

19.3 De Tocqueville Examines Democracy in America

Source: <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/815/815-h/815-h.htm>

Background: Alexis de Tocqueville (1805-1859) was a French sociologist and political theorist. In 1835, after traveling in the country, he published his observations about the United States. In his discussion of *Democracy in America*, de Tocqueville seems to almost be describing two different, and contradictory, societies existing at the same time.

Questions

1. According to passage A, what stood out for de Tocqueville during his visit to the United States?
2. According to passage B, why does de Tocqueville believe that whites and blacks will never live on equal footing in the United States?
3. If the second quote is accurate, could the United States in the 1830s, or any society that permitted the enslavement of a group of people and accepted hereditary inequality, be considered “democratic”?

Explain your views.

<p>A. Equality and Democracy in the United States Amongst the novel objects that attracted my attention during my stay in the United States, nothing struck me more forcibly than the general equality of conditions. I readily discovered the prodigious influence which this primary fact exercises on the whole course of society, by giving a certain direction to public opinion, and a certain tenor to the laws; by imparting new maxims to the governing powers, and peculiar habits to the governed. I speedily perceived that the influence of this fact extends far beyond the political character and the laws of the country, and that it has no less empire over civil society than over the Government; it creates opinions, engenders sentiments, suggests the ordinary practices of life, and modifies whatever it does not produce. The more I advanced in the study of American society, the more I perceived that the equality of conditions is the fundamental fact from which all others seem to be derived, and the central point at which all my observations constantly terminated.</p>	<p>B. Racial Inequality in the United States In the United States, except slaves, servants, and paupers in the receipt of relief from the townships, there is no class of persons who do not exercise the elective franchise, and who do not indirectly contribute to make the laws . . . I do not imagine that the white and black races will ever live in any country upon an equal footing. But I believe the difficulty to be still greater in the United States than elsewhere. An isolated individual may surmount the prejudices of religion, of his country, or of his race, and if this individual is a king he may effect surprising changes in society; but a whole people cannot rise, as it were, above itself. A despot who should subject the Americans and their former slaves to the same yoke, might perhaps succeed in commingling their races; but as long as the American democracy remains at the head of affairs, no one will undertake so difficult a task; and it may be foreseen that the freer the white population of the United States becomes, the more isolated will it remain.</p>
---	---