The Influence of Alexis de Tocqueville’s Political Thought on Lord Durham’s Report

This project considers the ways in which Alexis de Tocqueville’s political philosophy influenced early Canadian political thought. To this end, this paper rediscovers the connection between Lord Durham’s Report on the Affairs of British North America and Alexis de Tocqueville’s political writings, as first described by political historian Janet Ajzenstat in her book The Political Thought of Lord Durham. First, this paper outlines Tocqueville’s conclusion that the political problems faced by Lower Canadians during the early 19th century were a result of the historical influence of France’s colonial strategy in the era of the Ancien Régime. The consequence of this, according to Tocqueville, was that the political culture of Lower Canada’s French inhabitants would inevitably be overcome by the liberal political culture of the Province’s far wealthier English speaking inhabitants. The paper then demonstrates the influence of this view on Lord Durham, as it illustrates how Durham, influenced by Tocqueville, advocated for a policy of legislative union between Upper and Lower Canada that would ensure the dominance of the liberal political culture of British North America’s English speaking inhabitants. Firmly entrenched in the philosophical outlook of 19th century liberalism, Durham, like Tocqueville before him, did not believe that the political culture of the Ancien Régime, which he argued continued to exist in Lower Canada, could peacefully coexist with the liberal political culture of British North America. This paper concludes that Lord Durham’s recommendation, as it was influenced by Tocqueville, was an attempt to liberalize the political culture of Lower Canada’s French speaking inhabitants for the perceived economic and civic benefit of both the English and French inhabitants of the Province. Through analysis of Tocqueville’s influence on Durham’s Report, this paper provides further insight into the impact of the philosophical outlook of 19th century liberalism on controversial early pre-Confederation approaches to minority cultures.