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Alexis de Tocqueville and the Legacy of the French Revolution

BY HARVEY MITCHELL

> It must not be forgotten that the author who wishes to be understood is obliged to carry all his ideas to their utmost theoretical conclusions, and often to the limits of the false and impracticable; for if it is necessary sometimes to depart in action from the rules of logic, such is not the case in discourse, and a man finds it almost as difficult to be inconsistent in his language as to be consistent in his actions.[1]
>
> In my lifetime, I have already heard it said four times that the new society, such as the Revolution made it, had finally found its natural and permanent state, when succeeding events proved this to be mistaken.[2]

ALEXIS DE TOCQUEVILLE's observations on authorial concern for consistency are to be found in the introduction to the first volume of *Democracy in America*. His disillusion with the

[1] Alexis de Tocqueville, *De la démocratie en Amérique,* in the *Oeuvres complètes,* J. P. Mayer, ed., *Oeuvres, papiers et correspondance d'Alexis de Tocqueville* [hereafter *OC*] (Paris, 1951–), 1, pt. 1: 13–14/1: 17. Citations henceforth from *De la démocratie en Amérique* will appear parenthetically in the text as *DA*. The numbers following the slash indicate references to the translation, *Democracy in America,* Vintage ed., 2 vols. (New York, 1945). Whenever I believed my translations gave a more accurate rendering of the original text, I have used them.

[2] Alexis de Tocqueville, *L'Ancien Régime et la Révolution,* in *OC,* 2, pt. 2: 343. References hereafter will appear in parentheses in the text as *AR*. References to the page numbers in the *The Old Regime and the French Revolution,* tr. Stuart Gilbert (New York, 1955), will appear following the slash in the parentheses. I have again altered the translations where I saw fit. Translations from the second volume are my own.

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prognostications heralding the end of the French Revolution comes close to the end of his fragmentary notes on its actual events, for which he failed to work out a satisfactory conceptual framework. His stance on the two problems raised in the epigraphs may be seen as an instance in his work of an underlying search for continuity. It was in 1850 that he said he was prepared to put his trust in "a freely ranging judgment on our modern societies and forecast of their probable future . . . which I can only find in writing history . . . [and] [i]t is only the long drama of the French Revolution that provides such a period."[3]

Thus for more than half his life, he was driven to seek consistency in his accounts of human actions that must by their very nature forever remain inconsistent: writers seemingly accomplished this feat with some ease, for almost without thinking about it they imposed the language of logic upon and offered explanations for the actions they described. There is no reference in Tocqueville's thoughts on the question of the writer's unconscious reproduction of the language of prevailing discourses, but there is every reason to believe that he assumed that the writer works within it, constructing theories of human action in accordance with it, investing them with the appearance of unassailability, and also running the risk of becoming a prisoner of his own constructs. A circular relation is created between the interpreting discourse and the interpreted object, in the course of which the author loses sight of his historical particularity. Tocqueville's sense of irony, his taste for the paradoxical, his cunning recovery of silent and stubborn human ambiguities, attest to his awareness of the problem. He accepted it as a challenge more consciously, he believed, than most of the *gens de lettres* of his day, and set out to bind human unpredictability and structural trends in a tightly constructed interpretation. In many respects, *L'Ancien Régime et la Révolution* was just such a book, and he took

[3] Tocqueville to Kergorlay, Dec. 15, 1850, *OC,* 13, pt. 2: 229–234.

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enormous pride in its magisterial and economical perspective, for which he devised a rhetoric of necessary change and equally necessary continuity. But he did not believe that he had succeeded in creating the best kind of balance. He spent the last three years of his life pondering how he could make a breakthrough to the revolution itself, and he perhaps also wondered if he had lived up to Montesquieu's book on the greatness and decline of the Romans, which he held up to himself as a model for his own work, because of his belief that it had overcome the problems of "mixing . . . history, properly speaking, with philosophical history."[4]

At yet another level, he played with the idea that if sound grounds could be established for reducing the role of probability in human affairs, coherence would constitute less of a problem, inasmuch as human actions would not be as subject to the power of the contingent; but he came to believe that individuals could only come to terms with the mysteries of probability, never master them, just as he accepted the sense of incompleteness in his unsatisfied yearning for certainty.[5] This was matched by his resignation, amounting to stoicism, that both the mysteries of the unknown and the unknowability of truth could be borne by a faith in human power to sense the good.[6] Taste for this kind of inquiry may be seen as a pervasive theme in his emotional being and was expressed in his intellectual life in his project to interpret the Great Revolution as the starting point of a modern struggle between impersonal forces and liberty. He was unwilling, as he wrote to the former Restoration deputy, Royer-Collard, one of the more outstanding critics of its politics, to believe in human decline in the face of the counterevidence of human progress in so many areas of life.[7] He was consequently unwilling to settle for a seemingly

[4] *Ibid.*

[5] Kergorlay to Tocqueville, Jan. 6, 1838, *OC,* 13, pt. 1: 119–124; Tocqueville to Royer-Collard, Apr. 6, 1838, Sept. 15, 1843, *OC,* 11: 59, 114–116.

[6] Tocqueville to Corcelle, Aug. 1, 1850, *OC,* 15, pt. 2: 227–230.

[7] Tocqueville to Royer-Collard, Sept. 15, 1843, *OC,* 11: 114–116.

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coherent account of the revolutions of the past that would distort the nature of the struggle for liberty in an uncertain universe. In daring to reach a less false account of it, he exposed himself to enormous anxieties. To this will to comprehend the sources and outcome of the revolution must be added his doubts in finding an understanding audience.[8] The responses to his work never quite lived up to his own search for the polyvalent meanings of the revolution. Hence his disappointment that he had not been understood never left him.

At the center of his interpretation of the French Revolution, whose history he believed was just as likely to escape finality as an author's quest for consistency was destined to remain a permanent source of frustration, were the problems of continuity and determinateness, two of his favorite leitmotifs, which arose both from his study of politics and society and his own political and existential preferences. That the last might constitute an intrusion in his *métier* as historian he never concealed, but he felt confident that there was no necessary conflict between a work of historical inquiry and a teleological account of human affairs. The revolution carried with it certain aspects of the past; the historian must try to embody them in a coherent interpretation; and, since Tocqueville did not belong to a nonexistent fraternity of historians entirely detached from politics, but to the tradition of men in politics who wrote about the past to locate themselves in the present, he also thought that an essential aspect of his life as a public writer was to discern how significant features of a society's past might point to others in the future, as yet hidden. Persons who were cognizant of the power of impersonal forces were in a better position to distinguish real from false choices and had some chance to shape their worlds.

Tocqueville's problematization of the French Revolution exposed the tensions between determinateness and choice and

[8] Tocqueville to Henry Reeve, Feb. 6, 1856, *OC*, 6, pt. 1: 160–161.

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continuity and change, not only within each of these pairs but between them. He saw the two dualities as the principal variants of human history in which they dovetailed, informed, bore upon, but were not easily, though they were not ontologically, irreconcilable with one another. Thus he remained constantly poised on the edge of tentativeness when he spoke about modern liberty as the most likely casualty of democratic revolutions, expecting that his fears might indeed become realities, but hoping that individuals and events might conspire to achieve the opposite. This thought remained with him forever. He took it up, for example, when he made a distinction between the stances of historians in different ages. Historians in aristocratic periods centered their explanations around the actions of great personages; historians in democratic times tended to rob human beings of their power and transfer it to great forces external to themselves—to necessities. Neither were right: the first, because they sacrificed what was concealed and of long duration to the momentary voices of the present; the second, because it was necessary "to raise the faculties of men, not to complete their prostration" (*DA,* 1, pt. 2: 90–92/2: 90–93). Tocqueville's stance was self-consciously aristocratic in a democratic age which heightened his desire to rescue the individual voice from necessities.

Liberty, from this heroic but melancholy stance, consisted in the exercises of options within contexts of varying opacity made up of layer upon layer of customs, mores, moral systems, opinions, and language (*DA,* 1, pt. 1: 289, 300/1: 301, 310), which cling to human beings most tenaciously when they mistakenly believe that they are fully aware of them and think they are able to soar above them, only to find that their imaginations have taken them too far. This is why he inveighed against the Enlightenment men of letters whom he could not forgive for dreaming about and encouraging "une société imaginaire" (*AR,* 2, pt. 1: 199/146).[9] That is why, in addition, Tocqueville's philosophy

[9] See H. Mitchell, "Political Mirage or Reality? Political Freedom from Old Regime

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of history embodies an indignant protest against the notion that popular revolutions are planned. They are "desired rather than premeditated," and those who claim to be their leaders are simply borne along by the wind which takes them into unknown countries (*S*, 57/34–35).[10] He mocked Lamartine's criticism that he had written about the revolution as an accident. Rather, as he put it, the revolution was "the great transformation of the whole of European society, achieved through violence, but prepared and necessarily heralded by the work of centuries."[11] Revolutions happen, and have a quality of determinateness that ought to check human beings who presume to act with a full knowledge of their surroundings. Conceding the presence of determinateness apparently was not the same as hard determinism, for the first did not amount to a capitulation to a "chain of fatality . . . suppress[ing] men from . . . history," as he had remarked earlier in his *Souvenirs*. Human beings, however, are equally mistaken, he said, when they beckon to a concept like chance to help them out of the tangle of the inexplicable; chance was a primitive code word for their ignorance, since there is nothing that is not prepared beforehand (*S*, 84/64). Thus *sheer* chance is not only less interesting, it loses its power to defy the "natural laws," and hence must shed its arbitrariness, when it is seen, as Tocqueville saw it, as an integral part of multicausal explanation. Though he left unclear the nature of his position on design in the cosmos and in history, as we shall see later he was overwhelmed by the "surprise" of the revolu-

to Revolution," *Journal of Modern History* 60 (1988): 28–54. Gustave de Beaumont, Tocqueville's friend who was reading the proofs of *L'Ancien Régime*, pressed him for a fuller explanation, since in all countries, he wrote, writers are often far removed from practical affairs. Tocqueville replied that in France they not only had no practical involvement but had no idea of what actually went on in government. Their ignorance was due to the absence of political liberty; in free countries, by contrast, they somehow have an instinct for it without taking part in it. See Tocqueville to Beaumont, Apr. 24, 1856, *OC*, 8, pt. 3: 395.

[10] *Souvenirs*, in *OC*, vol. 12, referred to in the text in parentheses as *S*. Page references following the slash are to *The Recollections of Alexis de Tocqueville*, tr. A. T. de Mattos (New York, 1959).

[11] Tocqueville to Ampère, Oct. 21, 1856, *OC*, 11: 351.

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tion. He was therefore not at all disposed to discount as inconsequential the precise moment when events took a particular turn, or when individuals acted in unexpected fashion. In retrospect, or even as soon as the unexpected is experienced and thought about, and the future is contemplated, the future, on its arrival, always mocks individuals with reminders from the past, yet continues to tantalize them with the notion that the past will not choke the present. Of course, the fantasy that they could start afresh in utopian fashion would always be hard to dispel, even if the realities of their previous "institutions, cast of minds and . . . state of morals" would catch them up and presumably set them right (*S*, 84/64). But if he was wary of utopic visions, he was far from unreceptive to the element of free choice. His mind was not set on condemning the past as an incubus on the present. He wanted to understand the role of human diversity in shaping it in order to avoid illusions about the future. Thus for Tocqueville the French Revolution had heavy paradoxical meanings. They were structured in human kind itself. The analogues of self and society could, he believed, capture civic reality; but that was not the same as claiming that it could be caught by reducing the complexities of civic reality to personal biography.

The Revolution as Contradiction

Tocqueville's interpretation of the Great Revolution found its way into his writings before the 1856 publication of *L'Ancien Régime,* but it cannot be treated satisfactorily without recognizing that it owed its genesis, not only to *Democracy in America,* but especially to his *Souvenirs.* His search for an unwavering, relatively stable reference point in himself, to be attained by finding an exit from his personal "labyrinth" (*S*, 2/87), reached an acute stage as he began to ponder the significance of the 1848 revolution and its aftermath. He confronted his own *daimons* and

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the *daimons* of the Great Revolution in his "secret" *Souvenirs* which he began to write at the age of forty-five, claiming that thoughts not subject to public scrutiny were the only ones free from dissimulation. Thus he argued that, if he could be true to himself, he could be true to his subject. For him there could be no questioning the intersubjectivity of such entities as the public and private, the social and personal. They were, he believed, threatened by the development of a government that, in its omniscience, would isolate persons and effectively destroy both their private and their public lives (*AR,* 1, pt. 1: 74/xii). So in choosing an "unmoved" point in himself, he was not claiming that the points external to himself were subordinate to his will, but only that the world of self and others outside it were in a constant state of flux, and that individuals have no choice but to adopt a metaphysical fixity to make possible an interpretation of the empirical world. The maneuver was a heuristic device not to challenge but to confirm "the chain of history, so that [he could] the more easily attach to it the thread of [his] personal recollections" (*S,* 47/21). Just as the 1830 revolution released the energies that created *Democracy in America,* so 1848 was a turning point for Tocqueville. It forced him to bring into sharper relief the links he had already been making between the Great Revolution and the emergence of democracy.

When the second volume of *Democracy in America* appeared in 1840, he had been, if not completely, yet fairly confident in his analysis of the trajectory of democratic revolution. He plotted it in general terms as a succession of psychosocial stages. In its first stage, enormous energies fueled by boundless ambition are released, bringing to dizzying heights of power groups of men competing with one another and inspiring others waiting in the wings to make the best of the general confusion caused by changes in laws and customs. The power shifts continue for some time after the consummation of the revolution, and take place in an atmosphere in which people cannot respond outside their former contexts of behavior. The second stage is a compound of recollection and

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a sense of instability, each stimulating further ambition, while opportunities for satisfying them diminish rapidly. The last stage is reached with the complete disappearance of the privileged class of the aristocracy, the onset of political amnesia (the forgetfulness of the nature of the general and specific political struggles), and the restoration of order when the adaptation of desires to available means is reasserted: "the needs, the ideas, and the feelings of men cohere once again; men stabilize a new level in society, and democratic society is finally established" (*DA,* 1, pt. 2: 250–251/2: 256–257).

Tocqueville's anatomization of the Great Revolution and its 1830 aftermath was, he came to believe, incomplete, because, with the coming of the 1848 revolution, he saw that what had begun in 1787–89 had not reached its end. He needed to move into the realm of self-absorption to recognize or rationalize his weaknesses and errors in the Orleanist chamber of deputies, to purge himself of them, and to deny his parliamentary colleagues' accusations of underhandedness and slyness. By these means, he overcame his pain; he found that he could, as he phrased it, take pride in his "pride" as a man, politician, and author. He wanted to think that the approval of others was not the source of his pride, which he compared with the restlessness and disquiet of the mind itself (*S,* 104/90). He was preparing himself for his return to the writer's loneliness soothed by the writer's superior stance,[12] the only center for a "sincere" (*S,* 29, 102/1, 87) interpretation of the Great Revolution that had been leaving its marks in his imagination for a quarter of a century, but which he and others after 1830 had mistakenly thought they had been able to assemble into a coherent whole. Not until he could re-collect or collect himself (*S,* 30/2) could he begin to recollect—this time, he hoped, more accurately—more of the wholeness of the Great Revolution, in order to reach some understanding of why the actors of 1848 had appropriated

[12] Cf. G. A. Kelly, "Parnassian Liberalism in Nineteenth-Century France: Tocqueville, Renan, Flaubert," *History of Political Thought* 8 (1987): 479–486.

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from it what suited them and discarded the rest. The only result of pillaging rather than understanding the past was the creation of a wholly new set of false recollections. "The terrifying originality of the facts remained concealed from them," because the enormous powers of unreliable memories, the fictionalization and the theatricalization of the past hid it from their view. Thus they were hard at work in "acting the French Revolution, rather than continuing it" (*S,* 74/54). Acting out could also mean playing at being revolutionaries, and, indeed, Tocqueville's evocations of the theater to describe the actions of the politicians supports such a view.

They were in part stuck in a scenario from the past; in fluctuating degrees, and in a chaos of fluttering poses, they were prisoners of its signs and behavioral practices.[13] Tocqueville characterized the dilemma of the subject or the self in the familiar terms of self-interest and lack of distance preventing him from seeing himself as he is; the "views, interests, ideas, tastes and instincts that have guided [the self's] actions; the network of little foot-paths which are little known even by those who use them" wove the intricate network of a veil or a screen (*S,* 101/87). He wanted to use rather than bury the power of the past in personal lives and social settings to grasp something even more difficult. If he could emerge from the maze with a heightened understanding of where he had been, he could help rescue his countrymen from their *labyrinth*—a term he had already used in his *Democracy* (*DA,* 1, pt. 2: 90/91)—tell them where they had been, where they were likely to be going, and prepare them for the democratic future. But he did not want to slip into the naive belief that the past automatically teaches

[13] Cf. the richly suggestive essay by I. M. Lotman, "The Decembrist in Daily Life. (Everyday Behaviour as a Historical-Psychological Category)," *The Semiotics of Russian Cultural History: Essays by I. M. Lotman, L. Ia. Ginsburg and B. A. Uspenskii,* ed. A. D. Nahkimovsky and A. S. Nahkimovsky (Ithaca, N.Y., 1985), pp. 95–149. "The contemporary observer would see the everyday behavior of the Decembrists as theatrical, that is to say, directed toward a *spectator.* But to say that behavior is *theatrical* does not imply that it is insincere or reprehensible in any way" (p. 105).

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human beings much about the present, especially when "old pictures . . . [are] forced into new frames" (*S*, 59/37). He also wanted to convince readers that the best lesson history could offer was that it never repeats itself despite the propensity human beings have of repeating themselves. He began with an acerbic observation on historians:

> I started to review the history of the last sixty years, and I smiled bitterly when I thought of the illusions formed at the conclusion of each period in this long revolution; the theories on which these illusions had been nourished; the erudite dreams of our historians, and all the ingenious and deceptive systems by the aid of which attempts were made to explain a present which was still dimly seen, and a future which was not seen at all (*S*, 87/68).

He then moved on to speak in even less flattering tones about the politics of revolution. In his brilliant use of the metaphors of the theater of the grotesque and comic to describe the events of February, May, and June, and later, in drawing his portrait of Louis Napoleon, the new democratic despot whose model for his assumption of power was the first Napoleon, he was trying to warn Frenchmen not to mistake illusory for real change. Shifting his focus to England about a year after he completed his *Souvenirs*, he used similar language in telling Nassau William Senior that revolutions inevitably lead to masquerades.[14] If the Great Revolution was to be saved from the burlesque into which the majority of its heirs had dragged it—the irony was that they believed they were being faithful to it—its real nature had to be revealed. This could not be done by fashioning a discourse of mutilation—cutting the revolution from its roots in the Old Regime—nor by indulging in a cynical one dwelling on how it was being travestied—a sure sign of a partial understanding of its causes, and thus a failure to reply to its hidden cues for individuals to engage in choice. If Tocqueville had been an

[14] Tocqueville to Nassau William Senior, Nov. 13, 1852, *Correspondence and Conversations of Alexis de Tocqueville with Nassau William Senior from 1834 to 1859*, ed. M. C. M. Simpson, 2 vols. (London, 1872), 2: 31–32.

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advocate of simple and stark continuity, his commitment to political liberty in a democratic age would have been a species of play acting more perverse than the political acting he deplored: a heavily constrained notion of liberty could only support belief in deep and irreversible social structures. To be sure, fissures and faults, located deep in human archaeology, were always at work, but if they created new resting places it was not without the help of human agency. A reverse advocacy of discontinuity, with implications of radically new directions, would have trivialized his project, since exercising liberty would have been as effortless as wearing comfortable clothes. The issue for Tocqueville was thus not reducible to a discourse on the relative merits of continuity and discontinuity as instruments of historical explanation. The Great Revolution had to be seen rather as an epicenter from which shocks continued to radiate. In it inhered, as it were, the continuity with the past and was itself the very source of the change subverting it, with determinateness and choice engaged in a ceaseless dialectic. Tocqueville was playing on a subtle but vital difference when he spoke of the 1848 revolutionaries as "acting the French Revolution, rather than continuing it" (*S*, 74/54). If the difference were obscured, historical continuity would be reduced in the long run to continual reenactments of a single scenario, and not be seen for what it is—a *continuation* of a series or a succession of stages that had begun in France's prerevolutionary past, with the Great Revolution marking a partial embodiment of and obedience to ancient social and political impulses, as well as a harbinger of a new age. If Tocqueville's project is interpreted in the first sense, then change cannot figure in his philosophy of history; if in the second, it is never far from it.

Tocqueville did not take either path unequivocally. His opening remarks in *L'Ancien Régime* about unintended consequences may be seen as a compromise, but they remained the basis of one of his abiding intellectual principles; he transformed it into a powerful image focused on the blindness

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of politicians, who, in their mutual challenges for place and power, actually think that intentions and results are unambiguously related, because, as he put it at one point, they fail to note that "the kite . . . flies by the antagonistic action of the wind and the cord" (*S,* 50/26). The end of an action is not necessarily to be found in its intention. The net effect of the Great Revolution is to be sought both in the unexpected tensions that create it as in those that it creates. Unintended consequences are in any case as important as or indeed constitute the paradox that the revolutionaries "used the debris of the old society to construct the edifice of the new" (*AR,* 2, pt. 1: 69/vii). This could be taken both as a silent rebuke to and as an endorsement of Edmund Burke, whom he elsewhere criticized as blind to the abuses of the Old Regime and to the grandeur of the revolutionary image of renewal (*AR,* 1, pt. 2: 338–342);[15] and it may appear to place Tocqueville on the side of those who see change as mere froth on the tides of an implacable history. Unlike Burke, who tended to see change as an inversion or a perversion of a universal, natural order, but employed legalistic and utilitarian arguments against it, Tocqueville tried to remove himself from these remnants of an older theodicy and from the seductions of utilitarianism. Nor did he see change as part of providential design, as did Joseph de Maistre,[16] Louis de Bonald,[17] and even Mallet du Pan:[18] the first was literal minded and vengeful; the second saw the turmoil of the revolution as part of an expiatory plan; the much more sober Mallet preferred to speak of a less personal "force des choses." Tocqueville used

[15] Tocqueville was reading Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) with marked attention.

[16] J. de Maistre's two major works are *Considérations sur la France* (1797) and *Essai sur le principe générateur des constitutions politiques et des autres institutions humaines* (1809).

[17] L. de Bonald's early work (1796) was his *Théorie du pouvoir politique et religieux.* He also wrote *Législation primitive* (1802), and his *Démonstration philosophique du principe constitutif de la société* was published in 1830.

[18] See Mallet du Pan, *Mémoires et correspondance pour servir à l'histoire de la Révolution française,* ed. A. Sayous (Paris, 1851).

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some of the providential vocabulary, drained it of its conventional religious referents, and substituted for them a far more distant and unknown divine presence, which almost amounted to a divine absence from human affairs. He therefore ultimately deprived providence of consequentialism which is its marrow. He tried to be indifferent, as his thoughts on certainty and probability show, to rigorist notions of determinism. In most instances, he envisaged change as the instrument by which long-term trends asserted themselves more clearly and strenuously, shedding the encumbrances of obsolete practices sanctioned by conventional legal practices.

The reverse side of this notion of change, as Tocqueville saw it, was that the exalted ideals that animated the early revolutionaries were delivered a cruel and decisive blow. Whether or not he borrowed the notion of the revolution as monster from Burke, he called it a creature of diseased minds, a "virus,"[19] but he thought of it as creator as well. The revolution was both the symbol and devourer of the highest values. Its greatest legacy for Tocqueville was that it was both the child and mother of modern liberty. Nonetheless, the temptation to devalue it seemed to be an older and more persistent psychic drive. He was not forgetting the liberties that he believed were once part of the corporate structure of the Old Regime and that had been crushed by the state as it assumed its modern shape and imposed itself over civil society. But he was more concerned about a new and modern liberty that had to find its appropriate political setting. The revolution as contradiction lived as a reality in Tocqueville's mind so much so that he celebrated 1789 as "that period of [naive] inexperience, but also a time of generosity, enthusiasm, heroic courage, and [a sense] of grandeur, a time of deathless memory to which the thoughts of men will turn with admiration and respect long after those who have seen it, as well as we ourselves, have vanished" (*AR,* 2, pt. 1: 247/208). It

[19] Tocqueville to Kergorlay, May 16, 1858, *OC,* 13, pt. 2: 337–338.

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was in 1789 that Frenchmen were confident enough to believe that they could be equal and free at the same time. The years leading up to 1789, Tocqueville, however, had hinted earlier, represented just such a time. In that period between the silencing of the imagination characteristic of caste societies and the isolation and "torpor" of a society of conforming equals, "new ideas suddenly change[d] the face of the world" (*DA,* 1, pt. 2: 266 n.1/2: 274 n.1). As momentous as such periods in history are, Tocqueville would not let go of his more pessimistic view that liberty vanishes when admiration for absolute government feeds on the contempt human beings feel for their neighbors (*AR,* 2, pt. 1: 76/xv). Tocqueville was once again giving voice to the dangers he had detected twenty years earlier in democratic societies—in which equality and tyranny were likely to coexist—of inflating the benefits of private comfort to the detriment of good citizenship.

The revolution was thus a paradox. Because Tocqueville could not settle the question of the determinateness of the past, apart from his belief that the "unknown force" (*AR,* 2, pt. 1: 73/xii) at work in the destruction of aristocratic society could only have been regulated or slowed by human agents with practical wisdom, the revolution had been a promise, yet perhaps also an unintentional trap. However, he did not draw out the full import of the paradox. He did not write the planned history of the "vicissitudes of that long revolution." His first aim had been to develop the motif that he had set out in 1836 in his *État social et politique de la France avant et dépuis 1789,* which John Stuart Mill translated and published in the *London and Westminster Review.* In the *État,* he took care to say that the revolutionaries had been shaped by the old order, and remained recognizable under the superficial change (*État* in *AR,* 2, pt. 1: 65; cf. *AR,* 2, pt. 1: 72/10). But, as he put it to Henry Reeve twenty years later, what the revolution had truly accomplished and what its "violent labours" against the Old Regime had brought to birth that was truly new, were necessarily distinguishable. "But that [such a work] would lead

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me too far," he added.[20] As he grew older, his doubts about his capacity to explore these tensions increased and reveal how much he was troubled both by the common perception that the revolution was a total break with the past and his conviction that this was much too shallow an explanation.

Tocqueville's image of the cataclysmic and unpredictable force of the Great Revolution figured in his lexicon as a perplexing instance of the uncertain effect of human action in history, with the result that it threatened existence with meaninglessness. In the tropes of others closer to the revolution in time, either as participants or observers, its unfolding caught them in its embrace, inflaming passion, rarely cautioning distance. In spite of his declarations of "disinterestedness," his aim to be "strictly precise" (*AR* 2: pt. 1: 73/xii), and his pride in his patient archival research, his adoption of a strategy of detachment was tinged with a degree of self-doubt, but he never quite grasped its roots, possibly because he saw nothing contradictory in passionately avowing his political beliefs while denying that they constituted a species of prejudice, since he could not conceive of it as inimical to or obstructive of his great love for and his need to defend liberty. He wanted to possess the secret of the event and the idea, to capture them, as it were, as they occurred, were thought, or were uttered—to find them in the grid of the revolution in its actuality. The challenge threw him into a state of perplexity, inducing a state of vertigo.[21] He deeply sensed that he could not achieve the feat of penetrating to the raw reality of persons and movements; that at best his history would be a work of pale representation, but he wanted desperately that it should be more "true" than the work of others. He saw himself as a philosopher-historian and instructor to the future, by appealing to a "superaddressee"—I am borrowing Bakhtin's concep-

[20] Tocqueville to Henry Reeve, Feb. 5, 1856, *OC,* 6: 161.

[21] Tocqueville to Freslon, Sept. 20, 1856, cited in A. Jardin, *Alexis de Tocqueville 1805–1859* (Paris, 1984), p. 486.

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tion of the writer's ideal audience[22]—he thought he would be able to release the discrete mysteries of the French Revolution as well as reveal the general laws of revolution in their largest sense. But his project was to be accomplished, he promised himself, by resolutely setting himself apart from historians who claimed "mathematical exactness" in speaking about human affairs (*S,* 84/64), only to fall victim, as politicians and kings were prone, when they thought they were avoiding the mistakes of their predecessors, to errors of their own.

Tocqueville honestly acknowledged that his pose in the *Souvenirs* paled to nothingness in the light of the power of the events of 1848 upon which, in repose, he was reflecting (*S,* 85–86/66–67). And those events, he said, almost immediately assumed a mimetic character. Tocqueville treated the revolutionaries of 1848 as unconscious parodists of 1789, who just as unconsciously contributed to a comic view of the past; the comic was history's revenge; it offered the consolation of laughter; in Tocqueville's scale of values it was ironic laughter; it was the other side of history which is usually thought to have only a serious dimension. Thus the comic did not conceal the nature of human history, but was instead a way to a fuller knowledge of it.[23] Are we justified in seeing Tocqueville's lament that the men of 1848 were merely replaying an old script in their floundering uses of the radical rhetoric of 1789, and were unable to devise a new one that would take them and France beyond it? This makes sense if we recall his belief that the 1848 actors did not continue what 1789 had begun. Such an insight nevertheless left Tocqueville with a feeling of deep

[22] M. M. Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays,* tr. V. W. McGee (Austin, Texas, 1986), p. 126.

[23] L. Shiner argues that Tocqueville's carnivalesque treatment of the 1848 revolutionaries and politicians undermines any serious intent he might have had. I would claim that Tocqueville's growing pessimism and relentless attempt to extract answers from a recalcitrant past could be relieved only by the use of irony and of the comic, but he meant those devices to put his serious intentions into bold relief. See Shiner's "Writing and Political Carnival in Tocqueville's *Recollections,*" *History and Theory* 25 (1986): 17–32.

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unease. Could he articulate how what he admired in 1789 might be continued and bring an end to the revolution, some sixty years after it had shaken the world, without reconstituting the realities of the immense varieties of the conflicts and their participants preceding and during the revolution? His contemporaries, whose every weakness he caught in verbal caricatures worthy of Daumier, were, he thought, fair game; but they were safely locked away in his "secret" memoirs of the 1848 revolution, although the fact that he could not keep the *Souvenirs* completely secret, as his correspondence with some of his friends shows, proves how much his call upon his inner self was determined by his need to make sense of the revolution, and that he could not begin to do so without reemerging from his solitude.[24] Would he be able to expose the flaws and extol the deeds of the principal actors of the Great Revolution, the "real" but dead actors, those whose actions and whose party labels the politicians and enthusiasts of 1848 ingested so greedily? Would the "real" actors be any more real than their imitators? In theory, the answer could be yes, since, in Tocqueville's framework, they represented a genuine break with the past and their conduct constituted a foundational act. This question, however, he could not confidently confront, though he knew how important it was to open the question of the role of key actors. It was their impotence, volatility, fear, and self-interest that he observed. They were overwhelmed by momentary confidence and longer-term bafflement (*AR,* 2, pt. 2: 175–176/192–193). He was more comfortable moving around the long antecedents and the long-term effects of the revolution, despite his conviction that human beings cannot be absolved from and in fact contribute to the making of their own history, whether for good or ill, and should therefore be a proper subject of historical inquiry. The utterances of the men of 1789 could not be more opaque than the impermeability of the institutions,

[24] Tocqueville to Kergorlay, Dec. 15, 1850, *OC,* 13, pt. 2: 229.

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including language, under which they lived and had originally shaped together as a community, that tied them together by invisible bonds and bound them to a more and more remote past. They had to be transparent in some mythic beginning—in the years leading to 1789 and 1789 itself, the brief period in which modern liberty for Tocqueville came to life and which came to serve as a constant reminder of what people could accomplish. But, as we shall see, even such a privileged moment did not elicit from him a prolonged interpretation of the leading actors either at the outset of or during the revolution.

"Le Mal Révolutionaire"

Tocqueville feared being swallowed up in an ocean of materials, and he swam away from its undertow by subordinating the actors to his theory that the choice made in favor of liberty was blown off course—more, that the totality of human actions, rather than persons, took on a pathological character, for which he invented the locution "le mal révolutionnaire." Imprecise though it was, it may best be understood as an inversion of the will that amounted to a kind of illness or impoverishment of the spirit. Images of disease, sickness, defective organs, and the need to dissect them to find causes were meant to expose the sources of the Old Regime's defects (*AR,* 2, pt. 1: 73/xii). That was one path to understanding. Physiological metaphors for political breakdown were commonplace before Tocqueville's time. So were metaphors of unsettled and "unnatural" states of mind for deviant political and social action. He made use of both, but his language suggests that, while he found plausible explanations for the violence of the revolution, he was more perplexed by revolutionary mentality than by the breakdown of entrenched polities. It should be noted that he did not integrate these as

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part of a single dynamic process. He could write with comparative ease about the signs of a complaisant and dying social order and a well-intentioned but ineffective, inept, and often mendacious administration, but he found "le mal révolutionnaire," which followed the breakdown of the Old Regime, too intractable a subject. From the context with which he surrounded the phrase, it is safe to say he meant the successively more violent stages of the revolution itself. "Le mal révolutionnaire," he seemed to be arguing, was synonymous with revolutionary government, which was illegitimate, although he did not say how, except by suggesting it was due to the excesses of democracy itself. The newness of democratic equality led to scenes of brutality and inhumanity. The violence, which he contrasted with the benign nature of democratic theory, possessed a virulent quality that grew out of the very texture of the lives of oppressed people, and need not therefore be surprising. "Le mal révolutionnaire" was also more importantly a kind of philosophy and theory of action; the likelihood was that, even when it exhausted itself along with the concrete particularities giving rise to and created by revolutionary society, it would not disappear but would remain as a permanent, if shadowy, human passion. It had always been at, or the revolution had brought it to, the surface of human experience; and it was repeatable (*AR,* 2, pt. 2: 368–369). We cannot know whether he thought the "mal révolutionnaire" was a fall or an original flaw, since he seems to have been unable to choose between these two explanations. Thus he could scarcely have found it a simple matter to speak of individual responsibility, and he retreated to the notion that, if anything, the "mal" manifested itself and could best be represented as an example of a profound break with the past, which, in its turn, descended into incoherence and error.[25]

[25] For a discussion of some of these problems see G. Canguilhem, *On the Normal and the Pathological,* tr. C. R. Fawcett (Dordrecht, Boston and London, 1978), pp. 171–175. Another perspective is to be found in J. Elster's theory that illusions (or imaginaries) occur when "both the external situation and the internal processing . . . come into play.

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The development of such incoherence—the revolutionary disease—may have been given, he was suggesting, its impetus and rationale by the pamphleteers who were especially prominent in 1788–89. Tocqueville's notes reveal a fairly close inspection of several of their ideas; there is no evidence that he ever looked at the later, more revolutionary papers and pamphlets. The earlier ones were produced by men whose ideas, he claimed accurately, constituted more than just a transition point between the old and the new political discourses. The outlines and often the substance of their ideas were already, if not fully in every case, establishing a lexicon of revolutionary challenge. The prime example was Sieyès, whose *Qu'est ce que le Tiers-État* Tocqueville described as a veritable "cri de guerre"—"a specimen of the violence and the radicalism of opinion, even before the struggles that are said to have provoked violence and radicalism." In doing so, it was the germinal expression of the revolution ("le plus congénital de la Révolution"). In his call for full-scale war against the ancient social and legal structures of France and the absolute and unlimited triumph of his theories, without due regard for their practical effect, Tocqueville sounded a note of outrage and wonder at the breathtaking presumption that could ignore the cultural and political heritage of an ancient civilization and reduce politics to the mechanical counting of heads (*AR,* 2, pt. 2: 139–147).

Two crucial points emerge from his analysis of Sieyès's powerful and decisive pamphlet, which he resumed and expanded in his evaluations of pamphlets written by Mounier,[26]

. . . [O]ne could also speculate, though I would be more skeptical as to the value of the outcome, that differences in social origin generate differences in the internal apparatus and thus in the liability to illusions (keeping the external situation constant)." See J. Elster, "Belief, Bias and Ideology," in *Relativity and Relativism,* ed. M. Hollis and S. Lukes (Cambridge, Mass., 1982), p. 137.

[26] I am following the editors of *L'Ancien Régime et la Révolution* in the *OC* in the citation of Mounier's work consulted by Tocqueville: M. Mounier, *Nouvelles observations sur les États généraux de France* (1789). This will be also the case for succeeding citations.

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Barnave,[27] Brissot,[28] Rabaud-Saint-Etienne,[29] and Péthion.[30] The first was their animus against the idea of favoring the united action of the legal orders and social ranks, exemplified by the decision of the three estates at Vizille in the province of Dauphiné to remain a single body (*AR,* 2, pt. 2: 75–78, 145). The second was the almost total repudiation of Montesquieu's constitutionalism, which Tocqueville said was distorted by the pamphleteers who saw it as a screen to promote the special interests of the privileged. All of them were too blinded by their aversion for the Old Regime to grasp the benefits of a gradual readjustment of the balance of political forces in the monarchy.

For example, Mounier's great error was to allow himself to be carried away by the bizarre notion that a bicameral assembly was to be avoided, because only a unicameral one could effect the changes France required. Only after they were introduced did Mounier feel secure enough to entrust the nation to a divided assembly. Such a formula, which placed the political future of the nation at the mercy of a single class or a single party, Tocqueville complained, was "excellent indeed for making a revolution, but hardly the one to bring an end to it at the right time." The obliteration of all the features of an orderly society in these circumstances degraded liberty, and equality, left on its own, simply became another name for servitude (*AR,* 2, pt. 2: 150–151). Such a process in Tocqueville's eyes was a striking demonstration of how the powers of centralization were strengthened. Mounier's precise aim, he said, was not to support centralization, but he supported the steps that led to it (*AR,* 2, pt. 2: 148: "Il ne veut

[27] The editors do not provide a reference to Barnave's brochure. Tocqueville's own notes refer to its title as *Contre les édits du 8 mai et le rétablissement des parlements* (1788).

[28] J.-P. Brissot de Warville, *Plan de conduite pour les députés du peuple aux États généraux de 1789* (1789).

[29] Rabaud-Saint-Etienne, *Considération sur les intérêts du tiers état par un propriétaire foncier* (1788).

[30] Péthion, *Avis aux Français sur le salut de la patrie* (1788).

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pas précisément la centralization, mais ce qui y conduit.") This instance of unintentional consequences was once again the reward of false premises.

Barnave, too, had originally spoken out against innovation, when the monarchy dared to invade the rights of the magistrates in 1788. He did so, Tocqueville observed with approval, in the spirit of Montesquieu's detestation and fear of despotism. Tocqueville marveled at Barnave's youthful appeals for a union of all classes and interests, his praise of the "illustrious families" of France that protected the monarchy with their blood, and his "sincere" appeals to natural equality and democracy; and while Tocqueville wondered about the prospects of a permanent union of all the forces ranged against the despotic state, he conceded that such a union had reached the limits of the possible (*AR*, 2, pt. 2: 153–154).

Thus, though he kept coming back to the theme of united action, noting that the future Girondin, Brissot, had appealed for caution, conciliation, and harmony, he acknowledged that Brissot's opposition to the exclusivity of the first two orders was his major and most decisive argument. As a result of his stay in the United States, he had become convinced that a convention was a necessary step toward the remaking of the political map of France. For Tocqueville this was a truly revolutionary idea. Whether or not Brissot's text justifies Tocqueville's reading of it, Tocqueville derived a certain pleasure from and accorded his respect for Brissot's understanding of the conservative nature of the American political experience. As proof, Tocqueville mentioned the American decision to adopt a bicameral legislature. He may also have been recalling his praise of the makers of the American Constitution. Recognition of the utility of American practices was much more desirable in Tocqueville's opinion than the views of the "worst imitators" who had "taken from the United States the abstract principles of their constitution without having felt the need of applying them conservatively which

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had been achieved in America" (*AR,* 2, pt. 2: 155–157 and *DA,* 1, pt. 1: 208–209/1: 214).

From Brissot Tocqueville went on to consider Rabaud-Saint-Etienne who, he dryly observed, took four years to discover that he was tired of acting the part of the tyrant, and was executed for admitting that he was mistaken for thinking that the regime of privileges was more to be feared than royal power. Rabaud's sudden insight, Tocqueville could not resist adding, was a good case of human intelligence knowing too late that it was liberty that needed support; instead the mind had mistakenly turned its energies to equality (*AR,* 2, pt. 2: 160). But there was more in Tocqueville's interpretation of the desire shown by all the pamphleteers to move swiftly against any political ploy to retain any semblance of traditional representation. What choices did they have, Tocqueville finally asked himself. Almost none, because in their desire to end privilege, they were unable, because of the profound political differences between France and England, to adopt the English political model to enable them to reduce and limit rather than abolish what had to be ended (*AR,* 2, pt. 2: 158–163). Similarly his notes on a pamphlet attributed to Péthion show how he continued to perceive that the revolutionary discourse was moving further and further away from Montesquieu's ideas and that, while liberty was not forsaken, the "final word of the Revolution" came to be "let us try to be free by becoming equal, but it is a hundred times better to cease to be free than to remain or to become unequal" (*AR,* 2, pt. 2: 168–169).

The revolutionaries who then came into their own were "men who carried audacity to the point of sheer insanity, for whom no innovation was surprising, no scruple could act to restrain, and who would never hesitate to execute an action." Tocqueville was again sounding the theme of equality, the hunger for which had become so overwhelming that it was elevated above and displaced for all practical purposes everything else that the actors of 1789 were bringing to political consciousness in their desire to regenerate France.

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Those who were responsible for the deflection were not, however, "new beings," nor "the isolated and ephemeral creation of a single moment, destined to disappear with it. They had rather formed a new race of men that endured and gained ground throughout the civilized world, everywhere preserving the same features, the same passions, and the same character. They were already here when we were born, and they are still with us" (*AR*, 2, pt. 1: 208/157).

Humanitarianism and generosity, two of the noblest features of the Enlightenment, had been blighted by an inhuman revolution (*AR*, 2, pt. 1: 246/206). "Le mal révolutionnaire" had produced murderous effects and was always ready to be summoned up from the depths of human experience. On what grounds was he making these ominous claims? In part, he was calling on Burke's outrage at the climate of revolutionary suspicion of all established opinion. But he was more interested in exposing the origins and consequences of popular opinion. He did so delicately, but devastatingly. He was far from denying the connection between ideas and actual events; but he refused to extend to the extreme actions of the Year II a footing in solid ideas. At best, those actions and the ideology inspiring them constituted the revolutionary degradation of political ideas and conduct. He had little regard for most of the men of letters of the Old Regime, whom he mistakenly represented as misunderstanding the nature of politics, and who assumed, so to speak, the role of an unofficial public opposition, but did so irresponsibly by producing streams of impractical ideas.[31] At the same time, he made a distinction between abstract ideas and popular expressions of opinion. To the first he conferred a kind of dignity by conceding the good intentions of their theorists, while condemning the savage practices of the uneducated, unlet-

[31] For a corrective, see K. M. Baker, "On the Problem of the Ideological Origins of the French Revolution," in *Modern European Intellectual History,* ed. D. LaCapra and S. L. Kaplan (Ithaca, N.Y., and London, 1982), pp. 197–219.

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tered, and disorderly elements in society, who took control of and shaped the violent phases of the revolution. The humanitarians who were trying to transform political culture had no way of controlling their intellectual products, as the latter began to attract a mass audience (*AR*, 2, pt. 1: 246/207). In the *Democracy*, he had already dissected the power of public opinion; in *L'Ancien Régime*, he adverted to the processes by which public opinion achieved its force in the political and cultural structures of monarchical France. In democracies, he noted in his earlier work, opinion truly came into its own as mistress of the world, because equality erased trust among private men but enhanced their faith in the infallibility of public judgment (*DA*, 1, pt. 2: 18/2: 11). In the French Revolution, books were used by the populace, including the peasantry, to satisfy their "lust for revenge" (*AR*, 2, pt. 1: 246/207). This led to the inevitable deterioration of opinion, as it descended downward to the people from the literary figures and self-styled philosophers (*AR*, 2, pt. 1: 196/142).[32] Tocqueville's intention was to make the link between his earlier belief that the ubiquitous nature of public opinion in democratic nations stifled the critical mind and his later belief that nothing could resist its tyranny in revolutionary times. As if to underline this point, he expressed envy for the way in which the English upper classes had made a revolution in 1688

[32] If Tocqueville could not formulate the means of tracing the unexpected expressions of revolutionary ideas and practices from their presumed theoretical foundations expounded by the writers who evoked "une société imaginaire," Augustin Cochin simply gave body to Tocqueville's general observations but eschewed altogether any consideration of the theory/practice problematic. Cf. F. Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution*, tr. E. Forster (Cambridge, 1981), pp. 164–204, esp. 203–204. Also note P. Ricoeur's rejection of Furet's idea that we may be led back from Cochin to Tocqueville. Ricoeur writes, "No conceptual reconstruction will ever be able to make the continuity with the *ancien régime* pass by way of the rise to power of an imaginary order experienced as a break and as an origin." See P. Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, tr. K. McLaughlin and D. Pellauer (Chicago and London, 1984), 1: 221–224. On the generation of an expanded public opinion looking for a wider public space before the revolution, see K. M. Baker, "Politics and Public Opinion under the Old Regime: Some Reflections," in *Press and Politics in Pre-Revolutionary France*, ed. J. R. Censer and J. D. Popkin (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, 1987), pp. 204–246.

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and carefully controlled it by ensuring that it did not pass into the hands of the people. Not so the National Assembly, which had wavered in its resolution. It failed to pass Lally-Tollendal's "timid" motion of July 22, 1789, urging popular moderation, and thus transferred sovereignty to the people of Paris (*AR,* 2, pt. 2: 188).

Tocqueville saw in the democratic revolution a single but agonistic event that tore its principal actors apart: for him it was indeed the specter haunting Europe, but it was also the creator of a new society. He may have departed from the full import of his original assertion that democratic peoples must "secure the new benefits which equality may offer them . . . [and] to strive to achieve that species of greatness and happiness which is our own" (*DA,* 1, pt. 2: 338/2: 352), but he did not doubt even then that were the descent of democracy into democratic despotism to become more and more irreversible, it would be because human beings were wrong to believe it right, but were still willing to satisfy their inclination to simplify rather than diversify the means to reach their greatness (*DA,* 1, pt. 2: 347/2: 386–387). However, he questioned his own pessimism when he opposed Arthur de Gobineau's racial theories. He contrasted the "illness" of the revolutionary belief in total self-transformation with the "illness" of the postrevolutionary belief in the futility of will and virtue, and rejected both such expectations and such nihilism.[33]

The theme of continuity which has so enthralled readers of Tocqueville has blinded them to what he regarded as new in the Great Revolution and its echoes in the nineteenth century and after. He did not intend to support, nor may he be read retrospectively as supporting, the claim that the Terror foreshadowed the broad outlines and experiences of the *univers concentrationnaire* of the twentieth century. So respectful was he of the unique rather than the uniform circumstances of

[33] Tocqueville to Gobineau, Dec. 20, 1853, *OC,* 9: 201–204.

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events that he distinguished the 1793 Terror that "still preserved in its crimes a certain hypocrisy of forms and honesty missing" from Louis Napoleon's repressive policies that were sending thousands of unfortunate victims into exile without trial.[34] He made the same point after 1856 when he described the "perfected atrocities" characteristic of the Directory—the deportations to Guiana of journalists and politicians, the imprisonment of priests, the forced loans, the confiscations, and the law of hostages, which were, he said, much more cruel than any of the laws of 1793 and were not necessarily consequent on them (*AR,* 2, pt. 2: 270).

His general remarks on the Terror are couched in language he had consistently used. His conviction that the majority's loss of its rights and willing acquiescence in its own exploitation by tyrannical minorities recalls Montesquieu's conviction that individuals have a profound propensity for subjection. What had to be painted, Tocqueville promised in his notes, was the state of the revolutionary mind by means of which the majority rendered the tyranny of the minority possible. He admired Mallet du Pan's *Mémoires* for adverting to an explanation of the Terror that bordered on his own concerns. It was a powerful force that he said came close to organizing disorganization and uniting the forces of despotism and anarchy, and which was, he agreed with Mallet, not a singularly French but a European phenomenon, one of the most "active and contagious diseases of the human mind" (*AR* 2, pt. 2: 227–228). Quite early on, in the first volume of his *Democracy,* he noted that any legislative body, such as the French Convention, which had usurped the role of government, was destined to self-destruction, because, while its power was subject to shifts in the popular will, it tyrannized society in the name of that will, by claiming a false identity with it. Its vigor was thus an artifice, subject to imminent disclosure (*DA,* 1, pt. 1: 89/1: 92). The insight is reminiscent of Montesquieu's depiction of the operations and

[34] Tocquevville to Henry Reeve, Jan. 9, 1852, *OC,* 6: 132.

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ultimate impotence of despotism.[35] Something like the overthrow of the despotism of the legislative power, Tocqueville intimated, must have begun but was not completed at Thermidor. By the end of his life, he was satisfied that he had discerned the contours of the new democratic despotism. He had shifted his concern from the powers concentrated in the legislative body to those in the clenched fist of the executive power (*AR*, 2, pt. 2: 320–322). The study of the revolution's inflation of the popular will strengthened his conviction that it was the key to popular subjection.

It is not at all certain that he was prepared to entrust liberty to the bourgeoisie of his own day, who were hardly the same as they were at the beginning of the Great Revolution.[36] He was less interested in embarking on an analysis of their newer sources of wealth than in commenting on the development of their power and their total inwardness. They had undergone a sea change in two generations. Tocqueville was once again reflecting on the ironies and paradoxes of unintended consequences. By triumphing in 1789 and after, the bourgeoisie ended the unity of opposition to the crown. That union had captivated Tocqueville's admiration because it symbolized a willingness for self-sacrifice. By contrast, 1830 was the triumph of selfishness—it gave the bourgeoisie the chance to establish their full identity and their hegemonic power to demonstrate how they would utilize it. Tocqueville excoriated their abuses of power over the next eighteen years, noting disdainfully that they were enduring ignominies in 1848 similar to those suffered by the nobility whom they had displaced. The new governing class, "through its indifference, its selfishness and its vices," proved "incapable and unworthy of governing the country" (*S*, 39/13). Just as he inveighed against the old aristocracy for its exclusiveness, he turned against a similar

[35] *De l'esprit des lois*, in *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. R. Caillois (Paris, 1951), 1: 396–407.

[36] See A. Kahan, "Tocqueville's Two Revolutions," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 46 (1985): 585–596 for a consideration of Tocqueville's treatment of the bourgeoisie in his volume of notes.

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shortcoming in the bourgeoisie of his own time, but found that despite their common defect, one difference between them was striking, perhaps decisive. The middle class was far from being a homogeneous body. It expanded and contracted, it bordered on other classes, and, for this reason, was hard to locate, define, or attack, even if it tried to retain its exclusivity (*S,* 63, 94/41, 77). Indeed it was liable to greater vulnerability than the aristocracy, and would, in the light of 1848, be forced to face the fact that property was no longer shielded by the system of odious privileges which had been abolished in the Great Revolution, and was therefore more directly open to attack (*S,* 36–37/10–11).

Tocqueville just as determinedly ridiculed what he thought were the illusions of the socialist sects. There could be no question of entrusting them with the defense of liberty. But we should not forget that he adverted to the existence in the eighteenth century of conflicting views of political economy (*AR,* 2, pt. 1, 213–214/164; pt. 2: 128–129), calling into question the paramouncy of private property. He thus helped to bring to consciousness the question of how the desire to free the market from legal restraints, traditional conventions and customs, and the power of the state, triumphed over the challenges to them and had become the established dogma of the discourse of political economy. Tocqueville's reactions to its observed effects, rather than to its growing but by no means assured status as a body of noncontingent truths, were far from positive. Although he admitted that the growth of the modern economy conferred technological benefits, and although he affirmed that commerce prepared individuals for freedom (*DA,* 1, pt. 2: 268/261), he had, long before his work on the revolution, believed it necessary to look at the "concealed relationship between . . . liberty and commerce." From his examination, he drew the conclusion that freedom in its largest sense gave birth to commerce.[37] Indeed, he was in

[37] *Voyages en Angleterre, Irlande, Suisse et Algérie,* in *OC,* 5, pt. 2: 90–92.

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some important ways more sympathetic to some of the dying moral principles that underlay a premodern economy, while denying at the same time that they had any final purchase in a world that was being instructed by its leading political economists not to confuse commerce and ethics. In the *Democracy,* his views on individualism and jeremiads against the effects of economic success and well-being on the prospects of personal and political liberty made up his testament to the ultimate vacuity of restless ambition in a world that had ended endemic scarcity and had enthusiastically embraced material gratification as a goal, while investing with intense passion the power that such self-concentration gave to people in a democratic society to act in the name of but almost invariably against civic responsibility. It was as if he were saying that in some inexplicable way the relationship between modern political economy and liberty had been distorted—that commerce, the child of liberty, might in due course strangle its parent rather than preserve it, and thus help to smother civic responsibility, whose leading principle was liberty.

His conviction was not without its sense of desperation, and the problem was how to overcome or at least to mitigate it. As is often the case in interpreting Tocqueville's thought, what he failed to integrate into his deft crafting of his consistent view of the past holds the key to the question. When in the *Democracy* he charted the development of equality in America and in France, the two societies in which forms of democracy had been reached by different routes—one without, the other with, violent revolutionary struggle—he saw equality not only as a legal and political reality, but also as a desirable condition for expanding economic capabilities in the eyes of those who yearned for it. One may therefore read *L'Ancien Régime* in a state of forgetfulness of the immensely significant role Tocqueville gave in his *Souvenirs* to the bourgeoisie's defense of property in the prelude to and aftermath of 1848, in the course of which, as we saw, he took a much harder line against the nonpropertied majority. If we remain forgetful, we may

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also overlook the extent to which he had seen the 1830 revolution as a license for the bourgeoisie to plunder society. He castigated them for not taking care to see how their apotheosis of and seduction by wealth would generate bitter social conflict. And after 1848, he predicted darkly that fate decreed alternations between license and oppression rather than a regulated and stable system of liberty.

Tocqueville thought about liberty's and history's elusiveness as a positive inducement to human beings to see them both as reminders of their fragile hold on life's meaning. The only liberty that mattered was the liberty that allowed human beings to obey the laws they themselves enacted, provided the nations of which they were part made a proper use of it (*AR,* 2, pt. 1: 75/xv). He valued "the stable, regulated liberty, restrained by religion, custom and the law" about which he spoke in his *Souvenirs* (*S,* 86/68), and not the unregulated liberty that led to the undoing of the "authentic" liberty he believed was one of the great unclaimed legacies of the Enlightenment (AR, 2, pt. 2: 132). It is therefore an error to think that Tocqueville would have been ready to concede that in democracies "the new sense of equality, society and humanity [could] only be reconciled with liberty on condition that it never be realized." This conclusion is reached on the grounds that actualization would see human beings "slipping into the imaginary which would effect a split between the reign of opinion and the reign of power, between the reign of science and men who are subjugated."[38] Tocqueville, it is true, warned against this. The revolutionaries, he complained, had moved recklessly into an embrace of their own artifice, "une société imaginaire," and had produced a disaster. Instructive for Tocqueville in his understanding of the revolution was that it provided additional evidence of the fragility of modern liberty. In the *Democracy,* he had spoken about the practical measures he believed necessary to strengthen liberty. But after 1848, after

[38] C. Lefort, "Reversibility," *Telos* no. 63 (1985): 116.

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writing *L'Ancien Régime,* and during the last three years of his life as he reflected further about the events of the revolution, he could not resist coming back to those moments before and during the earliest stages of the revolution when a rare moment had united all classes. That is the only meaning that may be given to his belief that 1789 would remain enigmatic so long as human beings were caught in the tangle of reliving, rather than continuing, what it had begun. He had set out to escape from the labyrinth of the past, constructed a coherent view of it to instruct his fellow creatures to avoid its deepest recesses, and invented his own imaginary to keep the image of liberty alive.

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