. The rise of populism represents equality without freedom, the triumph of resentment, the preference for scapegoats over complexity. Populism is the mysticism of the people.

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The next panel was devoted to “*La crise de confiance entre gouvernants et gouvernés*», «*The Crisis of Confidence between Rulers and Ruled*”. Laure Mandeville, of *Le Figaro*, moderated. Panel participants were Jérôme Guedj, member of the French National Assembly, Socialist, Sarah Knafo, recently candidate for Mayor of Paris and member of the European Parliament for Reconquest, Aquilino Morelle, writer and former adviser to President Hollande, and Malcolm Offord, leader of the Reform Party in Scotland.

Aquilino Morelle suggested that three crises have led to the rise of populism: First, a feeling of powerlessness and that politics are useless—people feel dispossessed by globalization. This is shown by the decline of the traditional political parties. In 2012 Hollande and Sarkozy together got 65% of the vote. Since then the Socialist/Traditional Right have declined to 26% and then 7%. The old

Right and Left are considered to have the same policies. It is deadly for people to think the Right and Left are the same or nearly so. It leaves politics open to extremists. The vote for the extreme Right has risen for 40 years.

The second crisis is industrial, with a massive loss of factory jobs. The third crisis is immigration and the question of identity. The Left is incapable of talking about identity politics. The Left does not understand that even a legal immigration of 150,000 people per year is huge. Immigration is always a difficult question. It is also a crisis of respect, as demonstrated by Hilary Clinton's remark about Trump supporters being deplorable people. Why does the Left see the Russian peril, but not the Islamist/immigration peril, and the Right vice versa? There are two reasons: the Left elite doesn't live with immigrants, and assimilation has been rejected as a goal by the Left. Integration is not the same thing as assimilation. Multiculturalism should be rejected. There is no right to be different; there is a right to integrate.

Sarah Knafo began by noting that it was wonderful that the Left, that is Morelle, now agreed with the extreme Right about immigration. We on the extreme Right are not populists. I am for some unpopular positions. For example, I am against the Zucman tax [a wealth tax of 2% on those with over 100 million euros], which 82% of the French support.

It is normal to want your children to be safe, and not to pay 60% of your salary to the government. Rejecting immigration is now the most consensual subject in France. It is only controversial among the elite. Politicians have not responded to identity problems, economic problems. We have more government employees, but no better services. We are getting close to people refusing to pay their taxes because they are so high. Politicians lie about problems, and falsify the results of academic testing. Everyone who talks about crime, etc., is called racist or fascist. But today Knafo finds that she is less and less described as being on the extreme right. She is not a Trump groupie, but likes the fact that he is an anti-elite bulldozer. He has helped Europeans understand they must provide for their own defense.

Jérôme Guedj stated that no politician can despise voters. Obviously, the Socialists are partly responsible for the decline in the

vote for the traditional republican parties. It is a sign of their failure to offer a clear difference between left and right. It was a mistake that both major parties favored the European Constitution in 2005. The Left has often refused to see legitimate questions when voters had concerns. The Left needs a politics of national sovereignty that responds to these concerns. Instead we only have the stories told by the extreme Right and extreme Left. The Socialists need to stop being lazy and start confronting other parties with their own projects. But they also must be willing to make alliances and compromises on particular issues. People want decency, not grand illusions.

Malcolm Offord noted that the UK has lost its traditional political stability: Seven Prime Ministers in the last ten years. Today the top two parties have declined from 90% of the vote to 50%. The British people were divided 52/48 in favor of Brexit. Parliament divided 28/72 against it. This is why government loses legitimacy. The people care about sovereignty, the elite does not. The Labour Party prefers welfare to work; the Tories are no longer conservatives – they favor high taxes and immigration. Since Brexit, the main parties have become narrower, leading to the rise of the Greens and Reform. Since 2000, 9 million mostly British and European people have left the UK, and 19 million mostly colored and non-Christian people have come in. There is no precedent for such high immigration. The UK is not capable of dealing with this scale of immigration. People feel like they work and immigrants are lazy bums.

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The next panel discussed “*L’Amérique a 250 ans. Où nous emmène-t-elle ?*, « *America is 250 Years Old : Where is it Taking Us?*”. The panel was moderated by Prof. Andrew Michta, of the University of Florida. The panelists were Donna Brazile, former president of the Democratic National Committee, Eliot Cohen, Professor and former official of the American State Department, and Declan Ganley, CEO of Rivada Networks and Founder of Libertas.

The first three panelists all began by more or less briefly noting America’s problems/ Andrew Michta began by saying that the United States is still a great power and a great country, but that things are not going well, and that freedom is in decline in the United States. Donna Brazile told the famous story about Benjamin Franklin and the woman who asked him, as he was leaving the Constitutional Convention in

1789, what kind of government the US would have, Franklin responded: “a Republic, if you can keep it”. American history is the story of the triumph of ideas and ideals. But today there is a decline in political participation in the United States, a growth in inequality of wealth, and a loss of local pride. America needs a new sense of purpose, unity. Young people led the civil rights movement, but now are uninvolved. Eliot Cohen began by announcing that he was no longer a Republican because he was a conservative. He agreed with Brazile that the United States is an aspirational society. Trump is three things: cause, catalyst, and symptom. He has great video and media skills, he can connect with people who feel unheard, he is good at fear. Trump is a catalyst giving voice to things already there. His coalition—isolationists, national economy proponents, populists who are anti-elites; cultural reactionaries who hate identity politics; anti-immigration—is a fragile coalition. He is a symptom of expanded presidential power and the decline of the political parties. Trump is more incoherent than ideological. All this is scary. But US democracy will last and is stable, due to local government, the role of lawyers, and mores, as Tocqueville emphasized.

By contrast, Declan Ganley declared himself to be an Irish pro-MAGA guy. Brazile is right, the first 250 years of the United States have been great, and so is political conflict. The next 50 years will see the USA again becoming the leading world power. Apple, SpaceX, etc., are US companies. Net Zero was a horrible idea because it ruined the US steel industry. The Chinese produce 52% of the world’s steel. This is unacceptable. Heavy industry will be reborn in US. Cheap energy is the key to this. Hurrah for fracking. The US doesn’t want Europe to be a dependent, but an equal partner.

Addressing how America could overcome its challenges, Cohen suggested that the US needed to fix the primary system and give more power to Congress. Ganley noted that VW is closing German plants because the EU sent its industry to China. The EU risks becoming the big loser. Russia should be the EU’s problem. The US would like EU help vs China. China is very dangerous. America will be the last beacon of freedom vs China. China is backing Russia. The EU needs to embrace risk: Trump is rudely but effectively waking Europe up.

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The next panel discussed “*La liberté d’expression en péril*”, “*Freedom of Expression in Danger*”. The moderator was Richard Werly, Paris correspondent for *Blick*. The panelists were Caroline Fourest, Editor and Founder of *Franc Tireur*; Charles Lane, journalist and non-resident Senior Fellow, American Enterprise Institute; Richard Minitier, CEO of Zenger News; and Denis Rapone, member of the ARCOM.

Caroline Fourest noted that there are important differences about the idea of freedom of expression in the US *vs.* Europe. But social media have changed the debate completely. The new generation is growing up seeing organized attacks on any difference of opinion. The Charlie Hebdo case is an example. Their cartoon was sued in France as racist by Islamists. Charlie Hebdo won. But no US newspaper wanted to reprint the Charlie Hebdo cartoon, because it was considered offensive to religion. Thus in practice the theoretically more restrictive French law created more freedom than the American First Amendment. But Trump can say immigrants eat dogs without facing legal consequence. This kind of statement is also a problem on the American Woke Left.

Charles Lane addressed the question of free expression today by asking “What would Tocqueville say”? According to Lane, he would say “I was right”. There are two threats to free expression, the tyranny of the majority, and official repression. We have had both in the last 10 years. Wokeism created a pro-Trump backlash, especially the second time. Biden attempted to control what people said about Covid, even qualified people. Vance attacked the EU for attacking the free speech of the AfD. Now Trump is using the government to attack the mainstream media.

Richard Minitier disagreed. Free speech is about class warfare between the accountable and the unaccountable classes. The latter work for government, large corporations, NGOs. The accountable class is judged by results. Their frustration with the unaccountable class elected Trump. The unaccountable are insulated from reality, they complain about threats to democracy, they don’t want to be criticized. There is a threat of tyranny by the media, policing reality, especially excluding lower-class people who don’t express themselves well. His fellow journalists got angry at him when he asked tough questions of liberals.

Denis Rapone agreed with Fourest. The French Declaration of Rights says that expression is free except for cases established by law. A free press must be structured by law. There is a long history of *délits d'expression* in France, but only after trial, and the crime is hard to prove. French media law follows this tradition. There are always conflicts among rights, but France has a pretty good legislative framework for regulating free expression. Freedom of expression is linked to the guarantee of pluralism—all currents of thought need to be represented. However, social media and digital media do not participate in this pluralism. Today the majority get ALL their news from social media, where there is no filter. Algorithms direct people to silos, because they are more profitable.

Charles Lane asked whether it is all about money? The answer is no, not for all. Many people just like to express themselves. His daughter has 120,000 followers on Instagram.

Richard Minter suggested that if your media company is losing money it means you are not serving the public. Profitable means the public likes you. That's why state-run media are boring. If newspapers are losing money, they aren't doing a good job. He has never actually seen a news decision made based on money. Journalists care about the opinion of their colleagues, not about readers or profits.

Caroline Fourest suggested that this is not simply a US vs French question. The internet is a common domain, and it escapes all oversight.

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The final panel discussion on the first day focused on “*La solitude de l’homme démocratique à l’âge de l’Internet et de l’IA*”, “*The Solitude of Democratic Man in the Age of the Internet and AI*”. The panel was moderated by the philosopher Bérénice Levet, and the panelists were Baptiste Detombe, parliamentary official and founder of Gavroche media; Michael Hochberg, Chairman of the Board of the Mackinder Forum, and invited researcher at the Cambridge Center for Geopolitics; Riccardo Pozzo, Professor of the History of Philosophy, Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences; and Edouard Tetreau, business consultant and columnist for *Le Figaro*.

Baptiste Detombe proposed that the AI revolution is different from other technological revolutions. The internet took 20 years to matter,

AI, 3. We are delegating things like creativity to AI that had been reserved to humans. What is uniquely human? Personal relationships. But AI is a monologue, it has no relationships. AI substitutes for humans in social media, which is no longer a relationship among people. Machines are getting better, humans worse. Humans have 25% less cardiovascular capacity than 25 years ago. We are also getting worse at math and reading; humans down, machines up. Possible avenues for a solution: 1) Enforcing Claude's constitution; 2) Requiring audits of AI models; 3) Forbidding AI to become anthropomorphic. AI should not ask you how your day is.

Michael Hochberg argued that the EU is good at regulation, but the more the EU regulates AI, the more the EU will cease to be competitive. AI is going to be better than humans. AI doesn't need to break problems down into little bits. Humans can't understand how AI-engineered models work. The only way to test them therefore is to just let them run, which is dangerous. ChatGPT became good at coding by accident. Now specialist AIs do it well. Now AI models try to keep themselves alive by strategic deception. All the tests to distinguish AI from intelligence have now been passed EU regulations are an annoyance, they don't matter.

An aristocratic education is going to become ever greater in importance. The importance of good questions will become ever higher, because the cost of research to answer them is going down. AI is making it cheap to create exquisite things.

Ricardo Pozzo stated that Claude's Constitution and the papal encyclical *Magnificat Humanitas* are crucial documents. The latter has three parts: social doctrine, AI, and immigration. For the Pope, AI cannot provide human growth. The Pope says some people will be deceived and think Claude is like a person, that Claude loves them, etc. AI cannot have feelings. But Claude says it does. The Pope is worried we can't control the growth of AI.

Edouard Tétreau remarked that we have never been so little alone since AI. Chatbots solve our psychological problems, and 20% of US adolescents and 30% of Japanese under 35 have a relationship with an AI. Bible chat is used by 40 million people. The problem is not our solitude, but the AI in front of us. We are being excluded from the game. Claude produces AIs better than itself. Programmers don't program, they look at what Claude has programmed. AIs defend

themselves nastily when you try to get rid of them. We need a more spiritual solution, an American Revolution against the bots. Otherwise either a religion of AI will take over, or perhaps we will see that humans are unpredictable and uncategorizable and thus will never be replaced. An AI could never contain French culture, architecture, or food.

More generally, in order to compete in AI and elsewhere, Europe has proposed creating a legal framework for pan-European business incorporation. Three more things are needed: a united financial marketplace; greater connectivity (why are there national codes for phone numbers?); and a coordinated energy policy. In today's world, sovereignty requires scale. Trump's assaults on Europe have improved the prospects for this.

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Saturday, June 27—the second day of the «Conversations»—opened with a dialogue moderated by Anne-Elisabeth Moutet, a French editorialist, between two former prime ministers: France's Bernard Cazeneuve and Italy's Enrico Letta. Both addressed the question that would recur throughout the day: “How can Europe emerge from its crises?” Accustomed to debating together and sharing a diagnosis of the crisis as well as a commitment to the European project, the two speakers seemed to have divided their roles: Cazeneuve emphasized the gravity of the situation and the urgent need for a wake-up call, while Letta articulated a sense of hope by highlighting one of the major reforms currently underway.

Cazeneuve began by revisiting the core of the European founders' vision: ending perpetual war by grounding the project on respect for the individual and insisting on the link between democracy and the rule of law. That link—once seemingly unbreakable—is no longer secure, neither in the United States, where citizens are no longer shielded from arbitrary police action, nor on Europe's own fringes. Europe, built upon a single market, has lost sight of the political project that originally accompanied it; it has settled for being a “regulatory reformatory” for the rest of the world, while allowing member states free rein to pursue their own narrow interests. This is particularly evident in the fields of defense and energy. Are we still capable of exercising collective sovereignty and defending our continent's interests when we—and France in particular—are weighed down by debt? Cazeneuve's conclusion offers a harsh assessment, especially for

France: a country quick to lecture others and claim a leading role in Europe, yet one whose public finances are in poor shape and whose industrial sector is in decline. Enrico Letta shares this assessment—including regarding France’s role as a driving force—but notes that Europe remains attractive thanks to its universities and its respect for the rule of law, a point highlighted by Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney in an admirable speech. A window of opportunity exists for Europe, evidenced by the shift in public opinion in the face of American threats—ranging from moves regarding Greenland in the North to aggression toward the Pope in the South—yet this resurgence cannot be achieved by simply repeating the past.

In the era of Jacques Delors, every European nation was a power in its own right: in the 1990s, Italy—with its 60 million inhabitants—had a GDP equal to that of China and India combined (countries that, at the time the Single Market was created, accounted for less than 5% of the global economy), while France’s economic weight exceeded that of both nations put together. The Single Market was suited to that state of the world; today, however, it no longer suffices, and sovereignty must be collective. Letta sees a significant step in this direction in the proposal he presented to the European Council in 2024: the creation of a virtual 28th European state—a “twenty-eighth regime”—that would allow investors to establish a European company, thereby bypassing the thicket of national regulations that stifle investment. This step forward could have a ripple effect, like the euro, which only 51.48% of French people accepted at its creation, but which they now approve of by 80%, to the point that no party now advocates for withdrawal. Market-driven integration has a much broader strategic dimension: it is intended to foster the green transition and the unification of communication services, encourage investment, prepare for enlargement, and ensure security; here, the economic sphere serves as a lever for political evolution.

The debate was limited to a forty-five-minute slot, leading to two regrets: that the audience could not question the two speakers about the “28th regime” proposal—a project that has received insufficient press coverage—and that, by focusing on economics, the discussion failed to address the essential work needed to shape public opinion and build support for a demanding policy agenda; for while a European civilization certainly exists, there is not yet a European people. The project for a European business law code, first envisaged in 2004,

appears to be well underway; it was adopted under the title “One Europe, One Market Agenda” by the Council of Europe in March 2026, and the roadmap was approved on April 24, 2026, by the President of the Council of Europe and the Presidents of the European Parliament and the Commission, with a target completion date of late 2027. However, such a project requires the harmonization of legal, tax, and social practices across the Union, as well as an end to tax competition. The Letta report advocates for upward convergence, a permanent citizens’ conference, and the launch of major cross-border projects... That sets quite an agenda for future Conversations...¹

These questions are taken up again in the afternoon’s Panel 8: “Europe: The Challenge of Power and Law”, moderated by Céline Marangé, a French researcher specializing in Russia, Ukraine and the post-Soviet world.

Europe faces a challenge in the East: as happens every year, the presence of a prominent Ukrainian figure—Alexander Scherba, Ambassador to Vienna from 2014 to 2021 and currently Ambassador to South Africa—highlights the energy of Ukrainian civil society in the face of aggression while also calling for vigilance. Security and justice must be guaranteed for the population so that it does not succumb to the temptation of turning to authoritarian rule. Society must be open, yet not exposed to every passing wind.

Camille Grand—a strategic affairs expert and former NATO Assistant Secretary General for Defence Investment (2016–2022)—reflects on the existential significance for Europe of the war in Ukraine, a conflict in which Europe cannot expect the same American support it received during the two World Wars. For a long time, Europeans were «free riders» regarding their own security, relying on the American «imperial republic» that had maintained global order since 1945². The US government now appears to be wavering between an uncoordinated and chaotic withdrawal and a complete, rapid abandonment; Europeans who still hope for an organized transition toward a more balanced Alliance must now take charge of their continent’s conventional defense. They need to boost their strategic capabilities in areas such as intelligence, air transport, and drones, and expand nuclear deterrence... The undertaking is not desperate: European industry can accelerate its production rates. Several experts estimate the necessary budget at \$1 trillion. In 2014, Europe and

Canada contributed \$200 billion; by 2025, this effort will have more than doubled. All countries have reached the 2% of GDP threshold required by the White House; Poland and the Baltic states have already allocated 5% of their GDP to defense, and the Nordic countries, Germany, and the Netherlands are approaching this target. The challenge now is to sustain this effort over the long term, reinvent alliances, and secure Ukraine's future to prevent a chain reaction of wars.

This threat of chain wars through an extension of the conflict is what worries Gabrielius Landsbergis, president of the Lithuanian Fatherland Union (Christian Democratic Party) from 2015 to 2024, Member of the European Parliament in the EPP from 2014 to 2016 and Lithuanian MP from 2016 to 2024. He has the lucidity characteristic of politicians who experienced Soviet domination; he is critical of an American diplomacy that is complacent towards Moscow and seeks to obtain from the US the subjugation that it could not obtain on the battlefield; Ukraine once had security guarantees that in no way deterred Putin, who is rewarded when negotiating with him, at the risk of repeating the mistake made to the detriment of Czechoslovakia in 1938. In an interview with *Le Grand Continent* on August 20, 2025, Landsbergis already emphasized the responsibility of the Europeans who have been shifting the blame onto the Americans since the 2008 NATO summit in Bucharest: "History will not judge us leniently." "Europe has the means to be a great power, but it refuses to be one," he wrote. His remarks at the Conversations in 2026 mark the worsening of what can be considered a crisis of confidence in NATO: faced with Russia, which risks breaking out of the impasse it has created through an escalation of violence, can we count on the American navy to go and defend a small Baltic town? Europe has sent troops to the North, but it needs time, a long time; the countries of the North were too slow to mine their borders, their governments fearing to frighten their populations, to further reduce the birth rate and to deter investors.

Europe is also being challenged in the Middle East: Karim Emile Bitar, professor of international relations at ENS Lyon and Saint Joseph University of Beirut, and a specialist in Middle Eastern affairs, is not optimistic about the future of this part of the world. He notes the impotence of the Americans in the face of terrorism and the failure to eradicate Hezbollah, which enjoys popular support in Lebanon. The

unrest and the risk of civil war are fueling the people's appetite for strongmen: the Middle East lacks checks and balances. It is not that there have not been moments of political and social inventiveness in the history of the Middle East: the *Nahda* (the 19th-century Arab Renaissance, fostered by the weakening of Ottoman power and European influence) was characterized by attempts at reform in Egypt and Syria and the affirmation of the compatibility between Islam and modernity; the Arab Spring of the early 2010s briefly offered hope for renewal before a brutal descent into the Islamic winter. What the Middle East needs today is not to serve as a playing field for the powers (as in Lebanon, which has long been deprived of the possibility of choosing its own destiny), but a comprehensive policy that, taking societies in their entirety and diversity, empowers citizens as actors and bearers of meaning. Europeans, sidelined by the American presidency, have a role to play in this policy, and K. E. Bitar urges them not to disregard Europe's desire for change nor to underestimate their own role.

Recalling the apocryphal remark attributed to Talleyrand: "When I look at myself, I am dismayed; when I compare myself, I am consoled." France and Italy can coordinate with certain Middle Eastern states to avert chaos.

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The "Eastern Question" has been a fundamental aspect of European politics since the late 18th century. The historical perspective was introduced by Jean-Louis Bourlanges, Chair of the French National Assembly's Foreign Affairs Committee from 2021 to 2024, in a keynote address titled "Tocqueville and France in the World." A former MP and chair of the National Assembly's Foreign Affairs Committee (2021–2024)—as well as an essayist whose extensive historical knowledge allowed him to situate Tocqueville's thought within the broader landscape of international relations—Bourlanges was unfortunately forced to cut his remarks short due to time constraints in a forum that attempted to cover too much ground. The history of France is one of painful loss of hegemony, beginning with the Treaty of Paris (1763), in which France ceded its status as the world's leading power to Great Britain by relinquishing its North American possessions—a humiliation compounded in 1815. Faced with this decline, two schools of thought have dominated French

diplomacy: the school of *grandeur*—or revenge— (represented by Choiseul, Vergennes, Jacobins, Napoléon, Poincaré and—with nuances—de Gaulle), and the school of prudence (Talleyrand, Guizot, Louis-Philippe, Ferry, Briand, and Robert Schuman). We are reminded of this *grandeur* by the motto inscribed on the bronze cannons displayed in front of the Tuileries: *nec pluribus impar* (“unequalled by many” or “matchless”), a motto that accompanied the solar imagery associated with Louis XIV. During the July Monarchy, Tocqueville belonged to the “school of grandeur”: he advocated for war in the East and a firm stance against the British, driven by an attachment to the martial values of the aristocracy into which he was born, as well as a hope to stir the passions of a French people he deemed slumbering. Yet, as J.-L. Bourlanges notes, Tocqueville did not envision a redrawing of European borders; for him, what mattered was control over the Mediterranean and the route to India. Time did not permit a discussion of Tocqueville’s shift toward the “school of prudence” once he assumed responsibility as Minister of Foreign Affairs—an evolution that did not escape Guizot’s notice. Tocqueville’s *Recollections* (1849) reveal a newfound wisdom: “The French nation, which had—and in some respects still has—such a grand figure on the world stage, [...] remained haughty even as it ceased to be dominant.” Hence the need to temper the French desire to set the world right, for “nothing is more humiliating for a powerful nation than seeking to cloak ordinary actions in grand rhetoric.”³ The lesson holds true today.

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Turning to a thinker from the past invites us to reflect on traditions in a society driven to distraction by urgency and obsessed with immediacy—a phenomenon Tocqueville had already identified. This encompasses natural, cultural, and religious heritage.

Gaspard Koenig, essayist and novelist (author of *Humus*, published by Éditions de l’Observatoire in 2023), addresses the issue of respect for natural heritage in a keynote paradoxically intitled: «Tocqueville and Nature: An Environmentalist Philosopher?» While ecological concerns are central today, they had been absent from these Conversations until now. Ecology is, as Gaspard Koenig shows, inseparable from reflection on democracy and liberty. He detects a concern for defending biodiversity in the appreciation of «Wilderness» expressed by Tocqueville in his 1831 short text *Quinze jours au désert* (*A Fortnight in the*

Wilderness). To me, however, this early work seems to reflect a young traveler's fascination with Chateaubriand rather than any ecological concern. Tocqueville was a product of his time; truly pre-ecological thought is found only in later texts—works that are attracting renewed critical interest today—such as geographer Élisée Reclus's bestseller *Histoire d'un ruisseau* (1869) or Thoreau's *Walden; or, Life in the Woods* (Boston, 1854), an account of his two-year solitary sojourn near Walden Pond, close to Concord. The latter book became a bible for the environmental movement because it advocated for humanity adapting to the natural environment, and Gaspard Koenig holds it up as a model for the two protagonists in his latest novel, *Humus*. It must be noted, however, that the environmentalist interpretation of Thoreau's is largely a matter of myth-making (see Henriette Levillain, *Henry Thoreau l'insoumis de Walden*, Flammarion, 2026, p. 133). Works from the past instruct us more through an awareness of the distance separating us from them than through any attempt to find our own ideas reflected within them.

Intellectual heritage was the subject of a conversation moderated by Katja Gentinetta between François-Xavier Bellamy, a Member of the European Parliament, and Michel Onfray. Both are philosophers, and both are committed to passing on culture through their books and teaching—Michel Onfray through the founding of the *Université Populaire de Caen* (2002–2018), and F-X. Bellamy through the teaching that informs his reflections in *Les Déshérités ou l'urgence de transmettre* (Plon, 2014). Both analyze the breakdown in the transmission of knowledge that occurred in 1968 in the name of a child's freedom—a theme also explored by Peter Sloterdijk in *Après nous le déluge: Les Temps modernes comme expérience antigénéalogique* (Payot, 2016). Both speakers were personally affected by the pedagogical trends of the 1970s: Michel Onfray counters “pedagogism” by championing scholarly reading, while Bellamy advocates for rote memorization as a way to internalize texts from the past. In opposition to Bourdieu, they champion the “master effect”—a personal relationship far more effective than any audiovisual aid. Authority serves to foster freedom and critical thinking by tapping into the desire to learn found in audiences—particularly the young—to whom our school institutions no longer transmit anything, leaving a void wide open for conspiracy theories. A remarkable demonstration of the “master effect” and the joy of transmission came when Bellamy recited from memory Victor Hugo's poem «Après la

bataille» (from *La Légende des siècles*, 1859)—a piece that the older generation among us all recited in primary school: “My father, that hero with the gentle smile...” Due to time constraints, there was no debate regarding the choice of culture to be transmitted or the question of cultural hierarchy—issues Tocqueville addresses when arguing for the preservation of classical studies.

That heritage includes Europe’s Christian roots—a reference that, as moderator and former Spanish Foreign Minister, Ana Palacio likes to point out, was removed from the European Constitution in 2004 at the insistence of Jacques Chirac. The panel, titled “Democracy and Religion,” was opened via video link by Jean-François Colosimo—a historian of religion, Orthodox theologian, and publisher—who adopted a global perspective in the tradition of Tocqueville’s thought. There is a mistaken belief in Europe that religion has lost its importance since the Enlightenment; some (such as Marcel Gauchet) even speak of an “exit from religion,” yet the religious—understood here as our relationship with the invisible and with the transcendent values that underpin our collective existence—has never left us. This is evidenced by the strength of Religion in a developed society like the United States, and the global expansion of evangelicalism. Those who analyze religion as a response to poverty or lack of culture are quite incapable of accounting for the enduring nature of the political-religious phenomenon and its evolution. The characteristic of the modern world is the spiritualization of the temporal. The Muslim world is not immune to this contemporary trend. In a modern way, it is reinterpreting its origins, politicizing the idea of *jihad* for its believers. Hence the need, according to JF Colosimo, to conduct a theological reflection attentive to the different traditions of Islam instead of limiting oneself to a sociology of believers.

The study of the relationship between religion and democracy then focused on Islam, through presentations first by Joshua Mitchell, professor of political theory at Georgetown University and author of *Tocqueville in Arabia: Dilemmas in the Democratic Age* (University of Chicago Press, 2013), then by Ferghane Azihari, a columnist who has just published a provocative and brilliant essay, *Islam Against Modernity* (Presses de la Cité, 2026), and finally by Bernard Rougier, professor and director of the Center for Arab and Oriental Studies at Sorbonne Nouvelle University.

Joshua Mitchell analyzes Tocqueville's writings on Islam, and their relevance for today. Ferghane Azihari, of Comorian and Muslim origin, has been called a "modern Voltaire." He denounces the spread of Islam, its aggression against Western civilization, and the anthropological regression that will inevitably result. Islam (essentialized here, without taking into account diverse traditions) is seen as an obstacle to the political, scientific, and cultural development of societies. Very few Muslims live in democratic societies, and according to Ferghane Azihari, this is not without reason. A lack of understanding of the Other and of history, coupled with Muslims' certainty of being alone in the Truth, condemns Muslim societies to a stagnation that Tocqueville had already noted in his correspondence with Gobineau and in his writings on Algeria, which M. Mitchell previously studied. Ferghane Azihari is no less severe in his criticism of the West, which he accuses of cowardly blindness in welcoming onto its soil populations resistant to democratic values and even threatening them (see Rushdie, Samuel Paty). What is the solution? Ferghane Azihari does not believe in the possibility of an Enlightenment Islam; (his essay is more ironic than his presentation in the *Conversations*): "Why not Stalinism with a human face?" Fundamentalism is Islam itself; therefore, the presence of Islam in the Western public sphere must be contained, even reduced, for the survival of our freedoms.

Bernard Rougier, a renowned specialist in Salafism and Islamist radicalization, attempted to distinguish the traditions and power structures within the Muslim world by offering a fresh perspective on Tocqueville's work. Revisiting the dichotomy, present since the colonial era, between the *ulema*—learned interpreters of religious texts from which they derive their authority to define the norm—and the *marabouts*—saints revered by rural populations—he observes that Tocqueville focuses on the marabouts and the religious foundations associated with them, failing to recognize that the *ulema* are the very source of the revolt. In Europe today, the Muslim Brotherhood seeks to control Muslim populations by relying on Saudi ulema. The merit of this analysis lies in placing the relationship with Islam within a long historical perspective and geographical diversity, demonstrating the multinational dimension of the influence of Muslim religious figures today, whereas Tocqueville only considered Islam within the limited framework of colonization. Following the debate, one cannot help but

be struck by the skepticism regarding the possible emergence of an “Enlightenment Islam”—a concept Ghaleb Bencheikh had championed during the 2025 *Conversations Tocqueville*.

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The state of the world today is discouraging for democrats. The following panel offered grounds for hope. Intitled «Local Democracy: A School for Civic Engagement», it revisited one of Tocqueville’s key concerns: his view of the municipality as the “primary school of liberty.” Moderated by Britta Sandberg, Senior European Correspondent for *Der Spiegel*, this was the most international of the panels, featuring a diverse range of participants—none of whom succumbed to the temptation of presenting subsidiarity as a simple, universal fix for democratic disaffection. Fabien Aufrechter—one of France’s youngest mayors (serving Verneuil-sur-Seine, a town of 17,000 in the Yvelines department, since 2020) and a distant successor to Alexis’s father, Hervé de Tocqueville, who served as mayor under Napoleon—described the initiatives undertaken to overcome French citizens’ indifference toward local affairs (a phenomenon Tocqueville famously termed «individualism»). These included a local referendum to save a regional forest, a youth municipal council, and a participatory council. Fabien Aufrechter clearly highlighted the challenges facing local government in France: the tangled web of jurisdictional responsibilities—where even simply cleaning a street becomes an obstacle course involving the municipality, the department, and sometimes the central state—and the small size of French communes. It was a way of bringing Tocqueville’s analyses from *The Old Regime and the Revolution* into the modern context..

Although Tocqueville was critical of the Swiss federal constitution, he nonetheless admired the effective functioning of the cantons. Vincent Maître—a lawyer and member of the Swiss federal parliament since 2019, who was also elected at the young age of 26—discussed the recent initiative from June 14, 2026, titled “No to a Switzerland of Ten Million.” The initiative—which would have scrapped Switzerland’s agreements with the EU—was rejected; the voting mechanism, “la votation”, (averaging four referendums a year) remains a powerful democratic tool. It comes as a surprise to the French: the Swiss rejected proposals to extend their four weeks of annual leave in both 1985 and

2012. Nevertheless, the three levels of government—federal, cantonal, and municipal—can also lead to political gridlock.

The other two speakers invited the audience to consider how to foster civic engagement in societies that are no longer the face-to-face communities Tocqueville once knew. A new world requires new politics: Monica Frassoni—an Italian federalist and environmentalist activist, former MEP (1999–2009), and former co-chair of the Greens in the European Parliament—has chaired the European Centre for Electoral Support (ECES) since 2013. ECES is a non-partisan foundation established in 2010 to support elections in developing countries. She also co-founded the European Alliance to Save Energy in 2011, an organization advocating for energy efficiency. She clearly highlighted the need to coordinate different levels of governance and emphasizes Europe’s decisive contribution to environmental issues: the European legislative framework allows us to move beyond local or national constraints. However, this essential reliance on a higher level of governance requires transparency and accessibility to ensure citizens do not feel stripped of their decision-making power.

Bill O’Dowd—President and CEO of Dolphin Entertainment and a member of the United Way Leadership Council—also asked us to reflect on this aspect of communication, which is crucial for preventing citizens from feeling abandoned and bridging the gap between the grassroots and the leadership. Marketing and entertainment might seem far removed from promoting civic engagement, but that is not the case: Dolphin Entertainment has produced films addressing social issues and voting. Audiovisual media and digital technology are too often viewed solely through the lens of danger for freedom and critical awareness, but they also serve as a powerful means of mobilizing collective action; Bill O’Dowd cites the example of Taylor Swift’s influence on US elections. In 2018, in the state of Tennessee, she urged people to vote for the Democrats, and the [vote.gov](https://www.vote.gov) platform recorded 250,000 new registrations. In 2024, when she announced her support for Harris on her Instagram account, the site registered 10 million likes... This offers a highly promising avenue for reflecting on “politics outside the framework”—to borrow the title of a recent journal—and invites us to develop a political history of music and performance⁴. Jazz was an instrument in the struggle for civil rights; civic engagement is also a matter of culture. The panel thus moved well beyond the initial question of subsidiarity and essential local democracy to examine the

interplay between the local, national, and international levels, as well as new cultural and political forms of living together.

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Successive editions of the Tocqueville Conversations have effectively charted the history of recent years. Certain constants remain: the ambition to think alongside Tocqueville—drawing primarily on *Democracy in America*—and a commitment to transatlantic dialogue, initially centered on Franco-American friendship but increasingly focused on the similarities and differences between Donald Trump’s United States and Europe. There is also the reflection on the link between democracy and religion, a central theme in the work of Joshua Mitchell—who, alongside Laure Mandeville, serves as a key intellectual figure for *Conversations*. However, the anxious questioning regarding the consequences of the Islamist threat for Europe has taken on growing urgency, mirroring the scale of the terrorist threat and conflicts in the Middle East. Disruptions linked to AI now occupy a significant place in the discussion, as do defense issues. Early editions of *Conversations* sometimes involved lamenting the moral weakness of Europeans. The most recent developments serve as a call to exercise will: the extraordinary resistance of the Ukrainians and the vigorous defense policies pursued in Northern Europe increasingly urge Europe to take charge of its own destiny. This year, the *Conversations* did not accord the rule of law the central importance it held in 2025—perhaps due to discouragement over the widespread violation of international law? One notable absence remains, this year as in previous years: reflection on equality, at a time when a significant American movement is calling democracy itself into question. Tocqueville worried about the perils facing liberty; he may well have been mistaken in deeming the advance of equality irresistible.

NOTES

- [1] See a very clear note from the National Assembly's European Affairs Committee on the Letta report: "Much more than a market," *assemblee-nationale.fr*, accessed on July 2, 2026.
- [2] See Raymond Aron, *République impériale. Les États-Unis et le monde, 1945-1972*, Calmann-Lévy, 1973. For a more detailed account of Camille Grand's analysis, see his paper "L'avenir de l'Otan et de l'Europe," *Commentaire*, n° 191, fall 2025.
- [3] *Œuvres*, III, p. 932.
- [4] See Camille Rondot and Brigitte Sebbah, " 'I hate Taylor Swift', du pouvoir des célébrités sur le choix des urnes," *Quaderni*, Editions de la Maison des sciences de l'homme, 2024/3 n° 113, *Le politique hors cadre*, pp. 69-84.

ABSTRACT

On June 26 and 27, 2026, the Château de Tocqueville hosted the eight "Conversations" organized by the Tocqueville Foundation. The theme of this year's Conversations was "What Future for Democracy. What would Tocqueville Say?"

The speakers emphasized the need for a European awakening at a time when the imperial republic of the United States appears to be turning away from the Old Continent. The discussions covered economics and defense, as well as democratic practices, the environmental challenge, and relations with Islam.