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Democracy and Its Friendly Critics: Tocqueville and Political Life Today (Book Review)

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Lawler, Peter Augustine, ed.

Democracy and Its Friendly Critics: Tocqueville and Political Life Today

Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004.

Peter Augustine Lawler, Dana Professor of Government at Berry College, is the author of many books and countless articles on public philosophy and political theory, including de Tocqueville. His latest book, *Democracy and Its Friendly Critics*, is an edited volume of essays highlighting de Tocqueville's contribution to the study and practice of politics. Democracy is not perfect, and friends of democracy are not flatterers, as Lawler instructs. De Tocqueville would not disagree. In the first chapter (the highlight of the book), Harvey Mansfield and Delba Winthrop provide a concise overview of "What Tocqueville Says to Liberals and Conservatives Today." Conservatives are right to stress self-interest, rightly understood, but they should not envision the market or religion as universal solutions. Liberals are correct to worry about communities but are wrong to place their full trust in government. Both sides, the authors conclude, should acknowledge the extent to which these views are complementary. In a fine example of using Tocquevillian methodology to treat a contemporary issue, Lawler's contribution ("Compassionate Conservatism and Biotechnology") emphasizes the importance of religion in light of science's inability to solve human mortality. Most of the remaining chapters focus on the religious or moral applications of de Tocqueville. Marc Guerra's "Profiles in American Thomism" and Matthew S. Holland's "Christian Love and the Foundations of American Politics" are typical. As Lawler explains in the introduction, "Astute defenders of liberty today cannot help but see some connection between loving God and loving America" (xi). Yet, by focusing almost exclusively on the religious component of his subject's teaching, Lawler does the impossible: diminish de Tocqueville. Absent from this volume, for instance, is any discussion of federalism and the dangers of centralization, the tension between equality and liberty, and the importance of voluntary associations in a participatory democracy, all integral parts of de Tocqueville. Although many edited volumes lack a unifying theme, this one fails in the opposite extreme, so much so that one might wonder if there is an agenda at work. The most curious part of the volume is the concluding chapter, by Mary P. Nichols and David K. Nichols. Aside from a cursory mention of de Tocqueville in the first sentence, it is a Machiavellian reading of Chazz Palminteri's (film) *A Bronx Tale*. Clearly, Lawler and his "friends"—as he calls the contributors—have taken great liberties with this volume, and the result, although thoughtful and in many ways compelling, is somewhat insulting. Perhaps the collection would be less brazen were the title and premise of the book not so promising. This is Lawler's third edited volume on de Tocqueville, but it also is by far his weakest. Readers interested in a more diverse and comprehensive collection on de Tocqueville should begin with his earlier books, *Tocqueville's Political Science* (1993) and *Tocqueville's Defense of Human Liberty* (1993). Although some chapters are more accessible than others, this book is best suited for academics with a formal background or serious interest in political theory.

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