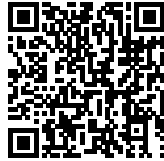




ALEXIS DE TOCQUEVILLE'S STUMBLING BLOCK

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Alexis de Tocqueville is a great mind of the hedgehog variety. Writers, Isaiah Berlin said, are roughly divided into two species: hedgehogs who stay in the same intellectual place for life, and foxes who scamper from place to place. The political writer Tocqueville deliberately chose the tactic of the hedgehog (minus the prickles); he centered his thought around a few core ideas whose facets he explored and whose implications he pursued tirelessly. What are these core ideas? They are three in number:

1. The great business of the modern world is democracy or equality;
2. The great cause par excellence is freedom, or more precisely freedom associated with the spirit of religion;
3. The parasite or the nuisance is revolution, or rather the revolutionary spirit.

Tocqueville's entire intellectual life is summed up in a reflection on these themes, a stubborn and tormented reflection from which came two great books: *De la démocratie en Amérique* [[*Democracy in America*](#)] (1835 and 1840), the first volume of which made him a famous man at the age of thirty. Second, after the coup d'état of December 2, 1851 made him an author once again, *L'Ancien Régime et la Révolution* [[*The Ancien Régime and the Revolution*](#)] (1856), the second volume of which remained unfinished. In the interim, Tocqueville had engaged himself wholeheartedly in politics—he was a deputy from 1839 to 1851 and a minister for a time under the Second Republic—but he always remained a politician on the fringe, and his ambitions were disappointed. In all circumstances, he remained unwaveringly faithful to the same cause, the one that inspired his whole life: the liberal cause (Tocquevillian version).

The second book is a great work, which however is an incomplete effort. Tocqueville did not succeed in solving the problem that is at the heart of his thought—he groped, rectified, resumed and never succeeded. The problem is this—how to think in one go about this great democratic or egalitarian revolution that is today generating a new world and that formidable and singular event that was the French Revolution? How to think about the dynamics of equality and the dynamics of the Revolution

together? Or more precisely, how to fit the dynamics of the Revolution into the dynamics of equality?

A New World

On the one hand, Tocqueville was deeply convinced that in the new lands of America and in the old societies of Europe, times had changed or were changing. The same destiny commanded both: the Americans are born equal; the Europeans are becoming equal. The great democratic revolution that had been working on Christian humanity for centuries had reached a threshold—one world was dying: that of the old aristocratic society, and a new era was opening up: that of modern society, characterized by the democratic social state. From one world to the other, the relations between men have changed in nature. The modern society is radically new and this novelty is due to the spirit which animates it, the democratic spirit—men think, feel equal there.

On the other hand, Tocqueville was very close to this French Revolution, which stunned the world, and which sent to prison or to the scaffold his parents, grandparents and his great-grandfather (Malesherbes), and which seemed to set French political history apart. How to decipher what contemporaries perceived as an unprecedented storm? For Tocqueville, the general meaning of the event was clear—it followed from his vision of History: The French Revolution was part of a movement which exceeded it. It was a "democratic revolution," in the sense that it was inserted into the march of the modern world towards equality.

But why did this march towards equality take on this unbridled and bloody pace? How to think about democratic movement and Jacobin crimes together? The difficulty tormented Tocqueville and fed his concern about the political future of France. There was, he explained, during this democratic revolution, a parasitic element that grafted itself onto it. The Revolution began with the magnificent impetus of 1789, where the spirit of equality and the spirit of liberty were combined. Then it quickly slipped under the sway of this parasitic spirit, a spirit of rupture, violence and tyranny, which he names, after Royer-Collard, "the revolutionary spirit." Tocqueville was here in tune with the other liberals of his time. He was led to sort out within the Revolution and its inheritance the good grain from the chaff. The politician Tocqueville opposed Guizot; he nevertheless shared the same objective—to purge post-revolutionary France of the survivals of the revolutionary spirit, in this sense to finish the Revolution.

The Revolutionary Spirit

But the difficulty remained. What is the origin and the posterity of this revolutionary spirit that has engendered so many misfortunes? In Tocquevillian terms, the question becomes more complicated—where does this parasitic spirit of democratic times come from? What is its future in democratic societies? And finally—what is the relationship between the revolutionary spirit and the democratic spirit? Tocqueville never stopped stumbling over these questions.

He mulled over them again and again in *Democracy in America*, and especially in the second volume, where there is an implicit comparison between the American version of democracy, a democracy without revolution (no "Old Regime" to be destroyed), and the French-style democracy, born in the form of a democratic revolution. But Tocqueville hesitated, oscillated, and in the end seemed to step back. He first presented the revolutionary passions as democratic passions pushed to the extreme; then he opposed them by explaining that the democratic spirit tends to extinguish revolutionary passions.

The issue is not clear-cut, nor is it clarified in *The Ancien Régime and the Revolution*, where he again operates on two fronts. On the one hand, he vigorously develops his famous thesis, faithful to his basic idea, which brings the Revolution into line—the revolutionary subversion only continued the monarchic subversion of the old aristocratic society and perfected in its turn the centralized State that would be culminate in the work of Bonaparte. The Revolution was thus only one moment among others, even if it was particularly turbulent and violent, of the continuous march towards equality. But on the other hand, he laid bare the components of another interpretation wherein the Revolution took on the colors of a new phenomenon, unprecedented in History—principles that were a "new religion," actors who were "new beings," "of an unknown species"—in other words, this revolutionary spirit, which had something irreducible and on which Tocqueville's basic idea always stumbled. A part of the Revolution remained enigmatic; and until the end, Tocqueville would continue to come up against this enigma. Here is what he wrote a year before his death to his close friend Kergorlay, while he was working on the second volume of *The Ancien Régime and the Revolution*:

"There is moreover in this disease of the French Revolution something particular that I feel, without being able to describe it well, nor to analyze the causes. It is a virus of a new and unknown species. There have been violent revolutions in the world; but the immoderate, violent, radical, desperate, audacious, almost mad and yet powerful and effective character of these revolutionaries has no precedent, it seems to me, in the great social agitations of past centuries. Where does this new race come from? Who produced it? Who made it so effective? Who perpetuates it? Independently of everything that can be explained in the French Revolution, there is something in its spirit and in its acts that is unexplained. I feel where the unknown object

is, but I can't lift the veil that covers it. I feel it as if through a foreign body which prevents me either from touching it well, or from seeing it" (2).

II

Let us resume. Seen by Tocqueville, the modern scene looked like this: the cause of equality has won but the cause of liberty is still in the balance. The cause of equality has won because aristocratic society is dead or dying irrevocably. The aristocratic spirit is fading away, which was a false spirit, but of which we must nevertheless try to preserve one element: the spirit of excellence. On the other hand, the cause of liberty, the one to which Tocqueville was attached with every fiber of his being, is in abeyance, threatened by the possible consequences of the democratic movement, directly threatened in France by what survives of the revolutionary spirit. From this, stem the two questions that are at the heart of Tocqueville's thought and from which we have seen that he never dissociated himself:

1. What is the logic of this democratic spirit. and what dangers does it pose to human freedom (and human excellence)?
2. What is the origin and the posterity of this revolutionary spirit that has poisoned French politics since the Revolution?

But it is by wanting to think of these two questions in a single way that he condemned himself to the grindstone. Tocqueville considered the revolutionary spirit only as an abusive mistress or a bastard daughter of the democratic spirit; and thus he forbade himself to think, or to think to the end, this revolutionary spirit as a rival in its own right of the democratic spirit and of a nature to subvert the democratic spirit totally. Convinced that the modern world was shaped first and foremost by the democratic spirit, he remained trapped in an overly homogeneous vision of the world and thus of the French Revolution. Tocqueville was the brilliant analyst of the democratic spirit. His stumbling block was the revolutionary spirit. He brought to light the dynamics of equality; he failed to decipher the revolutionary dynamics.

Perhaps Tocqueville was also trapped in another way by the democratic spirit. I want to say this: the privileged actors of History according to Tocqueville are the ordinary men, their ideas and their feelings. It is the average men who animate, lead democratic societies; in the case of the French Revolution, it

was "the French" or "the nation" who generally made History. Tocqueville underestimated the role of minorities within the revolutionary process and perhaps also within the egalitarian dynamic. No doubt, he notes on several occasions, the role played by minorities under the Revolution and the practices of usurping the will of the people. But he never thinks through this subversion, which not only corrupts political democracy but transforms it into a fiction or an appearance. The impulse of his mind always brought him back to general causes and to the democratic logic that is the basic idea of his interpretation. In this, he gave in, it seems, to a flaw in which he himself saw a tendency of the democratic mind—the abuse of general ideas.

In the United States, Tocqueville saw a people masters of themselves. In France he heard, resounding through the memory of time and his own research, the revolutionary rhetoric invoking tirelessly the "will of the people." Was he not a victim of what Augustin Cochin called the great fetish of the French Revolution—the "People" as actors in their own History?

III

If this interpretation is correct, Tocqueville was an incomparable guide to understanding much of the modern world—but not all of it. In fact, history has both confirmed and denied him.

In the second volume of *Democracy in America*, there are, as we have noted, many variations; but there is nevertheless a dominant tone—the risk of revolution tends to disappear in democratic societies, thanks, so to speak, to the democratic spirit which leads to a peaceful life, withdrawn into the private sphere, oriented towards well-being and devoid of political passions. The culmination of this analysis is the famous chapter in which the author takes the exact opposite view of the common opinion and of the justifications given by Guizot to the "politics of resistance" that he advocates; that is to say the chapter in which he explains "why great revolutions will become rare" in democratic centuries.

Tocqueville's concern then changed object—no longer the risk of a new political revolution—the French Revolution was over—but there were now the possible or foreseeable consequences of the democratic movement: social atomization, extreme individualism, the development of a new form of despotism (a tutelary power, invasive but far-sighted and gentle, a welfare state, an extreme version, as it were).

A Premonitory Vision

But Tocqueville anticipated History and in particular the History of France. This peaceful democracy, where individualism triumphs; this quiet society where the spirit of equality and material ambitions irritate souls but do not arouse any political passion, it is not the France of the 19th century where the revolutionary spirit remained, it is the French society of today, where revolutionary traditions are dead; it is more generally the Western society of our time, where egalitarian individualism has recently unfolded its full force. Reread today, *Democracy in America* shows a brilliant genius as a sociologist. By digging into the dynamics of equality, Tocqueville deciphers our social life and gives us the keys to understand our relations with our fellow human beings.

On the other hand, he wrongly prejudged the political future of France. The denial—the revolution of 1848—was not long in coming, sounding the death knell of his illusions. He confessed them himself in a passage of his *Memoirs* where a feeling of despair pervades: Will the French Revolution ever end? Will France ever be able to reach harbor?

"Constitutional monarchy succeeded the Ancien Régime; the Republic, the Monarchy; the Republic, the Empire; the Empire, the Restoration. Then came the July Monarchy. After each of these successive mutations, it was said that the French Revolution, having completed what was presumptuously called its work, was finished—it was said and it was believed. Alas! I had hoped it myself under the Restoration; and still since the government of the Restoration had fallen; and here was the French Revolution which started again, because it is always the same one. As we proceed, its goal moves away and grows murky... I do not know when this long voyage will end. I am tired of making for the shore in the deceptive fog, and I often wonder if this dry land which we have sought for so long indeed exists, or if our destiny is not rather to batter the sea eternally" (3).

It will take time for France to reach the port and the time of revolutions is not yet over. In the twentieth century, the Bolshevik Revolution took over, whose actors presented themselves as the heirs of the French Revolution. The Bolsheviks also toppled an old aristocratic society and built on its rubble a new social order that prided itself on embodying the truth of democracy. Yet the dynamics of this revolution clearly escaped Tocqueville's categories, and his analyses are of little help here. There is something else. Tocqueville speaks of gold, but only in one sense.

IV

Tocqueville does not explain the whole French Revolution; he does not explain the whole modern

world. The one and the other are linked. There are several dynamics at work within the modern world; there are several dynamics born of the French Revolution: the dynamics of equality and the one we call the dynamics of ideology. The French Revolution is thus not a block, it is composite. But it should not be broken down in the classical way, that of the liberals of the 19th century who opposed 1789 and 1793. The distinction, it seems, was made as early as 1789.

This composite character explains why the French Revolution could be sometimes opposed, sometimes related to the American Revolution. On the one hand, the French Revolution was animated by its own dynamic which made its singularity and whose heritage largely explains the specificity of French political History. It is this same dynamic or a dynamic of the same type that animated the Revolution in the East and whose acquired strength broke with the collapse of the Soviet regime; and it is this heritage that has just been erased from French politics. In this sense the French Revolution is over.

On the other hand, the French Revolution is of the same family as the American Revolution: it marks the entry into the world of equality. And it is this dynamic of equality that is redoubling today, dragging along both American and French society. In this sense the Revolution (French or American) continues. This explains, it seems to us, the end of the French exception.

If this analysis is correct, the contemporary period is a period of rupture, even if it is not always perceived as such. The French Revolution not only provoked a formidable explosion that shook the world and lit a blaze whose fire has only just been extinguished, it also, along with the American Revolution, set off a repeated bomb whose effects are working on our societies as never before since the "explosion" of the 1960s. The status of politics and the nature of social relations have been profoundly modified.

Tocqueville, saddened, died under the authoritarian Empire. He who had never reflected on history, except to enlighten the future and to promote the cause of a regulated and dignified freedom, saw the present: an adventurer turned despot, the rascals in power, the shameless servility, contradicting his analyses and his hopes. Would he be delivered today from his sadness or his anxiety? Certainly, the French Revolution as a political revolution is finished. But the democratic revolution, whose consequences he feared, brims over on all sides. Endless Revolution.

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