

The old régime and the French Revolution

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Alexis de Tocqueville, known and still frequently quoted for his book on democracy in America, started at the end of his life to write a book on the French Revolution, only the first part of which came to fruition, as de Tocqueville's life was cut short by cholera in his fifties. This first part is not intended as a history of the Revolution as such, indeed there is almost no mention of the the day to day affairs of the process, and apart from an indirect reference to Louis XVI as ill-starred, no mention of the Kings decapitation is to be found, but is meant as a history of its precedent, providing an attempt to explain why it arose, and why in France particularly. Thus the bulk of the book is devoted to the *ancien regime* of the 18th century, immediately preceding the revolutionary cataclysm. The writings of the author is no mere speculation, although there is plenty of that in the book as well, but is based on extensive archival research, which no doubt took him years to pursue, and fragments of which found their place in the extended endnotes. His thesis is that in spite of the wide gulf that seems to separate us from the old regime, after all at the time of his writing, many people who had been born in those distant times were still alive, there is a remarkable continuity between the old and the new. In fact the reason the revolution took place, according to the author, is because of this very continuity. Political revolutions seldom if ever involve such total repudiations of the past as do scientific and technical, even if the French Revolution strikes the author as a most singular event in the history of mankind, and unlike any other political revolution, as it was imbued with a universal appeal, formerly more characteristic of the missions of the great religions.

The author is an aristocrat and he is a conservative. The former may have only a slight effect on his point of view, the second is fundamental. No matter how assiduously you collect empirical evidence, there is no point to such exercises, unless they are guided by some overarching principle. Unsurprisingly de Tocqueville is in sympathy with Burke, whom he often quotes with approval, although from time to time censoring him for his unfamiliarity with the French social scene. Being a political conservative, is of course not the same as being a reactionary and being undemocratic, fanatically opposed to reform; nor does it necessarily mean to be indifferent to injustice let alone callous, although the term 'compassionate conservatism' has recently come in disrepute due to the Bush administration. Burke, to take an immediate example, was a Whig and a forceful advocate for the abolition of slavery. What it means is a deep appreciation of tradition. With this comes a distrust of abstract schemes of thought, especially when applied to the affairs of quotidian politics. As noted above, there is no principal opposition to reform in the mind of the conservative, but reform should be piecemeal and address concrete issues¹. One of the virtues of a conservative observer is the mild cynicism that comes with a long perspective and the concomitant predilection to spot unintended consequences of well-meant

¹ One may recall the arguments of Popper in 'The poverty of historicism'

actions and to recall troubling precedents. As such it is indispensable in a truly democratic process. It is a matter more of temperament than conviction, thus it transcends various ephemeral issues and hence can be detected along the entire political spectrum. Although conservatism is usually associated with the right, it is essentially meta-political in nature. Thus one remarkable thing of the book is the almost complete neglect of socialism, the theoretical development of which was very much in the air during the 19th century (with practical implementations dominating the 20th century²), and the Communist manifesto had already been published in 1848. One may in retrospect fault the author for such a glaring omission, but it would probably be better to see it as a sign of the times³

First and foremost, de Tocqueville is censorious of the celebrated French philosophers of the 18th century, normally associated to the Enlightenment. He censures their lack of political experience, and contrast them to the English empiricists, who were not strangers to experience of a free political society. The French had not had such benefits, and thus they could think up abstract schemes, no doubt inspired by the spectacular success of mechanical science, without having them tested against political contingencies. They were indeed intent upon making a political revolution on a scientific basis, by rethinking the fundamentals from scratch. As the author remarks, not without a certain sympathy, they exhibited the great virtue of youth, namely inexperience, which makes for an enviable enthusiasm. Their utter inhibition and disregard for tradition made them dangerous, as there were no natural limits to reign them in. This analysis, is of course strikingly modern, having been confirmed repeatedly during the 20th century. The French Revolution was masterminded by the intellectuals, or at least it felt like it, and thus it was deeply gratifying to them, making them feel that they really mattered, and also setting up a long-lasting precedent for how revolutions should be set about in the centuries to follow⁴. Another particular aspect of the French philosophical movement which irked the author, was their militant opposition towards Christianity. He has a hard time understanding such venom and passion. After all religions usually die naturally when they are no longer relevant having been supplanted. They were out to destroy, for whatever reason, without putting anything new in place, and hence leaving a void, de Tocqueville laments. This is a rather typical manifestation of the conservative temperament. He does in no way offer any arguments why religion should be good, he just assumes it to be so by virtue of its long tradition. Whether he really was religious or not, is beside the point, as he also sees in addition to his vague sense of unreflecting piousness, religion from a political point of view, and as such he assumes it having great potential as a bridge between various factions, and thus constituting an enabler of collective political action.

² Hobsbawm speculates that had not the First World War intervened, Socialism might have become triumphant, but that this war constituted such a catastrophe to the Western world, as to rupture a natural development.

³ A cardinal fault of much historical contemplation is to give undue emphasis to aspects of the past which have had direct influence on the particular present of the commentator.

⁴ The intellectuals were casting around for an actually existing ideal, or at least close to ideal society. Obviously none was to be found in Europe, so it was not surprising that they choose upon China, of which so preciously little was known to interfere with their process of idealization. Just imagine, a society in which the offices of bureaucracy were filled through a competitive literary examination!

As already remarked, the bulk of de Tocqueville's analysis is devoted to an impassioned account of the old regime, looking at it with fresh eyes, so to speak, after it having been so thoroughly discredited by the Revolution. Also, as noted, he spends a lot of time and effort to study the documents from the time, and what he finds surprises him, as being indications of much more modern society than had been assumed, and also almost contiguous with the Revolution and its aftermath, belying the total rupture that had been assumed to have taken place. The old regime was obviously built upon feudalism. As to feudalism he observes that England, France and Germany are strikingly alike in that respect, the institutions of each country having obvious counterparts in the others. As relations between those countries⁵ had been rather infrequent, isolated as they tended to be from each other, the reason for this must have been a common origin. In due time the different societies diverged, and although as expected he concentrates on the divergence between England and France, he does make, if mostly in footnotes, repeated references to Prussia and the reforms of Fredrick the Great. In France the aristocracy turned into a nobility. The distinction being that the former refers to the elite of a society, while nobility refers to a caste, isolated from the rest of society through prohibition on intermarriage. While in England no such prohibitions existed, the aristocracy could continue to function as an aristocracy, by absorbing in their midst the ablest and most enterprising members of the other classes in society, in practice meaning the rich burgers. In France the nobility became more and more marginalized, as well as cheapened by having its ranks swelled by generous royal ennoblements. Their marginalization was paradoxically due to being deprived of their duties while keeping their privileges. This was the result of a vicious circle. The more effectual power they lost, the more assiduously did they hold on to their distinctions and by so doing becoming more and more aloof from society around them. True they did exercise a kind of power when it came to armed forces, only nobility being entrusted with its leadership, but as de Tocqueville is at pains to point out, this was merely for show. Real power arose from dealing with matters below their dignity. Real power was invested in the Kings Council, which was mostly manned by able commoners. The council had provincial representatives in the various provinces, so called Intendants, who were not only in charge of collecting the various taxes, the *taille* being the most important, but also to supervise daily activities. As such they exercises much discretionary power implementing the intentions of the council. France during the old regime was not aristocratic but an absolute monarchy. This meant that it was a very highly developed centralized state, which interfered with almost every detail, no matter how trivial, in its realm⁶. The centralization of France, which among other things made Paris much more than just a capital city, in fact making it France itself, had a long pedigree and can to some

⁵ Although Germany was yet not formally united at the time of de Tocqueville's writing, and even less so in Medieval times, the notion of a German Nation had a long pedigree, without which the political idea of unification would never have arisen. Admittedly its only formal manifestation was the loose confederation of German states, known as the Holy German Empire, with an elected titular head.

⁶ The situation was of course somewhat more complicated. France consisted mainly of so called *pays d'élection* but also a few *pays d'états* in which local government played a much more important role, but of course only at the discretion of the central power, as embodied by the King. The author supplies an appendix in which he lauds the record of the largest of those - Languedoc.

extent be attributed to the growing power of the Monarch as the aristocracy faded away. Still one may wonder what is cause and effect, the abstract notion of a State may have a life of its own, and rather than being the creation of the King, the King himself may simply become its hapless embodiment. *L'état c'est moi*. Those famous words by Louis XIV may not be after all the boast of a megalomaniac, probably that king was too intelligent and shrewd, I guess, to be a victim of such grandiose illusions. Maybe, I wonder, it should rather be seen as a sober assessment of the facts. The notion of the divine rights of Kings has not survived the march of times, and strikes us now, and rightly so, as preposterous. Of course this very preposterousness should give us pause for thought. The people of the past were not that different from us, nor were they fools, at least not more foolish than us. Once you grant the legitimacy of the powerful state, and it was this very idea and its implementation in the old regime, that made the French Revolution possible and provided the basic structure on which it built, the question of its personal embodiment becomes a natural one. The idea of the powerful state is by no means an obsolete idea, on the contrary it played a very important role during the 20th century, and in one of the few references to Socialism, de Tocqueville points out it being an essential component thereof⁷. And even if we may think that the idea has been definitely abandoned in the 21st, and replaced by an even more abstract notion, that of the free market, powerful vestiges remain, as being illustrated by the increasing executive powers of the U.S. Government, ostensibly justified by the perceived threat of terrorism⁸. Given the powerful State, who should embody it? Of course embodiment is not strictly necessary, it can remain an abstraction, to which officials are temporarily elected to serve, but an embodiment seems to answer to deep human needs, maybe not that different from religious ones. Now if the State is embodied by someone ambitious, who indeed has brought about it himself, examples of which no student of 20th history needs to be reminded of, the situation is very dangerous. But if it is brought about by formal hereditary reasons, the situation is somewhat different. This has been understood for a long time. A hereditary monarch has greatness thrust upon him, he knows, unless of course he is clinically mad, that personal as his power may be, it is not really personal, he has definitely no say in its acquisition, and if he is not only not mad but reasonable, he understands that he has little say in its practical execution as well. Now constitutional monarchy, even when it was invested with more than formal power, degenerated during the 19th century and became ridiculous by the 20th. There may have been ability and initiative initially, but with incompetence there will be indolence, and with indolence an inability to form and take initiatives, and thus an inevitable loss of any real power. But Louis XV and his successor were of the 18th century, not yet complete figureheads, yet shorn of the ambition to direct, content to ride the wave⁹.

⁷ He also sarcastically comments, that the socialists disrespect for private property harks back to the despotism of Louis XIV, who claimed that ultimately everything belonged to the state, and that any gift he gave, he had the right to reclaim. So called 'requisition' played an important part in the reigns of the Carolinian Kings in Sweden - Charles XI and his son Charles XII, effecting as absolute monarchs a return of the generous gifts to the nobility effected by their predecessors, in particular that of Queen Christina.

⁸ The judicial excesses connected to that particular paranoia have a very long history indeed, and are just one in a long row of exceptional measures dotting the path of history.

⁹ Soon to overwhelm them, as predicted by Louis XV

18th century France was a feudal society, in which feudalism was in tattered ruins, but not removed, its legacy being everywhere but in disarray, as is the case, after all, with ruins. It was a centralized society, as already emphasized, that trudged along, trying to be great, trying to be prosperous, constantly micro-managing its affairs in trying to improve productivity¹⁰. It was a society characterized by a fragmentation of the population, with little sense of community and common interest, even when such, within the basic stratification of the hierarchal society, were rather striking. It was, compared to England, a non-political society, in which the democratic traditions from medieval times (and beyond?) had been stifled and rendered moot. But above else it was a society characterized by glaring injustice. The burden on taxation was falling upon those least capable of shouldering it. Thus the standard explanation of the French Revolution as a revolt against injustice, is not too far from the mark.

It was not that the injustices were not noticed by the elite. On the contrary, as the century progressed, the harshness that initially characterized the dealings of the elite with the masses, gave way for a growing leniency. The powerful vied with each other to express their compassion with the poor and their determination to provide relief. Philanthropy was fashionable, but there were really never any serious interest in addressing the root of the problem - the unfair system of taxation¹¹. This growing leniency and goodwill had paradoxical effects. Rather than to defuse the situation it brought it into greater relief. Writers were of course persecuted, but in a petty way that was bound to incite revolt; not in a steady way that would have broken their spirits, as de Tocqueville puts it. Furthermore, once the populace is alerted to the fact that oppression is not unavoidable it finds it intolerable. Once one injustice is being removed, the existence of others come to the fore. In spite of everything, prosperity increased as the century came to its dramatic close. The State was at the same time fermenting ambitions, mostly of the financial kind, which it was at the same time frustrating. Out of this contradiction the revolution was sparked. In 1787 the King re-hauled the entire system of laws. This merely served as a dress-rehearsal, reminding the populace that nothing was really sacred after all. (And here we see a true conservative lamenting the state of affairs.)

Alexis de Tocqueville, is of course strikingly modern, and his account can be read with pleasure, not only of the historical kind. But where he dates, is in his effusive description of French natural character, depicting them as the most contradictory of mankind, combining the lowest with the most exalted. Such excesses in phantasy we merely find embarrassing. In particular he lauds the roughness of the French peasants and the glories they brought to the French armies. Of course critical of Napoleon as an absolute monarch and disgusted

¹⁰ This was common in the 18th century. The author makes many references to how the State constantly was trying to educate and instruct in populace, as to the right way to grow their produce. It was also common in Sweden to set up committees to come up with new designs of agricultural and industrial improvement.

¹¹ The compassion of the rich for the poor reminds us very much of the compassion people feel for animals and the indignation engendered by their ill-treatment. In the same way the elite did not look upon the masses as real fellow beings, capable of speaking the same language, but expressed their concerns over their heads. It is reported by one of Voltaire's secretaries, that an aristocratic lady had no compunctions undressing in front of her men-servants, not really thinking of her lackeys as men of flesh and blood.

by the way he so quickly usurped power and turned the advances of the revolution upside down to further his imperial interests. Yet de Tocqueville lives only a few decades after the culmination of Napoleon, and cannot help basking in its glory. Historians and sociologists are human too, and are not above cheering for their favorite teams.

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