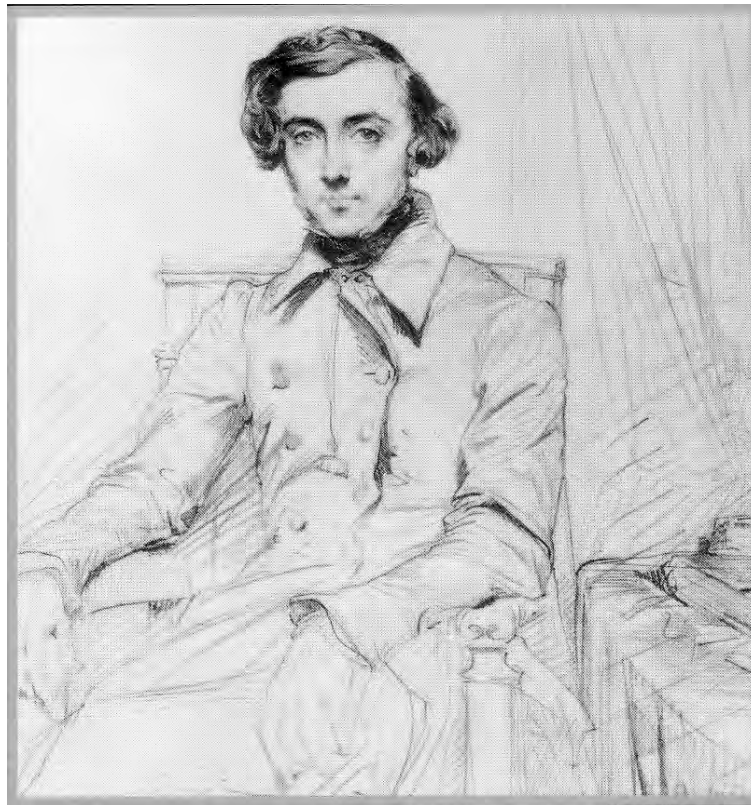


ALEXIS DE TOCQUEVILLE

AND THE MAKING OF THE MODERN WORLD



By Alan Macfarlane

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REFERENCES, CONVENTIONS AND MEASURES

Normally, much of the materials in a monograph would be one's own. This book, however, is a work in which I try to let Tocqueville speak to us in his own words. Consequently it is a patchwork of quotations with a concomitant effect on style. On the other hand I hope that the authenticity of the chosen authors will enrich the argument.

Spelling has not been modernized. American spelling (e.g. labor for labour) has usually been changed to the English variant. Italics in quotations are in the original, unless otherwise indicated. Variant spellings in quotations have not been corrected.

Round brackets in quotations are those of the original author; my interpolations are in square brackets. In the quotations from Adam Smith, where angled brackets have been used by modern editors to show where words or letters have been added, I have reproduced these. Square brackets are used for my interpolations or expansions.

The footnote references give an abbreviated title and page number. The usual form is author, short title, volume number if there is one (in upper case Roman numerals), page number(s). The full title of the work referred to is given in the bibliography at the end of the book, where there is also a list of common abbreviations used in the footnotes.

Where several quotations within a single paragraph are taken from the same author, the references are given after the last of the quotations. Each page reference is given, even if it is a repeated page number.

Measures

A number of the quotations refer to English systems of measurement, some of which are now no longer in use.

Value: four farthings to a penny, twelve pennies (d) to a shilling (s), twenty shillings to a pound (£). One pound in the seventeenth century was worth about 40 times its present value (in 1997).

Weight: sixteen ounces to a pound, fourteen pounds to a stone, eight stone to hundred-weight (cwt) and twenty hundred-weight to a ton. (Approx one pound (lb) equals 0.454 kg.)

Liquid volume: two pints to a quart, four quarts to a gallon. (Approx one and three quarter pints to one litre)

Distance: twelve inches to a foot, three feet to a yard, 1760 yards to a mile. (Approx 39.4 inches to 1 metre).

Area: an acre. (Approx 2.47 acres to a hectare).

Abbreviated Titles of works by Alexis de Tocqueville (1805-59)

Titles of works by Tocqueville discussed in this book are abbreviated as follows.

Journeys to America *Journey to America*, tr. George Lawrence, 1959

Recollections *The Recollections of Alexis de Tocqueville* (1893), ed. J.P.Mayer, tr. Alexander Teixeira de Mattos, 1948

Journey *Journeys to England and Ireland*, ed. J.P.Mayer, tr. George Lawrence and K.P.Mayer, New York, 1968

Memoir *Memoir, Letters, and Remains of Alexis de Tocqueville*, 2 vols. Cambridge 1961

Democracy *Democracy in America* (1835, 1840), 2 vols. Tr. George Lawrence, 1968

Ancien *L'Ancien Regime* (1856), tr. M.W.Patterson, Oxford, 1956

'Notes' Notes to *The Ancien Regime and the French Revolution*, tr. Stuart Gilbert, 1966

Letters *Selected Letters on Politics and Society*, 1985

European Revolution '*The European Revolution*' and *Correspondence with Gobineau*, tr. John Lukacs, Connecticut, 1959

Preface

In *The Riddle of the Modern World; Of Liberty, Wealth and Equality*, published by Macmillan in 2000 I discussed the work of four major writers who had dedicated their lives to trying to answer the riddle of how our modern world originated and what its future might be. These were the Baron de Montesquieu (1689-1755), Adam Smith (1723-90), Alexis de Tocqueville (1805-59) and Ernest Gellner (1920-95).

The book was reasonably successful and went into paperback. Yet, by combining these thinkers, the distinctive contribution of each one may have been somewhat muffled. This long and relatively academic book did not reach that wider audience who might be potentially interested in one or two of the authors treated, but not all of them at once.

So I have decided to re-issue each part as a downloadable electronic book alongside the sections on F.W.Maitland and Yukichi Fukuzawa whose work was treated in a separate book on *The Making of the Modern World* (Palgrave, 2002).

The section on Alexis de Tocqueville was originally published as four chapters on 'Alexis de Tocqueville's Life and Vision', '"America" as a Thought Experiment', 'How the Modern World Emerged' and 'Liberty, Wealth and Equality'. I have here divided these into eight shorter chapters.

Apart from correcting a few minor errors I have not otherwise altered the text. Since I wrote the original chapters some ten years ago, there has been further work on the problems that Tocqueville addressed. To have incorporated this more recent work would have created a different book. I hope one day to consider this new work in a wider appraisal of not only Tocqueville but of my whole attempt to pursue the 'riddle of the world', which will also incorporate the final synthetic chapter to *The Riddle of the Modern World*, 'The Riddle Resolved?', which is omitted here.

I subsequently lectured on Tocqueville for second year students at Cambridge University. The filmed lecture can be seen at:

<http://www.alanmacfarlane.com/theorists/tocqueville.htm>

I particularly enjoyed giving this lecture because I feel that Tocqueville provided a more penetrating answer to many of the puzzles relating to the origins and nature of the modern world than almost any other single thinker. I believe that Tocqueville's brilliant speculations stand on their own merits. It is obvious what problems he is addressing and many of his insights are still relevant today.

1. TOCQUEVILLE'S LIFE AND VISION

Alexis-Charles-Henri de Tocqueville was born in Paris on July 29, 1805. He was the son of Count Hervé (landed proprietor and prefect) and Louise de Tocqueville, and the great-grandson of Lamoignon de Malesherbes, an eighteenth-century statesman of renown. Tocqueville was of noble descent on both his father and mother's side and the family now had its main estates in Normandy. His parents had suffered badly during the French revolution. They were imprisoned and came within a few days of being guillotined.

Tocqueville was tutored by the Abbé Lesueur, an important moral and intellectual influence upon him and largely brought up by his father. He then attended the lycée at Metz until 1823. From 1823 to 1827 he studied law in Paris. In 1826-7 he travelled in Italy and Sicily with his brother. He served as a **juge-auditeur** (magistrate) at the Versailles Tribunal from 1827-1831. During this period he attended Guizot's lectures on the history of Europe and philosophy of history and became engaged to be married to an English lady, Mary Mottley.

From May 1831 to February 1832 Tocqueville visited America with Gustave de Beaumont. They travelled as far north as Quebec and as far south as New Orleans. In 1833 he went for five weeks to England and from September 1833 he spent twelve months writing the first volume of **Democracy in America**, which was published in 1835. He also made a second, longer trip to England from May to September 1835. In October 1836 he married Mary Mottley and travelled to Switzerland.

In 1837 Tocqueville failed to get elected to the Chamber of Deputies but did achieve this in 1839. During these years he had been writing the second volume of **Democracy in America** which was published in 1840. In 1841 he was elected a member of the French Academy and travelled with Beaumont to Algeria. He was elected to the General Council of La Manche in 1842 and later became president. From 1841-3 he worked on a study of India. In 1844-5 he became involved in a progressive newspaper, **Le Commerce**, which advocated various liberal programmes. In 1846 he made a second trip to Algeria with his wife.

In 1848 Tocqueville made a speech to the Chamber warning of the coming Revolution, and in that year was elected to the Constituent Assembly and was involved in writing a new constitution. In 1849 he was elected to the new Legislative Assembly and was briefly minister of foreign affairs. In 1850-51 he wrote **Recollections**, an account of the period 1848-51. In December 1851 he and other members of the Assembly opposed a coup and he was arrested and held for one day.

In 1853 Tocqueville started to study in the archives at Tours as a preparation for his work on the **Ancien Regime**. In 1854 he travelled to Germany to study feudalism and social structure. In 1856 he published the **Ancien Regime**. In 1857 he visited England again and was greeted with high acclaim. On April 16th 1858 he died at Cannes, aged 53.

What strikes one most forcefully about Tocqueville's life is that the central motif behind his work was a set of contradictions, which he was always seeking to resolve in his writing.¹ He described how, 'I passionately love liberty, legality, the respect for the law, but not democracy; that is the deepest of my feelings.'² In a discarded note a different formulation was 'Mon Instinct, Mes Opinions.' "I have an intellectual taste for democratic institutions, but I am an aristocrat by instinct, that is I fear and scorn the mob (la foule)."³ He wrote to a friend in 1835, that 'I love liberty by taste, equality by instinct and reason. These two passions, which so many pretend to have, I am convinced that I really feel in myself, and that I am prepared to make great sacrifices for them.'⁴ The clash between his mind and his heart was caught by Sainte-Beuve when he wrote that Tocqueville's whole doctrine had been 'a marriage of reason and necessity, not at all of inclination.'⁵ As Pierson writes, 'Wrestling with contrary impulses, his spirit torn by opposing loyalties, his career was to be one long, never-ending struggle to reconcile the powerful forces clashing for mastery within him. In the end, it was only as a crier in the wilderness, only as the solemn, foreboding prophet of equality that he was to achieve some measure of spiritual peace.'⁶

This clash between the aristocratic and democratic sides of his nature meant that although he had always refused to use the title of Comte, he remained attached to his aristocratic family line. In 1858 just before he died he wrote to his wife

We will not be replaced, as I often tell myself sadly...We are part...of a world that is passing. An old family, in an old house that belonged to its forefathers, still enclosed and protected by the traditional respect and by memories dear to it and to the surrounding population - these are the remains of a society that is falling into dust and that will soon have left no trace. Happy are those who can tie together in their thoughts the past, the present, and the future! No Frenchman of our time has this happiness and already few can even understand it.⁷

He summarized the reasons for his own ambivalence in a letter in 1837.

All forms of government are in my eyes only more or less perfect ways of satisfying this holy and legitimate passion of man. They alternately give me democratic or aristocratic prejudices; I perhaps would have had one set of prejudices or the other, if I had been born in another century and in another country. But the chance of birth has made me very comfortable defending both. I came into the world at the end of a long Revolution, which, after having destroyed the old state, had created nothing durable. Aristocracy was already dead when I started life and democracy did not yet exist, so my instinct could lead me blindly neither toward one nor toward the other. I was living in a country that for forty years had tried a little of everything without

¹ For a further analysis of the deep contradictions in his personality, background and views see Boesche, *Tocqueville*, 16, 264-6

² Drescher, *Tocqueville*, 15

³ Drescher, *Tocqueville*, 15

⁴ Tocqueville, *Letters*, 100 (1835)

⁵ Quoted in Pierson, *Tocqueville*, 750

⁶ Pierson, *Tocqueville in America*, 13-14

⁷ Quoted in Jardin, *Tocqueville*, 377

settling definitely on anything; therefore I was not susceptible to political illusions. Belonging to the old aristocracy of my homeland, I had neither hatred nor natural jealousy against the aristocracy, and that aristocracy being destroyed, I did not have any natural love for it either, since one only attaches oneself strongly to what is living. I was near enough to it to know it well, far enough away to judge it without passion. I would say as much about the democratic element. No family memory, no personal interest gave me a natural and necessary bent toward democracy. But for my part I had not received any injury from it; I had no particular motive for either loving or hating it, independent of those that my reason furnished me. In a word, I was so thoroughly in equilibrium between the past and the future that I felt naturally and instinctively attracted toward neither the one nor the other, and I did not need to make great efforts to cast calm glances on both sides.¹

It was this placing half-way between which allowed him to see so clearly. It led him to advocate a middle road that was revolutionary and conservative, monarchist and republican, centralizing and de-centralizing. He gave a summary of this creed in a letter of 1836.

I do not think that in France there is a man who is less revolutionary than I, nor one who has a more profound hatred for what is called the revolutionary spirit (a spirit which, parenthetically, is very easily combined with the love of an absolute government). What am I then? And what do I want? Let us distinguish, in order to understand each other better, between the end and the means. What is the end? What I want is not a republic, but a hereditary monarchy. I would even prefer it to be legitimate rather than elected like the one we have, because it would be stronger, especially externally. What I want is a central government energetic in its own sphere of action...But I wish that this central power had a clearly delineated sphere, that it were involved with what is a necessary part of its functions and not with everything in general, and that it were forever subordinated, in its tendency, to public opinion and to the legislative power that represents this public opinion.²

He was aware of the difficulty of achieving this balance between contrary pressures, yet believed, as shown in the same letter, that 'all these things are compatible,' and 'that there will never be order, and tranquility except when they are successfully combined.'³

As to whether they would be combined, and that he and France and the world would reach tranquility, he was not sure. Just as his personality was a mixture of hope and despair, so his writings are an exact blend of pessimism and optimism about the future, as well as the past and the present. Towards the end of the second volume of **Democracy in America** he wrote that 'I find that good things and evil in the world are fairly evenly distributed.'⁴ He noted that 'Men tend to live longer, and their property is more secure. Life is not very glamorous, but extremely comfortable and peaceful.'⁵ A middling condition had been attained. 'Almost all extremes are softened and blunted. Almost all salient

¹Tocqueville, **Letters**, 115-16 (1837)

²Tocqueville, **Letters**, 113 (1836)

³Tocqueville, **Letters**, 114 (1836)

⁴Tocqueville, **Democracy**, II, 913

⁵Tocqueville, **Democracy**, II, 914

characteristics are obliterated to make room for something average, less high and less low, less brilliant and less dim, than what the world had before.’¹

Yet he was also full of fear and regret. ‘When I survey this countless multitude of beings, shaped in each other’s likeness, among whom nothing stands out or falls unduly low, the sight of such universal uniformity saddens and chills me, and I am tempted to regret that state of society which has ceased to be.’² But the worst might never happen. ‘I am full of fears and of hopes. I see great dangers which may be warded off and mighty evils which may be avoided or kept in check; and I am ever increasingly confirmed in my belief that for democratic nations to be virtuous and prosperous, it is enough if they will to be so.’³ Laski suggests that his later work, the **Ancien Regime**, is even more uncertain and pessimistic. ‘The real clue to his book [**Ancien Regime**] is its sadness...he recognizes the inevitability of a new social system even while he is convinced that its results are bound to be disastrous.’⁴ Certainly he felt exactly balanced between the two emotions of hope and despair, and this was a feeling which he seems to have had over much of his life.

This then was the man who stands in the tradition of Montesquieu and Smith as one of the deepest thinkers about the riddle of the modern world. At every level his experiences placed him in a position to stand outside the great turmoils of the time. Yet he was close enough to them to be able to see their inner causes. As he put it, writing specifically of the French Revolution,

It would seem that the time for examination and judgment on it has arrived. We are placed to-day at that precise point, from which this great subject can be best perceived and judged. We are far enough from the Revolution not to feel violently the passions which disturbed the view of those who made it. On the other hand we are near enough to be able to enter into and to understand the spirit that produced it. Very soon it will be difficult to do so. For great successful revolutions, by effecting the disappearance of the causes which brought them about, by their very success, become themselves incomprehensible.⁵

In order to analyse and try to understand the puzzles and confusions that faced him as the industrial and political revolutions took their hold he needed other weapons beyond deep sensitivity and a brilliant mind. He needed a theoretical system and wide experience of a changing world.

¹Tocqueville, **Democracy**, II, 914

²Tocqueville, **Democracy**, II, 914

³Tocqueville, **Democracy**, II, 916

⁴Laski, ‘Tocqueville’, 111

⁵ Tocqueville, **Ancien**, 6-7

2. TOCQUEVILLE'S METHOD

The essence of Tocqueville's method, as it was of Montesquieu's, was to try to penetrate to the **Spirit of the Laws**, that is to say the principles that generated the system.¹ And again, like Montesquieu, this spirit was not composed of **things**, but relations between things - between liberty and equality, individual and group, centre and periphery. What he sought to do was to practice a kind of mental cartography, to discern the plan or map behind a civilization - how it was laid out. He commended the 'sagacity which penetrates through the passions of the time and of the country, down to the general character of an epoch, and to its place in human progress.'²

Sometimes the pattern was simple and symmetrical, as in a new country like America that is relatively easy to understand. 'The man whom you left in the streets of New York you find again in the solitude of the Far West; the same dress, the same tone of mind, the same language, the same habits, the same amusements.'³ There is less difference over the thousands of miles in America than there is between the tens of miles between different regions of France. Thus, 'In America, more even than in Europe, there is but one society, whether rich or poor, high or low, commercial or agricultural; it is everywhere composed of the same elements. It has all been raised or reduced to the same level of civilization.'⁴ The principle of America is equality, and this generates everything.

In America all laws originate more or less from the same idea. The whole of society, so to say, is based on just one fact: everything follows from one underlying principle. One could compare America to a great forest cut through by a large number of roads which all end in the same place. Once you have found the central point, you can see the whole plan in one glance. But in England the roads cross, and you have to follow along each one of them to get a clear idea of the whole.⁵

England is an old country, where there are contradictions and inconsistencies, and the winding tracks of a thousand years of history. William the Conqueror had set up a consistent system of government: 'the system made a more coherent whole than in any other country, because one head had thought out all the machinery and so each wheel fitted better.'⁶ Yet over time it had evolved and twisted into new shapes. In America, with its sparse population and short history this had not happened. It lacked the contradictions of class and the overgrowths of one system superimposed on another that one found in European countries. When he arrived in England he expressed the contrast thus.

So far this country seems to me, still, to be one vast chaos. This is certainly a different sort of difficulty to overcome than in the study of America. Here, there is not that single principle which tranquilly awaits the working out of its consequences, but

¹ For a good overview of Tocqueville's very considerable theoretical debt to Montesquieu, see Richter, 'Uses of Theory'.

² Tocqueville, *Memoir*, II, 358

³ Tocqueville, *Memoir*, I, 146

⁴ Tocqueville, *Memoir*, I, 146

⁵ Tocqueville, *Journeys*, xviii

⁶ Tocqueville, *Journeys*, 4

instead lines that cross one another in every direction, a labyrinth in which we are utterly lost.¹

Much of Tocqueville's brilliance arises out of his explicitly comparative method. He wrote 'no one, who has studied and considered France alone, will ever, I venture to say, understand the French Revolution.'² At more length he summarized his method as follows.

In my work on America.... Though I seldom mentioned France, I did not write a page without thinking of her, and placing her as it were before me. And what I especially tried to draw out, and to explain in the United States, was not the whole condition of that foreign society, but the points in which it differs from our own, or resembles us. It is always by noticing likenesses or contrasts that I succeeded in giving an interesting and accurate description...³

Again and again on his American tour he stressed this necessity. 'In this examination, one great obstacle arrests me. Each fact is without particular physiognomy for me, and without great significance because I can make no comparisons. Nothing would be more useful for judging America well than to know France.'⁴ Thus he testifies to the fact that France was always in his mind, night and day, as he observed America. 'In the midst of all the theories with which I am amusing my imagination here, the memory of France is becoming like a worm that is consuming me. It manages to surprise me by day in the midst of our work, by night when I wake up.'⁵ In fact, by making a three-way triangulation of France, England and America he was able to develop an especially powerful version of the comparative method.⁶

The problem was how one was to grasp the whole of a civilization for comparative purposes. Tocqueville stressed the difficulty on a number of occasions. 'Every foreign nation has a peculiar physiognomy, seen at the first glance and easily described. When afterwards you try to penetrate deeper, you are met by real and unexpected difficulties; you advance with a slowness that drives you to despair, and the farther you go the more you doubt.'⁷ It was important to grasp the first impressions of another country, 'For he had remarked that the first impression gives itself utterance almost always in an original shape, which, once lost, is not recovered.'⁸ Yet this first impression was only that. 'It would take a very fatuous philosopher to imagine that he could understand England in six months. A year has ever seemed to me too short a time for a proper appreciation of the United States, and it is infinitely easier to form clear ideas and precise conceptions about America than about Great Britain.'⁹ Indeed, at times, he thought the task was impossible. 'You are right

¹Jardin, *Tocqueville*, 235

²Tocqueville, *Ancien*, 21

³Tocqueville, *Memoir*, I, 359

⁴Quoted in Pierson, *Tocqueville*, 404.

⁵ Tocqueville, *Letters*, 58.

⁶ See, for further comments and examples, Pope, *Tocqueville*, 34ff; Schleifer, *America*, 71, 279.

⁷Tocqueville, *Memoir*, I, 304

⁸Tocqueville, *Memoir*, I, 18

⁹Tocqueville, *Journeys*, xviii

when you say that a foreigner cannot understand the peculiarities of the English character. It is the case with almost all countries.’¹ Yet one should still attempt to penetrate this otherness, even if it meant, in true anthropological fashion, a kind of willing suspension of disbelief or almost surrendering one’s identity. ‘I do not know how national character is formed, but I do know, that when once formed, it draws such broad distinctions between nations, that to discover what is passing in the minds of foreigners, one must give up one’s own nationality, almost one’s identity.’²

His basic aim was to see how the separate parts of a social system work and are connected together into a general, functioning, integrated whole. He may have received much of this vision from Montesquieu, whom we have seen also espoused such an approach.³ He was also strongly influenced by Guizot. For example in his notes on a lecture by Guizot on July 18, 1829, Tocqueville wrote:

the history of civilization...should and does try to embrace everything simultaneously. Man is to be examined in all aspects of his social existence. History must follow the course of his intellectual development in his deeds, his customs, his opinions, his laws, and the monuments of his intelligence...In a word, it is the whole of man during a given period that must be portrayed...⁴

This involved both general theory and an attention to the smallest details. The use of the microscope was as important as that of the telescope. Thus he wrote during his last visit to England in 1857

Besides, there is not a single one of my theoretical ideas on the practice of political liberty and on what allows it to function among men that does not seem to me fully justified once again by everything I have been seeing before me. The more I have delved into the detail of the way in which public affairs are conducted, the more these truths seem to me to be demonstrated: for it is the manner in which the smallest of affairs are managed that leads to a comprehension of what is happening in the great ones. If one were to limit oneself to studying the English political world from above, one would never understand anything about it.⁵

Yet while delving into the minutiae, it was always necessary to connect each of these details into something larger. ‘Is it enough to see things separately, or should we discover the hidden link connecting them?’⁶ His answer is clear in his writings. ‘He always attempted to convert specific observations into the broadest generalities that the fact at hand could be made to bear...’⁷ When he did this and his readers failed to see the links he had made he became upset. He wrote to Stoffels, having explained the purpose of the first volume of **Democracy**, ‘There is the mother-idea of the work, the idea which links all the others in a single web, and which you should have perceived more clearly than you did.’⁸ The web

¹Tocqueville, *Memoir*, II, 365

²Tocqueville, *Memoir*, II, 365

³See also Boesche in Nolla, *Liberty*, 180

⁴Quoted in Jardin, *Tocqueville*, 82

⁵Tocqueville, *Letters*, 355-6 (1857)

⁶ Tocqueville, *Democracy*, II, 675

⁷Drescher, *Tocqueville*, 26

⁸Tocqueville, *Letters*, 99 (1835)

metaphor hints at his aims. Even while exploring a particular thread or track, be aware of how it fits into the whole. He never became too involved in either thread or web, but kept a balance between them.

The idea of a whole and of parts, of a tension between the various threads as in a web naturally leads on to another element of his approach. The essence of the structure lies in the tensions between parts, in the relations themselves, rather than in 'things'. We have seen that this was in many ways one of the secrets of Montesquieu's greatness and here again Tocqueville adopted the method.

In all his work he concentrated on the relations, rather than the things - the relations between religions, between liberty and inequality, between central and local power, between the individual and the group.¹ It is this structural approach, and the way in which he saw the parallels between sets of relations, which sets him within the great tradition of analysts of modern civilization. In this he overcame the natural human tendency towards smoothing out contradictions. 'One of the most familiar weaknesses of the human mind is to want to reconcile conflicting principles and to buy peace at the cost of logic.'² He tended to see concepts as pairs in tension, to think in terms of paradoxes and dynamic equilibrium. This is why any account of his thought must present it as full of contradictions.

*

As a disciple of Montesquieu, Tocqueville was an heir to a mixed inheritance but one that put quite a heavy emphasis on geographical determinism. Thus when he went to America he expected this vast new world with its dramatic geography and climate and sparse population to show the predominant influence of the ecology. In fact, what he found shocked him. 'By a strange inversion of the ordinary order of things, it is nature that changes, while man is unchanging.'³ One example was the contrast between the French and the English parts of Canada. Despite a similar ecology, the two groups of settlers were entirely different. He found the extreme case when he traveled into the wildest part and found that 'The inhabitants of this little oasis belong to two nations which for more than a century have occupied the same country and obeyed the same laws. Yet they have nothing in common. They still are as distinctly English and French as if they lived on the banks of the Seine and the Thames.'⁴ He saw it clearly at a higher level in the difference between the English-settled world of North America, and the Spanish and Portuguese parts of South America.⁵

His next theory concerning the causes of things followed another strand in Montesquieu's thought, that is to say 'The Spirit of the Laws'. As Lerner writes, 'He learned relatively early to regard legal custom, statute, and code as keys for unlocking the inner meaning of social structure and national character. On this score the influence of Montesquieu and his **L'Esprit des Lois** on his thinking

¹ For a good discussion of his interest in 'relations', see Pope, *Tocqueville*, 136,139.

² Tocqueville, *Democracy*, II, 577

³ Tocqueville, *Journey to America*, 183

⁴ Tocqueville, *Memoir*, I, 193

⁵ Tocqueville, *Democracy*, I, 378-9

must be considered a capital one.’¹ But even this was not enough. Tocqueville began to realize that ‘there must be some other reason, apart from geography and laws, which makes it possible for democracy to rule the United States.’² This ‘other reason’ was what anthropologists term ‘culture’. ‘The importance of mores is a universal truth to which study and experience continually bring us back. I find it occupies the central position in my thoughts; and all my ideas come back to it in the end.’³ He had found the key. ‘It is their mores, then, that make the Americans of the United States, alone among Americans, capable of maintaining the rule of democracy; and it is mores again that make the various Anglo-American democracies more or less orderly and prosperous.’⁴

How could one explain these mores? They did not just suddenly appear, and they varied so surprisingly between cultures. Here he developed one of his most important ideas. Drescher describes how

It was also in connection with the analysis of American self-government that Tocqueville and Beaumont hit upon a primary organizational concept for their later works - the idea of the ‘point de depart’, or point of departure. Methodologically, an inductive discovery of the basic tendencies or fundamental social fact of the present led to a historical search for the original act or circumstances from which the present could be seen to have unfolded.⁵

He then points out that ‘From the **Democratie** to the **Ancien Regime**, unless Tocqueville could discover a social context with objectively discernible characteristics from which all subsequent developments could be logically explained, he did not feel that he had successfully encompassed the problem.’⁶

Drescher quotes Tocqueville to the effect that “‘One can’t help being astonished at the influence, for good or evil, of the point of departure on the destiny of peoples.”⁷ This can be paralleled by many similar observations in his works. In his notebooks of the American trip he wrote, when listing the causes of what he saw before him, ‘1st. **Their origin**: Excellent point of departure. Intimate mixture of the spirit of religion and liberty. Cold and rationalist race.’⁸ In the first volume of **Democracy** he stresses this approach. Nations, like people, are deeply influenced by their birth and formative years. ‘People always bear some marks of their origin. Circumstances of birth and growth affect all the rest of their careers.’ ‘Something analogous happens with nations.’⁹ Thus, in general, he believed of nations, as of individuals, that ‘If we could go right back to the elements of societies and examine the very first records of their histories, I have no doubt that we should there find the first cause of their prejudices,

¹Tocqueville, **Democracy**, I, xl

²Tocqueville, **Democracy**, I, 380

³Tocqueville, **Democracy**, I, 381

⁴Tocqueville, **Democracy**, I, 381

⁵Drescher, **Tocqueville**, 30

⁶Drescher, **Tocqueville**, 31

⁷Drescher, **Tocqueville**, 33

⁸Tocqueville, **Journey to America**, 181

⁹Tocqueville, **Democracy**, I, 35

habits, dominating passions, and all that comes to be called the national character.¹

This was particularly obvious in the case of a 'new' nation like America. 'When, after careful study of the history of America, we turn with equal care to the political and social state there, we find ourselves deeply convinced of this truth, that there is not an opinion, custom, or law, nor, one might add, an event, which the point of departure will not easily explain.'² Putting it in an extreme and aphoristic form, he came to believe that 'When I consider all that has resulted from this first fact, I think I can see the whole destiny of America contained in the first Puritan who landed on those shores, as that of the whole human race in the first man.'³

It was this insight that makes his later reflections on the nations of 'old' Europe so rich. He realized how important it was to trace the history of present structures back into the past. Particularly in the **Ancien Regime** he gave a brilliant exposition of the way in which certain ideas spread out from a particular 'point of origin' until they came to influence the whole of a civilization. In a footnote to that work he explained how

Every institution that has long been dominant, after establishing itself in its natural sphere, extends itself, and ends by exercising a large influence over those branches of legislation which it does not govern. The feudal system, though essentially political, had transformed the civil law, and greatly modified the condition of persons and property in all the relations of private life.⁴

This shows that the 'point of origin' was not a static concept. He saw a set of ideas changing and branching. It is an organic metaphor that could be interpreted as a partial anticipation of that evolutionary paradigm which was already widespread in the minds of Wallace, Darwin, Robert Chambers, Herbert Spencer and others, even if the **Origin of Species** was still three years from publication.

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Tocqueville was well aware of the need for precision in the use of key terms. For instance, he wrote 'I would like to take apart the word **centralization**, which, by virtue of its vague immensity, wearies the mind without leading it to anything.'⁵ Yet he seems to have left his most important words, democracy and equality, deliberately ambiguous.

Part of the difficulty was pointed out by J.S. Mill in the review of volume one of **Democracy** in 1835. He wrote that

¹Tocqueville, **Democracy**, I, 35

²Tocqueville, **Democracy**, I, 36

³Tocqueville, **Democracy**, I, 345

⁴Tocqueville, 'Notes', 253

⁵Tocqueville, **Letters**, 60 (1831)

M. de Tocqueville then has, at least apparently, confounded the effects of Democracy with the effects of Civilization. He has bound up in one abstract idea the whole of the tendencies of modern commercial society, and given them one name - Democracy; thereby letting it be supposed that he ascribes to equality of conditions, several of the effects naturally arising from the mere progress of national prosperity, in the form in which that progress manifests itself in modern times.¹

It is clear that Tocqueville himself realized that he had failed to define or distinguish his two key terms. Drescher points out that 'In the notes for the **Democratie** of 1840 Tocqueville had considered drawing a distinction between 'democratie' and 'égalité': "When I understand [the new society] in the political sense, I say 'Democratie'. When I want to speak of the effects of equality, I say 'égalité'."'² Yet Drescher also points out that 'This clarification, whether because it would have aesthetically weakened the impact of the term, or for some other reason, remained buried in his papers and his book went to press with "equality" and "democracy" used interchangeably.'³ Others have also noted the ambiguities. Pierson asks 'how he ever allowed himself to use "democratie" in seven or eight different senses is still something of a mystery. It was his key word.'⁴

It appears that Tocqueville found it logically unsatisfactory to split the two. Indeed his skill lay in connecting, in holding pairs in tension. Here he fused two separate meanings into one and his work would have been clearer but less insightful if he had subsequently split them again. As he might have put it, tranquility and peace of mind might have been gained - but at the price of logical interconnections.

The other main criticism of his approach lies in the assertion that, particularly in his later work, as he moved further away from the 'facts' of America, he came to rely too much on the deductive method; in other words he worked out the theories first and fitted the facts to them, rather than keeping a blend between them. Two of his wisest contemporaries alluded to such a charge. Lerner writes that even when he went to America 'Saint-Beuve's famous quip about the young Tocqueville, that "he began to think before having learned anything," has a light sting of truth in it. There is little question that he had a whole trunkful of ideas stored away in his mind, the result of his reading of the political classics, his work as a magistrate, his observation of men and nations.'⁵ Royer-Collard tried to explain why the 'prodigious effort of meditation and patience' of the second volume of America had caused misunderstanding, writing that Tocqueville was constructing ideal types, a procedure with which people were not familiar. "There is not one chapter that could not be different in certain respects from the way you have done it. That, of course, is because of your intention. You set out to imagine, to invent rather than to describe, and invention, within certain limits, is arbitrary."⁶

¹ Mill, *Essays*, 257

² Drescher, *Tocqueville*, 215

³ Drescher, *Tocqueville*, 215

⁴ Pierson, *Tocqueville*, 757; see also Boesche, *Tocqueville*, 120 for a further discussion.

⁵ Tocqueville, *Democracy*, I, xliii

⁶ Jardin, *Tocqueville*, 274

Tocqueville himself felt hurt by these charges, for he believed that “I have never knowingly moulded facts to ideas instead of ideas to facts.”¹ He perhaps took comfort from the views of the greatest nineteenth century expert on logical methods in the social and physical sciences, J.S. Mill. Mill pointed out that, on the surface, there were indeed grounds for doubt, ‘It is perhaps the greatest defect of M. de Tocqueville’s book, that from the scarcity of examples, his propositions, even when derived from observation, have the air of mere abstract speculations.’² Nevertheless he believed that

The value of his work is less in the conclusions, than in the mode of arriving at them. He has applied to the greatest question in the art and science of government, those principles and methods of philosophizing to which mankind are indebted for all the advances made by modern times in the other branches of the study of nature. It is not risking too much to affirm of these volumes, that they contain the first analytical inquiry into the influence of democracy.³

He believed that Tocqueville had blended the two approaches. ‘His method is, as that of a philosopher on such a subject must be - a combination of deduction with induction: his evidences are laws of human nature, on the one hand; the example of America and France, and other modern nations, so far as applicable, on the other.’⁴

Mill’s summation places Tocqueville as the man who combined the deductive and the inductive methods.

His conclusions never rest on either species of evidence alone; whatever he classes as an effect of Democracy, he has both ascertained to exist in those countries in which the state of society is democratic, and has also succeeded in connecting with Democracy by deductions **a priori**, showing that such would naturally be its influences upon beings constituted as mankind are, and placed in a world such as we know ours to be. If this be not the true Baconian and Newtonian method applied to society and government...⁵

Mill concluded his assessment with an affirmation of Tocqueville’s genius. He wrote that ‘though we would soften the colours of the picture, we would not alter them; M. de Tocqueville’s is, in our eyes, the true view of the position in which mankind now stand...’⁶

¹Quoted in Gargan, *Tocqueville*, 43

²Mill, *Essays*, 238

³Mill, *Essays*, 216

⁴Mill, *Essays*, 216

⁵Mill, *Essays*, 216-7

⁶Mill, *Essays*, 181

3. 'AMERICA' AS A THOUGHT EXPERIMENT - 1

Tocqueville described his visit to America in 1833 as a second discovery of that world.¹ He spent 286 days in the New World and then wrote the two volumes which form the greatest anthropological essay on a civilization that we possess. Yet before briefly outlining his findings and hypotheses, we need to be clear about two things

The first is that the two volumes of his **Democracy**, as many Tocqueville scholars have observed, are really very different works. He should really have called them something like 'America', and 'Democracy' to prevent confusion.² In the following account, for brevity and coherence, I will treat them together, though not only time but shifting intentions made them feel very different.

The major difference is alleged to be that the first book was really about America, and the second just used America as a way of talking about equality (democracy). Certainly there is a shift. But it is also important to grasp that even the first volume was really a way of experimenting with ideas that Tocqueville had partially worked out before his visit. The point is well made by Pierson. 'It will not escape the student that Tocqueville had just reversed the sequence of his perceptions. For literary purposes he implied that he had discovered his great natural law of modern societies in America. Actually, this idea had been the product of his youthful experiences at home. The sad history of the old aristocracy, the fate of the Restoration Monarchy, the suggestive lectures of Professor Guizot, the pronouncements of certain statesmen of France: all had seemed to Tocqueville to indicate that the process of levelling down had been going on for a long time and could not now be stopped.'³

In fact Tocqueville was fairly open about this. Near the start of the first volume he wrote 'I admit that I saw in America more than America; it was the shape of democracy itself which I sought, its inclinations, character, prejudices, and passions; I wanted to understand it so as at least to know what we have to fear or hope therefrom.'⁴ In 1834 between the visit and the publication, he wrote to a friend.

Some will find that at bottom I do not like democracy and that I am severe toward it; others will think that I favour its development imprudently ... but this is my response: nearly ten years ago I was already thinking about part of the things I have just now set forth. I was in America only to become clear on this point. The penitentiary system was a pretext: I took it as a passport that would let me enter thoroughly into the United States. In that country, in which I encountered a thousand things beyond my expectation, I perceived several things about questions that I had often put to myself. I discovered facts that seemed useful to know. I did not go there with the idea of writing a book, but the idea for a book came to me there.'⁵

¹Tocqueville, *Journey to America*, 183

²Drescher, *Tocqueville*, 215

³Pierson, *Tocqueville in America*, 747

⁴Tocqueville, *Democracy*, I, 17

⁵Tocqueville, *Letters*, 95 (1834); Tocqueville and Beaumont were officially employed on a survey of the American prison (penitentiary) system.

Or as he put it succinctly commenting on the first volume, in a letter to J.S. Mill, 'America was only my framework; democracy was my subject.'¹

His reasons for choosing America seem to have been three-fold. Firstly, America presented a simple, clear, field for the investigation of the questions that interested him. 'The special reason that has put the Americans in a state to be understood, is that they have been able to build their social edifice from a clean start.'² Secondly, with his fear of the emptiness of the abstract, he felt that his message would have more power if written as a kind of narrative. He himself recognized the rhetorical need to make the abstract concrete, as had Montesquieu and Smith, and he wondered explicitly at one point 'Here I want to illustrate how the government can do things which no power before it had done. But perhaps this idea might be introduced in narrative form...'³ In many ways all of his work is a semi-narrative, a journey or exploration, the outward form is America, England or France, the inner thought is mankind and the riddle of modern civilization.

The third aim was to use America as a guide. 'So I did not study America just to satisfy curiosity, however legitimate; I sought there lessons from which we might profit.'⁴ America should not, of course, be directly imitated. 'The new society in which we are does not at all resemble our European societies. It has no prototype anywhere. It has also some primary conditions of existence that no other possesses, which makes it dangerous for any other society to imitate it...'⁵ Yet one could learn from it, and particularly from its mistakes. To make a 'mistake' in an old civilization like Europe was usually disastrous. But the energy, youth and flexibility of America meant that 'the great privilege of the Americans is to be able to make retrievable mistakes.'⁶ Thus America was a thought experiment in more than one sense. It was a place for Tocqueville to test ideas he had been developing since he was nineteen, but it was also, in itself, a civilization which was making mistakes and retrieving itself - trying out new things and hence showing old Europe what it should and should not do.

It is these 'uses' of America which make Tocqueville's analysis so fascinating, and to our great good fortune we have the evidence not only of his final book, but also his letters and travel journals, to see how he wrote the book. As J.P. Mayer writes in the preface to his American journals 'That is how it has become possible to watch the birth-pangs of **Democracy in America**. There is no other book in the long history of political thought which gives us the same opportunity of following very closely a great thinker's process of work, except perhaps for the case of Montesquieu whose influence on Tocqueville was profound.'⁷ The work of reconstructing his travels and thought has been undertaken with great brilliance in the two works by George Wilson Pierson, **Tocqueville and Beaumont in America** (1938) and James T. Schleifer, **The**

¹Quoted in Tocqueville, **Democracy**, I, liii

²Tocqueville, **Journey to America**, 177

³Tocqueville, **Democracy**, II, 1025

⁴Tocqueville, **Democracy**, I, 17

⁵Pierson, **Tocqueville in America**, 70

⁶Tocqueville, **Democracy**, I, 287

⁷Mayer in Tocqueville, **Journey to America**, 15

Making of Tocqueville's Democracy in America (1980) which form the indispensable background to the following brief account.

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Tocqueville partly chose America because it appeared to be young, sparsely populated, and relatively 'simple'. He came to think of it as laid out on a kind of grid. If one could understand the straight roads, then one could understand everything. Once he arrived there he found another advantage, which was its homogeneity. Leaving on one side French Canada, he found that there was a surprising similarity at a deep level over the whole continent - despite dramatic geographical differences. This contrasted enormously with his experience of Europe. 'I doubt whether there is any nation in Europe, however small, whose different parts are not less homogeneous than those of the United States with an area half the size of Europe.'¹ More specifically, and recalling his own experience of the north-west tip of France, he wrote 'From the state of Maine to that of Georgia is a distance of some thousand miles, but the difference in civilisation between Maine and Georgia is less than that between Normandy and Brittany.'²

The combination of newness and homogeneity made it possible to comprehend and even to give it a name, 'America'. Yet it was no easy task to understand this new civilization. There were at first arrival a welter of impressions, often confusing, which had to be sorted out. 'You understand that I cannot yet have a fully developed opinion of this people. At first sight, it presents, like all others, a mixture of vices and virtues that is rather difficult to classify and that does not form a single picture.'³ He sensed that there was a surface and a deeper structure to be understood. As he later put it, 'the vices and weaknesses of democratic government are easy to see; they can be proved by obvious facts, whereas its salutary influence is exercised in an imperceptible and almost secret way. Its defects strike one at first glance, but its good qualities are revealed only in the long run.'⁴ Yet the difficulty was not merely one at the level of confusion, or of surface and base. The real difficulty, as Tocqueville realized, was that America was built on contradictions. It was the outcome of logically incompatible elements. Its fascination came from the fact that it was a **new** mix of forces, forming a restless, seething set of combinations.

Tocqueville uses an image of a pool in a rushing stream where contrary flows meet and swirl when he is trying to capture one of the major contradictions. 'When one examines what is happening in the United States closely, one soon discovers two contrary tendencies; they are like two currents flowing in the same bed in opposite directions.'⁵ At other times he described more than two contrary flows. For instance he talked of '...the great American fight between the provinces and the central power, between the spirit of independence and democracy, and the spirit of hierarchy and subordination.'⁶ He noted the

¹Tocqueville, *Democracy*, I, 206-7

²Tocqueville, *Democracy*, I, 207

³Tocqueville, *Letters*, 44 (1831)

⁴Tocqueville, *Democracy*, I, 285-6

⁵Tocqueville, *Democracy*, I, 477

⁶Tocqueville, *Democracy*, I, 483

agitation. 'This constant strife between the desires inspired by equality and the means it supplies to satisfy them harasses and wearies the mind.'¹ But paradoxically it also led to order. 'One may say that it is the very vehemence of their desires that makes the Americans so methodical. It agitates their minds but disciplines their lives.'² Lerner summarizes a number of these contradictions as follows. 'Thus Tocqueville saw the American as a deeply split personality: "feeling the need for guidance and longing to stay free"; "finding life at once agitated and monotonous"; feeling pride in his nation and in his own equality with others, yet ravaged by a sense of his own loneliness and insignificance - and, out of that sense, seeking to assuage his loneliness by huddling with others and to cure his insignificance by joining the majority...'³ If there was a central feature to the New World that was to be seen in America it was its turbulence and restlessness, its absence of tranquility.

Tocqueville described this turbulence caused by the conflicts of desire and reason, centre and periphery, equality and individualism, in a number of brilliant passages. 'No sooner do you set foot on American soil than you find yourself in a sort of tumult; a confused clamour rises on every side, and a thousand voices are heard at once, each expressing some social requirements. All around you everything is on the move.'⁴ The contrast was re-emphasized when he returned to France.

When one passes from a free country into another which is not so, the contrast is very striking: there, all is activity and bustle; here all seems calm and immobile. In the former, betterment and progress are the questions of the day; in the latter, one might suppose that society, having acquired every blessing, longs for nothing but repose in which to enjoy them.'⁵

The restless, swiftly changing cascade is what struck him forcefully.

Restlessness of character seems to me to be one of the distinctive traits of this people. The American is devoured by the longing to make his fortune; it is the unique passion of his life; he has no memory that attaches him to one place more than another, no inveterate habits, no spirit of routine; he is the daily witness of the swiftest changes of fortune.'⁶

Again he invoked the metaphor of a rushing stream with its cross-cutting currents and turbulent cataracts. 'Often born under another sky, placed in the middle of an ever moving picture, driven himself by the irresistible torrent that carries all around him along, the American has no time to attach himself to anything, he is only accustomed to change and ends by looking on it as the natural state of man.'⁷ The result was a paradox which is one of the central features of modern capitalism, that desire always outstrips achievement. 'At first

¹Tocqueville, *Democracy*, II, 694

²Tocqueville, *Democracy*, II, 796

³Tocqueville, *Democracy*, I, c

⁴Tocqueville, *Democracy*, I, 299

⁵Tocqueville, *Democracy*, I, 298-9

⁶Tocqueville, *Journey to America*, 182; cf. Tocqueville, *Letters*, 44 (1831)

⁷Tocqueville, *Journey to America*, 183

sight there is something astonishing in this spectacle of so many lucky men restless in the midst of abundance.’¹

Tocqueville was aware that in **ancien regime** societies, mercantile wealth tended to be looked down on. ‘In aristocracies the rich are also the ruling class. Constant attention to great affairs of state diverts them from the petty cares of trade and industry. Should one of them nonetheless feel a natural inclination toward business, corporate public opinion at once bars his path.’² Likewise, manufacturing was vulgar and ‘low caste’. Beaumont, Tocqueville’s travelling companion described a manufacturer thus: ‘No elegance; good nature; polite; sometimes indiscreet; embarrassingly obliging; it’s **absolutely America**.’³ In other words, being ‘in trade’, whether as a merchant or manufacturer was vulgar, vaguely dishonourable, somehow dirty and demeaning. But not in America.

The central American passion was the pursuit of profit, both as a means and as an end. Tocqueville comments on this with amazement. ‘So one usually finds that love of money is either the chief or a secondary motive at the bottom of everything the Americans do.’⁴ He noticed that ‘A breathless cupidity perpetually distracts the mind of man from the pleasures of the imagination and the labours of the intellect and urges it on to nothing but the pursuit of wealth.’⁵ He realized that this was partly to do with the ‘open frontier’ of America. ‘To clear, cultivate and transform the huge uninhabited continent which is their domain, the Americans need the everyday support of an energetic passion; that passion can only be the love of wealth.’⁶ But later, when he visited the French Canadians, he found that they lacked this mentality and realized that it was mainly cultural and historical, rather than caused by the vast ‘emptiness’ or the practicalities of battling with nature.

It continued to fascinate and surprise him. ‘It is odd to watch with what feverish ardour the Americans pursue prosperity and how they are ever tormented by the shadowy suspicion that they may not have chosen the shortest route to get it.’⁷ The desire for the shortest route was one of the reasons, he thought, for the huge inventiveness and conspicuously growing wealth of America.

They think about nothing but ways of changing their lot and bettering it. For people in this frame of mind every new way of getting wealth more quickly, every machine which lessens work, every means of diminishing the costs of production, every invention which makes pleasures easier or greater, seems the most magnificent accomplishment of the human mind.⁸

¹Tocqueville, **Democracy**, II, 693

²Tocqueville, **Democracy**, II, 714; for Tocqueville’s distaste for bourgeois society and particularly its obsession with wealth, see Boesche, **Tocqueville**, 85ff.

³Quoted in Drescher, **Tocqueville**, 63-4

⁴Tocqueville, **Democracy**, II, 796

⁵Tocqueville, **Democracy**, II, 583

⁶Tocqueville, **Democracy**, II, 805

⁷Tocqueville, **Democracy**, II, 692

⁸Tocqueville, **Democracy**, II, 593

This tendency was made all the stronger by the huge size, diversity yet homogeneity, of America.

In a large state thought on all subjects is stimulated and accelerated; ideas circulate more freely; the capitals are vast intellectual centres concentrating all the rays of thought in one bright glow; that is why great nations contribute more and faster to the increase of knowledge and the general progress of civilisation than small ones.¹

This mention of inventions and labour-saving devices is one of the few places where Tocqueville explicitly talks about the early stages of the technological and industrial revolution that had transformed England and was starting to do the same in America. As Schleifer points out, Tocqueville did, abstractly, recognize that the industrial revolution, along with the tendency to equality (democracy) was one of the great forces of his time.² He also showed some sporadic interest in specific technologies and industrialization.³ But in the case of America, in one of his very few failures to see into the future, he predicted a great commercial, but not industrial, future for the country.⁴

The likelihood of continuing wealth accumulation was also heightened by what, to an aristocrat like Tocqueville, was a very strange attitude to work. He explained to his French contemporaries how it was in America. 'Among democratic peoples where there is no hereditary wealth, every man works for his living, or has worked, or comes from parents who have worked. Everything therefore prompts the assumption that to work is the necessary, natural, and honest condition of all men.'⁵ Thus, 'Not only is no dishonour associated with work, but among such peoples it is regarded as positively honourable; the prejudice is for, not against, it.'⁶ Honour, which lies in idleness in most societies, has been overturned. 'In a democratic society such as that of the United States, where fortunes are small and insecure, everybody works, and work opens all doors. That circumstance had made the point of honour do an about turn and set it facing against idleness.'⁷ Thus all occupations, as long as they make money, are honourable and the American is very versatile and flexible in his or her attitude. 'In the United States professions are more or less unpleasant, more or less lucrative, but they are never high or low. Every honest profession is honourable.'⁸ People will often do several types of job, successively or simultaneously. 'In America it sometimes happens that one and the same man will till his fields, build his house, make his tools, cobble his shoes, and with his own hands weave the coarse cloth that covers him. This is bad for improving craftsmanship but greatly serves to develop the worker's intelligence.'⁹

¹Tocqueville, *Democracy*, I, 197

²Schleifer, *America*, 168

³Schleifer, *America*, 283

⁴Schleifer, *America*, 83

⁵Tocqueville, *Democracy*, II, 711

⁶Tocqueville, *Democracy*, II, 711

⁷Tocqueville, *Democracy*, II, 806

⁸Tocqueville, *Democracy*, II, 712

⁹Tocqueville, *Democracy*, I, 501

Tocqueville at times implied that perhaps necessity was the mother of work, as it was of invention, that people worked so hard because of their small fortunes. Yet he realized that it was deeper than this. Even as they became wealthier, they were driven on. 'For them desire for well-being has become a restless, burning passion which increases with satisfaction.'¹ They exhibited a restrained, puritan passion for wealth.

Such passionate materialism started with the commercial middle classes, and spread out as that bourgeois group took over the heart of America and set its standards. 'The passion for physical comfort is essentially a middle-class affair; it grows and spreads with that class and becomes preponderant with it.'² It also spread out from the sphere of the economy into all of life. 'The passions that stir the Americans most deeply are commercial and not political ones, or rather they carry a trader's habits over into the business of politics.'³ As Smith had earlier observed of England, it was a country 'ruled by shopkeepers'.

Those who have commented on Tocqueville have noted that he saw that **America** had somehow solved Adam Smith's contradiction between private desire and public benefit by harmonizing self-interest with public interest, creating a kind of calculative virtue.⁴ As Lerner puts it, 'Time after time he confronts the paradox of a society which is fragmentised by self-interest and self-seeking but which seems nevertheless to have found a principle of inner order.'⁵ Sometimes Tocqueville just recognizes that somehow this has been achieved. 'What a happy land the New World is, where man's vices are almost as useful to society as his virtues!'⁶ At other times he points to the way astute politicians and lawyers frame their activities to bring public and private good together. Thus 'American legislation appeals mainly to private interest; that is the great principle which one finds again and again when one studies the laws of the United States.'⁷ He noted furthermore that 'American legislators show little confidence in human honesty, but they always assume that men are intelligent. So they generally rely on personal interest to see to the execution of the laws.'⁸

In one of the few places where, in his travel journals, he tried to tackle the problem he wrote that

The two great social principles which seem to me to rule American society and to which one must always return to find the reason for all the laws and habits which govern it, are as follows: 1st. The majority may be mistaken on some points, but finally it is always right and there is no moral power above it. 2nd. Every individual, private person, society, community or nation, is the only lawful judge of its own

¹Tocqueville, *Democracy*, I, 350

²Tocqueville, *Democracy*, II, 685

³Tocqueville, *Democracy*, I, 352

⁴ For example, Schleifer, *America*, 235-243

⁵Tocqueville, *Democracy*, I, ciii

⁶Tocqueville, *Democracy*, I, 351

⁷Tocqueville, *Democracy*, I, 96

⁸Tocqueville, *Democracy*, I, 96

interest, and provided it does not harm the interests of others, nobody has the right to interfere. I think that one must never lose sight of this point.¹

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As for the consequences of the restless pursuit of profitable activity, Tocqueville notes several unexpected results. We have seen that it was combined with surprising restraint, not just as a result of the Puritan heritage. Paraphrasing certain themes in Montesquieu and Smith on the pacifying effects of the pursuit of wealth, he noted that 'Trade is the natural enemy of all violent passions. Trade loves moderation, delights in compromise, and is most careful to avoid anger.'² With an obvious message for his own revolution-prone country, and making a helpful distinction between permanent surface change, and the absence of fundamental revolutions, he wrote that 'Daily they change, alter and renew things of secondary importance, but they are very careful not to touch fundamentals. They love change, but they are afraid of revolutions.'³

The constant immersion in the pursuit of material goals also altered the whole attitude to time and the momentum of history. Time past was irrelevant. 'Aristocracy naturally leads the mind back to the past and fixes it in the contemplation thereof. But democracy engenders a sort of instinctive distaste for what is old.'⁴ Tocqueville saw that political, social and physical time is interrelated, a sort of Einsteinian view of the relativity of concepts of time and social relations.

Among democratic peoples new families continually rise from nothing while others fall, and nobody's position is quite stable. The woof of time is ever being broken and the track of past generations lost. Those who have gone before are easily forgotten, and no one gives a thought to those who will follow. All a man's interests are limited to those near himself.⁵

He noted the optimism and future-orientation of the Americans.

Howsoever powerful and impetuous the course of history is here, imagination always goes in advance of it, and the picture is never large enough. There is not a country in the world where man more confidently takes charge of the future, or where he feels with more pride that he can fashion the universe to please himself.⁶

These shocks and surprises at the turbulence and commercial spirit of America led Tocqueville to ponder on how the system could work like this. This presented him with further puzzles. He could see that the ever-striving, hard-working and calculating spirit was somehow linked to the political system. He made a strong connection between political freedom and the generation of 'wealth' or well-being. He first noticed that this was a characteristic of 'democratic' countries. 'There is therefore at the bottom of democratic

¹Tocqueville, *Journey to America*, 149

²Tocqueville, *Democracy*, II, 826

³Tocqueville, *Democracy*, II, 828

⁴Tocqueville, *Democracy*, II, 621

⁵Tocqueville, *Democracy*, II, 653

⁶Tocqueville, *Journey to America*, 183

institutions some hidden tendency which often makes men promote the general prosperity, in spite of their vices and their mistakes, whereas in aristocratic institutions there is sometimes a secret bias which, in spite of talents and virtues, leads men to contribute to the afflictions of their fellows.¹ On the basis of his later experience in England he widened this into a universal proposition. 'I doubt if one can cite a single example of any people engaged in both manufacture and trade, from the men of Tyre to the Florentines and the English, who were not a free people. There must therefore be a close link and necessary relationship between these two things, that is, freedom and industry.'² But the actual causal links were very difficult to discern.

At times he seemed to suggest that the bourgeois mentality was the most important, affecting political institutions and thence wealth. 'Everyone living in democratic times contracts, more or less, the mental habits of the industrial and trading classes; their thoughts take a serious turn, calculating and realistic; they gladly turn away from the ideal to pursue some visible and approachable aim which seems the natural and necessary object of their desires.'³ At other times he emphasized freedom and education and almost exactly paraphrased Adam Smith's 'peace, easy taxes and a due administration of justice'.

If you give democratic peoples education and freedom and leave them alone, they will easily extract from this world all the good things it has to offer. They will improve all useful techniques and make life daily more comfortable, smooth, and bland. Since their social condition by its nature urges them this way, there is no need to fear that they will stop.⁴

Another link was between the degree of political absolutism and centralization on the one hand and wealth creation on the other. He believed that

It is certain that despotism brings men to ruin more by preventing them from producing than by taking away the fruits of their labours; it dries up the fount of wealth while often respecting acquired riches. But liberty engenders a thousandfold more goods than it destroys, and in nations where it is understood, the people's resources always increase faster than the taxes.⁵

One way in which this insidiously happened was through the draining of the more innovative from the countryside as centralization proceeded.

'Is it a centralized country? The rural districts are emptied of rich and enlightened inhabitants. I could go further a centralized country is a country of imperfect and unprogressive cultivation; and I could comment on the profound saying of Montesquieu by explaining his meaning – 'lands produce less by reason of their fertility than by reason of the liberty of their inhabitants'.⁶

¹Tocqueville, *Democracy*, I, 289-90

²Tocqueville, *Democracy*, II, 696

³Tocqueville, *Democracy*, II, 773-4

⁴Tocqueville, *Democracy*, II, 701

⁵Tocqueville, *Democracy*, I, 257

⁶Tocqueville, *Ancien*, 130-1

Perhaps the nearest he came to resolving the difficulty of reciprocal causation was when he wrote

I have no doubt that democratic institutions, combined with the physical nature of the land, are the indirect reason, and not, as is often claimed, the direct one, for the prodigious industrial expansion seen in the United States. It is not the laws' creation, but the people have learned to achieve it by making the laws.¹

Here he recognized that there was something behind the laws - returning again to the primacy of culture.

Even if he had been content to explain the situation fully in terms of the legal and political 'freedom' he would have faced a serious problem. This was because, from a French standpoint, 'America' seemed to run itself without any obvious political system at all. Again it seemed to have achieved the impossible, to be very well organized and orderly, with few signs of government.

When Tocqueville first arrived he expressed his astonishment at the bizarre situation.

What is most striking to everyone who travels in this country, whether or not one bothers to reflect, is the spectacle of a society marching along all alone, without guide or support, by the sole fact of the cooperation of individual wills. In spite of anxiously searching for the government, one can find it nowhere, and the truth is that it does not, so to speak, exist at all.²

How then was it held together?

One part of the solution lay in de-centralized power, which, like Montesquieu, he admired. He was fully aware that too much decentralization could be disastrous. Thus, looking back at the early mediaeval period in Europe he described it thus: '...the cause of all the miseries of feudal society was that power, not just of administration, but of government, was divided among a thousand people and broken up in a thousand ways; the absence of all governmental centralisation then prevented the nations of Europe from advancing energetically toward any goal. Yet we have seen that in the United States there was no administrative centralisation. There is scarcely a trace of hierarchy. There decentralisation has been carried to a degree that no European nation would tolerate.'³

Tocqueville explained that the Americans had created an 'imagined community' to hold together, through ideology, an equal peoples who thus needed few police, no central bureaucracy, no standing army. He noted that in contrast to France, '...one is bound to notice that all classes show great confidence in their country's legislation, feeling a sort of paternal love for it.'⁴ Using 'ideal' in the sense of imagined, he wrote that 'The government of the

¹Tocqueville, *Democracy*, I, 301

²Tocqueville, *Letters*, 59 (1831)

³Tocqueville, *Democracy*, I, 107

⁴Tocqueville, *Democracy*, I, 297; Anderson, *Imagined Communities*

Union rests almost entirely on legal fictions. The Union is an ideal nation which exists, so to say, only in men's minds and whose extent and limits can only be discerned by the understanding.¹ This ideal community was highly artificial, manufactured, yet it felt 'natural'. He believed that it was only possible because it was founded on that most powerful set of American institutions, the self-governing commune, and a plethora of different institutions. 'Everything in such a government depends on artificially contrived conventions, and it is only suited to a people long accustomed to manage its affairs, and one in which even the lowest ranks of society have an appreciation of political science.'² The vitality was at the local level, and fed upwards. Centralized aristocracies like France were top-down, and the nation was only held together by physical force. 'So, whereas with us the central government lends its agents to the commune, in America the township lends its agents to the government. That fact alone shows how far the two societies differ.'³

The whole system depended on the dynamic creation and maintenance of 'artificial communities' at the lower levels. Tocqueville had earlier noted that 'The American people taken in mass is not only the most enlightened in the world, but - what I put much higher than that advantage - is the one whose practical political education is the most advanced.'⁴ This practical education was absolutely essential for democracy to work and hence for wealth to increase, especially as a counterbalance to the dangers of narrow individualism generated by growing equality. 'If men are to remain civilised or to become civilised, the art of association must develop and improve among them at the same speed as equality of conditions spreads.'⁵ And this is exactly what he found in America. 'Better use has been made of association and this powerful instrument of action has been applied to more varied aims in America than anywhere else in the world.'⁶ He found that '

Americans of all ages, all stations in life, and all types of disposition are for ever forming associations. There are not only commercial and industrial associations in which all take part, but others of a thousand different types - religious, moral, serious, futile, very general and very limited, immensely large and very minute. Americans combine to give fetes, found seminaries, build churches, distribute books, and send missionaries to the antipodes. Hospitals, prisons, and schools take shape in that way.'⁷

He had heard that the English were famous for their associations, or as Montesquieu would have described them perhaps, 'intermediary institutions'. Yet while 'A single Englishman will often carry through some great undertaking' he found that 'Americans form associations for no matter how small a matter. Clearly the former regard association as a powerful means of action, but the

¹Tocqueville, *Democracy*, I, 202-3

²Tocqueville, *Democracy*, I, 203

³Tocqueville, *Democracy*, I, 81

⁴Tocqueville, *Journey to America*, 179

⁵Tocqueville, *Democracy*, II, 666

⁶Tocqueville, *Democracy*, I, 232

⁷Tocqueville, *Democracy*, II, 662

latter seem to think of it as the only one.¹ This was one explanation for their dynamism for it made them self-confident, experienced in practical politics, unafraid of the State.²

Indeed Tocqueville placed great emphasis on individual self-responsibility in government and other spheres and this was one of the facts which attracted him to the American legal system as a central feature in his explanation of democracy. Firstly, whereas in France the political institutions dominated the legal ones, in America it was the other way round. 'In a sense the legislature penetrates to the very heart of the administration.'³ Secondly, the legislation itself was made for the people and not for the State and hence had a distinct flavour. 'Nothing is more peculiar or more instructive than the legislation of this time; there, if anywhere, is the key to the social enigma presented to the world by the United States now.'⁴ Thirdly, the dominance of law was combined with delegation downwards. 'In no country in the world are the pronouncements of the law more categorical than in America, and in no other country is the right to enforce it divided among so many hands.'⁵

Among these 'hands' two particularly struck him. One was the office of justice of the peace. As he realized, this was a system that had been introduced from England. 'The Americans have borrowed from their English forefathers the conception of an institution which has no analogy with anything we know on the Continent, that of justices of the peace.'⁶ The other major delegation of power had also been borrowed from England, namely the jury system. In a number of places Tocqueville explained how juries not only protected the individual citizen against the power of the State, but, perhaps even more importantly, involved them in responsibility for their own governance. It was the most important 'political' education they had and trained them to participate properly in a democracy.

¹Tocqueville, *Democracy*, II, 663

² Weatherford, *Native Roots*, 183-4 and Mander, *Absence of the Sacred*, ch.13, argue that the American settlers may have learnt some of the democratic and associational skills from the native Americans, for instance the famous Iroquois Confederacy, and that Tocqueville may have been half aware of this. I am grateful to Charles Ehrhart for these references.

³Tocqueville, *Democracy*, I, 89

⁴Tocqueville, *Democracy*, I, 46-7

⁵Tocqueville, *Democracy*, I, 87

⁶Tocqueville, *Democracy*, I, 90

4. 'AMERICA' AS A THOUGHT EXPERIMENT - 2

There was one further area where Tocqueville believed he had found a key to American civilization. That was religion, in particular the **relations** of religion to the political system.¹ Tocqueville's account captures yet again the deep contradictions in the system. On the one hand, it was clear to him that religion was enormously important as social glue and as a source of consolation. Faith and hope he thought were two of "the most permanent and invincible instincts of human nature" because "each has a need to nourish some illusion."² Without religious belief, man was easily seduced into terrible excesses. Thus in relation to the French revolution, he wrote that the 'universal discredit into which all religious beliefs fell at the end of the eighteenth century exercised without doubt the greatest influence on the whole course of our Revolution; it distinguished its character. Nothing contributed to a greater degree to give to its aspect that terrible expression which it bore.'³ Thus he was relieved to find that in many ways America was far more full of genuine religious activity than the Europe he had left. He believed that 'It is evident that there still remains here a larger foundation for Christian religion than in any other country in the world, to my knowledge...'⁴ Although he modified this a little in the published book, he still argued that 'In America religion is perhaps less powerful than it has been at certain times and among certain peoples, but its influence is more lasting. It restricts itself to its own resources, of which no one can deprive it.'⁵ Yet he also recognized that it was a peculiar and different 'religion' to the Catholicism which he had rejected in France.

He noted the absence of a dominant religious authority and hence the freedom to follow reason and individual conscience. In parallel to the de-centralization in politics, this led to de-centralized religion where the 'sects' became the equivalents to companies (economics) or communes (politics). He described the situation and his bafflement early on in his stay. 'Thus you see: Protestantism, a mixture of authority and reason, is battered at the same time by the two absolute principles of **reason** and **authority**. Anyone who wants to look for it can see this spectacle to some extent everywhere; but here it is quite striking. It is apparent here, because in America no power of fact or opinion hinders the march of human intelligence or passions on this point; they follow their natural bent. At a time that does not seem to me very far away, it seems certain that the two extremes will find themselves face to face. What will be the final result then? Here I am absolutely lost in uncertainty, and I no longer see the clear path.'⁶ There are obvious echoes of his own earlier battle between reason and authority. And this perhaps led to an early somewhat cynical observation which he later dropped - for although it captured the optional nature of particular faith it did not capture the sincerity. 'People follow a religion the way our fathers took a medicine in the month of May - if it does not do any good, people seem to say, at

¹ For an excellent fuller account of this topic, see Goldstein, *Trial of Faith*.

² Quoted in Boesche, *Tocqueville*, 110

³ Tocqueville, *Ancien*, 165

⁴ Tocqueville, *Letters*, 52 (1831)

⁵ Tocqueville, *Democracy*, I, 369

⁶ Tocqueville, *Letters*, 52 (1831)

least it cannot do any harm, and, besides, it is proper to conform to the general rule.’¹

Part of the mystery was resolved by seeing that religion had been separated from politics. ‘European Christianity has allowed itself to be intimately united with the powers of this world.’² This had not happened in America. State and Church were separate. This was recognized as a cause of the mutual harmony of each. Thus in America ‘...all thought that the main reason for the quiet sway of religion over their country was the complete separation of church and state.’³ It meant that while political and economic life could be turbulent, religion could be calm and certain. ‘Thus, in the moral world everything is classified, co-ordinated, foreseen, and decided in advance. In the world of politics everything is in turmoil, contested and uncertain.’⁴ It was extraordinary, but it worked. By separating the two worlds of politics and religion, they came to support each other better than by forcing them into the kind of concordats he was familiar with in Europe. ‘Far from harming each other, these two apparently opposed tendencies work in harmony and seem to lend mutual support.’⁵ Not that this flowed from any intrinsic lack of zeal, or even lack of ambition on the part of the sects. It was more, as Adam Smith and others had argued, the result of stalemate. America showed this wonderfully ‘because the religious and irreligious instincts which can exist in man develop here in perfect liberty.’⁶

Particularly interesting was the position of the Catholic clergy.

Protestants of all persuasions - Anglicans, Lutherans, Calvinists, Presbyterians, Anabaptists, Quakers, and a hundred other Christian sects - this is the core of the population. This church-going and indifferent population, which lives day to day, becomes used to a **milieu** which is hardly satisfying, but which is tranquil, and in which the **proprieties** are satisfied. They live and die in compromises, without ever concerning themselves with reaching the depths of things; they no longer recruit anyone. Above them is to be found a fistful of Catholics, who are making use of the tolerance of their ancient adversaries, but who are staying basically as intolerant as they have always been, as intolerant in a word as people who **believe**. For them there is only truth in a single point; on any line one side or another of this point: eternal damnation. They live in the midst of civil society, but they forbid themselves any relationship with the religious societies that surround them. It even seems to me that their dogma on liberty of conscience is pretty much the same as in Europe, and I am not sure that they would not be persecuting if they found themselves to be the strongest.⁷

He tried to capture the same point with a metaphor of a set of concentric circles, with the Catholics in the middle.

¹Tocqueville, *Letters*, 49 (1831)

²Tocqueville, *Democracy*, I, 372

³Tocqueville, *Democracy*, I, 365

⁴Tocqueville, *Democracy*, I, 5

⁵Tocqueville, *Democracy*, I, 55

⁶Tocqueville, *Letters*, 50 (1831)

⁷Tocqueville, *Letters*, 50 (1831)

It is an incredible thing to see the infinite subdivisions into which the sects have been divided in America. One might say they are circles successively drawn around the same point; each new one is a little more distant than the last. The Catholic faith is the immobile point from which each new sect distances itself a little more, while drawing nearer to pure deism.¹

In such a situation the extreme dogmatists, the Catholics, not only had to abandon any idea of an alliance with the State, but they were pushed back into a purely private role. Because of the multiplicity of sects and of different priests, each religious group became relegated to the level of the private life of the citizen. They had no choice but to accept that religion and their particular morality stopped at the front door of their sect follower; it could not be imposed on others. 'American Catholic priests have divided the world of the mind into two parts; in one are revealed dogmas to which they submit without discussion; political truth finds its place in the other half, which they think God has left to man's free investigation.'²

Thus religion was inwardly strong and outwardly weak.

Religion in America is a world apart in which the clergyman is supreme, but one which he is careful never to leave; within its limits he guides men's minds, while outside them he leaves men to themselves, to the freedom and instability natural to themselves and the times they live in. I have seen no country in which Christianity is less clothed in forms, symbols, and observances than it is in the United States, or where the mind is fed with clearer, simpler, or more comprehensive conceptions.³

It was not a 'civil religion', but a privatized, individualized, yet heavily ethical world continuing the traditions of its Pilgrim Fathers.

Like Montesquieu before him, Tocqueville seems to have realized that there was something about this religious structure which was particularly propitious for the development of what we would now call capitalism. It was not so much the actual dogma, but the structural position of religion and the spur it gave. Part of this is caught by Lerner when he writes 'He even saw what Max Weber and R.H. Tawney were to see later: that there was an inner relation between the religious spirit and the strength of the capitalist impulse in America, and that the single-minded pursuit of wealth and personal property was linked with the single-minded quest of God.'⁴ Or as Tocqueville himself put it, in a paradox of the same kind as Weber's 'That is why religious nations have often accomplished such lasting achievements. For in thinking of the other world, they had found out the great success in this.'⁵

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Tocqueville synthesized all these ideas into one major theory, that the development of the spirit of equality was the key to American civilization. In America he found a land which had explicitly enthroned the premise of equality,

¹Tocqueville, *Letters*, 49 (1831)

²Tocqueville, *Democracy*, I, 357

³Tocqueville, *Democracy*, II, 574

⁴Tocqueville, *Democracy*, I, cii

⁵Tocqueville, *Democracy*, II, 707

rather than of inequality. It made it a central tenet that man was born free and equal. This was still a peculiar way to look at things and Tocqueville consequently noted that 'No novelty in the United States struck me more vividly during my stay there than the equality of conditions.'¹ Equality, or democracy as he often called it, became the key to understanding America. 'So the more I studied American society, the more clearly I saw equality of conditions as the creative element from which each particular fact derived, and all my observations constantly returned to this nodal point.'² There had been some early attempts to take inequality over from the Old World, but they had failed. 'Laws were made there to establish the hierarchy of ranks, but it was soon seen that the soil of America absolutely rejected a territorial aristocracy.'³

He became convinced after his visit that this growing equality was the future. 'It seems to me beyond doubt that sooner or later we, like the Americans, will attain almost complete equality of conditions.'⁴ He believed that 'the gradual process of equality is somehow fated.'⁵ Governments could channel its course, but not stop it. 'In a word, from now on democracy seems to me a fact that a government can have the pretension of **regulating**, but of stopping, no.'⁶ This was all the more so because there was a positive feed-back. The more equality there was, the more impatient people became at the remaining inequalities. 'When inequality is the general rule in society, the greatest inequalities attract no attention. When everything is more or less level, the slightest variation is noticed. Hence the more equal men are, the more insatiable will be their longing for equality.'⁷

His certainty did not only arise from his American experience. His increasing research into the history of Europe appeared to show the same tendency. When people suggested that a new aristocracy created by industrial or commercial wealth might re-instate hierarchy, Tocqueville was prepared to concede temporary, small-scale, reversals. 'Hence, just while the mass of the nation is turning toward democracy, that particular class which is engaged in industry becomes more aristocratic. Men appear more and more like in the one context and more and more different in the other, and inequality increases within the little society at large.'⁸ Yet this was only marginal. 'Does anyone imagine that democracy, which has destroyed the feudal system and vanquished kings, will fall back before the middle classes and the rich?'⁹ Thus his work on **Democracy in America** was impelled by a need to understand and direct this tendency. 'This whole book has been written under the impulse of a kind of religious dread inspired by contemplation of this irresistible revolution advancing century by

¹Tocqueville, **Democracy**, I, 5

²Tocqueville, **Democracy**, I, 5

³Tocqueville, **Democracy**, I, 37

⁴Tocqueville, **Democracy**, I, 17

⁵Tocqueville, **Democracy**, I, 8

⁶Tocqueville, **Letters**, 56

⁷Tocqueville, **Democracy**, II, 695

⁸Tocqueville, **Democracy**, II, 720

⁹Tocqueville, **Democracy**, I, 8

century over every obstacle and even now going forward amid the ruins it had itself created.¹

Tocqueville's greatness lies in the fact that as a member of a noble family, he nevertheless partially rejected the premise of natural inequality which had been the foundation of his ancestral power. He realized that 'rational equality is the only state natural to man.'² This was proved not only by the fact that 'nations get there from such various starting points and following such different roads'³ but also by the evidence that 'Running through the pages of our history, there is hardly an important event in the last seven hundred years which has not turned out to be advantageous for equality.'⁴ His central dynamic, therefore, was the tendency towards equality, and the movement away from birth to achievement as the basis for social position. This was the unstoppable force, the tide of history. Thus he wrote that, 'the great human revolution which we set in motion more than sixty-five years ago, advances towards liberty only occasionally, but towards equality with an irresistible and uninterrupted progress.'⁵

His anxiety was that such a tendency could lead either to the elevation or subjugation of men. 'To me the Christian nations of our day present an alarming spectacle; the movement which carries them along is already too strong to be halted, but it is not yet so swift that we must despair of directing it; our fate is in our hands, but soon it may pass beyond control.'⁶ His central conclusion in the first volume of **Democracy** was summarized thus by J.S. Mill.

They may be stated as follows:- That Democracy, in the modern world is inevitable; and that it is, on the whole, desirable; but desirable only under certain conditions, and those conditions capable, by human care and foresight, of being realized, but capable also of being missed. The progress and ultimate ascendancy of the democratic principle has, in his eyes, the character of a law of nature.⁷

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Tocqueville was particularly interested in the effects of the advancing tide of equality on inter-personal relations. He noted the effects on parent-child relations. He wrote that 'Everyone has noticed that in our time a new relationship has evolved between the different members of a family, that the distance formerly separating father and son has diminished, and that paternal authority, if not abolished, has at least changed form.'⁸ Thus, in America, 'the family, if one takes the word in its Roman and aristocratic sense, no longer exists.'⁹ The phenomenon could be seen as a child grew up in America, for 'as soon as the young American begins to approach man's estate, the reins of filial

¹Tocqueville, **Democracy**, I, 9

²Tocqueville, **Journeys**, 9

³Tocqueville, **Journeys**, 9

⁴Tocqueville, **Democracy**, I, 7

⁵Tocqueville, **Memoir**, II, 282

⁶Tocqueville, **Democracy**, I, 9

⁷Mill, **Essays**, 217

⁸Tocqueville, **Democracy**, II, 756

⁹Tocqueville, **Democracy**, II, 756

obedience are daily slackened. Master of his thoughts, he soon becomes responsible for his own behaviour. In America there is in truth no adolescence. At the close of boyhood he is a man and begins to trace out his own path.¹

The independence of children and their separation from their parents could be seen when he compared his own aristocratic childhood with what he saw in America. In the former, patriarchal power was still present. He believed that 'When men are more concerned with memories of what has been than with what is, and when they are much more anxious to know what their ancestors thought than to think for themselves, the father is the natural and necessary link between the past and the present, the link where these two chains meet and join.'² On the other hand, in America 'When the state of society turns to democracy and men adopt the general principle that it is good and right to judge everything for oneself, taking former beliefs as providing information but not rules, paternal opinions come to have less power over the sons, just as his legal power is less too.'³ Here, as elsewhere, hierarchy and holism were linked on one side, with equality and individualism as a matched pair on the other.

The change from patriarchal to egalitarian family structures was obviously connected to the change from a situation where the state used the father, to one which separated politics and the family. 'As in aristocratic society, so in the aristocratic family, all positions are defined. Not only the father holds a rank apart and enjoys immense privileges; the children too are by no means equal among one another.'⁴ Thus

in aristocracies society is, in truth, only concerned with the father. It only controls the sons through the father; it rules him, and he rules them. Hence the father has not only his natural right. He is given a political right to command. He is the author and support of the family; he is also its magistrate.⁵

But this was not the case in democracies, where each member of the family was a free citizen, responsible for himself. The alteration in power was perceptible in the tone of the relationship of fathers and sons in America. For 'among democratic nations every word a son addresses to his father has a tang of freedom, familiarity, and tenderness all at once, which gives an immediate impression of the new relationship prevailing in the family.'⁶ Thus the premise of equality changed all the relations between the generations, and even between older and younger brothers.

Just as the relations between the generations were deeply affected, so was the relation between the genders. Tocqueville believed this to be a very important topic. 'Therefore everything which has a bearing on the status of women, their habits, and their thoughts is, in my view, of great political importance.'⁷ He

¹Tocqueville, *Democracy*, II, 756

²Tocqueville, *Democracy*, II, 758

³ Tocqueville, *Democracy*, ii, 759

⁴Tocqueville, *Democracy*, II, 760

⁵Tocqueville, *Democracy*, II, 758

⁶Tocqueville, *Democracy*, II, 760

⁷Tocqueville, *Democracy*, II, 763

wondered whether ‘democracy’ was likely to destroy or modify ‘the great inequality between man and woman which has up till now seemed based on the eternal foundations of nature?’¹ Personally he felt sure that it would ‘raise the status of women, and should make them more and more nearly equal to men.’² He then outlines the high status of American women. For instance

In Europe one has often noted that a certain contempt lurks in the flattery men lavish on women; although a European may often make himself woman’s slave, one feels that he never sincerely thinks her his equal. In the United States, men seldom compliment women, but they daily show how much they esteem them.³

The Americans carried to an extreme a tendency that Tocqueville had noticed seemed somehow to be linked to Protestantism and liberty, and hence was also found in England.

In almost all Protestant nations girls are much more in control of their own behaviour than among Catholic ones. This independence is even greater in those Protestant countries, such as England, which have kept or gained the right of self-government. In such cases both political habits and religious beliefs infuse a spirit of liberty into the family.⁴

The fact that Tocqueville was married to a middle class English woman, Mary Mottley, gave him an especial insight into these cultural differences.

Tocqueville noted that the freedom of American women started when they were young. ‘Long before the young American woman has reached marriageable age, the process of freeing her from her mother’s care has started stage by stage. Before she has completely left childhood behind she already thinks for herself, speaks freely, and acts on her own.’⁵ This was reinforced by the relatively late age at marriage. ‘Precocious weddings hardly occur. So American women only marry when their minds are experienced and mature, whereas elsewhere women usually only begin to mature when they are married.’⁶ It was then maintained by a division of labour between the sexes. Men and women were given different spheres, in recognition of their different abilities, but each was valued highly. The Americans ‘consider that progress consists not in making dissimilar creatures do roughly the same things but in giving both a chance to do their job as well as possible. The Americans have applied to the sexes the great principle of political economy which now dominates industry. They have carefully separated the functions of man and of woman so that the great work of society may be better performed.’⁷ ‘To sum up, the Americans do not think that man and woman have the duty or the right to do the same things, but they show an

¹Tocqueville, *Democracy*, II, 777

² Tocqueville, *Democracy*, II, 777

³Tocqueville, *Democracy*, II, 779

⁴Tocqueville, *Democracy*, II, 763

⁵Tocqueville, *Democracy*, II, 763

⁶Tocqueville, *Democracy*, II, 767

⁷Tocqueville, *Democracy*, II, 777-8

equal regard for the part played by both and think of them as beings of equal worth, though their fates are different.’¹

Thus again there was a paradox. In many respects American women were quite confined in their role. Yet they had the highest ‘station’ or status in the world. ‘For my part, I have no hesitation in saying that although the American woman never leaves her domestic sphere and is in some respects very dependent within it, nowhere does she enjoy a higher station.’² It was another instance of a blend of religion, economy and society. ‘The Americans are both a Puritan and a trading nation. Therefore both their religious beliefs and their industrial habits lead them to demand much abnegation on the woman’s part and a continual sacrifice of pleasure for the sake of business, which is seldom expected in Europe.’³ And it was upon the superior ability and status and intelligence of American women that the greatness of America was based. ‘If anyone asks me what I think the chief cause of the extraordinary prosperity and growing power of this nation, I should answer that it is due to the superiority of their women.’⁴

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Tocqueville was well aware of the implicit dangers of the New World which he was analyzing. In general he was very fair and balanced in his appraisal. He saw much to admire and to praise as we have seen, and may also note his admiration for the high educational standards and the independence of mind. It was a mighty, largely tolerant, and ambitious nation. Yet, alongside the achievements he noted not only the possibility of despotism and loneliness, but other presently existing evils.

One, which he castigated with bitterness, was slavery that appalled him on his southern travels.⁵ Another was the destruction of the American Indians. A book could be written just about his poignant account of the tragic destruction then in its last phases.⁶ Here we can only cite three examples from his extensive journals and writings. As he watched the last huddled bands of Indians he felt an inexpressible sadness. ‘There was, in the whole of this spectacle, an air of ruin and destruction, something that savoured of a farewell that was final and with no return; no one could witness this without being sick at heart; the Indians were calm, but somber and taciturn.’⁷ He summarized the European impact thus. ‘The Europeans, having scattered the Indian tribes far into the wilderness, condemned them to a wandering vagabond life full of inexpressible afflictions.’⁸ As he saw only too clearly, they were faced with an impossible choice. ‘From whatever angle one regards the destinies of the North American natives,

¹Tocqueville, *Democracy*, II, 780

²Tocqueville, *Democracy*, II, 780-1

³Tocqueville, *Democracy*, II, 766

⁴Tocqueville, *Democracy*, II, 781

⁵ There are numerous references to his views on slavery in the index to Tocqueville,

Democracy.

⁶ For a good background account of the tragic impact of epidemics, trade goods, alcohol, firearms, mission schools and so on on Indian culture, see Axtell, *European and Indian*, ch.9

⁷Tocqueville, *Letters*, 73 (1831)

⁸Tocqueville, *Democracy*, I, 393

one sees nothing but irremediable ills: if they remain savages, they are driven along before the march of progress; if they try to become civilised, contact with more civilised people delivers them over to oppression and misery.¹ Already he could see an end to their way of life and even, the prophet that he was, an end to the wilderness.

His vision of the ecological destruction that took place over the following century is shown in a moving passage written during his 'fortnight in the wilderness'. 'In a few years these impenetrable forests will have fallen; the sons of civilization and industry will break the silence of the Saginaw; its echoes will cease; the banks will be imprisoned by quays; its current, which now flows on unnoticed and tranquil through a nameless waste, will be stemmed by the prows of vessels.' It was the imminent loss which added to the beauty. 'It is this idea of destruction, with the accompanying thought of near and inevitable change, that gives to the solitudes of America their peculiar character, and their touching loveliness.'²

Yet, at a deeper level, he thought that even the white settlers were themselves being destroyed, but by a more insidious disease. There is sadness in this observation too. He thought that

the people is becoming enlightened, attainments spread, and a middling ability becomes common. The striking talents, the great characters, are rare. Society is less brilliant and more prosperous. These various effects of the progress of civilization and enlightenment, which are only hinted at in Europe, appear in the clear light of day in America. From what first cause do they derive? I do not yet see clearly.³

Later, though puzzled, he saw the malaise more clearly. 'Why, as civilisation spreads, do understanding men become fewer? Why, when attainments are the lot of all, do great intellectual talents become rarer? Why, when there are no longer lower classes, are there no more upper classes? Why, when knowledge of how to rule reaches the masses, is there a lack of great abilities in the direction of society? America clearly poses these questions. But who can answer them?'⁴

Another insidious evil that he saw emerging, was an effect of that very principle of the division of labour that Smith had elaborated. Alluding explicitly to Smith, Tocqueville asked 'What is one to expect from a man who has spent twenty years of his life making heads for pins? And how can he employ that mighty human intelligence which has so often stirred the world, except in finding out the best way of making heads for pins?'⁵ He expressed the thought thus. 'As the principle of the division of labour is ever more completely applied, the workman becomes weaker, more limited, and more dependent. The craft improves, the craftsman slips back.'⁶ The brave new world of industrial civilization which he saw ahead was not one he unequivocally welcomed. The

¹Tocqueville, *Democracy*, I, 420

² Tocqueville, *Memoir*, I, 202.

³Tocqueville, *Journey to America*, 87

⁴Tocqueville, *Journey to America*, 160

⁵Tocqueville, *Democracy*, II, 718

⁶Tocqueville, *Democracy*, II, 719

hugeness of America, with its physical size and in its growing population, presaged dangers. Those who had destroyed the wilderness and the Indians might be the heirs to a poisoned chalice. 'Great wealth and dire poverty, huge cities, depraved morals, individual egoism, and complication of interests are so many perils which almost always arise from the large size of the state.'¹

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Tocqueville had shown how the system seemed, amazingly, to work. But why was it like that? How had it come into being? Having diminished the importance of geography, and put 'laws' into perspective, he was not left with much else. For a while, he and Beaumont thought that the explanation for the large middle class and equality might lie in the inheritance system. But, as Pierson points out, this was a red herring and though it appeared in the **Democracy** could not get them very far.² There was only one area left, 'culture', that is mores and customs. So Tocqueville turned to an explanation of these, reverting to his methodical device of the 'point of departure.'

As Tocqueville thought more and travelled further he came to the conclusion that the secret of 'America' would not to be found in America, but in Europe, and particularly in England. He placed his final ideas on the subject in a footnote to his last work, the **Ancien Regime**. He put forward the general proposition that 'The physiognomy of governments can be best detected in their colonies, for there their features are magnified, and rendered more conspicuous. When I want to discover the spirit and vices of the government of Louis XIV, I must go to Canada. Its deformities are seen there as through a microscope.'³ The same was true of the relationship of the United States and England. 'In the United States ... the English anti-centralisation system was carried to an extreme. Parishes became independent municipalities, almost democratic republics. The republican element, which forms, so to say, the foundation of the English constitution and English habits, shows itself and develops without hindrance.'⁴ This also helped to explain the homogeneity of the United States - 'there was a strong family likeness between all the English colonies as they came to birth.'⁵

He developed the idea of a germ, or seed, which shaped the colony but then took certain early tendencies further than in the homeland. 'I do not think the intervening ocean really separates America from Europe. The people of the United States are that portion of the English people whose fate it is to explore the forests of the New World, while the rest of the nation, enjoying more leisure and being less preoccupied with the material needs of life, can devote its energies to thought and enlarge the empire of the mind in all directions.'⁶ 'That portion' had taken the central feature, liberty, with them. 'At the time of the first immigrations, local government, that fertile germ of free institutions, had already taken deep root in English ways, and therewith the dogma of the

¹Tocqueville, **Democracy**, I, 196

²Pierson, **Tocqueville in America**, 128

³Tocqueville, 'Notes', 270

⁴Tocqueville, 'Notes', 271

⁵Tocqueville, **Democracy**, I, 37

⁶Tocqueville, **Democracy**, II, 584-5

sovereignty of the people had slipped into the very heart of the Tudor monarchy.’¹ They also took the separation of religion and politics. ‘Most of English America was peopled by men who, having shaken off the pope’s authority, acknowledged no other religious supremacy; they therefore brought to the New World a Christianity which I can only describe as democratic and republican; this fact singularly favoured the establishment of a temporal republic and democracy. From the start politics and religion agreed, and they have not since ceased to do so.’² These central features had been taken to their logical extreme.

If it be true that each people has a special character independent of its political interest, just as each man has one independent of his social position, one might say that America gives the most perfect picture, for good and for ill, of the special character of the English race. The American is the Englishman left to himself.³

This was because of two significant facts. Firstly physical distance had created the practical necessity for self-governing local government institutions to take a greater burden than in the old country. From the very early days in the new colonies ‘One continually finds them exercising rights of sovereignty; they appointed magistrates, made peace and war, promulgated police regulations, and enacted laws as if they were dependent on God alone.’⁴ Secondly, the old hierarchical structure of England was not transferred. There was no extreme division of landed wealth, no aristocracy, no traditional gentry. In a sense America was an extension of that great middling part of English social structure, from the yeoman up to the successful manufacturer or merchant. The two extremes, the landless poor and the owners of huge estates, had vanished. As a result, ‘All, from the beginning, seemed destined to let freedom grow, not the aristocratic freedom of their motherland but a middle-class and democratic freedom of which the world’s history had not previously provided a complete example.’⁵ This was the fascination of studying America. Out of old English elements it had shaped something new and unprecedented. Because of its short history it was possible to observe exactly how it had started and how evolved and to see the combination of seed and maturation. ‘America is the only country in which we can watch the natural quiet growth of society and where it is possible to be exact about the influence of the point of departure on the future of a state.’⁶

At a specific level there were particular institutional transfers. ‘Thus the flowering of local government in America flowed from the essential principle of the English polity. Transported at a single stroke far from the feudal remnants of Europe, “the rural parish of the Middle Ages became the New England township.”’⁷ Yet this was just one element of the generalized system of freedom, carried from England.

¹Tocqueville, *Democracy*, I, 36

²Tocqueville, *Democracy*, I, 355-6

³Tocqueville, *Journey to America*, 177

⁴Tocqueville, *Democracy*, I, 46

⁵Tocqueville, *Democracy*, I, 37

⁶Tocqueville, *Democracy*, I, 35

⁷Drescher, *Tocqueville*, 204; the quotation is from Tocqueville, *Ancien*, 53, and Tocqueville in fact is speaking of medieval Europe in general as the origin of the parish.

The English who emigrated three centuries ago to found a democratic society in the wilds of the New World were already accustomed in their motherland, to take part in public affairs; they knew trial by jury; they had liberty of speech and freedom of the press, personal freedom, and the conception of rights and the practice of asserting them. They carried these free institutions and virile mores with them to America, and these characteristics sustained them against the encroachments of the state.¹

In turn, again linking freedom and wealth, he found that 'The English colonies - and that was one of the main reasons for their prosperity - have always enjoyed more internal freedom and political independence than those of other nations.'²

Tocqueville thus became increasingly aware, even during his stay in America, that in order to understand the origins and causes of that extraordinary land he would have to continue his travels. The answer to his riddle lay in the 'point of departure', and that point seemed to lie in England. Thus shortly after he returned from America he made a five week trip to England. Then in May to September 1835 he made a longer visit to study the country in depth. England, in fact, became his second home and not only because he had married an English wife. It was finally in England rather than America that he found the answer to some of his riddles. America was the future but in order to understand that future one must understand the past and present of a small island which had recently developed into the most powerful nation the world had ever known.

¹Tocqueville, *Democracy*, II, 875-6

²Tocqueville, *Democracy*, I, 45

5. ENGLISH ORIGINS - 1

Although Tocqueville's interest in American origins was a contributing factor in taking him to England, his interest in that country anticipated his voyage to America. In October 1828 he wrote a long summary essay on England based on the work of the historian Lingard, which Gargan rightly describes as 'brilliant'.¹ When he attended Guizot's lectures, he heard a good deal more about the constitutional and social differences of France and England which intrigued him and deeply influenced his later interpretation.

When he finally arrived in England in August 1833, for a first brief visit of five weeks, he was initially confused and in some ways disappointed. Part of the disappointment was social. He confessed to 'a continual dizziness and a profound feeling of my nullity. We were a great deal in America, we are hardly anything in Paris, but I assure you that it is necessary to go to below zero and to use what mathematicians call negative numbers to compute what I am here.'² A second disappointment was that at first sight his hunch that America was England writ large seemed not to be the case.

Tocqueville and Beaumont had planned to 'return to France by way of England' from America. They were unable to do so but, as Beaumont put it in 1833, they had hoped to find out what heritage "John Bull, father of Jonathan" had transmitted to his son.³ Yet when Tocqueville arrived in England he found that 'I am no longer in America.'⁴ Indeed, as Drescher puts it, 'Nothing struck him more than the difference between the two societies.' "Nowhere," he observed, "do I find our America."⁵ Above all he seemed to find that while America was based on the premise of equality, England was still a deeply 'aristocratic' rather than 'democratic' society in terms of its class structure - indeed in some ways more so than France.

The position that fortune joined to birth gives here appears to me to be still a million feet above all the rest. You are aware that I cannot yet speak of the spirit of the English people: what I can say, what strikes me most up to the present in its mores, is their aristocratic exterior. The aristocratic spirit appears to me to have descended into all classes; **every marquis wants to have pages**, make no mistake about it. In short, I do not recognize our America here in any point.⁶

Yet what at first came as a disappointment turned out to be a great advantage. Instead of a simple contrast between **Ancien Regime** Europe on the one hand, and Anglo-American civilization on the other, Tocqueville was forced to consider a third case, overlapping with both France and America, yet very different from either. This provided a three-way comparison which helps give his speculations far greater depth and subtlety. Like Montesquieu before him, he found in England a world very different from France, and one which gave him hope. "It is

¹Gargan, *Tocqueville*, 23; the essay is reprinted in Tocqueville, *Journeys*, 1-23

²Tocqueville, *Letters*, 82 (1833)

³Quoted in Jardin, *Tocqueville*, 197

⁴Tocqueville, *Letters*, 83 (1833)

⁵Drescher, *Tocqueville*, 37

⁶Tocqueville, *Letters*, 82 (1833)

the greatest spectacle in the world, though all of it is not great," he wrote. "One encounters, above all, things unknown in the rest of Europe - things which consoled me."¹ As Drescher notes, it seemed to him to contain both the old world and the new in almost equal measure and to stand on the exact intersection. 'With a pattern peculiar to itself, England seemed to contain so many elements of both social conditions that none could say whether it had not already crossed the invisible boundary.'²

Tocqueville never wrote a great book on England, like his **Democracy in America**. This is one of the reasons why his thoughts on that country have been for so long time over-shadowed by his writing on America and his work apparently devoted to France in the **Ancien Regime**. In fact, as Drescher's excellent book on **Tocqueville in England** shows, England was as important a 'thought experiment' for Tocqueville as was America. Drescher points out that 'The British Isles were the source of some of his greatest insights, especially into the historical connection between the rise of democracy and the extension of bureaucratic centralization.'³ His experiences in England 'gave him a comparative basis for a theory of the relation of ideas to social change, of the causes of and antidotes for revolutions.'⁴ In particular his second, longer, visit of 1835, stimulated him immensely. As Drescher writes, 'the spoils of the eleven-week expedition were immense. Tocqueville and Beaumont had undertaken a complete revaluation of what aristocracy and the democratic revolution meant in their English context.'⁵ Thus 'When Tocqueville and Beaumont left England early in July 1835, it marked the end of the fullest experience of their lives.'⁶

It is clear that the stimulus was not just intellectual but also moral and emotional. While in England he felt great consolation. Thus 'the excitement of England left more than a painful loneliness in its wake. No comparable period, except the visit to New England four years earlier, could compare with it for the sheer outpouring of ideas which were to dominate their thought and action.'⁷ We have seen that Tocqueville often felt isolated in his thought. In England and especially with his English friends and English wife he found support for his new evaluation of the world. As Tocqueville himself wrote to an English friend, 'So many of my sentiments and ideas are English, that England has become intellectually my second country.'⁸

It was a country which, in another way, could provide a model for France. It had undergone the immense urban and industrial revolutions, yet not had to suffer the torment of continuing political revolutions. As he revisited it over time, he was constantly surprised how it managed to change and yet to remain the same. Thus when he revisited it in 1857, after revolutions had swept across Europe, 'English society surprised him by being so consistent with its old

¹Drescher, **Tocqueville**, 191

²Drescher, **Tocqueville**, 123

³Drescher, **Tocqueville**, 221

⁴Drescher, **Tocqueville**, 221

⁵Drescher, **Tocqueville**, 103

⁶Drescher, **Tocqueville**, 99

⁷Drescher, **Tocqueville**, 99

⁸Quoted in Drescher, **Tocqueville**, vii

pattern. It appeared that if England had changed it was in reverse - that she was now even less agitated by revolutionary passions than in 1835.¹ America had many advantages in its newness. England had achieved the even more difficult route from a mediaeval to a modern society without needing a political revolution of the kind that had occurred elsewhere. Thus 'there were facets of the English political situation which were vital to his arguments and which America could not duplicate. England clearly presented a case in which the disintegration of mediaeval society had not led to the permanent alienation of its constituent classes, and it still afforded viable political machinery for the transfer of political power by peaceful means.'²

The English case, with all its obvious success as the greatest technological and military power in the world, provided Tocqueville with a rod with which to beat his fellow country-men. His last great book on the **Ancien Regime** could not have been written without the English counter case, which became far more important than the American one. His indictment of France was severe. 'No Frenchman could put down the "Ancien Regime" without noticing with equal terror that its author had assailed almost every class, every institution, and every event in recent French history.'³ No wonder he felt morally isolated, for he also loved France. He was able to make his powerful attack only because of his emotional and intellectual contacts with England.

Once again following Montesquieu, Tocqueville increasingly saw beneath the surface and realized that England was an object lesson. His illuminating account now seems self-evident. Yet it was less obvious in the 1820s as he developed his thoughts. "England itself, poorly known in any event, had not yet furnished the striking arguments in favour of liberty that it has since done. Free institutions produced internal and unseen effects which were hidden to foreigners; their fecundity and their greatness were not yet manifest."⁴ His interest in the country was increased by two further facts. Just as America was a case where one could watch England spreading out in a new space, likewise England was a place where one could see the European revolutions rippling out in a new environment. As he put it in a letter, referring to the English Civil War period for instance, the

The previous revolutions that the English have undergone were essentially English in **substance** and in **form**. The ideas that gave birth to them circulated only in England; the form in which these ideas clothed themselves was unknown to the continent; the means that were used in order to make them victorious were the product of mores, habits, laws, practices different or contrary to the mores, the habits, and laws of the rest of Europe (all of that up to a certain point). Those previous revolutions in England thus were an object of great curiosity to the philosophers, but it was difficult for them to give rise to a popular book among us. It is no longer so today: today it is the European revolution that is being continued among the English, but it is being continued there by taking wholly English forms.⁵

¹Drescher, *Tocqueville*, 191

²Drescher, *Tocqueville*, 221

³Drescher, *Tocqueville*, 216

⁴Drescher, *Tocqueville*, 204-5

⁵Tocqueville, *Letters*, 106-7

Or, as he put it in a slightly different form in a letter to Beaumont,

One is really aroused only by what partially coincides and is new and original in some way. The English have taken our ideas, but they have in some manner ground them in their own mill, and they are trying to make them triumph and to apply them in their own way. They are at bottom European, but English in style.¹

The second reason for being interested in England was because of its growing Empire, and particularly its increasing dominance in India. As he wrote in 1840, “Nothing is less well known in France than the causes that produced and that sustain the astonishing greatness of the English in India. This subject, which has always been interesting, is wonderfully so now that all the great affairs of Europe have their centre in Africa.”² He decided to work on the subject and wrote in 1841 “My intention is to occupy myself with India...”³ He worked hard for two years. ‘He would first deal with the conquest of India and the organization of the conquest. Next, he was to paint “a picture of the establishment of the English in India as it is today”; in a third part, he would set out to study the “effects of the English government on the condition of the Hindus”; finally the last part was entitled “How the English empire in India could be destroyed.”’⁴ As it was, he gave up this projected book in December 1843 under the pressure of other work. We are left with a few hints of his attraction to the subject and an immeasurable influence on his **Ancien Regime** when he discusses ‘caste’.

Thus England was important to Tocqueville at many different levels. It might contain the secret of the extraordinary New World. It held the key to successful imperialism. It had somehow moved from ancient to modern without the trauma of anything analogous to the French Revolution. It had industrialized and urbanized two generations before anywhere else. And it espoused those values of liberty which he cherished. For all these reasons he devoted much of his thought to the country, though his insights are scattered through his letters, journals, and unpublished papers and in asides in his major works. What did he find?

Despite the Revolution, France was still largely an **ancien regime** country in Tocqueville’s childhood. That is to say, it was still divided into the four estates of **paysans, bourgeois, clergé** and **nobilité**, even if this was officially below the surface. It was still largely an agrarian country, with pockets of commerce. It is because of this background that Tocqueville, like Montesquieu almost exactly a century before him, felt a sense of shock and otherness when he went to England in 1833. Indeed he approvingly quoted Montesquieu’s remark that ‘I am here in a country which hardly resembles the rest of Europe.’⁵ Though France had changed enormously in the century since Montesquieu, England had changed equally fast, not through political revolution but through the socio-economic transformation of the industrial revolution and the widening of the franchise in

¹Quoted in Drescher, **Tocqueville**, 73

²Jardin, **Tocqueville**, 339

³Jardin, **Tocqueville**, 339

⁴Jardin, **Tocqueville**, 341

⁵Tocqueville, **Ancien**, 89

1832. If France was one end of the continuum, England was in the middle, something that needed to be understood as a bridge between old Europe and the new world of America.

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One thing that struck Tocqueville was the general affluence of England. ‘A Frenchman on seeing England for the first time is struck by the apparent comfort and cannot imagine why people complain.’¹ He found “‘a nation among whom the upper classes are more brilliant, more enlightened and wiser, the middle classes richer, the poor classes better off than anywhere else.’”²

In contrast, writing in 1857 about the 1820s and 1830s, Tocqueville gives a picture of France as it was then, at least in the countryside.

Thirty years ago the peasant was dressed in linen all the year round; now, the poorest family wears warm and substantial woolens. Then he ate black bread; his bread now would have appeared a luxury even to the rich of those days. Butcher’s meat was then almost unknown. Twenty-five years ago the little town of St. Pierre had only a single butcher: he killed a cow once a week, and had great difficulty in selling his meat. Now there are nine, and they sell more in a day than was then sold in a week. Nor is this peculiar. I have observed a similar change in Touraine, in Picardy, in all the Ile-de-France, and in Lorraine.³

Yet, despite the improvement of conditions in France, England’s industrial progress was such that by the mid-century Tocqueville could write ‘is there any single country in Europe, in which the national wealth is greater...society more settled and more wealthy?’⁴ What then were the reasons for this relative wealth?

Of course the possession of India helped.’ It is an inexhaustible resource for it, all the more because the climate is so deadly that the odds are three to one that an Englishman will die there; but if he does not die, he is **sure** of getting rich.’⁵ That England’s agricultural system was ‘the richest and most perfect in the world’ was likewise important.⁶ It was also obviously becoming the workshop of the world. Tocqueville knew that ‘We live in a century, not of monasteries, but of railways and Exchanges.’⁷ He visited Manchester and Birmingham, and described the latter as ‘an immense workshop, a huge forge, a vast shop.’⁸ He realized that ‘manufacture and trade are the best-known means, the quickest and the safest to become rich.’⁹ The English understood this. ‘Newton said that he found the world’s system by thinking about it the whole time. By doing the

¹Tocqueville, *Journeys*, 44

²Drescher, *Tocqueville*, 110

³Tocqueville, *Memoir*, II, 370

⁴Tocqueville, *Ancien*, 184

⁵Tocqueville, *Journeys*, 62

⁶Tocqueville, *Ancien*, 34

⁷Tocqueville, *Memoir*, II, 376

⁸Tocqueville, *Journeys*, 82

⁹Tocqueville, *Journeys*, 105

same, the English have got hold of the trade of the whole world.¹ Yet Tocqueville realized that all these explanations themselves needed an explanation. Why, for example, was English agriculture the best in the world, or, how had they conquered India, or why did they think about trade and money-making all the time?

The last of these questions was particularly important for he had already found the same phenomenon in America. In England also 'all the resources of the human spirit are bent on the acquisition of wealth.'² He observed that 'In all countries it is bad luck not to be rich. In England it is a terrible misfortune to be poor. Wealth is identified with happiness and everything that goes with happiness; poverty, or even a middling fortune, spells misfortune and all that goes with that.'³ Everything was permeated with monetary values. 'Intelligence, even virtue, seem of little account without money. Everything worthwhile is somehow tied up with money. It fills all the gaps that one finds between men, but nothing will take its place.'⁴ All of men's powers were attracted towards it. 'In a nation where wealth is the sole, or even the principal foundation of aristocracy, money, which in all society is the means of pleasure, confers power also. Endowed with these two advantages, it succeeds in attracting towards itself the whole imagination of man.'⁵ The same was true in America. It was not just the growing towns where the commercial passion ruled. Although it was a vast, largely agricultural, land, 'the Americans carry over into agriculture the spirit of a trading venture, and their passion for industry is manifest there as elsewhere.'⁶ Even in the remotest parts of the apparent wilderness, where you might expect illiterate peasants, 'In these so called villages you find none but lawyers, printers and shopkeepers.'⁷

Tocqueville at times suggested that there had been a change to this attitude quite recently, in the late eighteenth century in England. 'Fifty years ago, more or less, this was an accomplished revolution in England. Since that time birth is but an ornament of, or at most a help towards getting wealth. Money is the real power.'⁸ At other times he argued that the drive towards economic acquisition was much older - and hence its enormous effects visible all over the world. 'Take into account the progressive force of such an urge working for several centuries on several millions of men, and you will not be surprised to find that these men have become the boldest sailors and the most skillful manufactures in the world.'⁹

This entire obsession with accumulating wealth was peculiar to a French nobleman. How much more so to the vast majority of mankind who had lived outside the market economy. When Tocqueville came into contact with the

¹Tocqueville, *Journeys*, 105

²Tocqueville, *Journeys*, 105

³Tocqueville, *Journeys*, 105

⁴Tocqueville, *Journeys*, 78

⁵Tocqueville, *Memoir*, I, 230

⁶Tocqueville, *Democracy*, II, 716

⁷Tocqueville, *Memoir*, I, 159

⁸Tocqueville, *Journeys*, 104

⁹Tocqueville, *Journeys*, 105

native Americans, 'I determined to have recourse to their cupidity. But there is no such a philosopher as the Indian. He has few wants, and consequently few desires. Civilization has no hold over him. He neither knows, nor cares for its advantages.'¹ Such a person

smiles bitterly when he sees us wear out our lives in heaping up useless riches. What we term industry he calls shameful subjection. He compares the workman to the ox toiling on in a furrow. What we call necessities of life, he terms childish playthings, or womanish baubles. He envies us only our arms.'²

This led on to a deeper puzzle. If the new man of England and America was obsessed with wealth acquisition, why was this? The direction to look towards, Tocqueville believed, was the social structure and the political system. This obsession with wealth was the result of numerous intersecting forces, and among the most important was the insecurity and restlessness generated by the absence of a fixed social hierarchy and by a competitive and balanced political system. The restlessness and dynamism was European, and Tocqueville, as we have seen, felt it himself. Thus the preparations for an invasion of China, he thought was an example of 'European restlessness pitted against Chinese unchangeableness,'³ but the restlessness was most extreme where, as in the 'perpetual restlessness of the Americans'⁴, there was least formal hierarchy, political or social. The fear of failure, the constant insecurity and ambition, he saw as follows. 'In democratic countries, not matter how rich a man is, he is almost always dissatisfied with his fortune, because he finds that he is less wealthy than his father was, and he is afraid that his son will be less wealthy than he.'⁵

In such 'democracies', that is to say in societies where wealth and power were based on achievement rather than on birth, people were involved in a vast competitive gambling match. Fortune's wheel was constantly turning, opportunities to rise and fall abounded. The vision of Adam Smith had come to pass and the zestful pursuit of wealth had developed into a passionate, restless and never-ending game which contributed to the wealth of the nation.

Chance is an element always present to the mind of those who live in the unstable conditions of a democracy, and in the end they come to love enterprises in which chance plays a part. This draws them to trade not only for the sake of promised gain, but also because they love the emotions it provides.⁶

Thus the answer to the puzzle of English and American wealth and dynamism seemed to lie in the area of politico-social structures. Echoing Montesquieu, Tocqueville thought that England's wealth and security 'does not flow from the goodness of all the individual laws, but from the spirit which animates the complete body of English legislation. The want of perfection in certain organs is

¹Tocqueville, *Memoir*, I, 186

²Tocqueville, *Memoir*, I, 195-6

³Tocqueville, *Memoir*, II, 54

⁴Tocqueville, *Memoir*, II 246

⁵Tocqueville, *Democracy*, II, 714

⁶Tocqueville, *Democracy*, II, 715

no impediment, because its spirit throbs with life.’¹ In fact, there was a circular causation. Commercial wealth was both a cause and consequence of the instability and dynamism.

The commercial nature of England meant that wealth could be acquired from sources other than land and hence a parallel ‘aristocracy’ was constantly emerging and challenging the older families. ‘In this way an aristocracy of wealth was soon established and, as the world became more civilised and more opportunities of gaining wealth presented themselves, it increased, whereas the old aristocracy, for the same reasons, continually lost ground.’² The consequences were status competition and uncertainty; a constant pre-occupation with small marks of difference and attempts to out-do others. Paradoxically this meant that in the middle of the nineteenth century, England was more snobbish than France. ‘The French wish not to have superiors. The English wish to have inferiors. The Frenchman constantly raises his eyes above him with anxiety. The Englishman lowers his beneath him with satisfaction.’³

Ranks still existed in England, but they were confused. ‘When birth alone, independent of wealth, decides a man’s class, each knows exactly where he stands on the social ladder. He neither seeks to rise nor fears to fall.’ But ‘when an aristocracy of wealth takes the place of one of birth, this is no longer the case.’⁴ This is because

As a man’s social worth is not ostensibly and permanently fixed by his birth, but varies infinitely with his wealth, ranks still exist, but it cannot be seen clearly at first sight by whom they are represented. The immediate result is an unspoken warfare between all the citizens. One side tries by a thousand dodges to infiltrate, in fact or in appearance, among those above them. The others are constantly trying to push back these usurpers of their rights. Or rather the same man plays both parts...Such is the state of England today...’⁵ ‘In democracies, where there is never much difference between one citizen and another and where in the nature of things they are so close that there is always a chance of their all getting merged in a common mass, a multitude of artificial and arbitrary classifications are established to protect each man from the danger of being swept along in spite of himself with the crowd.’⁶

One aspect of the difference that particularly struck Tocqueville was the difference of mentality between the French peasant and the English and American small rural farmer. Tocqueville gave an account of the French and German peasantry in the eighteenth century. For instance, ‘as in our own day, the peasant’s love for property in land was extreme, and all the passions born in him by the possession of the soil was aflame.’⁷ This was totally different from

¹Tocqueville, *Ancien*, 184-5

²Tocqueville, *Journeys*, 104

³Tocqueville, *Journeys*, 60

⁴Tocqueville, *Democracy*, II, 731

⁵Tocqueville, *Democracy*, II, 732

⁶Tocqueville, *Democracy*, II, 783.

⁷Tocqueville, *Memoir*, II, 7

England.¹ In England, 'land is a luxury; it is honourable and agreeable to possess it, but it yields comparatively little profit. Only rich people buy it.'²

As for America, it was like England. Tocqueville concluded after his many travels that 'there are no peasants in America.'³ What he meant is shown when he described his journey into the wildest parts of America. In the most remote region,

you think that you have at last reached the abode of an American peasant: you are wrong. You enter his hut, which looks the abode of misery; the master is dressed as you are; his language is that of the towns. On his rude table are books and newspapers; he takes you hurriedly aside to be informed of what is going on in Europe, and asks you what has most struck you in his country. He will trace on paper for you the plan of a campaign in Belgium.⁴

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Tocqueville was impressed by the freedom and balance of the politico-legal system in England and even more so by its offspring in America. Alluding to Montesquieu's thoughts on England, he wrote that 'Their **constitution** was famous already and was thought to be different from that of other countries.'⁵ He felt that 'Nowhere else in Europe as yet was there a better organised system of free government. No other country had profited so much from feudal organisation.'⁶ And when all this was taken to America it shed much of the snobbery and many of the contradictions of the mother country and settled for a purer form of commercial, middle-class, orientation. It was both a continuity and a transformation. 'In the North, the English background was the same, but every nuance led the opposite way...the two or three main principles now forming the basic social theory of the United States were combined...Their influence now extends beyond its limits over the whole American world.'⁷ Above all it refined and strengthened the freedom and self-rule brought from the old country. When he visited America, Tocqueville wrote that 'The two things that I chiefly admire here are these: First, the extraordinary respect entertained for law: standing alone, and unsupported by an armed force, it commands irresistibly.'⁸ This he believed was because 'they make it themselves and are able to repeal it.' The 'second thing for which I envy these people is, the ease with which they do without being governed. Every man considers himself interested in maintaining the safety of the public and the exercise of the laws. Instead of depending on the police he depends on himself.'⁹

He found these trends in England also.

¹Tocqueville, *Ancien*, 29

²Tocqueville, *Memoir*, II, 7

³Tocqueville, *Memoir*, I, 159

⁴Tocqueville, *Memoir*, I, 147-8

⁵Tocqueville, *Journeys*, 13

⁶Tocqueville, *Journeys*, 13

⁷Tocqueville, *Democracy*, I, 39

⁸Tocqueville, *Memoir*, I, 311

⁹Tocqueville, *Memoir*, I, 311-2

When I see the force given to the human spirit in England by political life, when I see the Englishman sure of the aid of his laws, relying on himself and seeing no obstacle but the limits of his own powers, acting without constraint...animated by the idea that he can do everything...seeking the best everywhere; when I see him thus, I am in no hurry to observe whether nature has carved out ports around him, and given him coal and iron. The cause of his commercial prosperity is not there; it is within himself.¹

How was one to explain this? Here Tocqueville rejected race. When he visited Switzerland with its famed republic, he concluded 'The kingdom of England is a hundred times more republican than this republic. Others would say that this results from the differences in the races. But that is an argument that I will never admit except at the last extremity, and when there remains absolutely nothing to say.'² So how could it be explained? Obviously the key must lie in the particular histories of different nations over the last five hundred years. One aspect of this could be seen in the contrast between the English and French revolutions.

Tocqueville summarized his views forcefully to an English correspondent, Lady Theresa Lewis, who had written a book on Lord Clarendon's contemporaries. 'Your biographies show the truth of your remark, that no two things can be more unlike than your Revolution of 1640 and ours of 1789. No two things, in fact, can be more unlike than the state of your society and of ours at those two periods.'³ He continued that 'These differences, added to those between the character and the education of the two nations, are such that the two events do not admit of even comparison.'⁴ In England, the dispute was between two segments of the ruling elite. 'They were divided; they were opposed to one another, and they fought; but never, for a single day, did they abdicate.'⁵ Whereas in France there was a real ideological and class revolution. The results of this difference could be seen, for instance, in the nature of the events. Tocqueville's father's hair had turned white and his mother had become the neurotic character whose anxiety had overshadowed his youth as a result of the Terror. In England, in contrast, the fact that the ruling classes were always in control meant that 'The consequences were, less boldness of intention, less violence of action, and a regularity, a mildness, even a courtesy, admirably described by you, which showed itself even in the employment of physical force.'⁶ In France there was a great rupture, a real turning over or revolution, a change in the rules. In England there had been Clarendon's 'Great Rebellion' where one power group replaced another temporarily but the rules were not changed at a deep, structural, level.

Tocqueville greatly admired the harmony and freedom of thought in England. The 'union of all the educated classes, from the humblest tradesman to the highest noble, to defend society, and to use freely their joint efforts to manage as

¹Quoted in Drescher, *Tocqueville*, 127

²Tocqueville, *Letters*, 108 (1836)

³Tocqueville, *Memoir*, II, 377

⁴Tocqueville, *Memoir*, II, 377

⁵Tocqueville, *Memoir*, II, 377

⁶Tocqueville, *Memoir*, II, 378

well as possible its affairs'. 'I do not envy the wealth or the power of England, but I envy this union. For the first time, after many years, I breathed freely, undisturbed by the hatreds and the jealousies between different classes, which, after destroying our happiness, have destroyed our liberty.'¹

Yet this union had the effect of leading to that turbulence and public confrontational behaviour which Fukuzawa and Montesquieu had noticed as a necessary feature of democracy. Thus Tocqueville noted that

No people carry so far, especially when speaking in public, violence of language, outrageousness of theories, and extravagance in the inferences drawn from those theories. Thus your A.B. says, that the Irish have not shot half enough landlords. Yet no people act with more moderation. A quarter of what is said in England at a public meeting, or even round a dinner table, without anything being done or intended to be done, would in France announce violence, which would almost always be more furious than the language had been.'²

This was a real gap between the English (and Americans) and everyone else. 'There is one point in which the English seem to me to differ from ourselves, and, indeed, from all other nations, so widely, that they form almost a distinct species of men. There is often scarcely any connection between what they say and what they do.'³ The result was, once again, the confusion of foreigners who were misled by English irony or apparent hypocrisy.

Tocqueville's balance between praise and criticism also comes out in his assessment of English justice. On the positive side 'My general impression is that English procedure is much more expeditious than ours; that it often excludes incriminating evidence; that the system of "examination and cross examination" is better than ours for petty cases; that the position of the accused would be infinitely better than in France.'⁴ On the other, 'It is impossible to imagine anything more detestable than the criminal investigation police in England.'⁵ On the one hand it is a country where the citizen is safe from absolutist power. In France

Aided by Roman law and by its interpreters, the kings of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries succeeded in founding absolute monarchy on the ruins of the free institutions of the middle ages. The English alone refused to adopt it, and they alone have preserved their independence.'⁶

On the other hand, speaking of England, 'There is not a country in the world where justice, that first need of peoples, is more the privilege of the rich.'⁷ The backbone of the system 'is administered by the Justices of the Peace who are nominated by the King.'⁸ This is a source of strength and independence, but

¹Tocqueville, *Memoir*, II, 397

²Tocqueville, *Memoir*, II, 353

³Tocqueville, *Memoir*, II, 352-3

⁴Tocqueville, *Journeys*, 131

⁵Tocqueville, *Journeys*, 47

⁶Tocqueville, *Memoir*, I, 428

⁷Tocqueville, *Journeys*, 78

⁸Tocqueville, *Journeys*, 56

there is also a danger that unelected and unaccountable individuals will gain too much power, for as Lord Minto warned Tocqueville, the administrative system 'rests almost entirely on the Justices of the Peace, magistrates who are responsible to no one and are not paid for the performance of their duties.'¹

In fact he had noted another paradox. The English judicial system was confused, unprincipled, inefficient and cumbersome. Yet it somehow protected the citizen against the State better than anywhere else in the world. 'English law may be compared to the trunk of an old tree on which lawyers have continually grafted the strangest shoots, hoping that though the fruit will be different, the leaves at least will match those of the venerable tree that supports them.'² On the surface the French system of law appeared greatly superior. If one looked at English law

Here are astounding defects. Compare this old-fashioned and monstrous machine with our modern judiciary system, and the contrast between the simplicity, the coherence, and the logical organisation of the one will place in still bolder relief the complicated and incoherent plan of the other. Yet there does not exist a country in which, even in Blackstone's time, the great ends of justice were more fully attained than in England; nor one where every man, of whatever rank, and whether his suit was against a private individual or the sovereign, was more certain of being heard, and more assured of finding in the court ample guarantees for the defence of his fortune, his liberty, and his life.³

Tocqueville ended up by commending the English system with its Gothic extravagances and deep inconsistencies as far superior to his own sleeker system.

Studying the judiciary system of England by the light of this principle, it will be discovered that while defects were allowed to exist which rendered the administration of justice among our neighbours obscure, complicated, slow, costly, and inconvenient, infinite pains had been taken to protect the weak against the strong, the subject against the monarch; and the closer the details of the system are examined, the better will it be seen that every citizen had been amply provided with arms for his defence, and that matters had been so arranged as to give to everyone the greatest possible number of guarantees against the partiality and venality of the courts, and, above all, against that form of venality which is both the commonest and the most dangerous in democratic times - subserviency to the supreme power. In all these points of view, the English system, notwithstanding its secondary faults, appears to me superior to our own. Ours has none of its vices, it is true, but it is not endowed with the same excellences. It is admirable in respect of the guarantees it offers to the citizen in suits against his neighbour, but it fails in the particular that is most essential in a democratic society like ours, namely, the guarantees of the individual against the State.⁴

Thus the judicial system, as he had already argued in relation to America, was at the heart of the freedom of the English. The other central protection was the degree of decentralized power.

¹Tocqueville, *Journeys*, 66

²Tocqueville, *Democracy*, I, 331

³Tocqueville, 'Notes', 301

⁴Tocqueville, 'Notes', 302-3

Beaumont and Tocqueville soon noted the importance of local institutions in England.

‘One must go to the meetings of a Vestry,’ wrote Beaumont, ‘to judge what extraordinary liberty can be joined to inequality. One can see with what independence of language the most obscure English citizen expresses himself against the lord before whom he will bow presently. He is not his equal, of course, but within the limits of his rights he is as free, and he is fully aware of it.’¹

The vestry was but one of the numerous local associations which were important and made each parish an almost self-governing community. As Drescher puts it, quoting Tocqueville and then adding his summary,

The ensemble of English institutions is doubtless an aristocratic government, but there is not a parish in England which does not constitute a free public.’ The parish, then, was the fundamental unit of public participation, the centre of a multitude of interests vital to everyone in the community. For Tocqueville it was a complete democracy at the base of the social edifice.²

We are told that

In his notes, Tocqueville wrote that if he were a friend to despotism, he would allow ‘the deputies of the country [to deliberate] freely about peace and war, about the nation’s finances, about its prosperity, its industries, its life. But I would avoid agreeing, at any price, that the representatives of a village had the right to assemble peacefully to discuss among themselves repairs for their church and the plan for their parsonage.’³

This led Tocqueville onto one of his greatest themes - the need for a balance between centralization and de-centralization. He was convinced that it was here, ultimately, that the secret of England and America’s greatness must lie. Speaking of England he wrote

In that country the system of decentralisation, restricted from the beginning to proper limits, has attached to it nothing but notions of order, prosperity, and glory. The system of decentralisation has made, and still makes, the strength of England. England has had strong despotic kings at a time when the kingship was too primitive to want to undertake everything. The kings established centralisation of government; morals and the state of society caused administrative decentralisation.⁴

After his examinations of the political, social and legal factors which encouraged liberty, Tocqueville tended to come up with a version of the same theme that we have seen in Fukuzawa, Montesquieu and Smith, that a characteristic of the modern world, and one which distinguishes it from earlier civilizations, is that political and religious freedom seem to have a close association with the generation of economic wealth through the production of artefacts.

¹Drescher, *Tocqueville*, 91

²Drescher, *Tocqueville*, 91-2

³Boesche, *Tocqueville*, 246

⁴Tocqueville, *Democracy*, II, 1026-7

He believed that 'Geographical position and freedom had already made England the richest country in Europe.'¹ Freedom was necessary because, as Smith had argued, it allowed the acquisitive urges to fulfill themselves. 'Freedom in the world of politics is like the air in the physical world. The earth is full of a multitude of beings differently organized; but they all live and flourish. Alter the condition of the air, and they will be in trouble.'² Thus one should, in estimating the likelihood of wealth, 'Examine whether this people's laws give men the courage to seek prosperity, freedom to follow it up, the sense and habits to find it, and the assurance of reaping the benefit.'³ That assurance of reaping the profit was equally important. Like Montesquieu and Smith he realized that political and legal security, and in particular the safeguarding of a person's assets against the vagaries of war, arbitrary taxes and capricious law, were essential. The outstanding English encapsulation of this security was in their security of property. The extensive national and individual wealth of the English he linked to the fact that such wealth was 'more secure' than anywhere else.⁴ This was linked to private property, 'exclusive proprietorial jealousy being so far developed here that it counts as one of the main national characteristics.'⁵ That same English spirit had been carried to its overseas Empire. 'The English colonies - and that was one of the main reasons for their prosperity - have always enjoyed more internal freedom and more political independence than those of other nations.'⁶

¹Tocqueville, *Journeys*, 15

²Tocqueville, *Journeys*, 107

³Tocqueville, *Journeys*, 106

⁴Tocqueville, *Ancien*, 184

⁵Tocqueville, *Journeys*, 74

⁶Tocqueville, *Democracy*, I, 45

6. ENGLISH ORIGINS - 2

Tocqueville had explained in what ways England was already a 'modern' country when it colonized America. He had shown that it was by the seventeenth century very different in its basic structure from most continental countries, especially France. Yet this left a further set of puzzles, in particular the dating of the divergence from Europe and the reasons for that parting of the ways. Essentially his answer to these questions is an expansion, with the historical sources carefully checked, of Montesquieu's argument. He suggested that out of a common European feudalism, that is the odd mixture which arose out of a decomposing Roman civilization and Germanic customs, the subsequent trajectory of continental Europe and England was different.

Tocqueville started with the premise that there had been very little difference between the parts of Western Europe in the Dark Ages. The system which emerged in about the ninth century covered the whole of western and central Europe. 'If the feudal system is due to chance in France, by what odd coincidence does it turn up again among the Germans, among the Poles where it still exists, among the Goths in Spain, and even in Italy, the Southern extremity of Europe?'¹ It was already established in principle well before the eleventh century, and thus the best place to study it was in the earliest Saxon and Danish laws. Thus '...if you want to understand the first underlying principles of the feudal system, and you need to understand them to see how the wheels work in the finished machine, you cannot do better than study the time before the Norman conquest, because, as I said before, we know of no people nearer to their primitive state than the Saxons and the Danes.'² Many of these ancient principles never disappeared and, paraphrasing Montesquieu's famous remark about the origins in the German woods, Tocqueville thought that '...the customs of the Saxons are interesting in themselves and especially interesting in the context of English history. Their legal procedure is the oddest which has ever existed, and one can find in it all the elements of the present-day procedure, some parts of which we have adopted ourselves.'³

Then came the invasion of England by Tocqueville's Norman ancestors. William the Conqueror and his successors were able to lay out a complete 'system' so easily because they were merely codifying what was already there. 'Clearly the feudal system of the twelfth century is but the result of an underlying cause. It sprang fully armed from the peoples of the North, like Minerva from the head of Jupiter, needing only the hatchet's blow.'⁴ At this point, Normandy and much of France, as well as most of the Continent, were identical to England. 'In comparing the feudal institutions in England immediately after the conquest with those in France, you find between them not only an analogy, but a perfect resemblance...In reality, the system in the two countries is identical.' However this identical system produced contrary results. He notes that Macaulay in his **History of England** 'alludes to the fact that England developed an open class

¹Tocqueville, *Journeys*, 2

²Tocqueville, *Journeys*, 3

³Tocqueville, *Journeys*, 3

⁴Tocqueville, *Journeys*, 2-3

structure, and France developed closed “castes”, but he does not try to explain it.’ Yet, why this divergence occurred is the key question, for there is no other which would provide ‘so good an explanation of the difference between the history of England and that of the other feudal nations in Europe.’¹

Tocqueville’s conviction concerning the important difference between English social structure and that of the Continent, and his puzzlement as to why it should have occurred continued in his **L’Ancien Régime** of 1856. He starts with the same assertion of a common starting point. ‘I have had occasion to study the political institutions of the Middle Ages in France, in England, and in Germany, and the greater progress I made in this work, the more was I filled with astonishment at the prodigious similarity that I found between all these systems of law...’ Thus ‘...in the fourteenth century the social, political, administrative, judicial, economic, and literary institutions of Europe had more resemblance to each other than they have perhaps even in our own days...’² He was struck by the fact that ‘At that time many of the episodes of our history look as if they were drawn from the history of England. Such events never occurred in the following centuries.’³ His picture is again one of divergence from a common origin. Starting with the thirteenth century,

At this time there were to be found, as I have already said, many analogies between the political institutions of France and England; but then the destinies of the two peoples parted, and became ever more unlike with the passage of time. They resembled two lines which, starting from neighbouring points but at a slightly different angle, the longer they become, the more indefinitely fall apart.⁴

Hence by the seventeenth century there was a great difference. All over the continent, there was ‘caste’, that is to say a system of stratification based on legal differences between groups arising from blood and birth and re-enforced by marriage rules, and its accompaniment, political absolutism.

As all European monarchies became absolute about the same time, it is not probable that the constitutional change was due to accidental circumstances which occurred simultaneously in every country. The natural supposition is that the general change was the fruit of a general cause operating on every country at the same moment.⁵

This he partly relates, as had Montesquieu, to the reception of Roman Law, for in its principles ‘to do with the relations between subjects and sovereign...it is full of the spirit of the age when the last additions were made to its compilation - the spirit of slavery.’⁶ Tocqueville’s summary of the process is given in a footnote to **Ancien Régime**.

At the close of the Middle Ages the Roman law became the chief and almost the only study of the German lawyers, most of whom, at this time, were educated abroad at the Italian universities. These lawyers exercised no political power, but it devolved on

¹ Tocqueville, **Memoir**, II, 223-4

² Tocqueville, **Ancien**, 18-9

³ Tocqueville, **Ancien**, 92

⁴ Tocqueville, **Ancien**, 105

⁵ Tocqueville, ‘Notes’, 242

⁶ Tocqueville, **Memoir**, I, 428

them to expound and apply the laws. They were unable to abolish the Germanic law, but they did their best to distort it so as to fit the Roman mould. To every German institution that seemed to bear the most distant analogy to Justinian's legislation they applied Roman law. Hence a new spirit and new customs gradually invaded the national legislation, until its original shape was lost, and by the seventeenth century it was almost forgotten. Its place had been usurped by a medley that was Germanic in name, but Roman in fact.¹

The causes for the adoption of Roman Law all over Europe varied but the effects were similar.

These causes do not suffice to explain the simultaneous introduction of Roman law into every Continental country. I think that the singular availability of the Roman law - which was a slave-law - for the purposes of monarchs, who were just then establishing their absolute power upon the ruins of the old liberties of Europe, was the true cause of the phenomenon. The Roman law carried civil society to perfection, but it invariably degraded political society, because it was the work of a highly civilized and thoroughly enslaved people. Kings naturally embraced it with enthusiasm, and established it wherever they could throughout Europe; its interpreters became their Ministers or their chief agents. Lawyers furnished them at need with legal warrant for violating the law. They have often done so since. Monarchs who have trampled the laws have almost always found a lawyer ready to prove the lawfulness of their acts - to establish learnedly that violence was just, and that the oppressed were in the wrong.²

Something very different happened in England because the Roman Law was never 'received' and Common Law underpinned both the older 'feudal' institutions and what emerged from them. In England,

Shutting your eyes to the old names and forms, you will find from the seventeenth century the feudal system substantially abolished, classes which overlap, nobility of birth set on one side, aristocracy thrown open, wealth as the source of power, equality before the law, office open to all, liberty of the press, publicity of debate.... Seven-teenth-century England was already a quite modern nation, which has merely preserved in its heart, and as it were embalmed, some relics of the Middle Ages.³

In this way it diverged dramatically from what happened elsewhere in Europe. That divergence was the culmination of a much more older process.

'It is very probable that at the time of the establishment of the feudal system in Europe what has since been called the "nobility" did not immediately form a caste, but was originally composed of all the chief men of the nation and was thus at first only an aristocracy.' Yet, by the Middle Ages, 'the nobility had become a caste, that is to say, its distinctive mark was birth.' This happened everywhere except England. 'Wherever the feudal system established itself on the continent of Europe it ended in caste; in England alone it returned to aristocracy.' This was the great difference, and one which the English seemed to have overlooked.

¹Tocqueville, 'Notes', 240

²Tocqueville, 'Notes', 241-2

³Tocqueville, *Ancien*, 21.

I have always been astonished that a fact, which distinguishes England from all modern nations and which can alone explain the peculiarities of its laws, its spirit, and its history, has not attracted still more than it has done the attention of philosophers and statesmen, and that habit has finally made it as it were invisible to the English themselves. The truth has been often half perceived, half described; never, I think, has the vision of the truth been quite full or quite distinct.

Montesquieu visiting Great Britain in 1739 wrote correctly “I am here in a country which hardly resembles the rest of Europe,” but he adds nothing more.¹

What then is the great difference according to Tocqueville?

It was far less its Parliament, its liberty, its publicity, its jury, which in fact rendered the England of that date so unlike the rest of Europe than a feature still more exclusive and more powerful. England was the only country in which the system of caste had been not changed but effectively destroyed. The nobles and the middle classes in England followed together the same courses of business, entered the same professions, and, what is much more significant, inter-married.²

The contrast with France was immense. There the gap between the different orders grew until they were strangers to each other. The nobility were separated from all other orders: ‘for the barrier which separated the nobility of France from the other classes, though very easily crossed, was always fixed and visible; striking and odious marks made it easily recognized by him who remained without. Once a man had crossed the barrier he was separated from all those, whom he had just left, by privileges which were to them burdensome and humiliating.’³ The worst of these was financial. ‘Let us take the most odious of all these privileges, that of exemption from taxation; it is easy to see that from the fifteenth century right down to the Revolution this privilege never ceased to grow.’⁴ This could be contrasted with England.

For centuries past no other inequalities of taxation have existed in England than those successively introduced in favour of the necessitous classes. Notice to what different ends different political principles can lead peoples so close. In the eighteenth century it was in England the poor man who enjoyed exemption from taxation.⁵

The growing gap between the bourgeois and the gentry and the nobility in France was related furthermore to the collapse of local government.

‘The fact is that, as the government of the lordship became disorganized, as the meetings of the States-General became rarer or ceased altogether, as the general liberties perished dragging with them in their ruin local liberties, the townsman and the gentleman ceased to have contact in public life. They no longer felt the need of approaching and understanding each other. Every day they became more independent and more unknown to each other. In the eighteenth century this

¹ Tocqueville, *Ancien*, 88-9.

² Tocqueville, *Ancien*, 89.

³ Tocqueville, *Ancien*, 95

⁴ Tocqueville, *Ancien*, 93

⁵ Tocqueville, *Ancien*, 105

revolution was complete; these two men never met except by mere chance in private life. The two classes were not only rivals, they were enemies.¹ Furthermore this urban middle class was equally separated from the country dwellers and the poor in the towns. 'Now if...we consider this middle class, we see something very similar; the middle class was almost as much separated from the common people as the noble was from the middle class.'²

How and why had this happened? Others had suggested that 'the English nobility has been more prudent, more clever' than others, and hence survived. In fact, Tocqueville notes, 'The truth is that for a long time past properly speaking there has no longer existed a nobility in England, if the word is taken in its old and circumscribed sense that it has everywhere else retained.'³ As to when the nobility disappeared, 'This singular revolution is lost in the darkness of past ages', but 'there remains still a living witness, namely, idiom. For several centuries past the word "gentleman" has entirely changed its meaning in England, and the word "roturier" no longer exists.' Thus one could follow the changing sense of the word 'gentleman' as an indication of the divergence of the two civilizations: '...you will see its meaning widen in England in proportion as classes draw nearer and mingle with each other. In each century it is applied to men placed ever a little lower in the social scale. With the English it passes finally to America. In America it is used to designate all citizens without distinction.' In fact, 'Its history is that of the democracy itself.' In France, however, 'the word "gentilhomme" has always been strictly confined to its original sense...The word has always been preserved intact to design the members of the caste, because the caste itself has always been preserved, as separate from all the other classes as it has ever been.'⁴

Thus while in England the barriers, as represented by the word gentleman, evaporated, in France 'this caste had become very much more separated than it was at the time when the word originated, and that a movement took place amongst us exactly the opposite of that which took place in England.'⁵ On the other hand, in England, the middle classes and aristocracy were overlapping. It is not that the English aristocracy 'was open but rather due to the fact, as has been said, that its form was indistinct and its limit unknown - less because it was possible to enter than because you never knew when you had got there...'⁶ As Drescher puts it, 'The English aristocracy, in addition to openness, also possessed the immense advantage of vagueness. A rigid body fixed by birth, as in France, laid itself open to hatred. In England its limits were unknown and its prejudices were diffused in diminishing proportions through the ranks of the entire nation.'⁷

Tocqueville's solution contains a paradox. On the one hand, England could be seen to be the 'most feudal' of countries in that it had maintained the early spirit

¹ Tocqueville, *Ancien*, 92

² Tocqueville, *Ancien*, 96

³ Tocqueville, *Ancien*, 89-90

⁴ Tocqueville, *Ancien*, 89-90; in fact, the term 'roturier', meaning someone who held by an annual rent, had never existed in England.

⁵ Tocqueville, *Ancien*, 90.

⁶ Tocqueville, *Ancien*, 95.

⁷ Drescher, *Tocqueville*, 45

of the feudalism which had existed up to the twelfth century all over Europe. Thus Tocqueville could write of William the Conqueror, 'in spite of the revolutions which followed, his version of the feudal system is nevertheless by and large the one that caused the least harm and left the smallest legacy of hatred.'¹ On the other hand, it could equally be argued that, as Tocqueville put it, by the seventeenth century the feudal system was 'substantially abolished', and only a few 'relics of the Middle Ages' remained. Likewise, with France one could argue that it was very un-feudal by the seventeenth century, that is to say it had moved towards caste and absolutism, both of which were diametrically opposed to 'feudalism' of the early period. On the other hand, one could look on the whole **ancien regime** fabric as a distorted form of feudalism. Thus Tocqueville believed that the French revolution destroyed a whole pattern of feudalism: 'ancient institutions were still mixed up with it, and, as it were, interlaced with almost all the religions and political laws of Europe, they had further supplied a crowd of ideas, sentiments, habits, manners, which, so to speak, were adhesive to them...'²

This paradox was linked to another. When Tocqueville visited England in 1835 he found it overwhelmingly aristocratic. He was taken aback at the huge estates and country houses. When he returned for his last visit in 1857 'I found England more aristocratic in appearance, at least than I left it twenty years ago. The democratic ferment that then had risen to the surface has disappeared, and all the superior classes seem to have reached a better understanding.'³ He asked his readers to remember that France was now the 'democratic' nation - and indeed had never had an aristocracy of the English kind; 'in England you have an aristocracy and powerful local influences, while we in France have nothing of the sort.'⁴

He explained this further when he explored the difference between **de facto** and **de jure** equality. The fact that inequalities on the basis of birth had been abolished, or never properly arisen in England, did not mean that there was little inequality. Ironically, the aristocracy was flourishing in eighteenth century England while they were decaying all over Europe.

This gradual impoverishment of the nobles was seen more or less not only in France but in all parts of the continent where the feudal system, as in France, disappeared without being replaced by a new form of aristocracy. Among the German peoples, who bordered the Rhine, this decay was everywhere visible and much noticed. The contrary was only met with in England. In England the old noble families which still existed had not only preserved, but also had largely increased their wealth...⁵

Thus one found in England, 'Apparent equality, real privileges of wealth, greater perhaps than in any country in the world.'⁶ Of course they proclaimed the universal rights and equality of men. But what did these consist of? 'The English

¹Tocqueville, *Journeys*, 5

²Tocqueville, *Ancien*, 23

³Tocqueville, *Letters*, 355 (1851)

⁴Tocqueville, *Memoir*, II, 226

⁵Tocqueville, *Ancien*, 86

⁶Tocqueville, *Journeys*, 79

have left the poor but two rights: that of obeying the same laws as the rich, and that of standing on an equality with them if they can obtain equal wealth.’¹

This clash between a **de jure** situation where everyone in theory was equal, but some definitely ended up ‘more equal than others’ to use Orwell’s famous capturing of the paradox, was made worse by the loss of religious faith. In many societies, the poor could reconcile themselves to their status by realizing that there was no alternative: they were born into a fixed social position. This was determined by **karma**, by their activities in previous lives. It was not their fault, a result of their fecklessness or inability. Even Christianity had provided the solace that even if this life was one of poverty, there would be recompense in eternity. The rich would find it virtually impossible to get through the eye of the needle into heaven. The poor and meek would inherit the earth, and heaven too. Yet as faith evaporated, mankind was faced not only with physical misery, but no consolation prize in the after life. How were inequalities to be borne ‘in an epoch when our view into another world has become dimmer, and the miseries of this world become more visible and seem more intolerable?’²

The solace of God-given inequality was no longer available. Indeed some of Tocqueville’s most perceptive observations concern the receding rainbow’s end of the constant striving for an ephemeral equality.

Among democratic peoples men easily obtain a certain equality, but they will never get the sort of equality they long for. That is a quality which ever retreats before them without getting quite out of sight, and as it retreats it beckons them on to pursue. Every instant they think they will catch it, and each time it slips through their fingers.³

There develops endless competition as people strive to reach beyond others, but only temporarily succeed. ‘They have abolished the troublesome privileges of some of their fellows, but they come up against the competition of all. The barrier has changed shape rather than place. When men are more or less equal and are following the same path, it is very difficult for any of them to walk faster and get out beyond the uniform crowd surrounding and hemming them in.’⁴

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Tocqueville had thus followed a chain of argument. ‘America’ was the first truly ‘modern’ civilization. Much of its modernity had, however, been received from an England which was already very ‘modern’ by the seventeenth century. England’s peculiarity in this respect, its divergence from the other Continental powers had occurred in the period between the twelfth and seventeenth centuries. England had proceeded towards a balanced constitution and an open and competitive social structure while much of the Continent, including Tocqueville’s France, had moved toward political centralization and an increasingly rigid stratification based on birth differences. He had thus put

¹Tocqueville, *Journeys*, 78

²Tocqueville, *Recollections*, 84

³Tocqueville, *Democracy*, II, 695; cf. also I, 243-4 on Pascal.

⁴Tocqueville, *Democracy*, II, 694

forward a thesis to explain how the modern world had emerged. Yet he still needed further answers as to why England was different.

In England the middling level institutions were retained. In France and most countries, the 'dissolution of the State' phase of early feudalism then coagulated into an absolutism where there were no powerful counter-powers to stop the monopoly power of the monarchy. He found it difficult to explain why the difference originally occurred, or how the English managed to preserve the balance between anarchy and absolutism. Sometimes he put it down to chance. 'Lucky difficulties which obstruct centralisation in England; laws, habits, manners, English spirit rebellious against general or uniform ideas, but fond of peculiarities. Stay-at-home tastes introduced into political life.'¹ At other times he explains it by a peculiarly modest and good-natured ruling powers. 'I admit, however, that in order to enable a government in which the supreme power is divided to be permanent to last, as yours has done, for centuries, the ruling authorities must possess an amount of patience and forbearance which never has been granted to ours.'² Neither of these appear to be very convincing and probably his most convincing guess, again following Montesquieu, lay in the nature of the effects of islandhood on the nature of warfare and hence on the chances of liberty.

Tocqueville was not a pacifist. He wrote 'I do not wish to speak ill of war; war almost always widens a nation's mental horizons and raises its heart.'³ On the other hand his visit to America made him convinced that the absence of powerful, war-like, neighbours was an important and necessary, if not sufficient, cause of liberty. He asked the question 'How, then, does it come about that the American Union, protected though it be by the comparative perfection of its laws, does not dissolve in the midst of a great war? The reason is that it has no great wars to fear.'⁴ This was because 'The American Union has no enemies to fight. It is as solitary amid the wilderness as an island in the ocean.'⁵ He noted that 'From Canada to the Gulf of Mexico there are only some half-destroyed savage tribes, which six thousand soldiers drive before them.'⁶ The New World was 'Placed in the middle of a huge continent with limitless room for the expansion of human endeavour, the Union is almost as isolated from the world as if it were surrounded on all sides by the ocean.'⁷ Thus 'The great good fortune of the United States is not to have found a federal Constitution enabling them to conduct great wars, but to be so situated that there is nothing for them to fear.'⁸ He was enormously impressed. 'How wonderful is the position of the New World, where man has as yet no enemies but himself. To be happy and to be free, it is enough to will it to be so.'⁹

¹Tocqueville, *Journeys*, 84

²Tocqueville, *Memoir*, II, 160

³Tocqueville, *Democracy*, II, 841

⁴Tocqueville, *Democracy*, I, 209

⁵Tocqueville, *Democracy*, 378

⁶Tocqueville, *Democracy*, I, 209

⁷Tocqueville, *Democracy*, I, 209

⁸Tocqueville, *Democracy*, I, 209

⁹Tocqueville, *Democracy*, I, 210

Tocqueville was not so naive as to think that absence of powerful enemies was a necessary and sufficient explanation for liberty. As he pointed out ‘geography gave the Spaniards of South America equal isolation, and that isolation has not prevented them from maintaining great armies. They have made war on one another when there were no foreigners to fight. It is only the Anglo-American democracy which has so far been able to maintain itself in peace.’¹ Thus one needed a combination of a ‘point of departure’ of liberty and absence of standing armies, combined with no warlike neighbours. ‘Their fathers gave them a love of equality and liberty, but it was God who, by handing a limitless continent over to them, gave them the means of long remaining equal and free.’²

The situation in Continental Europe, as Tocqueville who was brought up in the later years of Napoleon knew only too well, was very different. ‘Apart from our continental position, which has always made us feel more acutely the need for concentration of power, decentralisation has never appeared to us as anything but a breakup of the essential rights of sovereignty, that is to say, as the most oppressively active agent of anarchy.’³ What tended to happen, as Montesquieu had pointed out, was that a powerful nation was sucked into military aggrandisement, or defensive measures, and this almost inevitably led to increased armies, taxation, bureaucracy and absolutism.

For that reason all nations that have had to engage in great wars have been led, almost in spite of themselves, to increase the powers of the government. Those which have not succeeded in this have been conquered. A long war almost always faces nations with this sad choice: either defeat will lead them to destruction or victory will bring them to despotism.⁴

He noted that ‘it is chiefly in time of war that people wish, and often need, to increase the prerogatives of the central government.’⁵ Or again, ‘All those who seek to destroy the freedom of the democratic nations must know that war is the surest and shortest means to accomplish this.’⁶

It was a vicious circle, where success in war was as dangerous as defeat. ‘All men of military genius are fond of centralisation, which increases their strength; and all men of centralising genius are fond of war...’⁷ Thus, as Montesquieu had shown, ‘Any long war always entails great hazards to liberty in a democracy. Not that one needs apprehend that after every victory the conquering generals will seize sovereign power by force after the manner of Sulla and Caesar.’⁸

There was another difficulty, also anticipated by Montesquieu. A small but successful nation or city-state would in time be gobbled up by powerful neighbours. As Tocqueville puts it, ‘If for a century a democratic country were to

¹Tocqueville, *Democracy*, I, 378

²Tocqueville, *Democracy*, I, 345

³Tocqueville, *Democracy*, II, 1026

⁴Tocqueville, *Democracy*, I, 207

⁵Tocqueville, *Democracy*, II, 879

⁶Tocqueville, *Democracy*, II, 842

⁷Tocqueville, *Democracy*, II, 879; a slight exaggeration, as the long peace in China shows.

⁸Tocqueville, *Democracy*, II, 842

remain under a republican government, one can believe that at the end of that time it would be richer, more populated, and more prosperous than neighbouring despotic states; but during that century it would often have run the risk of being conquered by them.¹ 'As a result of this, except in peculiar circumstances, small nations always end up by being forcibly united with great ones by combining among themselves.'² Yet it was these very smaller nations - Greece, the Italian city states, Switzerland, Holland, which were the birthplace of liberty. 'Hence at all times small nations have been the cradle of political liberty. It has happened that most of them have lost this liberty in growing larger, a fact which clearly shows that their freedom was more of a consequence of their small size than of the character of the people.'³ If they decide to counteract the dangers by expanding, as did Rome, the burden of empire was likely to lead to the same dangers. As Montesquieu had argued in different words, 'All passions fatal to a republic grow with the increase of its territory, but the virtues which should support it do not grow at the same rate.'⁴ Tocqueville could conclude that in general 'nothing is more inimical to human prosperity and freedom than great empires.'⁵

There seemed no way round the problem.

War does not always give democratic societies over to military government, but it must invariably and immeasurably increase the powers of civil government; it must always automatically concentrate the direction of all men and the control of all things in the hands of government. If that does not lead to despotism by sudden violence, it leads men gently in that direction by their habits.⁶

In order to survive, a country was pushed towards disaster, '...the great ones prosper not because they are large but because they are strong. Therefore force is often for nations one of the primary conditions of happiness and even of existence.'⁷ Unfortunately 'Reason suggests and experience proves that there is no lasting commercial greatness unless it can, at need, combine with military power.'⁸

It was with these difficulties in mind that Tocqueville was particularly impressed, in different ways, by England and the United States. England seemed to be free and to maintain a huge empire - but then she was an island. America was a vast nation, peaceable and free and, as Tocqueville put it, America was 'as solitary...as an island in the ocean'. How could other, continental, nations break out of the trap? Tocqueville's only solution seems to have been along the lines developed by Montesquieu and Smith, namely that growing trade would finally make international warfare a disaster.

¹Tocqueville, *Democracy*, I, 276

²Tocqueville, *Democracy*, I, 198

³Tocqueville, *Democracy*, I, 196

⁴Tocqueville, *Democracy*, I, 196

⁵Tocqueville, *Democracy*, I, 197

⁶Tocqueville, *Democracy*, II, 842

⁷Tocqueville, *Democracy*, I, 198

⁸Tocqueville, *Democracy*, I, 505

As the spread of equality, taking place in several countries at once, simultaneously draws the inhabitants into trade and industry, not only do their tastes come to be alike, but their interests become so mixed and entangled that no nation can inflict on others ills which will not fall back on its own head. So that in the end all come to think of war as a calamity almost as severe for the conqueror as for the conquered.’¹

This was his hope, for every revolution and war tended to tip the balance against his precious liberty.

¹Tocqueville, **Democracy**, II, 856

7. FRAGILE LIBERTY - 1

The compelling feature of Tocqueville's analysis is that he captures the basic contradictions within the new commercial, democratic system that was only half apparent in England but clear in America. He saw that the new system created growing short-term inequalities of wealth, yet this was necessary for it to work. In a variant of Mandeville, he wrote 'inequality itself will work to forward the wealth of all, for, everybody hoping to come to share the privileges of the few, there would be a universal effort, an eagerness of all minds directed to the acquisition of well-being and wealth.'¹ He saw that the acquisitive spirit was one of the motors for growth: 'an immoderate desire to grow rich, and to do so rapidly; perpetual instability of purpose, and a continual longing for change; a total absence of established customs and traditions; a trading and manufacturing spirit which is carried into everything, even where it is least appropriate.'² He saw the strength of the new technologies, but he also saw the future ecological destruction.

He admired the optimism and progressiveness of his American hosts, their 'belief in the wisdom and good sense of mankind; the perfectibility of the human race is contradicted by few, if any.'³ Yet his own experience and that of his parents showed that this Rousseauite or Godwinian utopianism was a delusion. The best one could do was to choose between evils, as in his advice in relation to France. It was no longer possible to return to the old, aristocratic, world. The Revolution had happened and so

the only choice lay between two inevitable evils; that the question had ceased to be whether they would have an aristocracy or a democracy, and now lay between a democracy without poetry or elevation indeed, but with order and morality; and an undisciplined and depraved democracy, subject to sudden frenzies, or to a yoke heavier than any that has galled mankind since the fall of the Roman Empire.⁴

This is why it is impossible to characterize Tocqueville as either optimist or pessimist. Like all our thinkers, he showed a little, temporary, optimism, yet at heart he realized that in every success there simultaneously lay a failure, in every step of progress there was a loss. Hope and despair were mixed in about equal proportions. Liberty, equality and wealth might now be irreversible in England and America, but each of them also debased and isolated men.

Tocqueville was fully aware of the negative effects of the peculiar commercial and manufacturing developments in England and America. One was a human cost during the growing industrial and capitalist process which was pitifully obvious half a century on. There was the increasing inequality of wealth generated by machinery replacing human labour, a theme later taken up by Marx as one of the principal reasons for the inevitable collapse of capitalism. Tocqueville noted in Manchester that 'In this factory wages have a tendency to go down. Labour-saving devices are constantly being invented and, by increasing the

¹Tocqueville, *Journeys*, 150

²Tocqueville, *Memoir*, I, 390

³Tocqueville, *Memoir*, I, 305

⁴Tocqueville, *Memoir*, I, 398

competition among the workers, bring down the level of wages.¹ He saw the destitution of workers, in particular the migrant Irish in slums in the midland and northern cities and wrote, 'Here humanity attains its most complete development and its most brutish; here civilisation works its miracles, and civilised man is turned back almost into a savage.'²

There was a built-in contradiction between increasing efficiency and increasing inhumanity. As Smith had shown, 'When a workman is constantly and exclusively engaged in making one object, he ends up performing this work with singular dexterity. But at the same time, he loses the general faculty of applying his mind to the way he is working ... one may say that in his case the man is degraded as the workman improves.'³ This alienation and loss of integrity would become a central theme in sociology as the full impact of Adam Smith's new world became apparent.

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Yet the subject that obsessed Tocqueville above all others was the threat to individual liberty posed by the new form of civilization that he saw revealed in America. From his family's experience during the Revolution, and from his political experience during the various upheavals in France, he was well aware of the danger. Like his mentor Montesquieu he was terrified of the tendency towards absolutism and political repression. He believed that eternal vigilance was the price of freedom; '...to live in freedom one must grow used to a life full of agitation, change and danger; to keep alert the whole time with a restless eye on everything around; that is the price of freedom.'⁴ The difficulty was that political freedom consisted of walking a tightrope. Monarchical governments, as Montesquieu had shown, tended towards absolutism. The history of continental Europe had shown that. As previously quoted, he noted that by 1650 'absolute monarchies stood triumphantly on the ruins of the feudal or oligarchic freedom of the Middle Ages.'⁵ This tendency had started several centuries before when 'all monarchies were tending to become absolute. One man's standard replaced the oligarchic liberty which had been enjoyed for two centuries.'⁶ Such monarchs were to be dreaded, for 'a sovereign clothed in power to do everything in the name of law is far more to be feared and fears nothing.'⁷ All this Montesquieu had commented on. What is new about Tocqueville is that with the experience of America he could see that the supposed antidote to this, democracy, was just as dangerous.

Tocqueville's awareness of the fragility of liberty and his pessimism is shown throughout his life. He believed that "To be free one must be able to invent and persevere in a difficult enterprise, to be able to act on one's own; to live free, one must become accustomed to an existence full of agitation, movement and

¹Tocqueville, *Journeys*, 97

²Tocqueville, *Journeys*, 96

³Tocqueville, *Democracy*, II, 718

⁴Tocqueville, *Journeys*, 106

⁵Tocqueville, *Democracy*, I, 52-3

⁶Tocqueville, *Journeys*, 20

⁷Tocqueville, *Journeys*, 20

peril...”¹ For ‘political liberty is easily lost; neglect to hold it fast, and it is gone.’² ‘For my part, I owe that I have no confidence in the spirit of liberty which seems to animate my contemporaries.’³ He believed that there was a natural tendency towards political absolutism which lay embedded in the drive towards democracy itself. The tendency was not in doubt. ‘Reflecting on what has already been said, one is both startled and alarmed to see how everything in Europe seems to tend toward the indefinite extension of the prerogatives of the central power and to make the status of the individual weaker, more subordinate, and more precarious.’⁴ Anyone observing current affairs ‘will see that in the last half-century centralisation has increased everywhere in a thousand different ways. Wars, revolutions, and conquests have aided its advance...’⁵ Hence ‘...the social power is constantly increasing its prerogatives; it is becoming more centralised, more enterprising, more absolute, and more widespread.’⁶

The State is a predatory institution which sucks more and more power to itself. ‘Thus the state is by no means satisfied by attracting all business to itself, but is more and more successful in deciding everything by itself, without control and without appeal.’⁷ It almost automatically increases in power. ‘Society, which is in full progress of development, constantly gives birth to new needs, and each one of them is for government a new source of power; for it alone is in a position to satisfy them.’⁸ Thus the tendency towards increasing centralization and absolutism did not need a conscious plan on the part of would-be dictators. As he noted of the centralization in France,

There is nothing to show that, to achieve this difficult result, the government of the ‘old order’ followed a plan carefully thought out before hand; it only gave free play to the instinct, which leads every government to wish for the exclusive management of everything, an instinct which remained always the same despite the diversity of its agents.’⁹

The danger is all the greater because the process is simple and almost invisible. ‘If the lights that guide us ever go out, they will fade little by little, as if of their own accord.’¹⁰ Despotism is the easy path. ‘Thus the art of despotism, once so complicated, has been simplified; one may almost say that it has been reduced to a single principle.’¹¹ Freedom is hard, despotism easy.

It cannot be repeated too often: nothing is more fertile in marvels than the art of being free, but nothing is harder than freedom’s apprenticeship. The same is not true of despotism. Despotism often presents itself as the repairer of all the ills suffered,

¹Drescher, *Tocqueville*, 127

²Tocqueville, *Democracy*, II, 649

³Tocqueville, *Democracy*, II, 895

⁴Tocqueville, *Democracy*, II, 882

⁵Tocqueville, *Democracy*, II, 892

⁶Tocqueville, *Democracy*, II, 893

⁷Tocqueville, *Democracy*, II, 888

⁸ Tocqueville, *Ancien*, 65

⁹ Tocqueville, *Ancien*, 64

¹⁰Tocqueville, *Democracy*, II, 595

¹¹Tocqueville, *Democracy*, II, 881

the support of just rights, defender of the oppressed, and founder of order. Peoples are lulled to sleep by the temporary prosperity it engenders, and when they do wake up, they are wretched. But liberty is generally born in stormy weather, growing with difficulty amid civil discords, and only when it is already old does one see the blessings it has brought.¹

What Tocqueville foresaw, in fact, was a new kind of bureaucratic despotism, based on mind-numbing routines rather than brute force and fear.

Having thus taken each citizen in turn in its powerful grasp and shaped him to its will, government then extends its embrace to include the whole of society. It covers the whole of social life with a network of petty, complicated rules that are both minute and uniform, through which even men of the greatest originality and the most vigorous temperament cannot force their heads above the crowd.²

Having seen the dangers, Tocqueville dedicated much of his life to opposing this tendency. “To explain to men how to escape tyranny, that is the idea of both my books.”³ His urge to do so arose from two sources. Firstly he loved liberty above everything else. Like Montesquieu, he saw it as more important than wealth, equality or anything else. Near the end of the second **America** he wrote ‘I think that at all times I should have loved freedom, but in the times in which we live, I am disposed to worship it.’⁴ He loved it because of what it did for individuals and for the nation. “For me, it is self-evident that liberty is the necessary condition, without which there has never been a truly great and virile nation.”⁵ Liberty of the individual from governmental control leads to

the ripening of individual strength which never fails to follow therefrom. Each man learns to think and to act for himself without counting on the support of any outside power that, however watchful it is, can never answer all the needs of man in society. The man thus used to seeking his well-being by his own efforts alone stands the higher in his own esteem as well as in that of others.⁶

On the contrary bureaucratic absolutism led to the crushing of individual responsibility and imagination, and ultimately set the citizen at odds with the state machine. For example ‘Canada and Algeria were strung together on the endless chain of bureaucratic tyranny. “Preponderating, acting, regulating, controlling, wanting to foresee everything, to undertake everything.” It was a machine forever and uselessly active, “always more aware of the interests of the administered than he is himself.”⁷

He summarized his deep attachment to liberty in the following moving passage.

¹Tocqueville, **Democracy**, I, 296

²Tocqueville, **Democracy**, II, 899

³Tocqueville, quoted in Hearnshaw, ‘Tocqueville’, 109

⁴Tocqueville, **Democracy**, II, 903

⁵Drescher, **Tocqueville**, 191

⁶Tocqueville, **Journey to America**, 51

⁷Drescher, **Tocqueville**, 202

That which in all ages has so strongly attached to it the hearts of certain men as its own attractions, its own charm, quite apart from any material advantages; it is the joy of being able to speak, to act, to breathe, without restraint under no sovereign but God and the law. He who desires in liberty any thing other than itself is born to be a servant. Certain nations pursue it obstinately through all kinds of peril and misfortune. It is not for the material blessings, which it brings, that they love it; they regard liberty itself as a blessing so precious and so necessary, that no other good could console them for its loss, and with its enjoyment they console themselves for the loss of everything else. Others grow weary of it in the midst of their material prosperity; they let it be snatched from their hands without resistance in fear of risking by an effort the very well-being, which they owe to it. What is wanting to those last to remain free? Why? The very desire for freedom.¹

He realized that while liberty also brought long-term benefits, in the shorter term one might have to choose between liberty and other desirable things. The true love of liberty pursued it as an end, and not as a means.

I no longer think that the true love of liberty is ever born from the mere view of the material comforts that it secures; for this view is often darkened. It is very true that in the long run, liberty always brings to those who know how to retain it, ease, comfort, and often riches; but there are occasions, when for the time being, it disturbs the enjoyment of these blessings; there are other occasions, in which despotism alone can give the transient enjoyment of them. Men who only prize liberty for these blessings have never long preserved it.²

Tocqueville's passionate love of liberty would have been useless if he had felt that the situation was hopeless, the tendency to absolutism an inevitable progression. In fact he had some hope. In a letter of 1831 he wrote

I avow that nonetheless I still hope more than I fear. It seems to me that in the midst of our chaos I perceive one incontestable fact. This is that for forty years we have made immense progress in the practical understanding of the ideas of liberty. Nations, like private people, need to acquire an education before they know how to behave. That our education advances, I cannot doubt.³

Towards the end of the second **America** he explained that 'I have sought to expose the perils with which equality threatens human freedom because I firmly believe that those dangers are both the most formidable and the least foreseen of those which the future has in store. But I do not think that they are insurmountable.'⁴ He believed that 'Providence did not make mankind entirely free or completely enslaved. Providence has, in truth, drawn a predestined circle around each man beyond which he cannot pass; but within those vast limits man is strong and free, and so are peoples.'⁵

Fifteen months before his death, Tocqueville summarized his hopes and beliefs in a letter to the racist thinker Gobineau.

¹ Tocqueville, **Ancien**, 178

² Tocqueville, **Ancien**, 177

³ Tocqueville, **Letters**, 66 (1831)

⁴ Tocqueville, **Democracy**, II, 911

⁵ Tocqueville, **Democracy**, II, 916

To me, human societies, like persons, become something worth while only through their use of liberty. I have always said that it is more difficult to stabilize and to maintain liberty in our new democratic societies than in certain aristocratic societies of the past. But I shall never dare to think it impossible. And I pray to God lest he inspire me with the idea that one might as well despair of trying. No, I shall not believe that this human race, which is at the head of all visible creation, has become that bastardized flock of sheep which you say it is, and that nothing remains but to deliver it without future and without hope to a small number of shepherds who, after all, are not better animals than are we, the human sheep, and who indeed are often worse.¹

What then could he do to help to avoid the growing dangers? The first step was to show that the very force which many people thought was delivering mankind from old style despotism contained within itself a tendency towards an even greater and more powerful tyranny.

Tocqueville saw that, as part of that inevitable tendency towards equality of opportunity, there would also be an inevitable tendency towards some sort of political participation or 'democracy', rule by the people. Thus he wrote 'The century is primarily democratic. Democracy is like a rising tide; it only recoils to come back with greater force, and soon one sees that for all its fluctuations it is always gaining ground. The immediate future of European society is completely democratic; this can in no way be doubted.'² Yet this merely filled him with apprehension. Writing of America he warned that 'This effect of democracy, joined to the extreme instability, the entire absence of coherence or permanence that one sees here, convinces me every day more and more, that the best government is not that in which all have share, but that which is directed by the class of the highest moral principle and intellectual cultivation.'³ He believed that 'The realistic doctrine carried into politics leads to all the excesses of democracy; it facilitates despotism, centralization, contempt for individual rights, the doctrine of necessity.'⁴ 'I therefore think that despotism is particularly to be feared in ages of democracy.'⁵ For 'I am convinced that no nations are more liable to fall under the yoke of administrative centralisation than those with a democratic social condition.'⁶

In a draft of a letter he summarized the message of the first part of **Democracy in America** as follows.

I had become aware that, in our time, the new social state that had produced and is still producing very great benefits was, however, giving birth to a number of quite dangerous tendencies. These seeds, if left to grow unchecked, would produce, it seemed to me, a steady lowering of the intellectual level of society with no conceivable limit, and this would bring in its train the mores of materialism and, finally, universal slavery. I thought I saw that mankind was moving in this direction, and I viewed the prospect with terror...My aim in writing [my] book was to point out

¹ Tocqueville, *European Revolution*, 309-310.

² Tocqueville, *Journeys*, 52

³ Tocqueville, *Memoir*, I, 311

⁴ Tocqueville, *Memoir*, II 53

⁵ Tocqueville, *Democracy*, II, 903.

⁶ Tocqueville, *Democracy*, I, 117.

these dreadful downward paths...to make these tendencies feared by painting them in vivid colours...to teach democracy to know itself, and thereby to direct itself and contain itself.¹

Thus 'To show men if possible how in a democracy they may avoid submitting to tyranny, or sinking into imbecility, is the theme of my book...'²

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One of Tocqueville's great achievements was to see the way in which two planes that were normally held apart, the vertical one of social stratification, and the horizontal one of inter-personal relations, were actually part of the same thing. He realized that the changes he saw from a basically status (birth) based society to a contractual (achievement) one had immense effects on social relations. His basic insight was that there was a tension, inconsistency, mutual exclusion between two of the great themes of the French revolution, namely equality and fraternity. The essence of the problem was that 'Equality puts men side by side, without a common link to hold them firm.'³ Instead of being links in a chain between past and future, or members of a group, they were 'free', but totally isolated individuals. Thus the danger of the new world that was emerging was that 'Men being no longer attached to one another by any tie of caste, of class, of corporation, of family, are only too much inclined to be preoccupied only with their private interests...to retire into a narrow individualism'⁴ This was the new form of individualism which had been proclaimed in eighteenth century Enlightenment philosophy, in the work of Montesquieu, Smith or the other French philosophers. It was a world of 'no grades in society, no classes distinct, no fixed ranks; a people composed of individuals almost alike and wholly equal.'⁵

He believed that this was a relatively recent phenomenon, certainly in France. 'Our ancestors had not got the word "Individualism" - a word which we have coined for our own use, because in fact in their time there was no individual who did not belong to a group, no one who could look on himself as absolutely alone.'⁶ French society in the past had been based on exclusive and inclusive groupings, separate and antagonistic. Thus 'each of the thousand little groups, of which French society was composed, thought only of itself.'⁷ His distinction between the older form of group 'selfishness', and the new individualism is put in the following passage.

'Individualism' is a word recently coined to express a new idea. Our fathers only knew about egoism. Egoism is a passionate and exaggerated love of self that leads a man to think of all things in terms of himself and to prefer himself to all.

¹Quoted in Jardin, **Tocqueville**, 273

²Tocqueville, **Memoir**, I, 330

³Tocqueville, **Democracy**, II, 657

⁴Tocqueville, **Ancien**, xv

⁵Tocqueville, **Ancien**, 172

⁶Tocqueville, **Ancien**, 102

⁷Tocqueville, **Ancien**, 103

Individualism is a calm and considered feeling which disposes each citizen to isolate himself from the mass of his fellows and withdraw into the circle of family and friends; with this little society formed to his taste, he gladly leaves the greater society to look after itself. Egoism springs from a blind instinct; individualism is based on misguided judgment rather than depraved feeling. It is due more to inadequate understanding than to perversity of heart.¹

Thus Tocqueville was very keen to distinguish ‘individualism’, which saw the person as part of a set of mutual responsibilities, from egoism, which was pure selfishness. He put this in terms of an aphorism. “So wrong is it to confound independence with liberty. There is nothing less independent than a free citizen”² If the citizen became too independent and egotistic, he would stop being a citizen.

If the citizens continue to shut themselves up more and more narrowly in the little circle of petty domestic interests and keep themselves constantly busy therein, there is a danger that they may in the end become practically out of reach of those great and powerful public emotions which do indeed perturb peoples but which also make them grow and refresh them.³

On the other hand, citizens should have some personal free space. ‘From this derives the maxim that the individual is the best and only judge of his own interest and that society has no right to direct his behaviour unless it feels harmed by him or unless it needs his concurrence.’⁴ It was a difficult balance and one which he thought the Americans were more successful in achieving than his French contemporaries. ‘Every American has the sense to sacrifice some of his private interests to save the rest. We want to keep, and often lose, the lot.’⁵

What Tocqueville thought was that the growing equality would lead to a surfeit of egoism. This would be disastrous politically, but it would also have other undesirable effects. For instance, it altered man’s sense of history, making him present-centred, e-historical. ‘Among democratic peoples new families continually rise from nothing while others fall, and nobody’s position is quite stable. The woof of time is ever being broken and the track of past generations lost. Those who have gone before are easily forgotten, and no one gives a thought to those who will follow. All a man’s interests are limited to those near himself.’⁶ Thus, especially in America, the roots were cut off and society was constantly being reinvented. It was not just that it was a new country, but the social structure led people to start again in each generation.

Secondly, it led directly into that **Lonely Crowd** which David Riesman, one of Tocqueville’s greatest disciples, analysed so well. ‘Thus, not only does democracy make men forget their ancestors, but also clouds their view of their descendants and isolates them from their contemporaries. Each man is for ever thrown back on himself alone, and there is danger that he may be shut up in the

¹Tocqueville, *Democracy*, II, 652.

²Drescher, *Tocqueville*, 197

³Tocqueville, *Democracy*, II, 836

⁴Tocqueville, *Democracy*, I, 79

⁵Tocqueville, *Democracy*, II, 680

⁶Tocqueville, *Democracy*, II, 653

solitude of his own heart.’¹ The loss to humanity would be immense. ‘I fear that the mind may keep folding itself up in a narrower compass for ever without producing new ideas, that men will wear themselves out in trivial, lonely, futile activity, and that for all its constant agitation humanity will make no advance.’² Yet it would only be a temporary state, for in the weakness of atomized individuals there would be a tendency for the power of the State to increase. ‘As the extent of political society expands, one must expect the sphere of private life to contract.’³

The real problem was ‘How to reconcile equality, which separates and isolates men, with liberty? How to prevent a power, the offspring of democracy, from becoming absolute and tyrannical? Where to find a force able to contend against this power among a set of men, all equal, it is true, but all equally weak and impotent?’⁴ The danger was that since all power tends to corrupt, there would be a drift towards centralization and hence towards despotism. Tocqueville had seen this happen in France in relation to bureaucratic centralization:

a taste for holding office and a desire to live on the public money is not with us a disease restricted to either party, but the great, chronic ailment of the whole nation; the result of the democratic constitution of our society and of the excessive centralisation of our Government; the secret malady which has undermined all former governments, and which will undermine all governments to come.’⁵

The danger was aggravated by the passions and desires of men.

In a marvellous passage Tocqueville lays out the tendency towards benevolent despotism implicit in American civilization.

I am trying to imagine under what novel features despotism may appear in the world. In the first place, I see an innumerable multitude of men, alike and equal, constantly circling about in pursuit of the petty and banal pleasures with which they glut their souls. Each one of them, withdrawn into himself, is almost unaware of the fate of the rest. Mankind, for him, consists in his children and his personal friends. As for the rest of his fellow citizens, they are near enough, but he does not notice them. He touches them but feels nothing. He exists in and for himself, and though he still may have a family, one can at least say that he has not got a fatherland. Over this kind of men stands an immense, protective power which is alone responsible for securing their enjoyment and watching over their fate. That power is absolute, thoughtful of detail, orderly, provident, and gentle. It would resemble parental authority if, fatherlike, it tried to prepare its charges for a man’s life, but on the contrary, it only tries to keep them in perpetual childhood. It likes to see the citizens enjoy themselves, provided that they think of nothing but enjoyment. It gladly works for their happiness but wants to be sole agent and judge of it. It provides for their security, foresees and supplies their necessities, facilitates their pleasures, manages their principal concerns, directs their industry, makes rules for their testaments, and

¹Tocqueville, *Democracy*, II, 654.

²Tocqueville, *Democracy*, II, 836

³Tocqueville, *Democracy*, II, 783

⁴Tocqueville, *Memoir*, I, 10

⁵Tocqueville, *Recollections*, 33

divides their inheritances. Why should it not entirely relieve them from the trouble of thinking and all the cares of living.¹

This portrait puts flesh on his idea that ‘the type of oppression which threatens democracies is different from anything there has ever been in the world before.’² The difference between the despotism of the old tyrannies and the new bureaucratic State was that, ‘Under the absolute government of a single man, despotism, to reach the soul, clumsily struck at the body, and the soul, escaping from such blows, rose gloriously above it; but in democratic republics that is not at all how tyranny behaves.’³ A further contrast lay in the new material affluence that was in itself a product of liberty. As Boesche points out, the

very prosperity that accompanied bourgeois society might, in Tocqueville’s opinion, give birth to the conditions that make this new despotism possible, like a plant whose flowering moment also signals its demise. ‘One must take care,’ wrote Tocqueville, ‘not to confuse political liberty with certain effects it sometimes produces.’ Political liberty leads to prosperity, but prosperity leads to ‘the taste for material well-being’ and to a ‘passion for making fortunes’; these in turn threaten to ‘extinguish’ the very political liberty that gave them birth.⁴

The men of the eighteenth century hardly knew that kind of passion for material comfort, which is, so to speak, the mother of servitude, an enervating but tenacious and unalterable passion, which readily mingles with and twines itself round many private virtues such as love of family, respectability of life, regard for religious beliefs, and even the assiduous if lukewarm practice of the established worship, which is partial to respectability but forbids heroism, which excels in making men steady but citizens mean-spirited. The men of the eighteenth century were both better and worse.⁵

His deepest worry was that the growing equality and individualism put people in a particularly weak position to stand up to the State. The practice of divide and rule had been a conscious tactic in the old order.

Almost all the vices, almost all the mistakes, almost all the fatal prejudices which I have just described owed, in fact, either their birth, or their continuance, or their development, to the practice pursued by most of our kings in dividing men in order to govern them more absolutely.⁶

Yet in the new order, such division between individuals became institutionalized. Thus

when the citizens are all more or less equal, it becomes difficult to defend their freedom from the encroachments of power. No one among them being any longer strong enough to struggle alone with success, only the combination of the forces of all is able to guarantee liberty. But such a combination is not always forthcoming.⁷

¹Tocqueville, *Democracy*, II, 898

²Tocqueville, *Democracy*, II, 898

³Tocqueville, *Democracy*, I, 315

⁴Boesche, *Tocqueville*, 258-9

⁵Tocqueville, *Ancien*, 125

⁶Tocqueville, *Ancien*, 144

⁷Tocqueville, *Democracy*, I, 67

Thus he reported that 'What I find most repulsive in America is not the extreme freedom reigning there but the shortage of guarantees against tyranny.'¹ He saw that there could very easily be a switch from the 'sovereignty of the people' to the sovereignty of the State.

So, for a people who have reached the Anglo-Americans' social state, it is hard to see any middle course between the sovereignty of all and the absolute power of one man...the social state I have just described may lead as easily to the one as to the other of those results.²

He saw that Montesquieu's earlier warnings might apply here. 'Montesquieu has noted that nothing is more absolute than the authority of a prince who immediately succeeds a republic, since the undefined powers that had been fearlessly entrusted to an elected magistrate then pass into the hands of a hereditary sovereign. This is true in general but applies more particularly to a democratic republic.'³

As Acton would say, 'all power tends to corrupt', and the great, liberal thinker between Tocqueville and Acton, J.S. Mill, summarized Tocqueville's warning thus. 'Now, as ever, the great problem in government is to prevent the strongest from becoming the only power; and repress the natural tendency of the instincts and passions of the ruling body to sweep away all barriers which are capable of resisting, even for a moment, their own tendencies. Any counterbalancing power can henceforth exist only by the sufferance of the commercial class; but that it should tolerate some such limitation we deem as important as that it should not itself be held in vassalage.'⁴ Mill's suggestion of a 'counterbalancing power' was also in the tradition of Montesquieu and Tocqueville. Tocqueville's solution was, as with equality, to suggest a balance. Too little equality was as bad as too much. The balance must be between too much centralization and too little. He put the continuum clearly as follows.

There are two great drawbacks to avoid in organizing a country. Either the whole strength of social organization is centred on one point, or it is spread over the country. Either alternative has its advantages and its drawbacks. If all is tied into one bundle, and the bundle gets undone, everything falls apart and there is no nation left. Where power is dispersed, action is clearly hindered, but there is strength everywhere.⁵

This idea of a balance became his central concern. As he recalled 'I had conceived the idea of a balanced, regulated liberty, held in check by religion, custom and law; the attractions of this liberty had touched me; it had become the passion of my life; I felt that I could never be consoled for its loss, and that I must renounce all hope of its recovery.'⁶

¹Tocqueville, *Democracy*, I, 311

²Tocqueville, *Democracy*, I, 66

³Tocqueville, *Democracy*, I, 495

⁴Mill, *Essays*, 267

⁵Tocqueville, *Journeys*, 4

⁶Tocqueville, *Recollections*, 72

This balance reminds one very much of Montesquieu's solution of the balance of the contending forces of law, religion, other institutions. The judicial power was very important as a check to the administration. 'The necessity of bringing the judicial power into the administration is one of those **central** ideas to which I am brought back in all my researches to discover what allows and can allow men the enjoyment of political liberty.'¹ Likewise the balance between the secular and the religious was also important. Tocqueville warned of the danger of a pact, when religion and politics entered into a union which crushed all liberty. He noted that at the time of the rise of absolutist monarchies in Europe 'the Catholic clergy throughout Europe had become both a religious and a political body.'² He warned of a dangerous slavery 'where the Church is so thoroughly in the hands of the State as to become an instrument of government; of this Russia is an example.'³ The danger had, as Montesquieu knew, been manifest in France. 'The Church of France, under Louis XIV, was both a political and a religious institution.'⁴

¹Tocqueville, *Journeys*, 83

²Tocqueville, *Journeys*, 11

³Tocqueville, *Memoir*, II 355

⁴Tocqueville, *Memoir*, I, 211

8. FRAGILE LIBERTY - 2

Tocqueville's central obsession was with the balance between the centre and the periphery. In illustrating his important argument here he drew above all, as Montesquieu had done, on the English case. America was too new and de-centralized to provide a case study. The Continental states had clearly fallen off the tight-rope. The problem was how to 'unite liberty to the already existing equality', he 'searched eagerly in a democratic country for the fundamental conditions of liberty.'¹ He found these conditions in England. He believed that it had managed to walk the narrow path between too much and too little centralization, with only a few false steps, for a thousand years. He wrote a summary of the situation in 1835. 'There is a great deal of centralization in England; but of what sort?' To this he answered, 'Legislative and not administrative; governmental rather than administrative.' 'The mania for **regimentation** ... is found here as elsewhere', but unlike France, it had little effect. This is 'because the **centralizing** power is in the hands of the legislature, not of the **executive**.' Among the 'Lucky consequences' of this were the following:

'Publicity, respect for rights, obligation to refer to local authorities for the execution of the law; natural tendency to divide administrative authority so as not to create too strong a rival power. Centralisation very incomplete since it is carried out by a legislative body; **principles** rather than **facts**; **general** in spite of a wish to be **detailed**.'²

The '**Greatness and strength** of England' was 'explained by the power of centralisation in certain matters.' On the other hand the '**Prosperity, wealth, liberty** of England' were 'explained by its **weakness** in a thousand others.'³ This mixture was even shown in relation to the Indian Empire. England was

the most powerful in some things, and the weakest and most embarrassed in some other; which keeps eighty million people under its obedience three thousand leagues away, and does not know how to get out of the smallest administrative difficulties; which excels at taking advantage of the present, but does not know how to foresee the future. Who can find a word to explain all these anomalies?⁴

What Tocqueville noticed was a productive tension between different forces. 'Principle of **centralisation** and principle of **election of local authorities**: principles in direct opposition.' Furthermore there was '**Use of fines** as administrative weapons: **agency of the tribunals; intervention of third parties**.' He believed that these were the 'only means of combining the two principles to some extent since the one is essential to the power and existence of the State, the second to its prosperity and liberty.' This was the key. 'England has found no other secret', and France must learn it. 'The whole future of free institutions in France depends on the application of these same ideas to the genius of our laws.' If one could find a way 'to subject the centralising power to

¹Tocqueville, *Memoir*, I, 35

²Tocqueville, *Journeys*, 98

³Tocqueville, *Journeys*, 98-9.

⁴Quoted in Drescher, *Tocqueville*, 89.

publicity' and 'to have its **local** decisions carried out by **elected** authorities', Tocqueville would see 'no objection to extend its power as much as you like...'¹

He described this balance on several other occasions. The 'English government is strong although the localities are independent.'² He quoted Dr. Bouring to the effect that 'England is the country of decentralisation. We have got a government, but we have not got a central administration. Each county, each town, each parish looks after its own interests.'³ In comparing France to England, Tocqueville wrote in 1853,

in England you have an aristocracy and powerful local influences, while we in France have nothing of the sort. You have no centralization, while we have centralized the administration more than perhaps has ever been done in a great country. Whence it results that in England corruption and intimidation are the instruments chiefly of the great landowners, and of the rich in general, while with us corruption and intimidation can be made use of only by the Government.⁴

The heart of the difference lay in the fact that the English had centralized the judicial but not the administrative system. 'The English are the first people who ever thought of centralising the administration of justice. This innovation, which dates from the Norman period, should be reckoned one of the reasons for the quicker progress which this nation has made in civilisation and liberty.'⁵ In France, the early divisive tendencies of feudalism went in the other direction. The barons became too powerful. 'That is what happened in France, where the barons went so far as to abolish the right of appeal to the king's courts. That is what did not happen in England. William, master of all, gave lavishly but kept still more.'⁶ Ironically, Tocqueville's Norman predecessor, William the Conqueror, managed to steer a middle course. Faced with too much or too little centralization, Tocqueville wrote, 'I don't know if a mean between these extremes can be found, but it would seem that William did find it.'⁷ We have already discussed his theories to account for this difference. What Tocqueville is superb at doing is pointing out the tendency towards centralization, even to those who had mastered the art of liberty and then looked as if they would, through carelessness, lose it. 'The English themselves do not realise the excellence of their system. There is a mania for centralisation which has got hold of the democratic party.'⁸ He had absolutely no doubt of the 'immense political and moral advantages of this system.'⁹

The contrast with his three other cases, America, France and China, was instructive. In America there was as yet an almost complete absence of centralization 'There is nothing centralised or hierarchic in the constitution of

¹Tocqueville, *Journeys*, 98-9; final dots are Tocqueville's.

²Tocqueville, *Journeys*, 85

³Tocqueville, *Journeys*, 45

⁴Tocqueville, *Memoir*, II 226

⁵Tocqueville, *Journeys*, 75

⁶Tocqueville, *Journeys*, 4

⁷Tocqueville, *Journeys*, 4

⁸Tocqueville, *Journeys*, 84

⁹Tocqueville, *Journeys*, 85

American administrative power, and that is the reason why one is not at all conscious of it. The authority exists, but one does not know where to find its representative.¹ Thus 'Nothing strikes a European traveller in the United States more than the absence of what we would call government or administration.'² That is because 'there is no central point on which the radii of administrative power converge.'³ The problem lay in the future, for as the country grew wealthier and more populous, there would be a tendency towards bureaucratic centralization.

On the other hand France and other continental powers represented the other extreme. The height of centralization had been reached in France in the later seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. 'Under Louis XIV France reached the greatest possible degree of centralisation of government that can be conceived, for one man made the general laws and had the power to interpret them, and he represented France abroad and acted in her name. "I am the state," he said, and he was right.'⁴ But after the disruption of the Revolution, Napoleon has been quick to start the process again and now 'I assert that there is no country in Europe in which public administration has not become not only more centralised but also more inquisitive and minute.'⁵ 'Among all the nations of continental Europe, one may say that there is not one that understands communal liberty. However, the strength of free peoples resides in the local community.'⁶ The new socialist movements which were sweeping across Europe provided no alternative to this. As Drescher writes, 'In socialism he saw only the logical culmination of an omnipotent centralizing urge combined with a contempt for man as individual and citizen. It was "a new form of servitude".'⁷

Tocqueville saw China as the extreme of bureaucratic centralization. He noted that China had benefited from long periods of peace and order. 'China...had existed in peace for centuries; her conquerors had adopted her mores; order prevailed. Material prosperity of a sort was visible everywhere. Revolutions were very rare and war, one might almost say, unknown.'⁸ Yet there was the famous stagnation.

Three hundred years ago, when the first Europeans came to China, they found that almost all the arts had reached a certain degree of improvement, and they were surprised that, having come so far, they had not gone further. Later on they found traces of profound knowledge that had been forgotten. The nation was a hive of industry; the greater part of its scientific methods were still in use, but science itself was dead.'⁹

This strange withering away of curiosity and creativity was very puzzling.

¹Tocqueville, *Democracy*, I, 87

²Tocqueville, *Democracy*, I, 85

³Tocqueville, *Democracy*, I, 89

⁴Tocqueville, *Democracy*, I, 106

⁵Tocqueville, *Democracy*, II, 885

⁶Tocqueville, *Democracy*, I, 74

⁷Drescher, *Tocqueville*, 144

⁸Tocqueville, *Democracy*, II, 596

⁹Tocqueville, *Democracy*, II, 595

The Chinese, following in their fathers' steps, had forgotten the reasons which guided them. They still used the formula without asking why. They kept the tool but had no skill to adapt or replace it. So the Chinese were unable to change anything. They had to drop the idea of improvement. They had to copy their ancestors the whole time in everything for fear of straying into impenetrable darkness if they deviated for a moment from their tracks.¹

Tocqueville's solution to the puzzle was to blame a centralized and uniform bureaucratic system.

China seems to offer the classic example of the sort of social prosperity with which a very centralised administration can provide a submissive people. Travellers tells us that the Chinese have tranquillity without happiness, industry without progress, stability without strength, and material order without public morality. With them society always gets along fairly well, never very well. I imagine that when China is opened to the Europeans, they will find it the finest model of administrative centralisation in the world.²

He touched on a couple of aspects of this system. One was the overwhelming desire for bureaucratic office. 'There is no need for me to say that this universal and uncontrolled desire for official appointments is a great social evil, that it undermines every citizen's sense of independence and spreads a venal and servile temper throughout the nation...'³ The avenue to such offices was through the examination system. 'In China...no man graduates from one public office to another without passing an examination. He has to face this test at every stage of his career... Lofty ambition can hardly breathe in such an atmosphere.'⁴

It was not that Tocqueville was against government as such. He was not an Anarchist. He believed that strong government and administrative centralization were different things. 'In our day we see one power, England, which has reached a very high degree of centralisation of government; there the state seems to move as a single man.'⁵ Yet it was a free and wealthy country.

England, which has done such great things in the last fifty years, has no administrative centralisation. For my part, I cannot conceive that a nation can live, much less prosper, without a high degree of centralisation of government. But I think that administrative centralisation only serves to enervate the peoples that submit to it, because it constantly tends to diminish their civic spirit.⁶

Tocqueville also saw the English solution as having another enormous advantage. It made it possible to change peacefully over long periods without needing periodic revolutions. Continuous evolution rather than punctuated equilibria was the advantage of a proper balance between centre and periphery.

¹ Tocqueville, *Democracy*, II, 596

² Tocqueville, *Democracy*, I, 111, note 50

³ Tocqueville, *Democracy*, II, 821

⁴ Tocqueville, *Democracy*, II, 816-7

⁵ Tocqueville, *Democracy*, I, 106

⁶ Tocqueville, *Democracy*, I, 107

Like Montesquieu, Tocqueville attempted to elaborate a number of the institutional checks on the tendency towards absolutism. In early notes he quoted an Irish priest who said that 'Freedom of the press, Sir, is the first and perhaps the only efficient weapon which the oppressed has against the oppressor; the weak against the strong; the people against the government and the great.'¹ In relation to America he wrote 'The more I observe the main effects of a free press, the more convinced am I that, in the modern world, freedom of the press is the principal and, so to say, the constitutive element in freedom.'² It was particularly important in a democracy. 'The press is, par excellence, the democratic weapon of freedom.'³ It allowed individuals, weak and fragmented, to coalesce into an imagined community and hence to act as a counter-balance to the State. 'For this reason freedom of the press is infinitely more precious in a democracy than in any other nation.'⁴ Thus, as he explained, 'the more equal men become and the more individualism becomes a menace, the more necessary are newspapers. We should underrate their importance if we thought they just guaranteed liberty; they maintain civilisation.'⁵

As important as the freedom of the press was the nature of the legal system. As a trained lawyer himself, and a disciple of Montesquieu, Tocqueville was well aware of the power of the law. He saw several features of the Anglo-American system which particularly attracted him. One was the jury system. In his *Journal* while visiting America he wrote 'The jury is the most direct application of the principle of the sovereignty of the people.'⁶ Or as he put it in the finished book: 'Therefore the jury as an institution really puts control of society into the hands of the people or of that class.'⁷ He saw the jury as having a double role. 'The jury is both the most effective way of establishing the people's rule and the most efficient way of teaching them how to rule.'⁸ In fact it was the second of these that he most strongly commended. 'Juries teach men equity in practice. Each man, when judging his neighbour, thinks that he may be judged himself.'⁹ Thus he believed that 'Juries are wonderfully effective in shaping a nation's judgment and increasing its natural lights. That, in my view, is its greatest advantage. It should be regarded as a free school which is always open and in which each juror learns his rights...'¹⁰

Another crucial power was the independence of the judiciary, and in particular the institution of justices of the peace. 'The power of the courts has been at all times the securest guarantee which can be provided for individual independence

¹ Tocqueville, *Journeys*, 162

² Tocqueville, *Democracy*, I, 234

³ Tocqueville, *Democracy*, II, 906

⁴ Tocqueville, *Democracy*, II, 906

⁵ Tocqueville, *Democracy*, II, 667

⁶ Tocqueville, *Journey to America*, 174

⁷ Tocqueville, *Democracy*, I, 336

⁸ Tocqueville, *Democracy*, I, 341

⁹ Tocqueville, *Democracy*, I, 339

¹⁰ Tocqueville, *Democracy*, I, 339

but this is particularly true in ages of democracy.¹ As for independent magistrates, ‘When a justice of the peace has a share in the administration, he brings with him a taste for formalities and for publicity, which renders him a most inconvenient instrument for a despotism; but he is not the slave of those legal superstitions which make magistrates so little capable of administration.’² Thus the judiciary should be brought into the administration as much as possible. Independent justices, rather than paid bureaucrats, were essential. “‘The necessity of introducing the judicial power into the administration is one of those **central** ideas to which I am led by all my investigations concerning the sources of political liberty.”³

Of course there are still dangers. The tendency of the State to grow ever more powerful may mean that it starts to corrupt the judges. ‘Thus the government is daily more able to escape the obligation to have its will and its rights sanctioned by another power. Unable to do without judges, it likes at least to choose the judges itself and always to keep them under its hand.’⁴ The protection against this is to divide the legislature up into several parts. He wrote of

the principle of the division of legislative power; henceforth the need to share legislative activity between several bodies has been regarded as a demonstrated truth. This theory, hardly known to the republics of antiquity, introduced into the world almost by chance, like most great truths, and misunderstood by several modern nations, has at last become an axiom of political science in our day.’⁵

The best example of this system at work was in New England. ‘All the general principles on which modern constitutions rest, principles which most Europeans in the seventeenth century scarcely understood and whose dominance in Great Britain was then far from complete, are recognised and given authority by the laws of New England; the participation of the people in public affairs, the free voting of taxes, the responsibility of government officials, individual freedom, and trial by jury - all these things were established without question and with practical effect.’⁶ They had also adopted the other great check on abuse of power, the ability of the people to dismiss the rulers through elections. ‘An arbitrary power to dismiss public officials is the only guarantee of that sort of active and enlightened obedience which no judicial sanction can impose. In France we seek the ultimate guarantee in the **administrative hierarchy**; in America **election** fills that role.’⁷

All these checks and balances of a formal nature were not, however, enough. Tocqueville devoted much attention to two other areas. One was the necessity for religion, a second was how to mitigate the dangers of individualism through forming associations.

¹Tocqueville, *Democracy*, II, 907

²Tocqueville, *Democracy*, I, 91

³Quoted in Drescher, *Tocqueville*, 83

⁴Tocqueville, *Democracy*, II, 888

⁵Tocqueville, *Democracy*, I, 104

⁶Tocqueville, *Democracy*, I, 50

⁷Tocqueville, *Democracy*, I, 94

Tocqueville's views on religion are surprising for they contain another paradox. While too much religion, that is religion formally enforced by the State, is disastrous, too little religion is equally dangerous. One might have expected him to advocate a complete separation of politics and religion, but in fact he does not do this. He saw that religion and politics must be combined in some way: '...the real greatness of mankind must arise from the combined action of liberty and religion; the one to animate, the other to restrain.'¹ He particularly admired the way in which this was done in England. Again implicitly echoing Montesquieu's remark about the combination of wealth, liberty and piety, he wrote that 'I enjoyed too, in England what I have long been deprived of - a union between the religious and the political world, between public and private virtue, between Christianity and liberty.'² Indeed he makes the further connection when he writes 'So there must be a hidden relationship between those two words: **liberty** and **trade**. People say that the spirit of trade naturally gives men the spirit of liberty. Montesquieu asserts that somewhere'³, and further suggests that 'I think it is above all the spirit and habits of liberty which inspire the spirit and habits of trade.'⁴ But how did England manage to combine wealth, liberty and religious enthusiasm? How was it that England was so surprisingly active in mixing the latter two, being a country where, for example, 'Great political parties, as always happens in free countries, found their interest in uniting their cause with that of the Church.'⁵

The nearest Tocqueville comes to solving the apparent contradiction is by showing that the English made the separation not between religion and politics, but between the public and the private. Politics belonged to public life, religion to the private. The case was illustrated by English Catholics.

In fact, I never met with an English Catholic who did not value, as much as any Protestant, the free institutions of his country, or who divided morality into two sections, one consisting of public virtues, which might be safely neglected, and the other of private duties, which alone need be observed.'⁶

His insights into the necessary connection between liberty and religion came out of his observations of England and America.

I have already said enough to put Anglo-American civilisation in its true light. It is the product (and one should continually bear in mind this point of departure) of two perfectly distinct elements which elsewhere have often been at war with one another but which in America it was somehow possible to incorporate into each other, forming a marvellous combination. I mean the **spirit of religion** and the **spirit of freedom**.⁷

¹Tocqueville, *Memoir*, II, 238

²Tocqueville, *Memoir*, II, 397

³Tocqueville, *Journeys*, 105

⁴Tocqueville, *Journeys*, 105-6

⁵Tocqueville, *Ancien*, 163

⁶Tocqueville, *Memoir*, II, 398

⁷Tocqueville, *Democracy*, I, 360

He noted that ‘One cannot therefore say that in the United States religion influences the laws or political opinions in detail, but it does direct mores, and by regulating domestic life it helps to regulate the state.’¹ Thus he advocated the importance of religion. ‘Despotism may be able to do without faith, but freedom cannot.’² Or again, ‘Society has nothing to fear or hope from another life; what is most important for it is not that all citizens should profess the true religion but that they should profess religion.’³ As he put it in one of his aphorisms, ‘For my part, I doubt whether man can support complete religious independence and entire political liberty at the same time. I am led to think that if he has no faith he must obey, and if he is free he must believe.’⁴

Yet he was also aware from his own Catholic background that there was a tendency in religion to move towards absolutism and indeed be its main support.

Montesquieu, in attributing a peculiar force to despotism, did it an honour which, I think, it did not deserve. Despotism by itself can maintain nothing durable. When one looks close, one sees that what made absolute governments long prosperous was religion, not fear.⁵

How could the danger of too much religion be avoided? Again it was best if there was a division into balanced and competing units. Following Montesquieu and Smith he took the view that tolerance in religion arose from powerlessness. One religion in a State, for instance Catholicism, would be disastrous. Even if there were two, equally powerful, it would be hopeless.

If two religions faced each other, we should be cutting each others’ throats. But as none has as much as a majority, all need toleration. Besides there is a general belief among us, a belief which I share, that some religion or other is needed by man as a social being.⁶

With its proliferation of sects, in America even the Catholics preached toleration. ‘The Catholics are in a minority, and it is important for them that all rights should be respected so that they can be sure to enjoy their own in freedom.’⁷ Thus each religious sect was thwarted in its political ambitions ‘Every religious doctrine has a political doctrine which, by affinity, is attached to it. That is an incontestable point in the sense that, where nothing runs contrary to that tendency, it is sure to show itself. But it does not follow that it is impossible to separate religious doctrines from all their political effects. On the contrary, in almost every country in the world one has seen material interests bring about this separation.’⁸

¹Tocqueville, *Democracy*, I, 360

²Tocqueville, *Democracy*, I, 364

³Tocqueville, *Democracy*, I, 359

⁴Tocqueville, *Democracy*, II, 569

⁵Tocqueville, *Democracy*, I, 115

⁶Tocqueville, *Journey to America*, 31

⁷Tocqueville, *Democracy*, I, 357

⁸Tocqueville, *Journey to America*, 150

The result was that in the world of sectarian America or England, the separation between formal religion and formal politics had been effected.

Religion regards civil liberty as a noble exercise of men's faculties, the world of politics being a sphere intended by the Creator for the free play of intelligence. Religion, being free and powerful within its own sphere and content with the position reserved for it, realises that its sway is all the better established because it relies only on its own powers and rules men's hearts without external support.¹

Tocqueville had noticed this modesty when he visited England as well. 'I was struck this time in England, as I had previously been, to see how a religious sentiment conserved its power, without becoming something that absorbs and destroys all other motives of human action.'² Indeed he believed that the two were linked. Religious faith was much more active and sincere if it eschewed an alliance with the State. For 'any alliance with any political power whatsoever is bound to be burdensome for religion. It does not need their support in order to live, and in serving them it may die.'³

Thus religious faith was needed to unite and animate a democratic peoples, to provide an ideological alternative to the overbearing State and to give ideals and confidence. 'The longer I live the less I think that the peoples of the world can ever separate themselves from a positive religion...'⁴ Yet religious institutions must not become so powerful that they became, as in many ancient despotisms, the most potent force for tyranny.

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Tocqueville's final major protection against the tendency towards absolutism was his support for associations, or what we might today call a strong 'Civil Society'. Modern society supported the individual, the equality of citizens and the rights of man. Yet in order to effect very much, individuals must co-operate. This led Tocqueville into a discussion of how a modern society that could no longer use birth as the recruiting device to form groups could operate. His answer was that people in such a society generated large numbers of associations instead, that is to say contractual, voluntary, groupings, usually with limited purposes, which would allow individuals to drop some of their narrow egotism and work for a common goal. The importance of such associations was naturally most marked where equality was most extreme, in other words in America and we have seen his treatment of the association in the American context.

The English case puzzled Tocqueville. It appeared to be once again somewhere between the birth-status groups of traditional France, and the individual-associational extreme of America. A contradiction between individual's interest and that of the association seemed to him to be present in

¹Tocqueville, *Democracy*, I, 55

²Tocqueville, *Letters*, 356 (1857)

³Tocqueville, *Democracy*, I, 368

⁴ Tocqueville, *European Revolution*, 206

England. "Two spirits which, if not altogether contrary, are at least very diverse, seem to hold equal sway in England."¹ He could not "completely understand how the "spirit of association" and the "spirit of exclusion" both came to be so highly developed in the same people, and often to be so intimately combined."² He decided that

On reflection I incline to the view that the spirit of individuality is the basis of the English character. Association is a means suggested by sense and necessity for getting things unattainable by isolated effort. But the spirit of individuality comes in on every side; it recurs in every aspect of things.³

People in England were ultimately individuals, but were prepared to associate as the only means to attain their ends. "That being so, the need to club together is more generally felt, because the urge to get things is more general and stronger."⁴ For instance,

Example a club; what better example of association than the union of individuals who form the club? What more exclusive than the corporate personality represented by the club? The same applies to almost all civil and political associations, the corporations...⁵

Curiously, therefore, the extreme individualism of the English led to more co-operation between people for specific purposes than the group-mindedness of the French. The absence of any alternative structures "prompts people to pool their efforts to attain ends which in France we would never think of approaching in this way. There are associations to further science, politics, pleasure, business..."⁶ In France, on the other hand, before the Revolution, the country was divided "into a great number of sections, and within each of these small enclosures there was seen to speak a distinct society, which was only concerned with its own particular interests, and took no part in the life of the whole."⁷ Somehow the Anglo-Saxon peoples, including of course the Dutch, managed to combine individualism and co-operation in an unusual way.

Thus Tocqueville saw the associational forms as having their "point of departure" in England. "The English, though the divisions between them are so deep, seldom abuse the right of associations, because they have had long experience of it."⁸ It then spread to America. "The right of association is of English origin and always existed in America. Use of this right is now an accepted part of customs and of mores."⁹ This was in contrast to the trend on the Continent. In the remote past there had been as many "associations" in Germany or France as in England. Yet while they had continued and blossomed in

¹Tocqueville, *Journeys*, 74

²Tocqueville, *Journeys*, 74

³Tocqueville, *Journeys*, 75

⁴Tocqueville, *Journeys*, 75

⁵Tocqueville, *Journeys*, 74-5

⁶Tocqueville, *Journeys*, 74

⁷Tocqueville, *Ancien*, 83

⁸Tocqueville, *Democracy*, I, 238

⁹Tocqueville, *Democracy*, I, 236

England and then America, they had been destroyed on the Continent and their powers absorbed by the increasing power of the Absolutist state. 'The point I want to make is that all these various rights which have been successively wrested in our time from classes, corporations, and individuals have not been used to create new secondary powers on a more democratic basis, but have invariably been concentrated in the hands of the government.'¹ This was disastrous. Like Montesquieu, Tocqueville believed that numerous 'secondary powers', that is associations of free individuals into organizations for running their own affairs, were the major protection against tyranny. Using a metaphor of a dyke used to prevent the flood of despotism he wrote 'In countries where such associations do not exist, if private people did not artificially and temporarily create something like them, I see no other dyke to hold back tyranny of whatever sort, and a great nation might with impunity be oppressed by some tiny faction or by a single man.'²

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The encounter with Tocqueville adds further elements to a possible solution to the riddle of the modern world. He refines the concept of the separation of powers, the safeguards and importance of liberty, the precarious balance between centre and periphery and the effects of war. Tocqueville saw that the key to real progress as a never-ending tension or conflict between institutional spheres and is the absence of a dominating and dominant religion or State. He noted the beneficial effects of commerce on morals, the tendency to predate by war, the importance of an independent judiciary and the power of law, the way in which liberty brought wealth in its train, the way in which America had harmonized self-interest and the public good, the importance of secondary powers and the negative effects of industrialization. All these themes we have encountered in previous thinkers but they are given a fresh and deepened treatment.

There are also many new areas that he explored: the importance of the tendency towards 'caste', class and social hierarchy, the effects of growing equality in many spheres, the importance of associations, the separation of public and private. He drew attention to the materialistic ethic of capitalism, the pursuit of profit as an end in itself, the curiously high estimation of work, the effects of commerce on concepts of time, space and the family, the presence of an 'imagined community' as the basis of the modern nation state, the effects of equality on family relations, the dangers of a loss of liberty caused by the rising tide of 'democracy' itself and of centralization, the dangers of egotism and the necessity for religious belief.

Particularly important for our purposes, he supplements Montesquieu and Smith's historical account by giving the most detailed and convincing analysis not only of the difference between England and France, but of how that difference occurred and evolved. He showed the origins of the American system in mediaeval and early modern England, the difference between French peasant social structure and English agriculture, the entirely different political history of

¹Tocqueville, *Democracy*, II, 883

²Tocqueville, *Democracy*, I, 236

the two countries, with revolution and rigidity in one and flexible evolution in the other. He noted the absence of a nobility in England and the entirely different meaning of the words 'gentleman' and 'gentilhomme'. Thus after considering Tocqueville's work we have a rounded conjecture or suggested solution to the riddle.

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ed. edited or editor
edn edition
eds. editors
Jnl. Journal
n.d. no date
tr. translated by
Univ. University

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