AMERICAN POLITICAL THOUGHT
POLITICAL SCIENCE 317
MICRO-ESSAY #3

Write a 750-word essay on the following topic. Your essay is due in CLA 251 by 4 PM on FRIDAY February 12. Please include a title (not on a separate page), single space, and use both sides of a single sheet of paper. Also, please include a word count.

Do Tocqueville’s ascriptive assumptions trump his liberal principles?

Be sure to use direct quotations from the reading to bolster your argument and to cite the page number in parentheses after the quotation. Finally, be sure to include at least one claim-objection-rejoinder sequence.

As Tocqueville famously argued in 1836, America was the land of democracy. For Europeans it was also the land of the future since it featured the “equality of social conditions” (11) rapidly forming in the Old World as well. Because Tocqueville was writing for Europeans, he kept the contrast between democratic America and democratizing Europe front and center in his analysis. In America, voluntary associations and groups like lawyers took the place of the aristocracy, which according to Tocqueville had for centuries placed a check on tyranny in Europe. He was cautiously optimistic that in the European future, “the freedom to associate that citizens would enjoy could then replace the individual power of the nobles and the state would be protected from tyranny and license” (18).

Yet, he also conceded that “there are other things in America besides an immense and complete democracy,” namely Native Americans and African slaves, which “being American but not democratic” he decided to treat in a separate chapter on “the three races that inhabit the territory of the United States” (370). Through the first seventeen chapters of his book, Tocqueville emphasized both the liberal and republican traditions in America. Then in the last chapter of volume one, he considered the ascriptive tradition, a literal reproduction of the liberal and republican parenthetical treatment of race.

This leads to the contested issue of our third essay: why is Tocqueville so optimistic about the power of liberalism and democracy in America (and eventually in Europe) but so pessimistic about the Americans’ ability to achieve equality among the races? In other words, what in Tocqueville’s perspective makes him doubt the power of democracy to level white supremacy while watching it, “with a kind of religious terror” (15) and awe as it levels feudal supremacy? Is it because of the facts on the ground or because of his assumptions? Or does he begin with liberal assumptions only to use the facts on the ground to excuse competing but subconscious racist assumptions?

Questions of this sort force us to interrogate how liberals and republicans relate to the ascriptive tradition. We have seen how group identification among egalitarian liberals can lead to an explicit oppositional identity politics that is illiberal in its “us versus them” thinking. Thus, for Melancton Smith mere membership in the yeomanry tends to make one virtuous (“us”) while mere membership in the aristocracy tends to make one selfish (“them”). This essay forces us to confront the fact that competitive liberals also harbor ascriptive assumptions, though they may be more implicit and subconscious.