

# Alexis de Tocqueville and Rifa'a Rafi' al-Tahtawi on the Virtues of Colonialism

Responses to Empire in 19th Century French and Egyptian Thought

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*Abstract: This paper is an exercise in comparative political theory. I argue that Alexis de Tocqueville and Rifa'a Badawi Rafi' al-Tahtawi share a similar justification for empire: that it will 1) generate glory for the conquering nation, and 2) cause its inward-looking population to become more socially and politically active. Their justifications nevertheless differ, and I show that Tahtawi's argument for the anti-democratic effects of colonialism presents a potent challenge to Tocqueville.*

The purpose of this paper is to examine the justifications for colonialism of Rifa'a Badawi Rafi' al-Tahtawi (1801-73) and Alexis de Tocqueville (1805-1859), two contemporaries separated by language, religion, and political circumstance who nonetheless arrive at strikingly similar justifications for their countries' colonial ventures. Though one was an Egyptian serving in the Ottoman bureaucracy and the other (among other things) a representative in the French National Assembly, Tahtawi and Tocqueville have been compared before<sup>1</sup> – and why not? Their political and intellectual careers were animated by many of the same concerns: the relationship between political centralization and political apathy, the decline of public life, and the role of culture in the fates of civilizations. But their views on colonialism have yet to be presented side-by-side. In fact, despite his seminal role in the development of modern Arab and Islamic political thought, Tahtawi's views on Egypt's colonization of Sudan have yet to receive any sustained treatment in the scholarly literature. With the exception of Melvin Richter's

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<sup>1</sup> Euben, R. L. (2006). Journeys to the Other Shore: Muslim and Western Travelers in Search of Knowledge. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 90-133.

path-breaking work in the 1960s and the more recent scholarship by Jennifer Pitts, neither have Tocqueville's views on Algeria.<sup>2</sup>

Fortunately, recent years has seen a resurgence of interest in both European and Islamic colonial ideologies. In the case of the former, this was stimulated in part by the question of how prominent figures in the liberal tradition (eg. James and John Stuart Mill, Saint-Simon, Condorcet) might champion the cause of human liberty in Europe, and at the same time forcefully advocate for colonization in India, Africa, and the New World. Uday Mehta has argued that the desire for colonial conquest is "an integral and characteristic feature" of the British liberal tradition, that it practices a "strategy of exclusion" that denies liberty to those lacking the requisite social credentials.<sup>3</sup> His argument has prompted some criticism, as many prominent British liberals – Bentham, Maine, and Spencer among them – were skeptical of British imperialism.<sup>4</sup> Meanwhile, Sankar Muthu has pushed for a reassessment of 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century attitudes towards empire, claiming in part that a prominent stream of Enlightenment thought saw colonialism as the negation of its values, not their greatest expression.<sup>5</sup>

The scholarship on Islamic colonial ideologies is much more limited, in large part because there are so few examples of Muslim colonialism to draw upon. The period of time during which something like colonialism could have occurred in the Middle East was relatively brief; large-scale, centralized states did not begin to form in the region until the end of the eighteenth century, by which time they were just four or five decades away from losing their political and economic independence to their European creditors.<sup>6</sup> The only real example of colonialism in the Middle East, therefore, was Egypt's invasion and conquest of the Sudan in 1820-21. There is bound to be some debate over whether Egypt's rule there was, in fact, colonialism, and not just another incidence of invasion, conquest, and occupation. A number of scholars have argued in recent years that it was, and moreover that Egypt self-consciously modeled its own rule over Sudan on the British imperial example.<sup>7</sup> Most important nineteenth century Egyptian intellectuals (including Ali Mubarak, Ya'qub Sanu'a, and Jamal al-Din al-Afghani) who discussed the matter

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<sup>2</sup> Richter, M. (1963). "Tocqueville on Algeria." *The Review of Politics* 25(3): 362-398; Pitts, J. (2005). *A Turn to Empire: The Rise of Imperial Liberalism in Britain and France*. Princeton, Princeton University Press.

<sup>3</sup> Mehta, U. S. (1999). *Liberalism and Empire: A Study in Nineteenth-Century British Liberal Thought*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 194.

<sup>4</sup> Bell, D. S. A. (2006). "Empire and International Relations in Victorian Political Thought." *Historical Journal* 49(1): 281-298.

<sup>5</sup> Muthu, S. (2003). *Enlightenment Against Empire*. Princeton, N.J., Princeton University Press.

<sup>6</sup> It seems appropriate here to offer a brief definition of colonialism, one that will both contribute to a more precise analysis and help explain why this comparison across cultures is justified. By colonialism, we are referring to the project in which a nation-state attempts to politically, economically, and culturally subjugate a foreign population in such a way that erects a *regime of difference*.

<sup>7</sup> See Powell, E. T. (2003). *A Different Shade of Colonialism: Egypt, Great Britain, and the Mastery of the Sudan*. Berkeley, University of California Press; Lawson, F. H. (1992). *The Social Origins of Egyptian Expansionism During the Muhammad Ali Period*. New York, Columbia University Press; also Wendell, C. (1972). *The Evolution of the Egyptian National Image: From its Origins to Ahmad Lutfi al-Sayyid*. Berkeley, University of California Press, 164.

were supportive of Egypt's role there, and they justified their support on the grounds that Egypt had a duty, as the superior civilization, to improve the political, economic, and religious conditions of the Sudanese. This sort of justification would be familiar to many European liberals, and no doubt Mehta would see in it some of the same "strategies of exclusion" he finds in John Stuart Mill.

That is precisely why the contributions of Tahtawi and Tocqueville are so interesting. Unlike many of their contemporaries, both men concluded that colonialism promised little benefit for the colonized – on the contrary, that foreign rule had only worsened the situation for the Sudanese and Algerians. Yet they remained staunch supporters of their countries' rule there, on the grounds that doing so would improve the domestic political situation. Tahtawi believed Egyptian rule over Sudan was a powerful reminder to the Egyptian people of their past greatness, and that its grand colonial venture in Africa would serve as a sort of spur toward their own, individual greatness in public life. Tocqueville argued something strikingly similar, claiming that France's presence in Algeria was justified on the grounds that it would encourage political solidarity and engagement domestically, and promote France's reputation and position abroad. Despite their support for colonialism, therefore, neither Tahtawi nor Tocqueville can be lumped together with Mubarak, Mill, and others who celebrated their country's great *mission civilisatrice*. How could they be, when Tahtawi and Tocqueville were both so anxious about the status of their own civilizations? Far from triumphantly heralding the virtues of Egypt or France, both men were deeply anxious about their home countries, and were not entirely comfortable with the prospect of exporting their civilizations across the globe. It is this *anxiety* over civilization, coming at a time of great domestic turmoil and weakness, that lies beneath the surface of both men's writings, and what sets them apart from so many of their contemporaries.

This paper will begin by taking up the life and thought of Tahtawi. Since he is unlikely to be familiar to most readers, a slightly longer biography seems warranted. His philosophy of history, and the way it affirms his justifications for colonialism, will be presented. Next, it will take up Tocqueville's justifications for French colonialism in Algeria. These two sections comprise what might be called the "historical-descriptive" portion of the paper, and together they present an original interpretation of each man's argument. They do not, however, place the two theories into conversation with each other, nor evaluate their relative strengths and weaknesses. That will be the task of the third section of the paper, to address what Andrew March has called the "epistemic" duty of comparative political theory.<sup>8</sup> Taking the arguments of Tocqueville and Tahtawi seriously means taking sides, and though they begin from similar premises and suggest similar solutions, the two men arrive at completely contradictory conclusions. Whereas for Tocqueville, colonialism would result in the revitalization of French democracy and liberty, Tahtawi sees it as a means toward strengthening the power of Egypt's absolute monarch. In the third and final section of this paper, this contradiction will be confronted. By carefully unpacking each theory and laying them side-by-side, we will be

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<sup>8</sup> March, A. F. (2009). "What Is Comparative Political Theory?" *The Review of Politics*, 71(4): 538-39. Another good example of this is to be found in Jenco, L. K. (2007). "'What Does Heaven Ever Say?': A Methods-Centered Approach to Cross-Cultural Engagement." *American Political Science Review* 101(4): 741-755.

able to see how each becomes the other's best critic – and that Tahtawi may present to Tocqueville a challenge he cannot meet.

### I. Rifa'a Badawi Rafi' al-Tahtawi

Rifa'a Badawi Rafi' al-Tahtawi was born in the town of Tahta in Upper Egypt in 1801. At sixteen he entered al-Azhar University in Cairo, where he studied under Shaykh Hassan al-'Attar, a reform-minded 'alim who favored European sciences and was one of the first Egyptian scholars to attend Napoleon's Institut d'Egypte.<sup>9</sup> While at al-Azhar, Tahtawi was educated in the classical Islamic sciences, including Qur'anic and *hadith* studies, *usul al-fiqh*, philosophy, and Arabic grammar. Like al-'Attar, he possessed a keen interest in European culture, so was pleased when he was appointed by Muhammad Ali in 1826 to serve as imam to Egypt's first student delegation to Paris. While his official duties were limited to religious matters, Tahtawi took a keen interest in European culture and sciences, and over the next five years became fluent in the French language and familiar with some of the major figures in eighteenth century French thought, among them Voltaire, Condillac, Rousseau, and Montesquieu.<sup>10</sup> He seems to have been particularly impressed with Rousseau and Montesquieu, the latter of whom he slyly dubbed the "European Ibn Khaldun", a play on the Orientalist custom of calling Ibn Khaldun the "Montesquieu of Islam."<sup>11</sup>

Upon his return to Egypt in 1831, Tahtawi entered into public service in the court of Muhammad Ali. The travelogue of his time in Paris, *Takhlis al-Ibriz fi Talkhis Bariz* ("The Extraction of Gold from a Distillation of Paris") was published three years later and became immensely popular. After several false starts, Tahtawi was ordered to open a language school for the translation into Arabic of French texts (chiefly works of military, medical, and engineering techniques), though he also arranged for the translation of several works of history, philosophy, and logic.<sup>12</sup> It was here that Tahtawi's career truly took off, and he continuously won favor from the court for his careful translations of works that were seen, in light of Muhammad Ali's drive to reform the country's military and economy, absolutely essential.

For the next sixteen years, his star would continue to rise, but with the death of Muhammad Ali in 1848 and his succession by his son Abbas I in 1850, Tahtawi's fortunes changed dramatically. The new khedive (ruler) was less interested in European learning, and Tahtawi's school was closed. Not long after, and for reasons still not fully clear, he was exiled to Sudan with the vague instruction that he should open some sort of school for the children of Egyptian officers there. He languished in Khartoum for the

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<sup>9</sup> Hourani, A. (1983). *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age, 1798-1939*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 69. The best introduction to the thought of Hassan al-'Attar, and its influence on Tahtawi, remains Peter Gran's *The Islamic Roots of Capitalism: Egypt, 1760-1840*. Austin, University of Texas Press, 1979.

<sup>10</sup> There is no evidence to suggest he knew of or had read anything by Tocqueville.

<sup>11</sup> *Takhlis al-Ibriz fi Talkhis Bariz*, (2004). London, Saqi, 293. Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406) was a Tunisian-born bureaucrat and polymath. His *Muqaddimah* was enormously influential in Tahtawi's time, and remains today one of the most important works of Islamic political theory.

<sup>12</sup> Tahtawi, R. a. R. and D. L. Newman (2004). *An Imam in Paris: Account of a Stay in France by an Egyptian Cleric (1826-1831)*. London, Saqi, 46.

next four years, sending home a stream of letters protesting his treatment and declaring his loyalty to Abbas. Sudan in this period was a virtual Gulag, the dumping ground for troublesome Egyptians, a place where they could be conveniently forgotten until such time as the political situation changed or they succumbed to disease. More often it was the latter, since by all accounts the mortality rate among Egyptian exiles in Sudan was astronomical.<sup>13</sup> While in Khartoum, Tahtawi translated Fenelon's *Les Aventures de Telemaque*, an author with whom he must have closely identified, since he too was forced into exile for his work's veiled criticisms of the ruling regime.<sup>14</sup>

In 1854, Abbas was assassinated by two of his eunuchs and Tahtawi was recalled to active life. He bounced from bureau to bureau for a time, holding a series of positions all roughly similar to those he held before his exile. In addition to translating many more French texts, he also completed two major "philosophical" works of his own. In *Manahij al-albab al-Misriyya fi mabahij al-abab al-asriyya* ("The Roads of Egyptian Hearts in the Joys of the Contemporary Arts"), he lays out his defense of absolutist government and some of his views on contemporary politics. In *Anwar tawfiq al-jalil fi akhbar Misr wa tawthiq bani Isma'il* ("The Lights of the Great Success in Events about Egypt and the Strengthening of Isma'il's Dynasty"), he tells the history of Egypt, beginning with the pharaonic period and ending with the Muslim conquest. A biography of the Prophet Muhammad was written as well, but he died before it could be published. Tahtawi was seventy-two.

### **The loss of Arab science**

Tahtawi's justifications for colonialism rest on his peculiar notion of science and its relationship with political greatness. The problem, as he saw it, can be stated simply enough: how did Egypt, a civilization that had once stood at the forefront of science, the arts, and military might, fall so far behind Europe? How did it come to be that a French expeditionary force could so easily dispatch the powerful Mamluk army, and in short order conquer (and completely reorganize) the whole of Lower Egypt?<sup>15</sup> And by what means did Europe's rulers and bankers acquire such control over Egypt's economy, when for so much of its history Egypt had dominated trade in the eastern Mediterranean? In answering these questions, Tahtawi would develop a philosophy of history and science that would lead him to suggest colonialism as a solution to Egyptian decline.

According to Tahtawi, Egypt's inferiority to Europe was visible in many spheres (eg. artistically, economically, militarily) but all could be traced back to the disastrous state of Egyptian sciences and scientific culture. During the time of the Pharaohs, Egypt had been at the forefront of scientific innovation – what Tahtawi calls the non-*shari'ilm*,

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 53.

<sup>14</sup> Interestingly, Tahtawi was not the only writer on colonialism whose thought was affected by Fenelon's *Telemaque*. Both Diderot and Rousseau were deeply influenced by it as well, particularly by its idealized depiction of noble savagery and Classical perfection. See Muthu 2003, p. 47, and Riley, P. (2001). *The Cambridge Companion to Rousseau*. Cambridge; New York, Cambridge University Press, 78-93.

<sup>15</sup> In 1798, a French force, led by Napoleon, defeated the Mamluk army at the Battle of the Pyramids. After the French forces returned to Europe in 1801, Muhammad Ali was installed by the Ottoman sultan.

(*‘ilm* = knowledge), meaning the body of knowledge separate from those pertaining to the religious, and especially legal, sciences. Traditionally, the non-*shari ‘ilm* has been an amalgamation of Aristotelian physics, Ptolemaic astronomy, and Galenic medicine, all wedded to the metaphysics of the Qur’an. Tahtawi claimed that ancient Egypt was the font of all non-*shari ‘ilm*, and that all subsequent scientific discoveries owed their origins to ancient Egyptian culture.<sup>16</sup> Ptolemaic Alexandria, for instance, was essentially Egyptian (and not Greek) in character, and by right could lay claim to Abbasid and Fatimid sciences and natural philosophy as well. The ancient Greeks themselves had acknowledged their debt to Egypt, and hadn’t Solon, Pythagoras, and Plato all traveled there in search of illumination? In a very real sense, all subsequent European and Islamic science was still fundamentally Egyptian in nature, and belonged more to Egypt than to any other country or civilization.<sup>17</sup> The Franks themselves had conceded as much when they told Tahtawi that “we were their teachers in all sciences and that we had an advance on them.... Is it not so that the one who comes later delves into what has been left [by his predecessor], and is guided by his directions?”<sup>18</sup>

After the Muslim armies conquered Egypt in 639, leadership in the sciences was transferred to Islam and the Abbasid high caliphate in Baghdad. While no longer the precise center, Egypt retained its pre-eminence under the Fatimid caliphate, and might indeed have continued to advance scientific learning were it not for the disastrous accident of foreign rule. It was the conquest of Egypt by the Mamluks and the rest of the Arab lands by the Turks that ended the advance of science in those regions. Tahtawi is frustratingly vague about what exactly it is about foreign rule that was so disadvantageous for the sciences, or for that matter why a foreigner like Muhammad Ali (who was born in modern-day Albania and never learned to speak or write Arabic) was not equally problematic. But with the Mamluks and Turks in power, the light of science dimmed in Egypt, and was instead taken up by the Franks who carried it forward to its present splendor. Egypt quickly fell behind, whatever grandeur it once possessed memorialized now in broken temples and toppled statues.

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<sup>16</sup> Beginning his history of Egypt with the pharaohs and not with the Muslim conquests of Egypt in 639-642 was unusual in Tahtawi’s time. Most historians of his period began their chronology with the introduction of Islam, regarding all that went before as *jahiliyya* (the Age of Ignorance) during which nothing of great importance occurred. Tahtawi’s decision to do otherwise reflects the growing interest among Egyptians of his day with Pharaonic culture, an interest that coincided with French excavations of ancient Egyptian temples and monuments. Tahtawi worked hard to preserve his country’s ownership of Pharaonic artifacts, and vigorously protested Muhammad Ali’s decision to present an obelisk to King Louis-Philippe. As his career in public service developed, he became a leading voice in defense of Egypt’s ownership over its antiquities, and made his case increasingly in nationalist terms.

<sup>17</sup> Tahtawi’s attempt to link modern natural science to that of ancient Egypt – and to present each as recognizable versions of non-*shari ‘ilm* – was his way of responding to the critics of Muhammad Ali’s reformist policies. The khedive’s decision to import hundreds of European scholars, technocrats, and translators, and to introduce Western pedagogical methods, was deeply unpopular with most religious leaders. Tahtawi clearly hoped that by presenting European science as something familiar and fundamentally Egyptian, he could win them over and clear the path for reform.

<sup>18</sup> *Takhlis*, 105.

### **“Man is his own doctor!”**

The rule of Muhammad Ali (despite his foreign birth) represented for Tahtawi a real opportunity for recovery and advancement. He could not, however, do it alone. It is here that Tahtawi fleshes out his history by introducing to it an element that heretofore has been strangely absent: society. If science is portrayed in Tahtawi's writings as almost a sort of physical object that can be taken up and wielded as situations dictate, it appears at first as if it is only states and their rulers doing the wielding. Much of the focus in his history is on the importance of good rulers, who must possess the requisite virtues if their reign is to be a success. But Tahtawi's experience in France left him convinced that sound leadership was not enough – *society* must also be enlisted if Egypt was to recover its ancient glory.

The discovery of society and the “social problem” marks an important moment in Arab and Islamic political thought.<sup>19</sup> When speaking of society, Tahtawi had to literally invent terms like *al-hay'at al-mujtama'iyah* or *ijtima' al-bashri*, both of which are derived from the Arabic root *al-mujtama'*, which connotes both a place (meeting place, place of assembly) and a moment of encounter (gathering, assembly).<sup>20</sup> Prior to the nineteenth century, there was no developed notion of “society” as a separate sphere of human activity in Islamic political thought. Rather, communities were more apt to be thought of in terms of religious belief, of Sunni and Shi'a, of Muslim and *kafir* (unbeliever). To be sure, individual communities could be broken down into smaller groups (eg. rulers, religious scholars, warriors, producers) but people *qua* individuals were left undefined and largely excluded from any functional role in public life.<sup>21</sup> This began to change in the early nineteenth century as Muslim intellectuals needed to explain what, exactly, was causing them to fall so far behind Europe. Affected by the social science literature current in Europe, and shaped also by the penetration of capital markets in the Middle East and India, it became possible to think of a polity as constituted by a society of peoples, each person performing some function essential for the health of that polity.

Tahtawi was writing at a time when the concept of “society” was first coming into fashion in the Middle East, and in his political philosophy, it helped to explain why good rulership alone seemed incapable of resurrecting Egypt's fortunes. It was not a failure of leadership or the imposition of foreign rule – both had been rectified by Muhammad Ali. Rather, it was a failure of society. This point was dramatized for Tahtawi again and again during his time in France. Compared to Egyptians, he writes, the people of Paris

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<sup>19</sup> The “discovery of society” has received extensive attention in the scholarly literature. See, for instance, Mitchell, T. (1988). *Colonizing Egypt*. Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 63-94; Mitchell, T. (2002). *Rule of Experts : Egypt, Techno-politics, Modernity*. Berkeley, University of California Press, 54-119.

<sup>20</sup> Tripp, C. (2006). *Islam and the Moral Economy: The Challenge of Capitalism*. Cambridge; New York, Cambridge University Press, 18.

<sup>21</sup> Israel Altman notes that Tahtawi preserves the Medieval Islamic conception of society as comprised of these various orders. He hastens to add, however, that *within* each order, Tahtawi encourages individuals to “strive to improve [their] economic conditions and social status.” Attention must be paid, therefore, to producers as individuals, and not just anonymous members of a larger group. See Altman, I. (1976). *The Political Thought of Rifa'ah Rafi' al-Tahtawi: A Nineteenth Century Egyptian Reformer*. PhD diss., 139.

possessed a vibrancy and energy almost manic in its potency. Parisians distinguished themselves by their inquisitive nature and intellectual sophistication.<sup>22</sup> They had a keen interest in all manner of arts and sciences, and had established universities and academies dedicated to learning. This love of science was not limited to professional scholars (who flourish in Paris), but rather was a sentiment widely shared among all citizens. The French had “a natural propensity for the acquisition of learning and a craving for the knowledge of all things.”<sup>23</sup> Literacy was wide spread, and no home was without its own private library of a few select volumes. Frenchmen were always moving, always dancing from one idea to the next with an intellectual and emotional dexterity Tahtawi purposefully juxtaposes with their physical agility, such that one can “see a respectable personage running down the street like a small child.”<sup>24</sup> They were passionate to a fault and always in the throes of some great emotion, but never let anything get in the way of their commitment to their work. This drive to acquire more knowledge and complete great tasks was partly, Tahtawi writes, out of a practical desire to gain some material reward. But it also came from a place of vanity, a wish to earn “the glory ensuing from a reputation and the desire to leave a lasting memory.”<sup>25</sup>

In contrast, Egyptians were a slow, idle, and incurious people. They had little in the way of a public presence, and kept instead largely to themselves and their private lives. Few were literate, and even fewer engaged in any sort of public debate. Possessing neither vanity nor a desire for glory, they wiled away their days engrossed in petty, private affairs. Most of all, the people of Egypt did not rule themselves. They did not order their lives or shape their behavior in ways conducive to the public good. The French, for all their energy and motion, followed certain pre-defined rules and patterns. Egyptians, on the other hand, followed no rules, no patterns. What they lacked was *al-siyasa al-dhatiyya*, the “politics of the self” that makes man master of his own body. If a man cannot rule his own body, then he cannot serve the *maslahah* (public good), and his civilization will collapse. Science will wither, politics will stagnate, and the country will fall.

The custom of the civilized world has been to teach children the Holy Qur’an, in the case of the countries of Islam, and in other countries their own books of religion, and then to teach them an occupation. This in itself is unobjectionable. The Islamic countries, however, have neglected to teach the rudiments of the science of sovereign government and its applications, which are a general governing power, particularly as regards the inhabitants of the villages.<sup>26</sup>

The “general governing power” Tahtawi refers to is precisely that quality that gives man mastery over himself. It is “an individual’s inspection of his actions, circumstances, words, character, and desires, and his control of them with the reins of his reason.... Man

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<sup>22</sup> *Takhliis* 251.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, 253.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, 174.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, 173.

<sup>26</sup> Quoted in Mitchell 1988, 102.



is in fact his own doctor.”<sup>27</sup> Government and politics are extended here from the affairs of state to the affairs of the self, to matters of personal hygiene, education, and diet. Problems that heretofore had been considered completely unimportant to the business of government now, to Tahtawi, ranked among its chief concerns. Moreover, the refusal of people to recognize its importance suddenly appeared to be a disturbing retreat into private life, a denial of what was the ultimate public concern.

Tahtawi’s preferred solution to this problem was education reform, but education was slow. The effects of better education would not be felt for a generation at least, and even then would be uneven and incomplete. What the people needed in the meantime, he argued, was some sort of great political event, some momentous action that would remind them of their past glories and ancient grandeur. For this, he claimed the Egyptian conquest and colonization of the Sudan was uniquely suited. As a political event, it was undeniably of the highest magnitude. Moreover, by reuniting the two halves of the Nile, it established a clear link between Pharaonic Egypt and the kingdom of Muhammad Ali. *What the Pharaohs had lost was now, at long last, reclaimed.* The sheer power of that idea could not help but excite the imagination and stir the soul.

Tahtawi had not always justified colonialism this way. In the *Tahklis*, he describes Muhammad Ali’s conquest of Sudan as a *jihad*, as a means toward unfurling the “banners of might and justice” over all the land<sup>28</sup>, and in several points in his earlier writings, he discusses the importance of civilizing Sudan.<sup>29</sup> After the 1850s, this talk ends. The time he spent exiled in Khartoum left him convinced that the Sudanese were unfit for civilization and incapable of advancing beyond their near animal-like condition: Half of them are like beasts and the other half like stones, he wrote. They smear grease all over their hair and bodies, like one does with a camel to protect it against tick bites. They violate the *shari’a*, force their women into prostitution, and promote all manner of sexual deviance. They are lazy, disorganized, and naturally shiftless. Were it not for “the white Arabs” (*al-bid min ‘Arab*) the Sudanese would be nothing but “a blackness in a blackness”.<sup>30</sup> Tahtawi’s description of the Sudanese is written in the form of a *qasida* – a poem – that he had originally intended to send back to Egypt as proof of his dire condition. The poem was never sent, but it was later included in his *Manahij al-albab*, where he compares himself to “a prisoner in the jail of the Zanj”. Alone, forgotten, cut off from civilization and abandoned to the wilderness, Tahtawi’s hopelessness becomes overwhelming: “*la hayata li man tunadi*” (there is no hope – all is done for).<sup>31</sup>

Against such pessimism, colonialism must either collapse or find for itself a new rationale. Tahtawi found his in the politics of the self. No Egyptian, upon seeing the barbaric depths to which the Sudanese had sunk, could maintain any longer his posture of apathy and idleness. Instead, he would be seized by a desire to perform great deeds, as the newly remembered Pharaohs once did and his own country was doing now. Egypt would reclaim its position at the forefront of science, its reputation as a great power

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 104.

<sup>28</sup> *Tahklis*, 96.

<sup>29</sup> Altman, 93.

<sup>30</sup> Wendell, 130-131.

<sup>31</sup> Powell, 54.

secured. Best of all, this revitalization of society would be achieved without in any way threatening the security of the government. Because colonialism was an expression of *state-led* glorious politics, the people of Egypt could not challenge the state without rejecting that glory – and this they would not do. Tahtawi had been in France for the Revolution of 1830; he had seen first-hand how an over-active public could bring down a monarch. Colonialism provided a way of revitalizing public life that even a supporter of absolutism like Tahtawi could get behind.

## II. Alexis de Tocqueville

Between the publications of *Democracy in America* and *The Old Regime and the Revolution*, more than sixteen years passed. During that time, Tocqueville ran for office twice, won once, and wound up representing the district of Valognes in the Chamber of Deputies. When that body was dissolved in 1848, he was elected again to its successor, the National Assembly. He even served briefly as France's foreign minister during the short-lived Barrot administration. For all his many interests and expertise, however, his chief concern during this period was with France's recent colonial acquisition, Algeria. Indeed, Tocqueville emerged as a leading expert on the "Algeria question". He visited Algeria twice (1841 and 1846) and contemplated buying land there and becoming a farmer. He wrote many essays on the subject, read about half the Qur'an, and even made some inquiries into learning Arabic.<sup>32</sup> Though he never published a book-length manuscript on the subject, French colonialism was one of the major interests of his life, and he publicly declared it the country's "greatest affair", one that sits "at the forefront of all the interests France has in the world."<sup>33</sup>

The purpose of this section is to show how, despite his reputation as a defender of liberty and democracy, Tocqueville nevertheless was a forceful advocate for the conquest and colonial rule of Algeria. It will not seek to reconcile these two competing positions, but it will attempt to show how his support for colonialism came about. In the process, a novel justification for colonialism will be presented, one strikingly similar to Tahtawi's own defense for Egyptian rule in the Sudan: namely, that the French imperial project was an expression of Great Politics, a manifestation of public virtue that would inspire the people and spur them toward some act of national greatness.

### A fugitive politics

In the fifty years before Tocqueville's birth, the colonial empires of France, Britain, and Spain all suffered major setbacks that undermined the ideologies that sustained them. France in 1763 and Britain in 1776 both lost some of their most valuable New World possessions, and Spain seemed poised to follow suit. The Continent had been wracked by unprecedented political turmoil and revolution, and its politicians found it increasingly difficult to justify so much expenditure for so little profit. In France, the *ancien regime's* imperial holdings abroad were seen as confirmation of its illiberal rule at home, and to

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<sup>32</sup> Tocqueville, A. d. and J. Pitts (2001). *Writings on Empire and Slavery*. Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, xii.

<sup>33</sup> "Intervention in the Debate Over the Appropriation of Special Funding", in Tocqueville and Pitts (2001) 122, 127.

criticize the former became a means of undermining the latter. Diderot, Rousseau, and Voltaire all emerged as powerful critics of French colonialism, and their arguments found an eager audience amongst a population already hostile toward the monarchy. Pagden has argued – with perhaps a touch of hyperbole – that by 1800 the political and economic situation for Europe’s over-seas empires was so dire that “their theorists had talked themselves into a position from which no right-thinking person should have been able to contemplate the creation of new empires.”<sup>34</sup>

Of course, no one would accuse a political theorist of being right-thinking. The nineteenth century witnessed the greatest colonial expansion in history, with vast empires stretching across India, Africa, and Central Asia. These new empires were different from the old ones – for the most part, they were interested in exploitation and resource extraction, not settlement. Instead of relying on slave labor (which was quickly becoming ethically untenable, and unprofitable to boot) the new colonies only attempted labor-intensive enterprises where a large native population already existed. Labor was to be paid for, not coerced, and to forestall any chance of rebellion or uprising, the relationship between colonizer and colonized was to be one of parent and child, a “tutelage” to the benefit of each.

In some ways, the French invasion of Algeria in 1830 was both an exception to and a chief exemplar of this new, gentler kind of colonialism. Initially conceived as an outpost of republican values on the African continent, the occupying army was faced with a population so hostile that it was soon forced to resort to the very violence and cruelties that had been so roundly criticized in the 1770s and 1780s. France was saddled from the start with an impossible situation. Far from beginning from a place of strength, France’s invasion of Algiers was carried out by a dying government – a last, desperate attempt by the unpopular Bourbons to win public support and stave off defeat.<sup>35</sup> The attempt failed, and the government was overthrown later that year. The crown was offered instead to Louis-Philippe, who, backed by a liberal government, continued the conquest and colonization of Algeria.

Though Tocqueville’s own career was greatly complicated by the 1830 Revolution (his father had been a prominent “legitimist”, or supporter of the Bourbons), he looked upon the conquest of Algeria with no small amount of enthusiasm. For the duration of his service in public life, he was a staunch defender of France’s colony there, and a tireless proponent of imperial expansion. For many Tocqueville scholars, the relevant question here has been how to reconcile his defense of colonialism abroad with his support for democracy and liberty at home.<sup>36</sup> This question need not delay us here –

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<sup>34</sup> Pagden, A. (1995). Lords of All the World: Ideologies of Empire in Spain, Britain and France c. 1500-c. 1800. New Haven, Conn., Yale University Press, 6.

<sup>35</sup> Jardin, A. and A. J. Tudesq (1983). Restoration and Reaction, 1815-1848. Cambridge; New York; Paris, Cambridge University Press ; Editions de la Maison des sciences de l'homme, 159-160.

<sup>36</sup> See for instance Richter 1963; Pitts 2005; Boesche, R. (2005). "The Dark Side of Tocqueville: On War and Empire." The Review of Politics 67(4): 737-752; Connolly, W. E. (1994). "Tocqueville, Territory and Violence." Theory, Culture & Society, 11(1): 19; Welch, C. B. (2003). "Colonial Violence and the Rhetoric of Evasion: Tocqueville on Algeria." Political Theory 31(2): 235-264.

suffice to say that not all authors think they *can* be reconciled.<sup>37</sup> Regardless of its consistency with his overall work, however, Tocqueville's justification for colonialism is important because it is so strikingly different from the "tutelage" arguments of Condorcet, Saint-Simon, and the Mills.

Tocqueville viewed the aftermath of the 1830 Revolution with dismay – not because he was sympathetic to the Bourbons, but rather because their overthrow had so completely exhausted the passions of the public. His *Recollections*, a chronicle of that period, vividly describes the general ennui that took hold of the population following the installation of the new government. Like the rest of his published materials, it is a pleasure to read and worth quoting from at length:

No sooner had the Revolution of 1830 become an accomplished fact, than there ensued a great lull in political passion, a sort of general subsidence, accompanied by a rapid increase in public wealth. The particular spirit of the middle class became the general spirit of the government; it ruled the latter's foreign policy as well as affairs at home: an active, industrious spirit, often dishonorable, generally orderly, occasionally reckless through vanity or egoism, but timid by temperament, moderate in all things except in its love of ease and comfort, and last but not least mediocre. It was a spirit which, mingled with that of the people or of the aristocracy, can do wonders; but which by itself, will never produce more than a government shorn of both virtue and greatness. Master of everything in a manner that no aristocracy has ever been or may ever hope to be, the middle class, when called upon to assume the government, took it up as an industrial enterprise; it entrenched itself behind its power, and before long, in their egoism, each of its members thought much more of his private business than of public affairs; of his personal enjoyment than of the greatness of the nation.<sup>38</sup>

Several of the themes here will be familiar to those who have read *Democracy in America* or *The Old Regime and the Revolution*: virtue, political greatness, patriotism, and their vulnerability to a bourgeois ethic of mediocrity. When the *Recollections* were published in 1851, France had already experienced three revolutions, and as far as Tocqueville was concerned, each one had failed to erect anything meaningful in its place. The passionate sentiments that had swept the nation on the eve of each uprising seemed, in the light of day, to evaporate into air. In France, the political was always "a fugitive experience" that eludes all capture, where the majority will has barely *any* will to speak of, and society is not a cohesive unit, but rather "a loose collection of separate individuals content if protected in their personal rights," amorphous, anonymous, and incapable of "[recognizing] itself as an actor, much less as *the* actor."<sup>39</sup> America had fared better after its revolution; indeed, "[n]othing is more annoying in the ordinary intercourse of life than

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<sup>37</sup> Richter: 364.

<sup>38</sup> Tocqueville, A. d. (1970). *Recollections*. London, Macdonald & Co., 3.

<sup>39</sup> Wolin, S. S. (2001). *Tocqueville Between Two Worlds: The Making of a Political and Theoretical Life*. Princeton, N.J., Princeton University Press, 198.

this irritable patriotism of the Americans.”<sup>40</sup> But the situation in France was different. The revolution there had devoured too much, and in the absence of any new customs, *mores*, or memory of the past, what was there left for the people to believe in?

Then men see their country only by a weak and doubtful light; their patriotism is not centered on the soil, which in their eyes is just inanimate earth, nor on the customs of their ancestors, which they have been taught to regard as a yoke, nor on religion, which they doubt, nor on laws, which they do not make, nor on the lawgiver, whom they fear and scorn. So they find their country nowhere, recognizing neither its own nor any borrowed features, and they retreat into a narrow and unenlightened egoism.<sup>41</sup>

This was Tocqueville’s dilemma: how to shake his countrymen out of their private egoism and inspire in them some sense of patriotism. The solution, he concluded, must be some sort of spectacle, a glorious expression of national greatness and sacrifice so inspiring, they will race to participate in public life. Colonialism was that spectacle.

Tocqueville’s first impressions of the country were electric. As his ship came round Cape Caxine, the city of Algiers came into view, looking for all the world like “an immense quarry of white rock sparkling in the sun....I have never seen anything like it.” The sheer energy of the city nearly overwhelmed him: “This whole world moves about with an activity that seems feverish. The entire lower town seems in a state of destruction and reconstruction. On all sides, one sees nothing but recent ruins, buildings going up; one hears nothing but the noise of the hammer. It is Cincinnati transported onto the soil of Africa.”<sup>42</sup> In his early writings, Tocqueville saw in Algeria all that was absent in France: energy, dynamism, passionate debates and public discourse. But he also saw much that concerned him, particularly the ham-fisted way the French army and civil administration went about the business of government. The same mistakes the French made after the 1789 Revolution were now being made in Algeria, only this time it was the destruction of Ottoman norms, institutions, and customs. No lessons had been learned; they had merely exported their disastrous style of rule from one country to another.<sup>43</sup> Rather than follow the British model of indirect rule – which Tocqueville

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<sup>40</sup> Tocqueville, A. d. (1969). Democracy in America. tr. G. Lawrence. New York, Harper Row., 237. Tocqueville believed American patriotism was generated by citizens’ participation in local associations. Individual pride and ambition drives private men into the hurly-burly of political life, who learn as a result how dependent they are on each other. Mutual sympathies form, help is exchanged, and something like patriotism begins to take root. In this way, private citizens are made public. Democracy in America 509-13.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, 236.

<sup>42</sup> “Notes on the Voyage to Algeria in 1841” in Tocqueville and Pitts (2001) 36.

<sup>43</sup> Tocqueville considered its colonies the best place to judge a country’s form of government, because “there all its characteristic traits are usually enlarged, and become more visible. When I want to judge the spirit of the government of Louis XIV and its vices, it is to Canada that I must go. There one can perceive the object’s deformities as if under a microscope.” See n20 in The Old Regime and the Revolution, tr. Alan Kahan. Chicago, University of Chicago Press (1998) 280.

greatly admired<sup>44</sup> – the French chose to eliminate every last vestige of Ottoman rule in Algeria. Then, when the dust settled, they discovered they knew absolutely nothing about how to rule the population. The result was chaos. Property rights were ignored, taxes could not be collected, disputes could not be settled. Towns and farms were abandoned and their owners fled into the wilderness, where they found refuge with the great tribal chief Abd-el-Kader (‘Abd al-Qadir al-Jaza’iri), a man who became the leader of a vast uprising that achieved remarkable success against the French before it was finally defeated. All the death, destruction, and barbarities to which the French were forced to resort could have been avoided had they pursued some more reasonable path.<sup>45</sup>

Tocqueville’s earliest writings on Algeria, therefore, are at once enthusiastic and deeply troubled. He still held out the hope that the French might, with time, come to win over the native population and gradually acculturate them to French political norms.<sup>46</sup> But as time went by and an easy victory became increasingly unlikely, he was forced to shift tactics. The introduction of republican values would have to wait. Instead, France had to pursue a strategy of total domination, and Abd-el-Kader, a man he had come to admire as a great leader and considered a sort of “Muslim Cromwell,” would have to be crushed.

If, from the beginning, we had said convincingly that we aimed only at government and not at land [he is referring to what he calls the “British model”], it might have been easy to get them to recognize our authority. But that moment has passed. Now, the prejudices that we have brought about are so powerful that we would have trouble making them believe in a change of the system, however real and sincere it were on our part....To flatter ourselves that we could ever establish a solid peace with an Arab prince of the interior would, in my view, be a manifest error.<sup>47</sup>

Unlike other supporters of colonialism, therefore, Tocqueville never gave much credence to the “tutelage” argument. While Mill had declared the British to be a force for good in India, Tocqueville acknowledged early on that colonialism was inherently violent, and far more likely to destroy than create. This did not stop him from supporting it, however; indeed, he considered the destruction of the Native American population an unfortunate but absolutely necessary condition for America’s westward expansion, an

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<sup>44</sup> See for instance his “Sketches of a Work on India, 1843” in which he favorably compares the British empire in India to the empire of Alexander the Great, and calls it “an inexplicable and amazing *event*.” Tocqueville, A. d., O. Zunz, et al. (2002). The Tocqueville Reader: A Life in Letters and Politics. Oxford; Malden, MA, Blackwell, 229. Emphasis in original.

<sup>45</sup> See especially “Second Letter on Algeria, 1837” and “Essay on Algeria, 1841” in Tocqueville and Pitts (2001).

<sup>46</sup> He predicted that the Kabyles (non-Arab agriculturalists) would be won over by commercial exchange. The Arabs, on the other hand, had no desire for material goods, and so would have to be enticed with French arts and ideas. See the “Second Letter” in Tocqueville and Pitts (2001) 21.

<sup>47</sup> “Essay on Algeria” in Tocqueville and Pitts (2001) 62-63.

event he considered one of the signal events of the age.<sup>48</sup> Colonialism was simply not justifiable on the grounds that it would benefit the colonized – all the evidence pointed in the other direction.

Tocqueville, therefore, presents a different argument, one that justifies France's presence in Algeria on the basis of how it reflects the glory of France. This is not meant to suggest that his justifications were somehow *ad hoc*, or that he readily scrapped one justification for another, according to prevailing political fortunes. It is, rather, a matter of emphasis. As France's difficulties in Algeria grew greater and domestic pressure to withdraw became more intense, Tocqueville began to emphasize the great glory his country was winning there and how, were it too withdraw now, the rest of the world would see it as "the clear indication of our decline."<sup>49</sup> Losing its colonies because of European intervention would at least be understandable, but to admit defeat at the hands of "little barbarous tribes" would "seem in the eyes of the world to be yielding to [France's] own impotence and succumbing to her own lack of courage. Any people that easily gives up what it has taken and chooses to retire peacefully to its original borders proclaims that its age of greatness is over. It visibly enters the period of its decline."<sup>50</sup> If, on the other hand, France can overcome its enemies and establish a thriving colony in Algeria, it would be an event of such grandeur that it could not help but evoke the French people's long dormant sense of patriotism. Moreover, the struggle had brought out some of France's best qualities. Its soldiers had exhibited great courage and self-sacrifice, and the prospect of new beginnings in Algeria had engendered in the people a desire to strike out and tame the wilderness. The Frenchman, he writes, possesses "a natural taste for quiet pleasures; he loves the domestic hearth, he rejoices at the sight of his native parish, he cares about family joys like no other man in the world."<sup>51</sup> In short, he is the private, bourgeois, inward looking citizen Tocqueville bemoans in his *Recollections*. Colonialism represented a chance to change all that, to drive the Frenchman out from his parish and into the grand political experiment unfolding on the shores of Africa.

### III. Analysis

The business of comparative political theory is a tricky one. On its face, our first obstacle is to overcome what we might call simply *the language problem*; namely, the fact that words like "politics" and "homeland" mean something significantly different for Tocqueville than they do for Tahtawi. It is convenient to pretend otherwise, but *politique*

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<sup>48</sup> Tocqueville found much to admire in the Native Americans: the strength of their character, their courage, and their fierce independence. Yet they were a doomed people. Because they refused to settle down, to till the soil, and to slowly acquire the means necessary to resist the American government, they were living on borrowed time. "The ills I have just described are great, and I must add that they seem to me irremediable. I think that the Indian race is doomed to perish, and I cannot prevent myself from thinking that on the day when the Europeans shall be established on the coasts of the Pacific Ocean, it will cease to exist." Democracy in America, 326.

<sup>49</sup> Essay on Algeria" in Tocqueville and Pitts (2001) 59.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, 59.

<sup>51</sup> "Some Ideas About What Prevents the French from Having Good Colonies" in Tocqueville and Pitts (2001) 1-2.

does not mean the same thing as *siyasa*, nor does *la patrie* capture the full meaning of *al-watan*. This paper glosses over these facts, and by writing in a language alien to both Tocqueville and Tahtawi, further muddies the waters. But the language problem persists, and if we cannot overcome it, the critics will say, then we can never establish the necessary body of shared ideas and concepts any comparative enterprise requires to sustain itself.<sup>52</sup> Many postcolonial scholars go even further, arguing that the comparative political theorist risks silencing non-western voices – that her project necessarily involves deploying western hermeneutical categories in a way that distorts the non-western subject. Not only is comparative political theory bad scholarship, therefore, but it is also fundamentally violent.<sup>53</sup>

There are many ways to respond to this critique. One might begin by pointing out that the differences between ancient Greece and the contemporary United States are also vast, but that few object when theorists like Arendt or MacIntyre use Plato and Aristotle to shed light on our own very modern political problems. *Zoon politikon* does not mean the same thing as “the political animal”, but most political theorists are willing (after the necessary hedging and hairsplitting) to look the other way. Why not extend the same courtesy to Tocqueville and Tahtawi?

But this is a glib response to a serious question. If comparative political theory is to make any sense, it is first necessary to establish that the two political thinkers involved are speaking about a similar set of issues and are interested in solving a common social problem. So far, this paper has focused on accomplishing just that task. The reason Tahtawi and Tocqueville’s colonial ideologies have been explored in such detail is to reassure the skeptic that their theoretical similarities are real and meaningful. Are they using identical terminology or beginning from the same premises? Of course not, and that is a concern worth taking seriously. Nevertheless, the entire analysis up till this point – the “historical-descriptive” portion – has been bent on showing that a *conversation* between Tahtawi and Tocqueville is both possible and worthwhile. A conversation is a negotiated enterprise, and while no two participants ever use the exact same words or engage with identical issues, they operate in an overlapping conceptual universe that makes communication possible. It is through the conversation itself that meanings are established, definitions agreed upon, and points of real difference identified. This *dialogic* model provides a useful tool for comparative political theorists, and may supply a way of resolving the language problem.<sup>54</sup>

Granting, then, that Tahtawi and Tocqueville’s justifications for colonialism have a great deal in common, the time has come to discuss the ways they differ – namely, how they are working toward goals that are not merely distinct, but are in fact completely incommensurable. For Tocqueville, national pride and an engaged citizenry are meant to serve one end over all others: liberty and democracy for France. On the other hand,

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<sup>52</sup> See for instance the difficulties in applying the word “law” to describe the Islamic *shari’a* in Hallaq, W. B. (2009). *Shari’a: Theory, Practice, Transformations*. Cambridge, UK; New York, Cambridge University Press, 1-13.

<sup>53</sup> See for instance Chakrabarty, D. (2000). *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton, N.J., Princeton University Press; and El-Affendi, A. (1991). “Studying My Movement: Social Science without Cynicism.” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 23(1): 83-94.

<sup>54</sup> See Jenco, 743, for a good description of this model as applied to comparative political theory.



Tahtawi sees those same factors contributing toward a very different sort of goal: strengthening the power and authority of the *khedive*, Egypt's absolute monarch. Though frequently mislabeled a liberal,<sup>55</sup> Tahtawi was firmly committed to the cause of Egypt's ruler. He was neither a radical nor a democrat, but rather a consummate party man absolutely dedicated to the throne.<sup>56</sup> The same basic line of argumentation, therefore, renders two fundamentally opposed conclusions. It is our purpose here to carefully explain how these two different conclusions were reached, and to suggest that a comparison of the two shows that Tocqueville's theory may contain a significant flaw. Indeed, Tahtawi presents a potentially devastating challenge to Tocqueville's justifications for colonialism.

Broken down to its composite parts, Tocqueville's argument for colonialism proceeds in the following fashion:

1. *Colonialism is an act of political greatness carried out by the nation. It proves to citizens that the nation is a great and glorious thing.* It is the nation that accomplishes the great act of imperial conquest and expansion – not individual soldiers or settlers. The colonial project would be of little use if each individual participant saw himself as a separate, autonomous agent whose victories and defeats redounded solely upon his own private person. The entire point of colonialism is that it is eminently public in nature. The glory that colonial conquest generated was to reflect the greatness of the nation.

2. *Therefore: Individual citizens will see their nation's greatness, and derive from it a sense of national pride.* While not the individual authors of this greatness, citizens will nevertheless come to feel through their identity *qua* citizens that they are a party to it. Thus, rather than feeling a sense of *admiration* for France (as a non-Frenchman might), they will feel a sense of *pride* generated by their membership in the very community that performed such great deeds.

3. *Moreover: Colonial conquest will require the citizens to cultivate their own virtues as well.* Much in the same way a battle brings out what is best in the soldier, so will colonial conquest cultivate what is best in the settler-citizen: Activity, sacrifice, concern for the public good. At the same time that the citizen learns to feel pride in his nation, he will also develop the tools necessary to contribute to its greatness.

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<sup>55</sup> See for instance Hourani, 67-83 and Kurzman, C. (1998). Liberal Islam: A Source Book. New York, Oxford University Press, 9.

<sup>56</sup> On this extremely important point, see especially Altman, 128-197. Though Tahtawi openly expressed his attraction to many liberal and constitutionalist values, his support of these values "was no more than an advocacy of an abstract ideal on the part of a humanist. He never translated his support of those values into advocating the adoption of constitutionalist institutions in Egypt. Instead, his political philosophy can be viewed as a system of legitimation of Muhammad 'Ali's and Isma'il's autocracy." (Altman, 137)

4. Therefore: *This national pride will generate in citizens the desire to use their virtues in order to increase the nation's glory. In order to do so, they will demand the right to participate in political society.* Habituated as they now are to contributing directly to political projects – and convinced that their nation's welfare and glory are the proper objects of their concern – the citizens will demand civil and political liberties. They will reject the centralization of power, and expect instead to play an active role in political life.

In this way, democracy and liberty in France will be ensured.

For Tahtawi, this result would be a disaster. He was, as has already been argued, a committed monarchist. Following the political tradition established by al-Mawardi and defended throughout the medieval Islamic period, Tahtawi believed in the indivisible sovereignty of a divinely appointed ruler. The king's authority is derived both from scripture and from the dictates of reason, for without it there would necessarily be chaos or internal strife. Classical Islamic political theory famously held that it is better to suffer under an unjust ruler than to face the anarchy of rebellion.<sup>57</sup> Tahtawi seems to have taken this maxim to heart, and while he expressed in the *Tahklis* guarded sympathy for France's constitutionalist movement, he abhorred the actions of the anti-monarchists during the Revolution of 1830. Rather, citizens of a country should be content with a more advisory role, where their own individual expertise facilitates the sovereign's just (but absolute) rule.<sup>58</sup>

Tahtawi, therefore, could never accept point 4. He agreed with Tocqueville on points 1 through 3, but derived from them a version of 4 so different that it could never result in a threat to the Egyptian monarchy. Tahtawi's version of 4 would instead appear as something like this:

4. Therefore: *This national pride will generate in citizens the desire to use their virtues in order to increase their nation's glory – and this entails preserving the right of the nation to be the author of all political acts. In order to do so, they will seek out ways to participate in political society that do not fracture national politics into individual action.*

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<sup>57</sup> For a brief introduction to al-Mawardi and medieval conceptions of kingship, see Rosenthal, E. I. J. (1958). *Political Thought in Medieval Islam: An Introductory Outline*. Cambridge. Cambridge University Press, 21-62. On Tahtawi's acceptance of this viewpoint, see Altman, 141-142.

<sup>58</sup> In keeping with traditional Islamic political thought, Tahtawi exhorted the ruler to pay special attention to the *ulama*, since only they are knowledgeable about the *shari'a*. However, he also encouraged him to listen to the Egyptian citizenry in general, since they possess much information that could contribute to the common good, (eg. in the realm of agriculture, public health, economics, etc.). Hourani argues that this sort of secular expertise was generally undervalued in classical Islamic political theory, and that Tahtawi's recognition of its utility represents a significant liberal advance. See Hourani 76-77.

The point here may be a bit muddled, but it is an important one. Tocqueville envisions a citizenry capable of, on the one hand, honoring the French nation as the author of a great colonial conquest, but then concluding from this that they *as individuals* should have a hand in the business of government. This shift – from national pride to individual responsibility – is dramatically under-theorized in Tocqueville’s writings on empire. He never explains how a citizenry inspired by the political glory of a centralized state would seek to further that glory by resisting the state’s undivided authority – especially in the context of colonialism, which (as Tocqueville points out again and again) inevitably takes on an authoritarian hue. The sort of France most Frenchmen will see as the author of the Algerian invasion will be France at its most centralized and despotic. They are expected to admire the actions of this authoritarian France, but then seamlessly pivot to a stance so liberal in its inflection that democracy will flourish.

What this reveals is that there are two competing ways of viewing the nation in Tocqueville’s ideology of empire: as a unified body capable of performing great acts and acquiring glory, and as a community comprised of many individuals working for common ends. This tension is visible in point 2, where Frenchmen who do not view themselves as the authors of their country’s colonial conquests nonetheless feel a sense of pride. It is a strange sort of relationship that permits the citizen to feel pride for something he never did, but this is exactly the kind of relationship Tocqueville expects his countrymen to uncritically adopt.

Tahtawi, to his credit, recognizes this tension. Unlike Tocqueville, however, he celebrates it. He fully expects his fellow Egyptians to view the Egyptian nation as a unified body, with the ruler at its head and the citizenry as its limbs and organs.<sup>59</sup> The limbs and organs cannot act contrary to the will of the head, nor seek to issue commands of their own. True, he expects Egypt’s conquest of the Sudan to reinvigorate the public and lead his fellow citizens into a more active political life, but that same sense of patriotism and national sentiment will also act as a check on any excess enthusiasm. The desire to further the nation’s glory will at once drive people into political life, and, at the same time, convince them that their role is – at best – an advisory one. Tahtawi does not just acknowledge this “regulatory” aspect of national sentiment; he relies on it as a means of generating a politically safe form of civic activism.

Absent any sort of explanation from Tocqueville on how the power of national sentiment will not overcome or dampen the individual’s desire for democratic participation, Tahtawi seems to possess the more convincing account of human psychology. The latter’s argument leans heavily on his belief that grand state-led political acts (like colonization) produce a relatively safe kind of political and scientific engagement on the part of the citizenry – one that discourages factionalism and preserves the monarch’s powers. Tocqueville’s does not. At work here is more than just Tocqueville’s inability to imagine national sentiment as a threat to democracy. Rather, it is a sign of a deeper contradiction in his theoretical edifice, between the nation as a community of actors and the nation as *the* actor.

It must be emphasized that this Tahtawi-derived critique of Tocqueville is different from the critique made by Pitts in *A Turn to Empire*. In that work, she points out that

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<sup>59</sup> Altman 138-39.

Tocqueville possesses no convincing account of how the glorious deeds of the few will necessarily lead to the political activism of the many.<sup>60</sup> Tahtawi supplies that account, describing the way a shift in historical understandings of contemporary Egypt vis-à-vis Pharaonic Egypt will generate in his countrymen a desire to do great things. However, he also presents a new challenge to Tocqueville by showing how an active and engaged public is not necessarily a *democratic* public. Tahtawi shows us that a citizen can be deeply engaged in political, scientific, and economic matters, but still see his role as merely advisory in nature – and, in fact, that this is exactly the sort of outcome a powerful nationalist spirit is likely to engender.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

This paper has sought to accomplish two tasks. First, it has attempted to demonstrate the similarities between Tahtawi's colonial ideology and Tocqueville's. Unlike their contemporaries, who tended to focus on material interests or the *mission civilisatrice*, Tahtawi and Tocqueville supported colonialism because of the glory it would bring the conquering nation and the civic engagement it would evoke there. Tocqueville's writings on empire have received relatively little attention from English language scholars, and Tahtawi's have nearly been ignored all together. This paper, therefore, represents an important contribution to our knowledge of these theorists. Second, it has attempted to bring Tahtawi and Tocqueville into conversation with each other. By doing so, certain weaknesses in Tocqueville's theory become visible in a way they might not otherwise. Tahtawi convincingly argues that the nationalist sentiment generated by colonialism is more likely to lead to increased centralization and despotism, not decentralization and democracy. Tocqueville fails to take into account the difficulty citizens are likely to have challenging the unitary nature of a state that just performed such an act of political greatness. France, with none of the cultural or institutional checks on despotism Tocqueville found in America, would be unlikely to remain democratic for long.

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<sup>60</sup> Pitts 2005, 194.