Analytical Sociology in Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America*

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Abstract
Analytical sociology seeks to explain complex social processes by carefully dissecting them and then bringing into focus their most important constituent components. It is through dissection and analytical abstractions that the important cogs and wheels of social processes are made visible and intelligible. By identifying some common features between Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America* and contemporary analytical sociology, we argue that the explanatory approach that Tocqueville pursued in many respects is a forerunner to analytical sociology. These features are contrasted with those of other classical approaches in order to highlight the defining characteristics of Tocqueville’s approach. One reason why Tocqueville is still worth reading, 200 years after his birth, is as an early example of the explanatory power of the analytical approach to sociology. However, the methodological and theoretical advances that sociology has undergone since the publication of *Democracy in America*, makes it more interesting as a classic than as a useful source of reference for today’s sociology students.

Introduction.
In our view, developing middle-range theories and testing them through careful empirical investigation is what the core of sociology should be all about. Given this professional inclination, why should we care about Tocqueville, or any other of the classics of sociology? Indeed, many sharp minds have argued that we should not care. In a famous passage Whitehead (1974[1917]), for instance, claimed a science lost, which does not forget its founders. And Weber (1992 [1919]) argued that one of

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1 By a ‘classic’ we mean a piece of written work that has significant status relative other works, past and present. A classical sociologist is a person associated with one or more such classics in sociology.
the defining aspects of science is that the serious questions of the past are outdated today, because that is the essence of scientific accumulation. We also observe that many successful sister disciplines – including economics and physics – do very well without spending much time on doctrinal history. Sociologists on the other hand, dwell relentlessly on re-reading and re-interpreting their founding fathers. This of course, is because sociology has a split identity and has always been caught between science and humanities (Lepenies 1985). Every sociologist is reminded of this tug of war almost on a daily basis. ‘Perhaps the majority oscillate between the two, and a few try to consolidate them. These efforts to straddle scientific and humanistic orientations typically lead to merging the systematics of sociological theory with its history’ (Merton 1968:29). As we see it from our vantage point in sociology’s ‘scientific camp’, this merging contributes minimally to our knowledge about social processes, and contemporary theories of social processes alas remain fairly uninfluenced by the classics.

Nevertheless, we believe that there are lessons to be learned from the classics beyond that of disciplinary history. The authors of the sociological classics do not provide the most stringently formulated theoretical propositions, nor the most sophisticated philosophical arguments, and they certainly do not use the most efficient and reliable sociological methods. We can, however, learn from their approach to sociological research, from their mindset, so to speak, and from their vision of what a sociological explanation is and should be. In line with this, in this article we argue that Tocqueville’s explanatory approach in many respects is a forerunner to contemporary analytical sociology. One reason why Tocqueville is still worth reading, 200 years after his birth, is as an early example of the explanatory power of this type of approach. However, our reading of Democracy in America, which we will present in this article, has led us to the conclusion that Tocqueville’s work will certainly be of interest when thinking about the history and development of our discipline; less so for the practicing sociological analyst.

2 A telling example is the type of theory-related articles often written by sociologists. As noted by the former editor of Sociological Theory, Craig Calhoun, the submissions the journal receive often are ‘summaries of what dead people said (with no indication of why living ones should care or how the revered ancestor’s work would advance contemporary analytic projects)’ and ‘criticisms of what other people have said that dead people said (with no more indication of why we should care than that those criticized are famous)’ (Calhoun 1996:1)
The article is organised as follows. We start with spelling out what we see to be the distinctive features of analytical sociology. We then turn to Tocqueville and his *Democracy in America* (2000). As just mentioned, a close reading of this text suggests that his approach has many features in common with the approach used by contemporary analytical sociologists. We identify these features, and conclude the article by contrasting them with those of other classical approaches in order to highlight the defining features of his approach.

The Analytical Approach to Sociological Theorizing. 3

Although the term ‘analytical sociology’ is not commonly used, 4 as will be discussed below, the type of sociology designated by the term has an important history that can be traced back to the works of Tocqueville and other 19th century scholars. Among contemporary social scientists, the analytical approach is most closely associated with names of Raymond Boudon, James Coleman, Jon Elster, and Thomas Schelling. 5 The type of sociology that this group of scholars represent and which we refer to as ‘analytical sociology’, seeks to explain complex social processes by carefully dissecting them and then bringing into focus their most important constituent components. The core idea being that it is through dissection and analytical abstractions that the important cogs and wheels of social processes are made visible and intelligible.

One important aspect of this analytical approach is the quest for clarity and precision. If it is not perfectly clear what a given theory or theorist is trying to say, how can we then possibly understand and assess the potential merits of the theory being proposed? On an even more fundamental level, the purpose of theorizing, in our view, should always be to clarify matters, to make the complex and seemingly obscure clear and understandable. But if the theory itself lacks clarity, this goal cannot be attained.

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3 Space does not allow for a detailed discussion of the defining characteristics of the analytical approach. For a more detailed account, see Hedström (2005) upon which this section draws a great deal.

4 Exceptions include Burger (1977), Turner (1987), Pearce (1994). Turner’s and Pearce’s uses of the concept are rather different from the one adopted here, however, and Burger’s discussion of Parsonian analytical sociology concerns only the methodological and epistemological aspects of the approach. Barbera’s (2004) characterization of the approach is more in line with ours.

5 For some representative texts, see Boudon (1979; 1986), Coleman (1986; 1990), Elster (1983; 1989), and Schelling (1971; 1978).
One example of a mystifying statement is the following, in which Pierre Bourdieu tries explicitly to define his master concept of habitus. In *The Logic of Practice* (1990:53), Bourdieu defines habitus as

...systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them. Objectively ‘regulated’ and ‘regular’ without being in any way the product of obedience to rules, they can be collectively orchestrated without being the product of the organizing action of a conductor.

Ambiguous definitions like this are like mental clouds that mystify rather than clarify, and from an explanatory point of view, they are clearly unsatisfactory. Not only is it unclear what habitus more precisely refers to, it is also unclear why he believes that habitus, whatever it is, operates the way it does. Although Bourdieu devotes a full chapter to the concept of habitus, such questions are not resolved. If we want to propose that one phenomenon partly or fully explains another, it must at least be clear what phenomena we are referring to and why and how we believe they are interrelated.

Clarity, in the sense of precision, is important for a slightly different reason as well. As perhaps most vividly demonstrated in Schelling’s work on so-called tipping processes (e.g. Schelling 1971), small and seemingly insignificant differences or events can sometimes set in motion processes that make a huge difference for the outcomes we are trying to explain. If our concepts and theories are not sufficiently precise to pick up on such differences, they are not capable of explaining why we observe what we observe. For these various reasons clarity, precision, and fine-grained distinctions are of crucial importance for the development of explanatory theory.
Another important aspect of the analytical approach concerns the focus on explanations. Unlike much of contemporary sociology which is predominantly concerned with descriptions and interpretations (see Alexander 1988 for a programmatic statement to this effect), analytical sociology is concerned with explaining phenomena in the sense of accounting for why they happen or why they develop as they do. A cornerstone of the analytical approach is that explanations of social phenomena should focus on the ‘mechanisms’ that brought them about. A mechanism, as defined here, is a constellation of entities and activities that are organized in such a way that they regularly bring about a particular type of outcome. A mechanism-based explanation of an observed outcome refers to the mechanism by which such outcomes are regularly brought about. For example, if we want to explain why an individual acts like other individuals the so-called rational-imitation mechanism may be relevant, and if we want to explain self-fulfilling prophecies like those discussed by Merton (1968), the explanation may refer to groups of individuals acting on the basis of such mechanisms and to the way in which these individuals are linked to one another.

A third important aspect of the analytical approach concerns the importance attributed to action-based explanations. In sociology the relevant mechanisms always tend to be action-related because actions are the activities that make society ‘tick,’ and without actions social processes would come to a halt. This focus on actions does not mean that it is the actions per se that one is interested in explaining. In fact, as we see it, the focus on actions is merely an intermediate step in an explanatory strategy that seeks to understand change at a social level. A slightly modified version of Coleman’s (1986) so-called micro-macro graph clarifies the issues being involved (see Figure 1).

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6 See the various contributions in Hedström and Swedberg (1998) as well as Hedström (2005) and Machamer, Darden and Craver (2000) for a further discussion of the logic of mechanism-based explanations and their role in explaining various social phenomena.

7 We want to emphasize the distinction between action-based explanations and rational-choice explanations. The latter is a subcategory of the former and endorsing the former is not necessarily an endorsement of the latter.
As sociologists we are often concerned with explaining social or macro-level outcomes (D in Figure 1), and typically we explain such outcomes with references to other social or other macro-level phenomena (A). But simply relating the two to one another, statistically or otherwise, would lead to a rather superficial explanation since the mechanisms that inform us about how and why they are related is not to be found at this level. We must instead seek to show how individuals’ orientations to action are influenced by the social structures in which they are embedded (A→B), and possibly also by whatever belief-biases or other psychological processes that may be at work (B→B). Thereafter we must seek to show how these orientations to action influence how the actors act (B→C), and how these actions bring about the social outcomes we seek to explain (C→D). Thus, in order to explain social or macro-level phenomena it is not sufficient to simply relate them to other macro-level phenomena. To be explanatory a theory must specify the set of mechanisms that are likely to have brought them about, and this means that one must demonstrate how macro states at one point in time influence individuals’ actions, and how these actions bring about new macro-states at a later point in time.
This sort of explanatory approach not only leads to more precise and, in our view, intellectually more satisfying explanations, it also reduces the risk of various kinds of aggregation fallacies. For example, as Schelling (1971) has shown, even if individuals’ residential decisions are exclusively determined by their racial prejudices, the extent of racial segregation and racial prejudice are only weakly related to one another. Similarly, as Granovetter (1978) has shown, even if all individuals in one group join a collective action organization while no one joins in another group, this may say little or nothing about how the individuals’ differ from one another in their support for the cause that the organization seeks to promote. In fact, differences in aggregate outcomes like these can arise even when the individuals in the two groups are virtually identical to one another. The general lesson to be learned from these kinds of analyses is that causal inferences based on information about macro-level units often are likely to give erroneous results. If we fail to properly analyze the links between micro and macro we are easily led astray because macro-level patterns and relationships say surprisingly little about why they look the way they do.

Action-based explanations also allow for the important distinction between intended and unintended outcomes of action (e.g., Merton 1936). Although individuals’ actions often can be said to be caused by their intentions, the effects of their actions often is not what they intended. A prisoners’ dilemma situation where selfishly rational individuals bring about undesirable outcomes is the prototypical example of

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8 Granovetter’s core idea was that an individual’s decision to perform a certain act, e.g. participate in a social movement, often depends in part on how many other actors already have decided to participate. He also recognized that actors differ in terms of the number of other actors who already must have performed the act before they decide to do the same, and he introduced the concept of ‘threshold’ to describe this individual heterogeneity. Assume for example a group of 100 people in which one individual has a threshold of 0, one has a threshold of 1, one has a threshold of 2, and so on up to the last individual who has a threshold of 99. Initially only the person with a threshold of 0, will participate. His or her participation will activate the person with a threshold of 1 and this person’s participation, in turn, will activate the person with a threshold of 2. This process will continue until all 100 people participate. Now imagine another group that is identical with the first group except for the fact there is no person with a threshold of 1 but two persons with a threshold of 2. The groups are virtually identical and their interest in the cause that the collective action organization seeks to bring about is more or less the same, but the collective outcomes they generate are dramatically different. The person with a threshold of 0, of course, will participate in this group as well. But since there is no one with a threshold of 1, the process ends at this point; only one person in the second group will participate in the ‘collective’ movement.
these kinds of situations, and illustrates once again the dangers inherent in trying to make inferences from macro-level outcomes to the micro-level processes that generated and thereby explained the outcomes.

In sum, the approach to sociological theorizing that we refer to as ‘analytical sociology’ is a middle-range approach that avoids the somewhat empiricist and eclectic tendencies of Merton’s (1967) original middle-range approach. This type of analytical theory seeks to explain specific social phenomena on the basis of clearly and explicitly formulated theories of action and interaction. With its middle-range focus, the analytical approach is rather modest in its ambitions as compared to many other contemporary approaches. Needless to say it would be highly desirable if we were able to explain large-scale historical and trans-national processes, as some sociologist seek to do, but as Merton (1967:45) noted when discussing the attempts by some of his contemporaries to develop grand all-embracing social theories: ‘We are not ready. Not enough preparatory work has been done’.9

*Tocqueville’s Democracy in America.*

In the prelude to the first volume of *Democracy in America,* Tocqueville urges the reader to judge his book as a whole, not by critical dissection of its pieces.10 Needless to say, the lasting impression and final judgement of his rather extensive work will leave different impressions depending on the reader. One could for instance single out the grand theoretical aspects of *Democracy in America,* and all its sweeping propositions such as Tocqueville’s (2000:12) conviction ‘that sooner or later we shall arrive, like the Americans, at an almost complete equality of conditions.’ Such statements, and there are many like that, can form the basis for intriguing debates, but will hardly provide any deeper insights into the workings of democracy nor sociological methodology. Speaking for our self, we are struck by the particular approach to explaining social phenomena that permeate this work. Tocqueville is strikingly consequent in insisting on factors at the individual level when seeking to understand and explain the particularities of democracy in America (see Elster 1991; Elster 1993; Meyer 2003; Boudon 2005), although on the

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9 As Whitehead (1917[1974]) insightfully noted: ‘It is a characteristic of a science in its early stages ... to be both ambitiously profound in its aims and trivial in its handling of details’.

10 Throughout we have used the English translation by Harvey Mansfield and Delba Winthrop published by Chicago University Press in 2000.
actual facts and tendencies of these explanations he is sometimes contradictory (eg. Elster 1993).

In his analysis of democratic America Tocqueville brings to the fore an appreciation of a specific methodological approach. The core idea of this approach is to keep constant as many of the unknowns as possible and then to proceed with a small and sufficiently abstract battery of concepts. Tocqueville was well aware that the study of America was almost like a natural experiment. As he expressed it himself: ‘America is the only country where one has been able to witness the natural and tranquil developments of a society, and where it has been possible to specify the influence exerted by the point of departure on the future of states.’ (2000:28).

*Democracy in America* was written with a particular audience and a particular purpose in mind, namely to convince the French aristocracy that democracy was not such a terrible threat to French society. Given this pragmatic rationale, it is perhaps surprising that the book is dominated less by dogma and more by analytical reasoning and explanation. As Elster (1991) has argued, Pels (1991) notwithstanding, the explanations put forward by Tocqueville in *Democracy in America* can be characterized as a form of methodological individualism or at least a form of ‘structural individualism’ in Udehn’s (2001) sense of the term. That is to say, Tocqueville strives to explain democratic institutions in America with reference to individual sentiments and habits, which in turn are products of social institutions and structures.

To begin with, Tocqueville invokes only three influential causes that he argues are sufficient to analyse the democratic system in America. Admittedly, these are very general, abstract, and broadly defined causes. Nevertheless, such a focus on a limited set of explanatory factors is characteristic of the analytical approach. The purpose is not to explain phenomena by describing and understanding every single aspect and particularity, but to narrow down the theoretical building blocks so that one can produce a parsimonious and general narrative, invoking only the most essential causal factors. Tocqueville writes,

> I have thought that all the causes tending to the maintenance of a democratic republic in the United States can be reduced to
The particular and accidental situation in which Providence has placed the Americans forms the first; the second comes from the laws; the third flows from habits and mores (Tocqueville 2000:265).

The ‘accidental situation’ in this quotation simply refers to the physical conditions of the new land. The most interesting concept of the three, at least from a sociological perspective, is that of mores. Tocqueville’s primary interest is to study the state and development of democracy in America and it is interesting that he chooses to seek for *explanans* at the individual level. In fact, by the concept of mores he brings the beliefs, sentiments, and habits of individuals, into the core of the analysis. We saw earlier Bourdieu’s confusing definition of habitus, a concept one might perhaps find related to that of mores.\(^\text{\textsuperscript{11}}\) However, at least to us Tocqueville’s definition of mores, although arguably not exemplary, is intuitively far more accessible:

> I understand here the expressions moeurs in the sense the ancients attached to the word mores; not only do I apply it to mores properly so-called, which one could call habits of the heart, but to the different notions that men possess, to the various opinions that are current in their midst, and to the sum of ideas of which the habits of the mind are formed (Tocqueville 2000:275).

On several places in the book, especially in the first volume, Tocqueville claims that mores are the most important explanatory factor of the three. The physical conditions, Tocqueville argues, must be of relatively less importance because; ‘I perceive in the other peoples of the New World the same conditions of prosperity as in the Anglo-Americans, minus their laws and their mores; and those people are miserable’ (ibid, 293). In further comparing Anglo-Americans not with other peoples but with themselves, Toqueville asks why the states of the East and the West do not resemble each other in spite of the fact that they have similar conditions and

\(^\text{11}\) Habitus, for instance is probably some sort of action trigging entity that is ‘a product of history’ and ‘produces individual and collective practices’ (Bourdieu 1990:54), which could presumably also be said about mores.
similar laws? The answer, Tocqueville reasons, has to be found at the level of individuals, and he polemically concludes that,

 [...] in Europe one exaggerates the influence that the geographic position of the country exerts on the longevity of democratic institutions. One attributes too much importance to laws, too little to mores. Without doubt, these three great causes serve to regulate and to direct American democracy; but if it were necessary to class them, I would say that physical causes contribute less than laws, and laws less than mores (p. 295).

For instance, in observing the democratic institutions of the United States, Tocqueville is struck by the fixation on regularity and order that dominates both the practice of state administration and the discourse of political life. The explanation that he suggests is that the new Americans was faced from the beginning with a surplus of resources. The land was rich and wide and offered great opportunities for entrepreneurs of various sorts. In short, Tocqueville claims, success came to those who were efficient in exploring these opportunities and then defended their productive outcome. Although Tocqueville does not use selection arguments he essentially argues that the dominant mindset that was selected for was one of ‘positive calculation’. He argues that it is foremost the mores of the people that explain the particular administrative and political arrangements in America. And although in this example he invokes also the physical conditions, it is clear that mores are superior in explanatory power to both the laws and natural circumstances.

So, it appears Tocqueville presents us with a clear explanatory hierarchy that put special emphasis on individual level factors, i.e. mores. But as much as one might wish the claim that mores are the primary explanatory factor to be consistent throughout the book, Tocqueville adds several complications to this schema. As pointed out in Elster's (1993) brilliant analysis, the underlying intellectual idea appears to be rather complex, and the relationship between the three explanatory variables is quite intricate. In the text, Tocqueville suggests several causal relationships between physical conditions, laws, and mores as well. For instance, in
one passage, found on the same page as the previous quote, the author implies that mores also explain the laws:

If, in the course of this work, I have not succeeded in making the reader feel the importance that I attribute to the practical experience of the Americans, to their habits, to their opinions – in a word, to their mores – in the maintenance of their laws, I have missed the principal goal that I proposed for myself in writing it (ibid, p. 295).

In other words, mores are not only the most important cause in explaining democratic institutions, mores also explain the laws. In itself this can be encompassed in the theoretical analysis with some slight modifications. However, such modifications will not do since Tocqueville also proposes what appear to be pure contradictions. After studying Tocqueville’s presentation of mores, Elster summarizes his own impressions in the following way:

In these passages, then, we have seen Tocqueville asserting (1) the priority of mores over all other causes, (2) the priority of mores over laws, (3) the priority of the social state over laws and mores, (4) the priority of laws over mores, and (5) the priority of laws over the social state (Elster 1993:123).

While Elster seems to muse at the fact that Democracy in America has to be deciphered rather than read, we find this to be a good reason to regard Democracy in America as a forerunner and inspiration, rather than a methodological sourcebook. Elster regards Democracy in America as an equilibrium analysis suffering in particular from a limited understanding of causality (1991, 1993). And Elster suggests that the solution to the contradictory statements in the above quotation is to develop the idea of mutual causality further. Our solution goes in the same direction. In our view it seems reasonable to assume that, had Tocqueville lived some 150 years later, he would have phrased his reasoning about the three ‘causes tending to the maintenance of a democratic republic’ (ibid, 265) in terms of complex dynamic systems and positive feedback loops.
Replacing the idea that one cause has priority over the other, with the notions of feedback and mutual dependency, one gets a more favourable and parsimonious picture of what Tocqueville might have been aiming at. For instance, there is no contradiction in the following system of equations,

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\begin{align*}
equ &= f(law, mor, nat) \\
law &= f(mor, equ) \\
mor &= f(equ, law)
\end{align*}
\]

where \(equ\), \(law\), \(mor\), and \(nat\) stand for the social state of equality, laws, mores and natural conditions respectively. This equation is at least potentially compatible with Elster’s summary of Tocqueville’s theory of equality, laws and mores. It should be noted that nothing in the equation excludes the possibility that mores have a larger impact on equality than laws, as this is to be defined in the function. Another advantage with the dynamic systems approach is that it encompasses the equilibrium space of classic equilibrium analysis and simultaneously allows for analysing more complex equilibrium dynamics. This simple illustration indicates that at least some of the apparent contradictions in *Democracy in America* can be resolved when confronted with a more sophisticated conceptual toolbox than was available to social scientists in the early 1900’s. If one would reformulate, Tocqueville’s theory in such terms, we believe the result is precisely what Udehn (2001) refers to as structural individualism, namely a theory of the dynamic interplay between the individual and her social and institutional environment.

Glancing back at Figure 1, the reader might now be willing to agree that Tocqueville indeed had a firm belief that explanation of macro phenomena, i.e., outcome \(D\) in Figure 1, are explained by individual level factors, \(B\) and \(C\) in the figure. However, in itself this is not contradictory to Pels (1991:299) argument that Tocqueville is in fact engaged in explaining ‘how aggregate factors determine other aggregate factors, passing through individual actors as unconscious, insensible bearers of historical forces or collective phenomena, in classical 19th century style.’ So what about the micro-level mechanisms that we claim are at the hart of the analytical approach to sociology? From our perspective, Pels’ (1991) version of Tocqueville would hardly exemplify what we mean with an analytical sociology because the micro-level
mechanisms also have to be spelled out and elaborated. It is one thing to say that mores are important, quite another to indicate how they produce actions. The most thorough comment on the micro-level mechanisms in *Democracy in America* is found in Elster’s *Political Psychology* (1993) and the inevitable conclusion is that the link between \textbf{B} and \textbf{C} – if we refer once more back to Figure 1 – is the least developed part of Tocqueville’s approach.

But occasionally, Tocqueville does elaborate on the connection between beliefs and desires (mores) and action in a way that point in the direction of clearly articulated intentional-action explanations. In the following passage, for example, which deals with the widespread respect for the laws that he observed across the United States, Tocqueville writes that,

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\ldots \text{in the United states each finds a sort of personal interest in everyone’s obeying the laws; for whoever does not make up a part of the majority today will perhaps be in its ranks tomorrow; and the respect that he professes now for the will of the legislator he will soon have occasion to require for his (Tocqueville 2000:230).}
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Still, we must confess that examples like this are relatively rare. It is easier to locate examples where he discusses links from the macro to the micro level and from the micro to the macro level, than these kinds of micro-to-micro links. We round off the discussion of *Democracy in America* with such an example that deals again with the interaction between the political sphere and the economical. This time Tocqueville is astonished by the rational and orderly manner in which, compared to his own native country France, politics is pursued.

The passions that agitate the Americans most profoundly are commercial passions and not political passions, or rather, they carry the habits of trade into politics. They love order. Without which affairs cannot prosper, and they particularly prize regularity of mores, on which good houses [of business] are founded; they prefer the good sense that creates great fortunes to the genius that often dissipates them; general ideas frighten
their minds, accustomed to positive calculations, and among them, practice is more in honor than theory (Tocqueville 2000:273).

Tocqueville sets out to explain to the reader the workings of democracy in the United States, and he does so from several perspectives. In this respect he is perhaps more of a contemporary social scientist than some of the more well-known classical sociologists. Most of them wanted to either explain or change the world at large, to paraphrase Marx. They spent less time on detailed analysis of specific problems; instead they sought to paint the bigger picture. It should be added though, that Tocqueville’s ambitions might have been grander than we suggest. This is in fact what Elster (1993) proposes, adding that such a great ambition was perhaps what was needed to muster the energy for the study. The unintended consequence of Tocqueville’s investment in a detailed analysis is that the approach and the details remain interesting although the grand theory failed.12

Styles of scholarship

As a way of concluding this article, let us briefly compare Tocqueville’s approach with some of the other classical sociologists. Tocqueville not only differed from them in his attention to detail. There also were pronounced differences in their ‘styles’ of scholarship. One important property distinguishing different styles of theorizing from one another concerns the kind of primary elements or units of analysis that the theories focus on. In our view, as should be obvious from the discussion above, the most essential difference in this respect is whether the theory is factor based or actor based.13 That is to say, does the theory focus on actors and their actions or are the core units factors or variables characterizing collective entities such as organizations, institutions, or societies at large? While many of the classics were factor oriented, Tocqueville was an actor-oriented theorist although, as noted above, he did not always explicate the micro-level mechanisms in sufficient detail.

12 The mechanism, according to Elster (1993, ch 3, n 22), is that achievement is a function of investment in time and energy spent on them. An ambitious project requires a larger investment and thus increases the chances of a high achievement.
13 See Macy and Willer (2002) for an illuminating discussion of the trend from factor-based to actor-based approaches in computational sociology.
Another important aspect of different styles of theorizing is the use the theorist makes of these primary elements. Some theorists predominantly are concerned with classifying them into different categories in order to arrive at conceptual or empirical ‘maps’ of the problems at hand, while others are concerned with causally relating them to one another and/or to the phenomena to be explained. While many of the sociological classics were concerned with classifications and the creation of various kinds of typologies, Tocqueville always sought to explain phenomena by specifying how they were causally linked with one another.

By cross-classifying these two dimensions, four ideal-typical ‘styles’ of theorizing can be identified (see table 1). We want to emphasize the ideal-typical nature of these distinctions. They identify what we believe to be important and analytically distinct styles of theorizing, but obviously these styles can co-exist in any specific theory or theorist. Consider the writings of classical sociologists such as Tönnies, Weber, Durkheim, and Tocqueville. Given their intellectual creativity and the breath of their scholarship, their work spans several of these categories. Still, these distinctions bring out important differences in their general styles of scholarship.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ultimate unit of analysis</th>
<th>Factors</th>
<th>Actors</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Primary activity</strong></td>
<td>Classify</td>
<td>I</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Causally relate</td>
<td>III</td>
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Table 1. Four ideal-typical styles of sociological theorizing

Tönnies (1931) with his notion of ‘Gemeinschaft’ and ‘Gesellschaft’ exemplifies a Type I approach. He describes societies at large in terms of these two ideal categories, and he uses them to classify different societies. The approach is classificatory, the entities being classified are societies at large, and the classification is factor or variable based.
Weber, in particular the Weber of *Economy and Society* (1978), exemplifies a Type II approach. Unlike Tönnies, Weber focused on actors and actions, but like Tönnies he was mostly concerned with developing classificatory schemas. He provided useful typologies of different types of actions such as the one distinguishing between goal-oriented rational action ('zweckrational'), value-oriented action ('wertrational'), emotional or affective action, and traditional action. But, given this classificatory orientation, he did not make as important contributions to our causal understanding of action – the causal links between A, B, and C in Figure 1 – nor to our understanding of how actions based on these different logics bring about different macro-level outcomes – the link between C and D in Figure 1.

Durkheim is a prototypical example of a Type III theorist. Like Tönnies, the phenomena he focused on typically were collective phenomena the characteristics of which he referred to as 'social facts'. He moved beyond the analyses of Tönnies in that he did not only classify the phenomena but sought to detail how they were related to one another. Partly for programmatic and strategic reasons, he often took an anti-actionist stance, and argued that sociology should be exclusively concerned with detailing how variables describing such aggregate entities were related to one another. As he once said: ‘The sufficient cause of a social fact should always be sought among preceding social facts’ (Durkheim 1895 [1978]: 191).

Tocqueville differs from Tönnies, Weber, and Durkheim in being a Type IV theorist. That is to say, the explanations he proposed mostly were action-based and he sought to causally relate the relevant properties of the social settings in which the individuals' were embedded to individuals’ action-relevant beliefs, sentiments, and habits, their mores. Furthermore, he sought to relate individuals’ actions to the larger social patterns he wanted to explain by explaining the latter as an outcome of the former. It is in this respect Tocqueville can be seen as a forerunner to contemporary analytical sociologists whose theories explain macro-level outcomes in terms of the intended and unintended effects of individual actions.
Concluding Remarks

We began this short discussion of Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America* by questioning the utility of the classics. But at the same time we argued that this work was interesting from a methodological perspective, and that we could learn from the explanatory strategy of the classics. In particular, we suggested that Tocqueville’s approach was a forerunner to what is now referred to as analytical sociology. We do not wish to renounce this position, but we will end by asking ourselves a rhetorical question: Will *Democracy in America* make it to the list of recommended readings that we pass on to our students interested in an analytical approach to sociology?

When assigning literature, foremost we want to provide our students with useful theoretical and methodological tools for analysing relevant and important contemporary social phenomena. Does *Democracy in America* provide this? After a careful reading we must conclude that the tools that can be extracted from the text leave something more to wish for. We find concepts that appear to make sense, but they are too loosely defined; we find a focus on the relations between micro and macro phenomena but his analysis is often unclear and sometimes even contradictory, etc. In short, we search intensely and find the seeds, but the fruit is long to grow ripe.

It is 170 years since the publication of *Democracy in America*, and since then many great, and small, minds have been at work struggling with the methodological and theoretical problems of sociological analysis. What we have at our disposal today is far superior to what Tocqueville came up with in *Democracy in America*. It is a great book, written by a great and admirable scholar. It clearly belongs to the classics. But it will not make it into our reading lists.
References.


