

# The Contributions of Beaumont to Democracy in America: His Analysis of Race Relations and Slavery

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Alexis de Tocqueville has become famous for his analysis of the foundations of American democracy. Tocqueville's close friend, Gustave de Beaumont, on the other hand, who accompanied him during his journey to the United States in 1831-1832 fell into oblivion. *Democracy in America*, which focused on the pragmatism underlying the functioning of American democracy, has been reprinted a number of times. In contrast, the latest French version of Beaumont's novel, *Marie*, which deals more explicitly with issues slavery and race relations, dates back to 1847. It was not translated into English until 1959 and its readership to this day remains limited.<sup>1</sup> The contrast between the literary fates of these two writers and their works is particularly telling since they shared the same social background and childhood experiences, underwent the same formal training, and were both local judges. Further, not only were their observations of the American social scene convergent, but they were and remained close friends throughout their lives.<sup>2</sup> Beaumont served as Tocqueville's literary executor. The opposite trajectories of the works of these two men reveal the complexities underlying the selective nature of the responses to what strangers observe and report (Simmel, 1950).

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My main purpose in this paper is to restore Beaumont's historical standing by evaluating his contributions to our understanding of American race relations as they prevailed in Jacksonian America. While Beaumont consciously explores how race and slavery were and are embedded in a tension between nature and culture as social constructs, his contributions in this regard also represent unwitting reflections of the social position he occupied as a French aristocrat playing the role of a stranger in the New World. Further, as the relative stress that the prevailing ideology placed on nature and culture evolves slowly, most of his observations remain relevant today.

### The venue

There are two likely reasons for which Beaumont chose the novel as a literary form to convey his observations about race in America. First, he probably feared that the French literary market was too cramped to bear simultaneously two analogous social science analyses of American society. In his introduction to *Marie*, he indicates that he divided the work to be done regarding the account of their American experiences with Tocqueville. Tocqueville would write about institutions, Beaumont would report about mores. Secondly, by adding scientific appendices, he sought to distance himself significantly from the material he presented in the novel itself. The early variety of science/fiction that *Marie* represents was in his eyes one way of dampening the negative reactions that his evaluation of race relations in America could provoke both locally and at home.

Briefly, Beaumont's novel is about the tragedy stemming from the reciprocal love binding Ludovic, a French traveler, and Marie, a beautiful young American woman whose some grand mother has some "Negro blood." As is often the case in the romantic tradition, their association is doomed. Their involvement triggers violence and contributes to tearing apart the local social fabric. The two main characters go into an exile which ultimately causes Marie's death. As for the twelve appendices, three concern race relations (A, K, and L); eight are about various facets of American social life (B, C, D, E, G, H, I, and J) and one is about the organization of Native American domestic life (F). Directly or indirectly, the practices, ideas or feelings they describe affect the outcome of the bond woven between Marie and her French lover.

## Placing Beaumont's work in the History of the Tension between Nature and Culture

Since nature and culture have a history (Moscovici, 1968), there are recurrent shifts in their respective social representations. During the Enlightenment and the early phase of the Romantic period, European dominant constructions of Nature and Culture concepts evolved between two poles.

At one end of the continuum, most typical of a conservative stance, the two terms continued to represent mutually exclusive terms. In this perspective, Nature was viewed as a symbol of either innocence or of wilderness and savagery. Thus, some Romantic writers drew a sharp contrast between the awesome majesty of pristine landscapes and the social turmoil of urban environments. Indeed, the two major characters in *Marie* escape the urban violence triggered by their love and withdraw toward the most lonesome parts of Ohio. At the same time, many European philosophers, including Gobineau, continued to hold restrictive views of culture, which they saw as an aristocratic privilege. As such, they were keen to deny the unity of mankind. Thus, Elizabeth De Fontenay (1998) documents painstakingly how, in the eyes of these philosophers, the animal kingdom included women (because of their menses), children (because their size is likened to that of dwarfs), and lunatics, deaf-mutes, or savages, (because it is impossible to understand them). As these philosophers confined Africans to the silence of Nature, and denied them any intelligence, they deemed it legitimate to treat them as slaves.<sup>3</sup>

At the opposite end of the continuum, progressive writers ceased to treat Nature and Culture as mutually exclusive entities. In their eyes, scientific progress facilitated the taming and recapture of ground lost to wilderness. For example, De l'Épée acted as a pioneer in constructing ways of teaching the blind. Similarly, within the Saint Simonian circles with which Beaumont was familiar, Ismail Urbain and Eichthal (1839) did not view slavery as a mode of economic exploitation. Rather, they saw it as an earlier version of the *White Man's Burden*, that is, as an opportunity for creating a new social order providing Africans with the skills generated by civilization (Cohen, 1980).<sup>4</sup> In fact, their analysis previewed the Parsonian distinction between the instrumental and the socio-emotional func-

tions of individual roles. In their work which illustrates what Fredrickson (1987) has called "romantic racialism," Whites were described as most gifted to perform the technical activities required by the search for rationality. In contrast, the sensitivity of Blacks was deemed to predispose them to symbolic pursuits and to seek emotional rewards. In this perspective which emphasizes similarities in the distinctions between races and genders, Whites were endowed with masculine psychological properties, Blacks with a feminine outlook. As bonds between masters and slaves should be defined in terms of domestic affection or complementarity rather than of economic efficiency, they were supposed to concern primarily White men and Black women, as illustrated by the love between Ludovic and Marie in Beaumont's novel.

The polar properties of the two types of stances placed race at the heart of two major scientific controversies. The first of these controversies concerned the unity of mankind. Thus, European intellectuals of the period speculated as to whether disparities in the location or in the dates of origin of the human remains found by archeologists constituted evidences of significant differences in the natural intelligence of various races (Cohen, 1999; Shipman, 1994). Similarly, these intellectuals wondered why certain human groups were keener than others to resist becoming slaves (Fredrickson, 1988). Both Tocqueville and Beaumont were fascinated by the resistance that American Indians seemed to show to slavery and to laboring for White settlers. Both were keen to explain the rank ordering of various types of human populations to ascertain whether some social engineering could alter it.

The second controversy pertained to the properties of "natural laws." As these laws emphasized the universal character of human rights and obligations, they were inconsistent with the persistence of slavery and its underlying rationales. The coexistence of the relevant but conflicting ideologies has been conducive to the seemingly paradoxical coexistence of class and caste. In this regard, Beaumont anticipated Fredrickson's views (1996,1997) that the explicit references to equality present in the Bill of Rights might coexist with inequalities among Whites only under the condition that the emphasis placed on democratic values would not apply to African Americans. This is why the most fortunate of White immigrants encouraged or allowed their least fortunate counterparts to assert their superiority toward slaves.

## Beaumont's Contributions to the Analysis of Racial Status

As already suggested, Beaumont's contributions are both a conscious comment on and an unwitting reflection of the contradictions between the two Romantic conceptions of Nature and Culture. These contradictions are twofold. On the one hand, Beaumont was keenly aware of the limitations inherent in the views that asserted that racial status was natural. In the novel itself, he graphically documents the process through which the representations that dominant groups hold of mulattoes shape the behaviors they adopt toward them (1998: 5).

One evening, his hero visits a theater and asks the man sitting nearby how:

a young woman dazzling in beauty, whose complexion proclaimed the purest European blood could be so lacking in shame as to sit among the Africans. That **woman**, he replied, is colored – What? Colored? She is whiter than a lily - She is colored, he replied coldly, local **tradition** has established ancestry and everyone knows that she had a mulatto among her forebears.....At the same time, I made out in the balcony for whites a face which was very dark; I asked for an explanation. The American answered “the **lady** who attracted your attention is white- What? White? She is the same color as the mulattoes- She is white; local tradition affirms that the blood which flows in her vein is **Spanish**.

Thus, while tradition is the one foundation of the racial origin imputed to individuals, the ensuing distinction between races spells the hierarchical arrangements (symbolized here in the seats allowed and forbidden) and linguistic behaviors (note the difference between the use of “lady” and of “woman”) expected from the various categories of actors involved. Lastly, the ensuing prescriptions and taboos concern local people exclusively. The reference to “Spanish blood” suggests that, today as then, the hierarchy evoked in race relations does not apply to foreigners.

On the other hand, as Beaumont emphasizes the problematic implications of the bonds woven between White men and Black women, he ignores the alternative pairing, between Black men and White women. Yet, both the incidence and the functions of each type of bond differ across historical periods, societies, or places (Guyot, 1993), and this invalidates the concept of interracial marriage which

includes distinct phenomena. In the United States of 1832, as in the South until a recent past, it was deemed impossible that an African American male and a White woman might feel mutual attraction, let alone love. Not only “does the law of Tennessee decrees a flogging for the slave who permits himself the smallest verbal insult to a white woman” (Beaumont, 1998: 194), but any attraction that a male slave and a white woman might experience toward one another was viewed as an unspeakable crime against nature<sup>5</sup>. It is only recently that social change has transformed both race and gender stratification in diverging directions, with subsequent changes in the profile of interracial associations. The number of Black men pairing with White women has increased since some of the former have been tempted to exchange the plums attached to their social upward mobility against the higher racial status of their female partner.<sup>6</sup>

To conclude, when Beaumont chooses to write about *American* passions, he chooses to underline the variety of violent behaviors or beliefs associated with and generated by the uncertainties stemming from the equivocations underlying interaction between nature and culture and hence, between genders as well as between human races. Thus, he shows how the silence generated by the fear of transgressing racial lines causes misunderstandings between his two main characters. Ludovic does not understand why his passion troubles Marie who shares his feelings but has a clearer vision of the turmoil their love will trigger. Indeed, Beaumont also emphasizes the collective violence that is facilitated or generated by the coexistence of caste and class. Lastly, however tentative his sketch might be, he alludes to the enthusiasm with which American settlers sought to invent a new system of social interaction, notably between men and women, regardless of unfavorable circumstances.

### **Beaumont’s Analyses of The Legal Ambiguity of Slavery**

In Appendix A (1998: 189-216), Beaumont describes the legal “condition of the Negro slave in America, the types of slavery and the arguments that are advanced in favor of and against abolition.” In probing the extent to which slavery is a part of Nature or of Culture, Beaumont explores the extent to which the institution is governed by passion as opposed to rationality. Either one views slaves as “beasts,” in which case the potential threats they might pose as a result of their nature required their treatment to be coordinated by

the community at large. Or one acknowledges the unity of mankind positing the preeminence of the individual as a subject of rights over nature, including over slaves. Further, to view slavery as embedded in nature is to emphasize its ahistorical property, but to see it as a cultural arrangement is to underline its contingency and to raise questions as to the conditions under which it is detrimental, irrelevant, or beneficial to economic growth.

By successively reviewing the distinctions between (a) the federal and state powers, (b) the public and private nature of the rights enjoyed by slave holders, (c) the legal principles and actual practices, and (d) their respective dynamics, I will show how Beaumont highlights consciously as well as unwittingly the equivocations inherent in the legal arrangements underlying slavery. In fact, slavery turns out to be an heterogeneous analytical category (Testard, 2000).

#### *Federal versus State Rights*

Ambiguities in the philosophical status of nature and culture, and hence, of slavery introduce uncertainties in the geographical level at which this institution is legally defined and implemented (Litowitz, 1997). Since land was initially the main source of American wealth, at first the most significant legal stakes were about land tenure. The relevant claims were managed by state rather than federal authorities because it made sense to adjudicate this type of conflict as close as possible to the evidence and to the litigants.

This is probably one of the main reasons why the Founding Fathers did not seek to develop strong Federal powers. Viewing the rights that slave owners held over their "chattel" as natural implied that the legal status of slaves would be determined by the legal status of the land to which they were attached. Correspondingly, the Federal Constitution could not but keep silent about slavery. Further, while the federal government was too weak to enforce the ban imposed on the international trade of slaves (Beaumont, 1998:213), the rationales of the law itself were themselves equivocal. In many ways, the ensuing scarcity of slaves stimulated the market.

Because they viewed the federal government as a threat, Southerners cynically "used" the Constitution by counting slaves as three fifths of regular citizens in the enumeration of the population in order to enhance the political representation of their own states. Alternatively, Northerners relied on the equivocations of the Constitution to challenge the view that the residents of the territories joining the United States might be entitled to own or acquire slaves in the

hope of retaining their own political influence (Fogel 1989). In other words, debates about slavery were exclusively couched in terms of White concerns. African hopes or aspirations were ignored.

Insofar as the local nature of real property rights determined of the legal status of slavery, state contrasts in modes of subsistence and in the size of agricultural holdings were paralleled by sharp variations in the definitions of the crimes and misdemeanors specifically imputable to slaves and of the public or private punishments to be meted out to them. As an illustration, Louisiana allowed anyone to shoot fugitive slaves while South Carolina's regulations insisted on punishing those individuals who assisted them (Beaumont, 1998: 190-4). Further, the same variations also accounted for differences in the dates at which individual States relaxed or, conversely, tightened penal rules and the way these rules should be enforced.

Yet, the corresponding segmentation of the constraints imposed upon slaves ended up undermining the smooth functioning of the institution. As slaves were tempted to cross state boundaries in order to escape their bondage, the only strategy likely to foil their goal would have been to mobilize federal authorities. Such a step, however, would have been paramount to acknowledge the legitimacy of federal intervention regarding issues that were defined as local. To be sure, Congress passed legislation that aimed at facilitating the recapture of fugitive slaves, but without taking a stand legitimating their kidnapping, since this would have been to interfere with State rights. (Fogel 1989: 249,281). In short, the very hands off policy of the federal government toward slavery made somewhat ineffective the "demands" of slave-holding states. At the eve of the Civil War, less than twenty slaves per annum were recaptured after crossing state lines (Still, 1960: 204).

In view of the relatively recent character of centralization in France at the time, the silence of Beaumont on the ambiguous allocation of power over slavery between federal and state authorities is most remarkable<sup>7</sup>. He does not allude either to the demographic ploy devised by Southern States in order to accumulate additional political clout. Nor does he describe the growing conflicts opposing Federal to State governments or to local authorities themselves as to what to do with the increasing number of fleeing slaves.

Despite the strong symbol that Louisiana represented for French elites, Beaumont also did not refer to the implications of the Louisi-

ana purchase on slavery. Truly enough, his visit to New Orleans took place in 1832 at the end of his trip and it turned out to be both short and marred by a succession of accidents (Pierson, 1938). Yet, one might have expected that his background would induce him to evaluate the change undergone by a former French colony sold supposedly cheaply by Napoleon. From a more theoretical vantage, he might also have been expected to wonder about the effects of adding a population that was accustomed to a centralized form of authority to loose federal structures.

To conclude, even though federal interventions in the field of race relations gave then (as they do today) preeminence to equality over liberty. Alternatively, the prevailing emphasis placed on state laws facilitated the implicit or explicit recognition of the "natural" superiority of the caucasian over the African race. Strangely enough, Beaumont did not develop an analysis of the linkage between centralization and decentralization on the one hand and liberty and equality on the other, as it keeps affecting the definition and implementation of race relations.

#### *Public versus Private Rights*

Depending on whether the prevailing ideology emphasizes the tame or the wild properties of Nature, it tends to minimize the social limitations to be imposed upon individual rights or, alternatively, to make the survival of these rights contingent on subservience to local norms. In other words, the underlying issue is to spell the optimal interaction between liberty or individualism and consensus, and hence, between entrepreneurship and conformity.

Since slavery was, from the very start, an institution geared toward making profits, the underlying stress placed upon rationality implied that the sanctions meted out to delinquent slaves should not disrupt their economic performances. Physical punishments (whipping or mutilation) should "leave intact and sound the slaves' limbs", and in many States, slaveholders were forbidden from killing their chattel. Yet, the legal sanctions imposed on those may have violated the law regarding the handling of slaves were minimal (Beaumont, 1998: 195-6). Finally, the emphasis placed on the preeminence of private property was such that the relevant rights were not exclusively attached to the land and as such, were not inextinguishable. Insofar as "American slavery rests upon the same bases

as all bondage of man to man" (ibid.: 199), the rights of slave owners were personal and could be terminated as a result of a decision they would take during their life times or in their wills. However few in number there may have been to do so, the fact is that some owners manumitted their slaves and that others freed or at least claimed their intention of doing so in their wills (Still,1970)<sup>8</sup>

Yet, despite the overt attachment of American ideologies to the preeminence of private rights, slaveholders themselves were subjected to a number of restrictions in dealing with their own chattel. In many states, they were forbidden from teaching their slaves reading and writing, for it was assumed that literary skills would enable slaves to organize and rebel against their masters (Beaumont, 1998: 192). *A fortiori*, conservatives deplored the sexual attraction that some white settlers experienced toward Black women as symbolizing the triumph of Nature over Culture (Cohen, 1999: 131-40). To assert the dominance of Culture, both freedmen and mulattos were subjected to a number of residential restrictions (von Daacke, 1999). Nor were they allowed to move into a state or a community where they could undermine the smooth functioning of the local free labor market. Any deviation from the dominant and most conservative pattern of race relations disturbed the White community at large. As an example, the authorities of the ports of the Southern Atlantic Seaboard (Charleston and New Orleans) kept imposing tight restrictions on the Black sailors who formed the majority of the crews of the ships handling maritime commerce in the area (Bolster, 1997). They wanted to avoid the diffusion of threatening expectations among local slaves.

Thus, the nature of American decentralization served conflicting purposes. At one end of the continuum, it was looked upon and practiced as a proxy for the dominance of private interests. Correspondingly, local public authorities were expected to interfere minimally with patterns of racial interaction. At the opposite end of the continuum, the same local authorities relied on formal as well as on informal strategies to contain initiatives likely to change the racial status quo and hence, and hence, to systematize the authority and control they claimed to exert on the various segments of the White population.

*Legal Principles versus Practices*

The tension deemed to oppose Nature to Culture implies overt or covert tensions between legal prescriptions or proscriptions and practices. These tensions take a variety of forms, some of which were described by Beaumont. First, variations or changes in the nature of crops were accompanied by parallel differences or changes in the size and the qualification of the labor force required. Tobacco crops in Maryland offered a case in point. "As soon as there is competition of labor between the slave and the freeman, the ruin of the slave owner is assured" (1998: 205). In this sense, Beaumont's work anticipated the recent analyses of Naipaul (1989) on the successive patterns of social organization in the South.

For the same reason, Beaumont documented how and why the development of an urban economy induced some slave owners to depart from the rule and provide Africans with a formal education. When he writes "the colored children show an aptitude and a capacity for work equal to those of the white children...when public schools are for the children of the Blacks are founded on the same principles as those for the Whites" (1998: 203), his analysis highlights the contingent character of the relationship between the skills expected from the labor force and economic development. More pointedly, he previews the successive relevant Supreme Court decision.

Beaumont also denounced the fallacies inherent in comparing the average outlooks of Whites and Negroes. He emphasized that differences between the two populations should be weighted in relation to differences within each of them. "Some slaves proved to be as intelligent and industrious as some masters" (1998: 204). In a similar vein, both Beaumont and Tocqueville took the case of Kentucky, populated by immigrants originating from Pennsylvania and from Ohio, to ascertain how cultural differences may override the sharing of the same economic environment in shaping attitudes toward slavery. In short, both demonstrated the contributions of controlled comparisons to our understanding of social life.

At the same time, however, Beaumont did not fully explore the contradictions present in the legal status of slaves. Thus, although the law treated slaves as objects deprived of any legal standing (1998: 191), the de facto occupational monopoly enjoyed by some of them enabled them to earn an independent income after having fulfilled their obligations as slaves, notably in the urban context (Berlin, 1998).

As a result, notably in Virginia, a few slaves earned an autonomous income they would use to redeem themselves and, in some cases, to buy land as well as slaves for their own use (Fogel, 1989, von Daacke, 1999). It is striking that however scarce these instances might have been, slaves did manage the incomes they earned through their labor or their transactions and seemed to accumulate assets without being legally challenged. Correspondingly, the legal boundaries standing between slavery and indenture seem to have been fuzzier than is often argued. For example, even though interracial marriages or informal associations were forbidden, the taboo applied less stringently whenever the White individuals concerned were servants whose transportation had been paid by their employers. Given the marginal social status of the people involved, the few marriages of this type did not threaten the White supremacy.

Third and last, even though slavery was increasingly constructed as a cold and impersonal system of economic exploitation, it did not necessarily prevent passions. As far as hatred is concerned, Beaumont offers a graphic description of a "furiously demented Negro ... who had been subjected to such brutalities that his reason had snapped" (1998: 46-47). In the same vein, he graphically documents the violence of the 1834 New York race riots in his Annex L. As far as love is concerned, the novel itself focuses on the forbidden passion that binds a White man to the female slave who was Marie's ancestor. Far from being innocuous, the distinction between house and field slaves accounts for this kind of association.

More generally, then, both White and African men and women did not necessarily develop uniform patterns of interaction from and through the institution of slavery. Disparities in the incidence of manumission by gender in various communities suggest that the bonds woven between White slave holders and their female slaves were often enduring and institutionalized. Thus, this incidence was consistently greater for women than for men in New Orleans, Charleston, and Charlottesville, despite the diverse economic basis of these cities. In addition, because the status of freedwomen was less threatening to Whites or because they took advantage of an expanding labor market or because of both, they were more often allowed to become economically and socially autonomous than their male counterparts (Berlin, 1998; Von Daacke, 1999). In this regard, culture did not necessarily overcome nature. At least in the case of Virginia, the restrictions that the State legislatures intended to im-

pose on the process of manumission often failed to be implemented except as a result of conflicts among the white settlers themselves. In other words, the segmentation of culture and the diffusion of individualism prevented race relations from forming a homogeneous and uniform whole.

*Diverging Changes in the Legal Status of Slavery*

As the ideological tension underlying the Nature-Culture debate evolved continuously throughout the early part of the 19th century, there were parallel changes in the profile of slavery and in the ensuing boundaries between a system of class and a system of caste. Originally, conversely to what is usually asserted, money and opportunities were the primary forces that accounted for the institutionalized use of slaves, at least in the case of Virginia. There, one slave (to be sure, the case is exceptional) was sufficiently economically successful to redeem himself first, and subsequently, to buy slaves for his own use to claim to deserve the same privileges as those bestowed on other respectable members of the community (Von Daacke, 1999). Thus, class and mere variations in the amount of resources available seemed to shape individual decisions. It is only later on, with the systematic development of large scale plantations that political authorities sought to streamline the status of slaves and to systematize their exploitation. It is only later then, that the tension between class and caste became more obvious and took more complex forms.

Many observers, including Jefferson and Beaumont (1998: 210-11), have nevertheless underlined the negative impact of slavery on the entrepreneurial motivations necessary for stimulating the emerging industrialization and urbanization of the American landscape. The ensuing transition from a servile to a free labor market has been conducive to the erosion of the boundaries standing between slavery and indenture. Thus, a number of northern states adopted legislation allowing slaves to negotiate their redemption, albeit at differing dates ranging from 1780 for Pennsylvania to 1799 in the case of New York and five years later in the case of New Jersey (Fogel, 1989: 246).

It is striking that Beaumont failed to see the contingencies attached to such laws, since slaves remained officially forbidden from earning income, accumulating wealth, and signing contracts. He did not assess either the pace at which the relevant social change would proceed. During the 1840's, slaves still represented a significant per-

centage of the Black population in the rural parts of New York State or of Pennsylvania (Berlin, 1998).

To conclude, Beaumont saw that racism took a variety of forms that vary in function of the economy and prevailing cultural arrangements. To the extent that the evidence he collected concerned both the North and the "border states", his argumentation highlighted the fact that the severity and the nature of racism differed not only between North and South, but also within each one of these two sections. In this sense, his observations previewed the critical remarks that Fanon (1960) developed about the notion of Negritude and its wholesale treatment of racism. In his eyes, race relations take forms that vary across environments and times, as a result of the unstable character of the tension between nature and culture. As far as the United States are concerned, the central tendency in the distribution of race relations is and remains an indifferent or hostile segregation, but various forces have kept introducing significant exceptions to the prevailing patterns.

### Conclusions

Thomas Jefferson said that "when he thought about slavery at night, he trembled for the future". One century and a half after Beaumont's visit, some patterns of race relations persist while they have changed in appearance. First, because or although social amnesia continues to cloud any exploration of the memories of the descendants of the victims or of the champions of slavery (Douglas, 1998), the passions of the past are easily rekindled<sup>9</sup>. To be sure, the White and Black segments of the same Hairston family from Virginia seem to maintain close, albeit selective patterns of interaction (Wienczek, 1998), but the use of DNA-based analysis to demonstrate the involvement of Jefferson with Sally Hemmings has not necessarily brought the White and Black segments of Jefferson's offspring closer to one another.

Second, the consensus that holds all Americans together in the definition and implementation of economic success does not work sufficiently either to erase the weight of the biased expectations associated with two hundred years of slavery (Fredrickson, 1998: 864). Today as yesterday, the derogatory use of the term "boy" as a racist slur serves to remind African Americans of the period when their ancestors were held as legally dependent or minor (Hyde, 1983: 105).

Similarly, the physical rationale used to justify slavery continues to color the properties imputed to the same African Americans. They are supposed both to excel in athletics and exert a monopoly on all the forms of unacceptable interpersonal but unorganized violence (Patterson, 1998).

Thirdly, in the same way that the economic success of African-Americans was sufficiently disturbing until a recent past to induce some Whites to eliminate them physically (Mc Murray, 1998), it continues to be a sufficient source of irritation to account for a significant amount of inter racial violence.

Lastly, despite the partial nature of Beaumont's observations concerning the impact of decentralization on race relations, the ambiguous nature of this political arrangement persists today. Local autonomy continues to explain the slow pace with which cases of racial violence or discrimination are not only solved but also dealt with.

The strengths and weaknesses of Beaumont's observations as well as the outcome of his publication contribute to highlight the conflicting functions assigned to the stranger, as they have been raised initially by Simmel. However timid the stance of our traveler might appear today, he correctly assessed not only the difficulties that slavery generated with regard to the further economic development of the United States, but also the hurdles preventing its peaceful abolition. Indeed, the opposite stances that successive generations of American historians have adopted toward slavery cannot but highlight the boldness of his analysis (Davis, 1974).

This makes it even more important to re-evaluate Pierson's (1938) explanation of Beaumont's lack of success. First, Pierson derides the style of Marie as being excessively romantic. Yet, both the structure of the plot and the symbolic distance generated by the fact that the reader is appraised of the drama, only indirectly, through the account that the hero offers to a visitor, are typical of the Romantic aesthetic paradigm. Yet, some novels of the same period that are built after the same pattern have survived until today. In other words, it remains necessary to empirically demonstrate in what sense Beaumont has failed as a novelist of his period.

Second, Pierson faults Beaumont for focusing on social rather than political problems. Yet, social problems constitute the backbone of any political discourse. Since they do not enter the political arena as long as significant actors fall prey to amnesia or indifference. Pierson's distinction is moot.

Thirdly, a modern reader can fault Beaumont for his methodology<sup>10</sup>. To give but one example, Beaumont's status precluded direct contacts with the slave population on two counts. As a French aristocrat, he did not see the need to interview African Americans and he probably felt ill equipped to do so. In addition, as a foreigner, he was afraid, and rightly so, that such a move would prevent him from getting further information from the Caucasian segments of the American population. Regardless of these biases, Beaumont did highlight the relative diversity of the reactions of his White interviewees to slavery as well as of their more general stance toward race relations.

In my view, then, it is the very selection of race relations as the most significant feature of American mores and passions that is at the root of Beaumont's literary demise. Whether in France or in America, "one was (is) not supposed to talk about slavery and race relations". To be sure, in the past as nowadays, both issues have generated countless polemics and controversies.<sup>11</sup> Yet, typically, as most "proper citizens" have always and continue to hold a low image of Africans, debating their treatment was and is still a source of guilt and as such, it is often deemed improper (Cohen, 1980).

Thus, Beaumont has been sanctioned for having transgressed the social amnesia and blindness that his peers expected him to observe both in America and in France (Jacoby, 1975). The informal sanctions taken against Beaumont's work appear even more dramatic when compared to that of Gunnar Myrdal's *American Dilemma* a century later (1944). Truly enough, Myrdal's analysis was sponsored and elicited by a key segment of the American intellectual elite. Not only did this elite understand that the role of leadership the United States were expected to play after World War II required a drastic change in race relations, but they also understood that the change they called for had more chances of being accepted if the message originated from an outsider.

In short, the diverging trajectories of Beaumont and Tocqueville or Myrdal highlight the contingencies that mark the distinction between insiders and outsiders and its impact on the form and the content of the message the latter is supposed to convey to the former. (Merton, 1973). To be acceptable, the reports of the outsiders must be positive. Alternatively, the conclusions of these reports must have been requested by some influential insiders.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> A good example of unobtrusive research would consist in evaluating the number of times Beaumont's book has been checked out of the type of library where it is held (Webb *and al.*, 1966).

<sup>2</sup> In this regard, it should be noted not only that Tocqueville himself devoted an entire chapter of *Democracy in America* to race relations in which he praises the writings of Beaumont on the same topic, but also that the same chapter is edited out of many of the successive American translations.

<sup>3</sup> As an illustration of the strictly natural status ascribed to slaves, "the physician and planter W.C. Daniell of Georgia recommended that "the mother's milk should be drawn off by the nurse, the midwife, another and older child, or by a **puppy** (emphasis mine)" (as quoted by M.J. Schwartz, 2000: 63)

<sup>4</sup> Each one had a vested interest in doing so, the former because he was the natural child of a slave, the latter because he was Jew. One easily forgets that both cultural groups occupied a marginal position in the French society of the time.

<sup>5</sup> For accounts of this type of pairing and the tragedies they foster, see Brink (1976) for South Africa; and Kenneally (1972) for Australia. It is significant that slaveowners imputed strong sexual drives to their female slaves, an imputation that would apply to African American males much later (Schwartz, 2000: ch.7).

<sup>6</sup> Disparities between the incidence of African men pairing with White women and of White men pairing with African women highlight the richness of Simmel's intuition defining sociology as "the algebra of social relations". Given the two negative signs attached to both their race and their gender, African American women rely much more on self reliance than on crossing racial boundaries and on associating themselves with White men.

<sup>7</sup> It is even more striking in view of the fact that like Tocqueville, Beaumont (section III of Appendix A) sees a strong central government as a "must" if abolition is to proceed peacefully. In this sense, centralization is on the side of culture rather than of nature.

<sup>8</sup> It should be noted that many slave uprisings were caused by the fact that owners did not necessarily hold true to their word. The rebellion of Nat Turner in 1831 offers a case in point. It is surprising that Beaumont does not make any reference to this event which took place during his journey and was undoubtedly a hot topic in the circles that he visited.

<sup>9</sup> Reactions to the recent show of photographs on lynchings confirm the diffusion of collective amnesia as well as its conflicting functions (Sengupta, 2000).

<sup>10</sup> More generally, Beaumont's research strategy raises questions as to the effect of the distance between the observer and the observed on the amount and the quality of the data collected (Béteille and Malan, 1975).

<sup>11</sup> In this regard, we should keep in mind that slavery existed in the French West Indies at the time and that the issue was as explosive for French elites as it was for Americans. It is a recurrent temptation to believe that issues will go away if one does not stir them as exemplified by the behavior of a large segment of the population during the war in VietNam or in Algeria.

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