

Course Proposal and Justification

Seminar in Public Writing: de Tocqueville's America

Fredrik B. deBoer

Writing and Rhetoric

I write to propose teaching a 400 level seminar, cross-listed in Writing & Rhetoric and Political Science, entitled "Seminar in Public Writing: de Tocqueville's America." The class will be a seminar revolving around Alexis de Tocqueville's seminal text *Democracy in America*, and using the text as a lens to consider public writing, public formation, and deliberative democracy.

Public writing is a field concerned both with writing objects designed for public consumption and with the theoretical and practical structures within public writing. It foregrounds the role writing plays in various types of political power structures, with an emphasis on its generative potential within a deliberative democracy. Public writing is ideally designed to produce effects within the world. Those effects may be as passive as mutual understanding or as active as generating concrete expression within the political process. In every case, public writing looks out from the individual or small group concerns of the creator of the writing onto a larger public to which it is addressed.

Dr. Linda Shamoon, in her textbook *Public Writing* (soon to be published by Longman Press), describes the process of public writing creating social change:

In our democratic society we ordinary citizens (as well as professional writers and those in leadership positions) who encounter a problem we consider to be public in nature may use many kinds of writing to arouse the concern of others in our community. Some in our society say we are *obligated* to speak out—or write—about such problems or issues. Initially, like Friedman, we may get little or no response to our demands for a remedy to the problem, but those of us who track an issue and seek or develop forums for our voices to be heard may find ourselves involved in many different kinds of public writing in support of our cause and working with others for solutions we had just begun to understand when we started.

Public writing assumes various stages of success. Generally, we see public writing succeeding in four stages:

- Recognition— the work of public writing is read/heard; the argument is recognized as having been made.
- Inclusion— the person or persons who produced the writing are recognized as valid members of the public, permitted to make public statements.
- Discussion— the piece of public writing is legitimately and openly debated in good faith.
- Action— the public writing produces effects more or less equivalent to those effects it was designed to produce.

Note that any piece of public writing need not be successful at any of these stages for it to be considered worthwhile by the person or persons writing it. Political dissidents and other out-group members often participate in public writing with no expectation that their writing will be recognized, included, discussed, or will generate the action they desire. The work of the public writing is still seen as beneficial and worthwhile even if it satisfies none of these stages, suggesting that perhaps a preliminary stage of success, Creation, may be added to the beginning of the above list.

This tendency for public writing to be created but to be denied entry into the space of public discourse concerns the second stage of success, inclusion. Public writing is deeply concerned with the question of who has the right to speak— that is, who is allowed entry into a particular public sphere. Public formation is one of the key theoretical areas of public writing, and it is here that we intersect with Alexis de Tocqueville and *Democracy in America*.

De Tocqueville's text is one of the seminal texts of early political science and a definitive statement on early American democracy. De Tocqueville, a traveling French nobleman who was deeply intrigued by the still-young American republic of the 1830s. Commissioned to examine the American prison system, de Tocqueville and his traveling companion sojourned across the United States and into parts of Canada, documenting many aspects of early American life that were in contrast to the practical and political norms of continental Europe. De Tocqueville's text is a useful historical account, but it is most valued today as one of the most important evolutions in the history of political science.

A pressing question animates de Tocqueville's text: why had republican representative democracy succeeded in America when it had seemingly failed in many other parts of the world? As an intrigued and sympathetic observer, de Tocqueville catalogs the unique elements of American democracy and civic participation. Concerned particularly with the intersection of religion, citizenship, and democratic duty, *Democracy in America* attempts to understand the particular American equation for successful representative democracy.

But of course, the success of 1830s America was success predicated on a system of brutal and oppressive inequities in power and quality of life, which de Tocqueville does not ignore. (It is relevant to point out that de Tocqueville's view on American democracy grew much darker in his later years.) Indeed, the question of slavery haunts the book.