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Naomi Wulf, *Une autre démocratie en Amérique (1824-1844). Orestes Brownson, un regard politique*, Paris, PUPS, 2017

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Few are the scholars who return to their dissertation after years of having delved into questions connected to and crisscrossed with their initial research topic. Yet when they do it is with an unquestionably more mature and refined understanding. Naomi Wulf's *Une autre démocratie en Amérique* is an excellent example of this course of action. Since completing her PhD. on the American thinker and activist Orestes Brownson (1803-1876), she explored in depth and at length the intellectual and political history of the Early Republic and embarked in the study of biography as a historical genre. Indeed, Wulf developed a growing interest in studying individuals who disclosed and mirrored the period in which they lived. Hence, with these tools at hand thoughtfully acquired over time, she once again tackled Brownson, the actor-cum-observer of the long-time and for many badly-named "Jacksonian democracy". In the book, her purpose is to reveal the failings of the said democracy, notably the increasing social and economic inequalities and corrupting power of money. In sum, rather than only focusing on Brownson's discourses and writings to grasp the meanders of the contradictory thought of an intellectual "weathervane", as some have labeled him, Wulf resorts to Brownson to cast a different and more nuanced light on the Jacksonian era.

The title *Une autre démocratie en Amérique* clearly encapsulates the author's thesis. In an unmistakable reference to Alexis de Tocqueville's *De la démocratie en Amérique*, Wulf sets the framework of the book by comparing Brownson and Tocqueville's works. The French aristocrat who, imbued with liberal ideas, traveled throughout the United States in 1831 and 1832, poured his observations about the young nation's political system and society in a two-volume work, upon his return to France. It has since been considered one of the most comprehensive and penetrating analysis of early American democracy. Yet the Frenchman's achievement, hailed notably by Americans, has largely contributed to overshadowing the reflections of the radical reformers of the time in the United States, such as Orestes Brownson. It is important to point out, however, that this monograph is no anti-Tocquevillian tract. Indeed, the author explains that both thinkers agreed on identifying the "tyranny of the majority" as the main peril of democracy, and yet were fully aware that it is thanks to universal suffrage, even if defective, that equality of conditions for the people is guaranteed. But if Tocqueville understood political democracy as being full democracy, mainly because he perceived no significant class distinctions within U.S. society, Brownson argued that democracy would only become complete and real for the people when social democracy was finally achieved. "We are far from having realized what I regard as true democratic equality [...] I look forward to a time when every man 'shall sit under his own vine and fig tree, with none to molest or make afraid'; when the relations of master and slave, and of proprietor and workman, or employer and employed, shall be unknown", he wrote in the *Boston Quarterly Review*¹. And to make this true, only government, he believed, could do away with social inequalities.

Brownson's preoccupation with the workers' plight, as he explains in his daring and controversial article "The Laboring Classes", in 1840, begs the question of how thorough and accurate Tocqueville's understanding of American democracy was. U.S. scholars in particular return recurrently to this frustrating and somewhat pointless query. Wulf, on the contrary, chooses to steer clear from this debate, and rightly so. She focuses instead on guiding the reader through the intense and instructive discussions Brownson held with his contemporary radical reformers, notably Frances Wright, Robert Dale Owen and Thomas Skidmore, and the philosophers Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson. In other words, she deals with the fleeting European visitor Alexis de Tocqueville in the introduction to then fully concentrate in the rest of the book on the American-centered analysis of the complexities of the Jacksonian era by its local observers. And here lies the

¹ *Boston Quarterly Review* 1840, "Introduction", p. 15-16.

power of *Une autre démocratie*. Wulf renders their debate about the sovereignty of the people, class conscience, the value of education, the role of the state, and the power of money in chapters 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6 respectively not only vibrant but also apropos to the times we are living. For those who have made of teaching their long-life vocation and mission, the chapter about the importance of educating the people will be balm to their spirit. Little can be said against Brownson when he writes that education is “republicanism in practice” (p. 148).

Since the 1930s, studies about Brownson have regularly been published. Many of them highlight Brownson’s peculiarly sinuous trajectory as a radical and conservative thinker, labor activist, Universalist preacher, Unitarian pastor and late convert to Catholicism. Here once again Wulf makes a wise choice by leaving aside Orestes Brownson’s religious activities and beliefs, which certainly took up no small part of his life and mind. Hence, by focusing exclusively on the political aspect of his thought, Wulf convincingly presents the reader with the exhaustive result of her exploration and exposition of Brownson’s critiques, often ferocious, of “Jacksonian democracy”. And it is only in the realm of his political ideas that the author takes on Brownson’s reputation of being a “weathervane”. In the last chapter “*Qui êtes-vous, pasteur Brownson: un radical ou un conservateur?*”, she argues that the quandary has no clear-cut answer because Brownson himself believed that the conservative and the radical had to be combined in the same individual. For him progress could not be achieved if the past was obliterated. Moreover, Wulf adroitly clears Brownson by pointing out that he reflected the contradictions and complexities of the Jacksonian era of transition from an agrarian economy to a more industrialized one.

If Brownson was a man of his time, both as a thinker and an activist, the author is, however, rather discreet about his activism. As a young man, he was involved for a time with the Workingmen’s Party William Heighton founded in Philadelphia in 1828, yet continued for years to write about the unfavorable conditions of the laboring classes. Thus, albeit the focus of the book being on Brownson’s intellectual development, it would have been instructive to have learned more about if and how his political activity impressed on his thought and vice-versa. If what is distinctive about Brownson, as opposed to many of his contemporary reformers and Tocqueville, is that dual position in society, the interplay of word and action is a somewhat relevant detail, inasmuch as it can be established.

The reader could also wonder why the author did not make more use of Brownson’s work *The American Republic* (1865). It could be argued that not only it was not published during the Jacksonian era but that it saw the light the same year the Civil War ended, bringing to a close the most critical period Americans lived through in the 19th century. Nevertheless, it could be asked if Brownson wrote *The American Republic* to close the circle. If this is the case, did he reflect about “Jacksonian democracy” with the benefit of hindsight? If he did not, why not? Because Wulf does make reference to this late book of Brownson here and there, it is rather frustrating not to have a better idea of the place of *The American Republic* in Brownson’s intellectual landscape. Having said this, the very fine conclusion makes up for this absence. This is where Wulf offers the reader the full dimension of Orestes Brownson and his take on American democracy. It is through Brownson’s work that the tension between the republican heritage, i.e. the ideal of the virtuous common good and the guarantor of an egalitarian and moral democracy, and a democracy that increasingly allows the inequality of conditions, comes to light. And this is the reason why Brownson is still very much our contemporary, Wulf concludes.

Naomi left us far too early yet entrusted the French community of historians of the United States with the precious results of her research and writings. Her colleagues and friends Elise Marienstras and Nathalie Caron, in collaboration with Sophie Wanich, edited the manuscript Naomi wrote before her untimely passing away. Parts of it were included in the dossier of her habilitation *Le Politique et l’Histoire: comprendre la Jeune République américaine* (2006) prepared under the guidance of Marie-Jeanne Rossignol, a long-time colleague and collaborator. May they all be thanked for having worked steadfastly with Naomi for many years, the final fruition of which is the long-awaited publication of *Une autre démocratie*. Let us now hope that this major contribution to the history of the Early Republic be soon translated into English for a wider Anglo-American readership.

A propos de l'auteur

Monica Henry is Associate Professor of U.S. History at the Université Paris Est-Créteil. She specializes in the history of the Early Republic, notably U.S.-Spanish-American relations in the early 19th century. She has contributed numerous articles on the topic in collective works published in France, Spain, Argentina and Colombia. She is presently contributor of the born-digital publication of *The Papers of the Revolutionary Era Pinckney Statesmen* (Rotunda/University of Virginia Press).

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