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PROPHET OF THE MASS AGE
A STUDY OF ALEXIS DE TOCQUEVILLE

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A STUDY OF ALEXIS DE TOCQUEVILLE

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Alexis de Tocqueville (by Chasseriau) *Frontispiece*

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uprightness of his character to the old priest who alone taught him the Christian virtues—to do the good and eschew the evil—and his gratitude did not cease with his teacher's death. 'Never again,' he writes from America to his beloved brother, 'shall we meet a man whose whole faculties and affections are centred upon ourselves. He seems to have lived for us alone.'

During the six years of Count Hervé de Tocqueville's prefectship in Metz Alexis completed his studies at the *lycée* in that town. His career at school was a brilliant one, a special prize and two first prizes being awarded to him. There were many lonely hours, too, during which the boy browsed in his father's library. At sixteen years old he was reading books hardly accessible to the average boy of his age. It was at this time that he lost the religious belief to which he was to return only in the last months of his life. Among his early papers are some fragments, included by Gustave de Beaumont in the biographical notice with which he prefaces the complete edition of his friend's works, which show a young mind wrestling hard with the theories of Descartes. 'There is no Absolute Truth,' writes de Tocqueville in these early papers. And again: 'If I were asked to classify human miseries I should rank them in the following order: (1) Disease; (2) Death; (3) Doubt.'³ Shattered for him was the strict Catholic belief of his ancestors, gone all but a Christian deism.

Alexis de Tocqueville's basic inclination for critical and original thinking seems to have been developing

the case, and it is a question of awakening and stimulating a miserable and half-paralysed people for whom passivity is a pleasure, and whose upper classes are dulled by vices or inherited indolence, I can think of no more welcome expedient than this parcelling-out of land. Were I king of England I would favour large estates; were I lord of Sicily I would vigorously support small holdings; but as I am neither I return with all speed to my diary.'⁴ The typical habit of mind of the twenty-two-year-old writer, his exact eye for detail, his analytical dissection, and his abstraction of the structural political law underlying the details, is unmistakable in this passage. Clear, too, is the political application, although it is presented in somewhat frolicsome manner. De Tocqueville is, however, still far from an original comprehensive view of the whole social body-politic. With youthful uncriticalness he adopts the climatic theories of Bodin and to some extent also of Montesquieu, whose great works were doubtless familiar to him. Later he definitely rejected the fatalistic naturalism of the climatic dogma and its associated race-theory. On this he was later to write on the last page of his book on America: 'I know that several of my contemporaries have thought that the peoples of the earth are never their own masters, and that they must of necessity obey I know not what dark and unconquerable forces generated from early experiences of the race, from the soil, and from the climate. These are false and cowardly doctrines, which can produce only weak individuals and faint-hearted nations.'

CHAPTER II

CALLING AND VOCATION

THE young official concentrated on his work. He was sometimes afraid lest he should become a mere routine man and copyist like many of his colleagues, yet he would prefer, as he wrote to an intimate friend, to burn all his books than to grow 'incapable of judging a great movement or of guiding a great undertaking.'¹

The July Revolution of 1830 was no surprise to de Tocqueville. It implied the final victory of bourgeois France. In the *Souvenirs* (a broad survey of his life as a politician which he undertook as a kind of *apologia* in July 1850 after his resignation from his post as Minister for Foreign Affairs and which was not published until long after his death) he explains the critical significance of the July Revolution in the social history of France. Although this account dates from twenty years later, and carries the weight of those twenty years' riper political judgment behind it, it requires mention here since the great political thinker's basic views on this matter were already established in 1830. 'Our history from 1789 to 1830, viewed at a distance and as a whole, affords the spectacle of an embittered struggle between the *ancien régime* with its traditions, its memories, its hopes, and its personnel, represented by the aristocracy,

and the new France under the leadership of the middle class. The year 1830 closed this first period of our revolutions—or rather of our revolution, for there is but *one* revolution, the same under all the changes of fortune, of which our fathers saw the beginning, and of which we ourselves in all probability shall not see the end. In 1830 the triumph of the middle class was definitive, and so complete that all political powers, franchises, prerogatives, the government in its entirety, came to be confined and as it were accumulated within the narrow limits of this one class to the exclusion of all below it, and indeed of all above it. . . . The spirit peculiar to the middle class became the general spirit of the Government, dominating foreign as well as home affairs—a bustling, industrious spirit, often dishonest, orderly for the most part, sometimes courageous through vanity and egotism, temperamentally timid, moderate in all things except in the desire for easy living and mediocrity—a spirit which mingled with that of the people or of the aristocracy can work wonders, but which in isolation can only produce a Government without virtue or greatness.’²

This passage not only contains de Tocqueville’s axiomatic concepts of the health of the body politic, but makes plain furthermore why, as a politician, he repudiated absolutely the bourgeois monarchy of Louis Phillipe. He did not, however, quit the service, but succeeded (the more easily, perhaps, as son of the Prefect for Seine - et - Loire) in obtaining from the new Minister of the Interior leave to pursue an

CHAPTER III

YEARS OF EARLY MATURITY

THE two years during which Alexis de Tocqueville wrote his book, *Democracy in America*, were possibly the happiest of his life. He applied to this voluminous work the full intensity of his newly-ripened powers. He modelled his style upon that of the great French seventeenth-century classics, but before all upon that of Pascal, who amongst the masters of French literature was perhaps his spiritual next-of-kin. 'These two minds,' wrote de Beaumont, 'were made for one another.' It was not alone the penetrating logic of Pascal's style which deeply influenced de Tocqueville, for he had that in the depths of his soul which responded to the Jansenistical rigorism of Pascal's morality.

De Tocqueville also devoured at this time with a tireless appetite (de Beaumont is again our authority) the works of Plato, Plutarch, Machiavelli, Rousseau, and Montesquieu, and it would seem that in these same years he made a close study of Aristotle, Polybius, and, more particularly, the works of Edmund Burke. He felt a need to measure the wealth of his American observations against the whole Western heritage of political doctrine.

During these two years he interrupted his work only once when in 1833 he went to England, but this was an

Because of its privileged status the French nobility inevitably evoked a reaction of hate among the bourgeois (and later among the proletarian) classes which is, in fact, unknown in the English social consciousness even to the present day. During centuries of evolution the English aristocracy has actually become a *functional* nobility, whereas the continental nobilities for the most part cut themselves off from the pulsing life of their nations and were, relatively speaking, shut out from it.

The specialized political function of the English aristocracy was certainly one of the determining factors in de Tocqueville's deep veneration for England. In the course of his very thorough researches into de Tocqueville's unpublished papers Antoine Redier came upon a document which has a bearing on this point, reminding one by its positively Pascalian honesty of the famous *Mémorial*,³ and showing very distinctly de Tocqueville's instinctive adherence to the aristocracy. The confession reads as follows:

‘MY INSTINCT, MY OPINIONS

‘Experience has taught me that almost all men (and most certainly I myself) return always more or less to certain fundamental instincts, and only do well what conforms with these instincts. Let me try sincerely to discover where lie my *fundamental instincts* and where my *true principles*.

‘Intellectually I have an inclination for democratic institutions, but I am an aristocrat by instinct—that is to say, I despise and fear the mob.

‘I have a passionate love for liberty, law, and respect for rights—but not for democracy. There is the ultimate truth of my heart! I am neither of the revolutionary party nor of the conservative. Nevertheless, when all is said, I hold more by the latter than the former. For I differ from the latter more as to means than as to end, while I differ from the former both as to means and end.

‘Liberty is my foremost passion. This is the truth!’³

Though this *Mémorial* is perhaps of a later date, it none the less outlines very sharply its author's basic social-philosophical attitude.

It is significant that the notes on the English journey of 1833 close with the following passage: ‘Here (in England) freedom is not a Right of Man but a special privilege of the Englishman. (The German, for his part, will tell you that it is a fruit of education.)’⁴

De Tocqueville found the norm of his ideal state in the structure of the English state. So far, in dealing with the English notes, we have touched only on the sociological principles therein displayed, and it is desirable to come rather nearer to the concrete, even though we do not intend to attempt to reproduce the entire content of these notes. Two points, however, may be mentioned here. De Tocqueville refers to a conversation he had with an Englishman about the decentralization of government in England. ‘England,’ he reports the Englishman as saying, ‘is the land of decentralization. We have a central government, but not a central administration. Each county, each

De Tocqueville's recollection of his own sense of horror at the boundless loneliness of the primeval forests of America justifies the quotation here of this letter of much later date: for few men have been so conscious in early manhood of their own dispositions and their own life's tasks.

De Tocqueville might not, like Pascal, wrestle with his God in solitude. He tried to find God in the things of the world. The world and its many-sided experiences were for him a necessary if roundabout way, but one that none the less led at last to the goal. A letter written from Berne on 24th July 1836 to Eugène Stoffels, a boyhood's friend, gives a clear indication of the fundamentally religious trend of his political philosophy. 'You seem to me to have understood the general ideas on which my programme rests. What most and *always* [the italics are ours] amazes me about my country, more especially these last few years, is to see ranged on the one side men who value morality, religion and order, and upon the other those who love liberty and the equality of men before the law. This strikes me as the most extraordinary and deplorable spectacle ever offered to the eyes of man; for all the things thus separated are, I am certain, indissolubly united in the sight of God. They are all *holy* things, if I may so express myself, because the greatness and the happiness of man in this world can only result from their union. It seems to me, therefore, that one of the finest enterprises of our time would be to demonstrate that these things are not incompatible; that, on the con-

trary, they are bound up together in such a fashion that each of them is weakened by separation from the rest. Such is my basic idea.'¹⁰ I believe that the human state-order, in its essence and totality, has found no such exemplary formulation as this since the writings of Aristotle. It is true that Thomas Aquinas in his *De regimine principum* restated the Aristotelian political philosophy in accordance with the medieval ordering of temporal and spiritual life, but this medieval hierarchic order had since dissolved beyond recall. Machiavelli, Bodin, Hobbes, Rousseau, and Montesquieu had attempted to interpret man as *zoon politikon* from a consideration of his natural activities, but de Tocqueville was the first to attempt once more to display the natural and creaturely ordering of mankind in its single indissoluble actuality. No one since then has followed him on this road.

In the above-quoted letter to Stoffels there is a passage about the book, *Democracy in America*: 'I have shown, and shall continue to show, a lively and rational passion for liberty, and this for two reasons. In the first place it is my profound conviction, and in the second I do not wish to be identified with those lovers of order who are ready to sell free will and our laws cheap for the sake of sleeping safely in their beds. There are enough of them already, and I dare to prophesy that they will never achieve anything great or durable. I shall show my taste for liberty frankly, then, and a general desire to see it developed in all the political institutions of my country. But at the same

time I shall profess so great a respect for justice, so true a love for order and law, so deep and so reasonable an attachment for morality and religious beliefs, that I cannot but believe people will see plainly in me a *liberal of a new kind* [the italics are ours] and will not confuse me with the majority of the democrats of our day.' ¹¹ The passage stresses the fact that the writer is not one of those who can sail with any breeze. It was the more needful for such a man to have a life companion of a special kind. Mary Mottley intimately revealed England to de Tocqueville. His letters to her, of which Antoine Redier gives us some examples, show between the pair an uncommonly close union whose fulcrum is to be sought perhaps rather in the realm of comradeship and ethics than in that of the actually erotic. 'I swear to you, my dearest,' he wrote to her, 'that I believe my love for you makes me a better man. When I think of you I feel that my soul is exalted.' ¹²

In Mary he found inexhaustible sources of tenderness and patience. Even her perhaps typically English liking for pet dogs, who were treated almost like children (there were none of the marriage), did nothing to injure the love of her sensitive French husband. She was often unbearably capricious, yet his kindness was un-failing. It is not easy to fathom the soul of an English-woman. She is little given to emotional expression, and can only be judged in action. Fortunately there is a passage in a letter to Mme Swetchine which plainly shows the hidden role of Mary Mottley in de Tocqueville's life. He writes on 11th February 1857:

which has no dangers for the State. I would that all those who dream, in the name of America, of a republic for France, could come and see it here in the working!

'The last reason which I have just given you is, in my judgment, the principal explanation of the two dominant characteristics which distinguish this nation, namely, its industrial genius and the variability of its character. Nothing is easier in America than to acquire wealth; it is natural, therefore, that the human mind, which demands a ruling passion, ends by fastening all its thoughts on gain. The result of this is that at first sight the people here seem to be a nation of merchants met together to trade, and that in proportion as one obtains deeper insight into the American character one sees the more clearly that one question alone decides the value of everything in this world—how much money will it bring in?

'As for inconstancy of character it is apparent in a thousand ways. An American takes up ten occupations in a lifetime, leaving them and returning to them again: he continually changes his place of abode, and perpetually undertakes new enterprises. Less than any man does he fear to jeopardize the fortune he has acquired, for he knows with what ease he can found a new one.

'Besides, change seems to him the natural state of man, and how should it be otherwise? Everything around him keeps up an incessant movement—law and opinions, public officials, fortunes, even the earth herself changes her face from day to day. Surrounded by

by creating an equilibrium in the State. He conceives of the State as being subject to a higher norm, the idea of Justice, against which idea the State is ever, in the last instance, to be measured. Thus the State is not in itself, as Hegel would have it, the realization of the ethical idea, but possesses the capacity of attaining this ultimate ethical norm only in a supreme instance, namely, by non-violation of the idea of justice. For de Tocqueville actuality and idea of the State constitute a tension. The State is interpreted by him as an approximation to the 'Law of Justice.' De Tocqueville had not read his Plato in vain. It appears then as if this elemental factor in the conceptions of the great Frenchman has hitherto received insufficient attention. James Bryce, in an appreciation of de Tocqueville's technique, which he published before writing his own *American Commonwealth*, remarks that the facts cited by the former are rather the illustrations of conclusions than their sources. Bryce was, however, far from perceiving that the *real* presuppositions of de Tocqueville's way of thinking lie in the realm of pure philosophy, and are there alone to be sought.

De Tocqueville cherished a profound belief in the essential freedom and equality of man, and held that only under a political *régime* which succeeded in establishing these two indispensable conditions could the dignity of man be inviolably assured. These presuppositions alone make possible any understanding of the doctrines of state and society for which Western thought is indebted to de Tocqueville.

twofold effect on my contemporaries. To those who make to themselves an ideal democracy, a brilliant vision which they think it easy to realize, I undertake to show that they have arrayed their future in false colours; that the democratic government they advocate, if it be of real advantage to those who can support it, has not the lofty features they ascribe to it; and, moreover, that this government can only be maintained on certain conditions of intelligence, private morality, and religious faith, which we do not possess; and that its political results are not to be obtained without labour.

‘To those for whom the word “democracy” is synonymous with disturbance, anarchy, spoliation, and murder, I have attempted to show that the government of democracy may be reconciled with respect for property, with deference for rights, with safety to freedom, with reverence to religion; that if democratic government is less favourable than another to some of the finer parts of human nature, it has also great and noble elements; and that perhaps, after all, it is the will of God to shed a lesser grade of happiness on the totality of mankind (*de répandre un bonheur médiocre sur la totalité des hommes*), not to combine a greater share of it on a smaller number, or to raise the few to the verge of perfection. I have undertaken to demonstrate to them that, whatever their opinion on this point may be, it is too late to deliberate, that society is advancing and dragging them along with itself towards equality of conditions; that the sole remaining alternative lies between evils

of Mill's judgment remains unimpaired to the present day.

Of the last volume of *Democracy in America* we can here only touch upon the fourth part, for it contains the synthesis and quintessence of de Tocqueville's work.

Democratic revolution is the hall-mark of the age. The future, according to de Tocqueville's prediction made at the end of the fourth decade of the nineteenth century, belongs to equality. In former centuries certain rights were granted to cities, to families, and to individuals, but in the great modern mass-societies, brought into being by increasing industrialization, all citizens will face one another as *equals*. These men of the new age hold simple and general ideas; like their philosophy, their religion, and their intelligence, their government—the supreme authority of their State—must be simple and undivided, and they regard uniformity in law as the hall-mark of good government. The individual becomes lost in the mass and fixes his eyes solely on the mighty and all-embracing vision of the people as a whole.

Filled with pride and self-reliance among his equals, he will at first imagine his independence to be freedom. Because all men are visibly becoming equal this very feeling of freedom may impel modern mankind to political anarchy, although, more probably, it will lead to servitude with the rise of some leader who will ruthlessly make himself master of these competing equalities. To the equal citizen the power of the State seems to be the one and only support of his own individual

weakness. It is in these conditions that de Tocqueville perceives the most formidable danger to democratic communities, and it may be asserted without fear of exaggeration that it is on this especial aspect that de Tocqueville concentrates his political teaching.

On the other hand (as de Tocqueville maintains) the power of the State favours the equality of citizens because this secures and extends its dominion. 'I am of opinion,' he writes, 'that in the democratic ages which are opening upon us, individual independence and local liberties will ever be the produce of artificial contrivance; that centralization will be the natural form of government.'⁶ This thesis may easily be proved from history. The English Puritans who emigrated in the seventeenth century to found a democratic commonwealth on the shores of the New World, carried with them the liberties to which they were accustomed. They had learned to take a part in public affairs in their mother country, they took for granted independent administration of justice, their religious beliefs, and their ideas about liberty of speech and of the press. They defended these free institutions against the encroachments of the State. The example of Napoleon I, on the other hand, shows that he was forced, after destroying the nobility and the upper middle classes, to centre in his own hands all the administrative functions of the State. In this case, in contrast to the example of America, the guarantees of individual freedom were annihilated. De Tocqueville brilliantly formulates the basic orders of American, English,

and French social life in the following words: 'The lot of the Americans is singular; they have derived from the aristocracy of England the notion of private rights and the taste for local freedom: and they have been able to retain both the one and the other because they have had no aristocracy to combat.'⁷

The tendency to centralization of government is irresistible. It is common to all the political communities of Europe. The privileges of the nobility, the liberties of cities, and the powers of provincial bodies are either destroyed or on the verge of destruction. Uniformity prevails in the modern world. De Tocqueville sees that even religions, both Protestant and Catholic, are in danger from the new powers of the State. States often make the clergy their servants, 'and by this alliance with religion they reach the inner depths of the soul of man.'⁸ In the last volume of his work de Tocqueville shows that the threatening 'new despotism' (Lord Hewart) of bureaucracy has by no means escaped his attention. In a note (pp. 499 et seq.) he writes as follows: 'In proportion as the duties of the central power are augmented, the number of public officials (*fonctionnaires*) by whom that power is represented must increase also. They form a nation in each nation; and as they share the stability of the Government, they more and more fill up the place of an aristocracy.'

This, however, is by no means a complete picture of the new Leviathan as prophetically envisaged by de Tocqueville. With the increasing centralization of the

power of the State it becomes also more inquisitorial and more detailed (*plus inquisitive et plus détaillée*): 'It everywhere interferes in private concerns more than it did; it regulates more undertakings, and undertakings of a lesser kind; and it gains a firmer footing every day, about, above, and around all private persons, to assist, to advise, and to coerce them.'⁹ The economic activity of the modern State is also on the increase, the Government becoming not only the country's chief industrialist, but tending to invade the domain of all private industrial enterprises, and to bring them forcibly under its control.

It is manifestly a very peculiar dialectic which is moving modern society. De Tocqueville defines its laws as follows: 'As long as the democratic revolution was glowing with heat the men who were bent upon the destruction of old aristocratic powers hostile to that revolution displayed a strong spirit of independence; but as the victory of the principle of equality became more complete, they gradually surrendered themselves to the propensities natural to that condition of equality, and they strengthened and centralized their governments. *They had sought to be free in order to make themselves equal; but in proportion as equality was more established by the aid of freedom, freedom itself was thereby rendered more difficult of attainment.*'¹⁰ [The italics are ours.]

I believe that de Tocqueville has revealed the very structure of the modern mass-society in this dialectical exposition. It might certainly be said that he has

1840 he became member of a commission on prison reform. In 1846 he had to deal with African colonial problems, for the study of which he had made two journeys to Algiers. On one of these journeys he fell dangerously ill. His most important speech was made on 29th January 1848, a month before the outbreak of the February revolution, when he vainly prophesied to the Chamber the coming upheaval. A few pivotal passages from this speech must be quoted here:

‘ . . . A time is coming when the country will once again find itself divided into two great parties. The French Revolution, which abolished all privileges and destroyed all exclusive rights, has yet left one which subsists throughout the land—the right of property. But property-owners need cherish no illusions as to the strength of their position, nor need they fancy that the right of property is an unassailable bulwark because it has never yet been breached—for our times are unlike any others. As long as the right of property was the origin and groundwork of many other rights it was easily defended—or rather it was not attacked; it was then the citadel of society, while all the other rights were its outworks; it did not bear the brunt of attack and, indeed, there was no serious attempt to assail it. But to-day, when the right of property is regarded as the last undestroyed remnant of the aristocratic world, when it alone is left standing, the sole privilege in an equalized society . . . it is a very different matter. . . . Consider what is passing in the hearts of the working classes, although I admit they are quiet

enough as yet. It is true that they are less inflamed than formerly by political passions, properly speaking; but do you not see that their passions, from being *political* have become *social*? [our italics]. Do you not see that little by little, ideas and opinions are spreading amongst them which aim not merely at removing such and such laws, such a ministry or such a government, *but at breaking up the very foundations of society itself?* [our italics]. . . . Such, gentlemen, is my deepest conviction: I believe that at this very moment we are sleeping on a volcano—I am profoundly convinced of it. . . .

‘When I come to seek in different ages, different epochs, different peoples, for the effective cause that has led to the ruin of their governing classes, I see, indeed, such and such a man, such and such an event, such and such an accidental or superficial cause, but, believe me, the true cause, the effective cause of men’s loss of power, is that they become unworthy to wield it.’¹

Four weeks later the February revolution broke out in Paris and became the prelude to a European movement whose momentum, following laws proclaimed by de Tocqueville, has continued down to our own day. De Tocqueville did not, however, prophesy alone. In 1842 Lorenz von Stein foresaw social revolution in the very near future, while both Marx and Engels in *The Communist Manifesto* (whose composition preceded de Tocqueville’s speech by a few months only) recognized in the social antagonism between bourgeois

day, and de Tocqueville's own relations to these, are realized for the reader with plastic art and with uncompromising self-criticism and analysis. It may be true to call the *Souvenirs* his finest book: it undoubtedly gives the most immediate expression to his fundamental attitude as man and thinker.

The writing of the *Souvenirs* was, nevertheless, a work of secondary importance to de Tocqueville at the time. During the health-giving weeks of that south Italian winter he was concerned with a greater objective. After more than a decade which in many respects had proved, as he wrote in a letter to de Kergorlay, 'rather barren,'¹ he wanted to write 'a great book.' He now felt more confidence than at the time of the work on America 'in taking in hand a great political book.'² Should he venture on a comprehensive portrayal of modern society and of its probable future? He rejected the plan because of the difficulty of arriving at a unitive conception. 'I can see the parts of such a work, but I cannot see the whole.'³ De Tocqueville, like all great French thinkers, had a remarkable power of abstraction, yet he was not as a writer able to work in abstract categories. It was only *through* history that he could exercise his rare faculty for universal, abstract condensation. 'I must find somewhere a solid, lasting basis of fact for my ideas. I can find this only as I write history—as I concentrate on an epoch whose story gives me occasion to paint the men and events of our century, and to build up a unitive picture from all these separate studies. The prolonged drama of the

vas, the latter the colour—and both these are necessary to make a picture).’⁵ A book on which de Tocqueville thought of modelling his work was Montesquieu’s *Greatness and Decadence of the Romans*. ‘One travels without a pause, so to speak,’ he writes of his great model’s method, ‘across the whole of Roman history, and yet one sees enough of this history to wish for and to understand the author’s explanations.’⁶

De Tocqueville knew, nevertheless, that his was a harder task than Montesquieu’s, because he had to deal with the history of his own times. To see it from a distance comparable to Montesquieu’s ‘one needs to speak of men and things without passion and without reticence. As touching persons, although they have lived in our own times, I am sure of feeling neither love nor hate for them: and as to the forms of things which are called constitutions, laws, dynasties, classes, I can say that for me they have not only no value but no existence independently of the effects they produce. I have no traditions, I have no party, I have above all no *cause* save that of liberty and human dignity. Of this I am certain. . . .’⁷ Such were the philosophical and systematic bases from which de Tocqueville approached his new work.

He was, of course, well acquainted with previous histories of the revolution. Thiers’s *History of the Revolution* and *History of the Consulate and the Empire*, the books of Mignet, Carlyle, and Michelet, Louis Blanc’s work which had just begun to come out, Lamartine’s *Histoire des Girondins*, Madame de Staël’s posthumous

family, are but too easily inclined to think of nothing but their private interests, ever too ready to consider themselves only, and to sink into the narrow precincts of self, in which all public virtue is extinguished. Despotism, instead of combating this tendency, renders it irresistible, for it deprives its subjects of every common passion, of every mutual want, of all necessity of combining together, of all occasions of acting together. It immures them in private life. . . .'³⁴ 'Freedom alone,' continues de Tocqueville in another paragraph, 'can effectually counteract in communities of this kind the vices which are natural to them, and restrain them on the declivity down which they glide. For freedom alone can withdraw the members of such a community from the isolation in which the very dependence of their condition places them by compelling them to act together. Freedom alone can warm and unite them day by day through the necessity for mutual agreement, for mutual persuasion, and mutual complaisance in the transaction of their common affairs. . . .'³⁵

A careful distinction should therefore be made between free and unfree democratic societies—a distinction of which our own day stands in need of reminder. On this point too the preface to *The Ancien Régime and the Revolution* is definitive. 'Democratic communities which are not free may be rich, refined, adorned, magnificent, powerful by the weight of their uniform mass; they may contain many private merits, good fathers of families, honest traders, estimable men

was fifty-one years old, and he had but three more years ~~to live~~. Dark shadows lay over his beloved France, the false glitter of the Second Empire notwithstanding. But his faith in the light of human freedom and human dignity was unshakable. For him these things were as everlasting as the stars.

as they arise, changes with changing incidents, provides for the passing needs of the moment, and makes use of the ephemeral passions of the age. This is the art of government.

‘Undoubtedly there is a difference between the art and the science; practice often diverges from theory—I do not deny it. I will go further, if you like, and concede that to excel in the one is no reason for being successful in the other. . . .

‘The art of writing does, in fact, give to those who have long practised it habits of mind unfavourable to the conduct of affairs. It makes them subject to the logic of ideas, whereas the mob obeys only that of its passions. It gives a taste for what is delicate, fine, ingenious, and original, whereas the veriest common-places rule the world.

‘The study of history itself, while it often throws light on present facts, may sometimes obscure them. How many there are among us who, with their heads enveloped in thick clouds of learning, saw 1640 in 1789 and 1688 in 1830, and who, always one revolution behind the times, tried to apply to the second the treatment appropriate to the first. . . .’²

I know of no modern politician who has more deeply illumined the relationship between theory and practice in politics. The differing logics which underlie political thought and political action are sharply defined, and we are reminded, even to the actual words used, of Pascal’s distinction between *ordre logique* and *order du cœur*. De Tocqueville also points clearly to

loneliness of the individual who refuses to surrender hope and belief in freedom in this our age of modern mass-dictatorship! 'I have no child to be pleased by my small share of fame; I scarcely believe that writings such as mine could have the least influence in such times as these—nor indeed any writings except perhaps the bad novels which may have the undesirable effect of making us even more demoralized and disorderly than we are already.'⁶ It is almost exactly eighty years since de Tocqueville wrote this sentence. He would not have changed a word to-day. The greatness of his political philosophy appears not least in his perseverance in his work, despite his insight.

He was not one of those intellectuals who enjoy making play with constructive yet empty abstractions. He was no modern professor of philosophy, and would probably have found little acceptance with one. Faguet notes a passage in which de Tocqueville analyses the principles of his own philosophy of history, and at the same time shows plainly enough how foreign to his thought was empty theorization. 'I have lived amongst men of letters who have written history without mixing in affairs, and amongst politicians who have been occupied with making things happen without ever troubling to write about them. I have always noticed that the former see general causes on all sides, while the latter, living in the haphazard of daily events, prefer to think that everything that happens must be attributed to particular accidents and that their petty daily string-pulling represents the forces that move the world. I

believe that both are mistaken. For my part I hate these absolute systems which make all the events of history depend on great first causes by a chain of fatality, and which, as it were, exclude man from the history of mankind. . . . I believe, with all due deference to the writers who have invented these sublime theories to nourish their vanity and facilitate their work, that many important historical facts can only be accounted for by accidental circumstances, and that many others remain inexplicable, and that, in fine chance, or rather that network of secondary causes which we call chance since we are unable to unravel it, counts for much in all that we see in the theatre of this world. . . . Antecedent facts, the nature of institutions, mental attitudes, the state of morals—these are the materials from which are composed those *impromptus* which amaze and terrify us.’⁷ De Tocqueville was a political philosopher in the true sense, for he sought tirelessly and with persistent curiosity into the principles of man’s political activities.

The riddle of man’s nature is the starting point of all political philosophy, for all that our modern shallow and short-sighted political thinking, so often blind to all but immediate aims, seems quite to have forgotten this dimension of politics. Again and again de Tocqueville’s thought penetrates to this fundamental aspect of political philosophy. In a masterly passage in one of his letters (he was a great letter-writer) he defines his own method of thinking as against traditional philosophic *schema*. ‘I should have had a passion for those

philosophical studies which you have been engaged on all your life if I had been able to get more profit from them, but, whether be it a defect of my mind, or lack of courage in pursuit of my plans, or the special character of the material, I have always reached a point at which I have found that the notions given me by these sciences get me no further—indeed not so far—as I could reach at once by means of just a few quite simple ideas shared more or less by all men. *These ideas easily lead to belief in a first cause which is at once evident and inconceivable: to fixed laws, apparent in the physical world and a necessary supposition in the moral world: to God’s providence, and, consequently, His justice: to man’s responsibility for his actions, since he is permitted to know good and evil, and, consequently, to belief in a future life* [the italics are ours]. I confess to you that, outside revelation, I have never found that the most subtle metaphysic could give me clearer notions on these points than the plainest commonsense, and that has given me rather a grudge against it! What I have called *the bottom which I am unable to touch* is the *wherefore* of the world—the plan of this creation of which we know nothing, not even our bodies and still less our spirits—the reason of the destiny of that singular being whom we call Man, to whom has been given just light enough to show him the miseries of his condition, but not enough to change them. . . .’⁸ In these sentences de Tocqueville develops his philosophical creed—a creed in which the frontiers of the knowable are fixed with a calm and a reverence reminiscent of Goethe’s

senist moralists influenced him profoundly through the writings of Pascal, but there is perhaps also a trace of Kant's influence which may have affected him through Royer-Collard. The categorical imperative of the great Prussian philosopher is by no means foreign to de Tocqueville's political philosophy.

This political philosophy was based on human nature in its totality, wherein politics, morality, and religion are fundamentally inseparable from one another. Just as with him the nation concept borders on the religious, so, on the other hand, religions and creeds are to him constituent categories in a healthy national life.

De Tocqueville's last years show an increasing consciousness of religion. Probably the steady decline of his health—the lung trouble, early apparent, having progressed to an acute and dangerous stage—made him more ready to receive the means of grace offered by the Roman Catholic Church, for serious illness often provides the motive in the history of religious conversions. Not that de Tocqueville had been irreligious up to this time. In early youth he had been touched by Cartesian scepticism, and in his outlook in maturity the chief stress was never laid on God and the things of religion. As a landowner he practised the faith of his fathers, but rather as a convention than as a matter of personal devotion and belief. A letter of July 1835 to Kergorlay throws much light on the value he set upon the religious sphere in the human mind as a whole. 'I have ever believed,' he writes, 'that there is danger even in the best passions when they become ardent

ages therefore, naturally, and in a manner involuntarily, accustom themselves to fix their gaze for a long course of years on some immutable object towards which they are constantly tending; and they learn by insensible degrees to repress a multitude of petty passing desires, in order to be the better able to satisfy that great and lasting desire which possesses them. When these same men engage in the affairs of this world, the same habits may be traced in their conduct. They are apt to set up some general and certain aim and end to their actions here below, towards which all their efforts are directed: they do not turn from day to day to chase some novel object of desire, but they have settled designs which they are never weary of pursuing.

‘This explains why religious nations have so often achieved such lasting results: for whilst they were thinking only of the other world, they had found out the great secret of success in this. . . .

‘Governments must apply themselves to restore to men that love of the future with which religion and the state of society no longer inspire them; and, without saying so, they must practically teach the community day by day that wealth, fame, and power are the rewards of labour—that great success stands at the utmost range of long desires, and that nothing lasting is obtained but what is obtained by toil. . . . Thus the means which allow men, up to a certain point, to go without religion, are perhaps after all the only means we still possess for bringing mankind back by

a long and roundabout path to a state of faith.'⁴ De Tocqueville clearly recognized the anti-religious tendency in the modern state. This has much increased since his day, and may probably even be regarded as permanent, unless some great crisis in the West, such as might be brought about any day now by war, were to bring in its train a reaction to religion.

De Tocqueville ended his life as a believing Catholic. His work was finished, and he was able to listen to the inner voice of conscience bidding him make his peace with the God of his fathers. Such is my own interpretation of de Tocqueville's conversion, the story of which is convincingly told in the closing chapter of the book by Redier which I have so frequently quoted here. Of the new, unpublished documents which Redier has so devotedly assembled in this chapter I will only quote one letter to Mme Swetchine, bearing the date of 26th February 1857, and most essential to an understanding of de Tocqueville's religious development. 'I believe that my sentiments and my desires are in excess of my capacities. I believe that God has given me a natural taste for great actions and great virtues, and that despair at never being able to lay hold on the grand vision that floats before my eyes, the sadness of living in a world and an epoch that answers so little to that ideal creation in which my spirit loves to dwell—I believe, I say, that these impressions which age does nothing to weaken, are among the chief causes of this interior *malaise* of which I have never been able to get the better. But to how many less reputable causes

de Tocqueville under a party label even while his own analysis explodes the fallacy. For he writes of de Tocqueville: 'His sense that an individualistic economy and a political democracy are incompatible has been justified by all subsequent history. . . . He saw that the privileges of property are an inherent contradiction of popular sovereignty, and that they involve either surrender by their possessors or challenge by those excluded from them.'⁴ In this passage Laski hits the nail very neatly on the head, but he fails to see that a thinker in whose political philosophy this recognition plays an essential part must already have overstepped in principle the boundaries of liberalism. There is nothing quietistic about such a confession of faith: it implies a step forward into a *new* world.

In America Francis Lieber has paid understanding tribute to the great analyst of American political life, and in the third volume of his *Political Theories* Dunning has devoted some able pages to de Tocqueville, though these do not in any sense penetrate the fundamentals of his political philosophy.⁵

In the literature of political science in Germany Robert von Mohl and J. C. Bluntschli have done the service of making due mention of de Tocqueville's significance. In Mohl's *History and Literature of the Political Sciences*, whose first volume appeared in 1855, de Tocqueville is classed among 'the first of political scientists,'⁶ and Bluntschli, in his *Geschichte des allgemeinen Staatsrechts und der Politik* (1864), states that de Tocqueville's books 'have exercised on German political

a sure instinct for the uniqueness of intellectual rank to be assigned to de Tocqueville.⁹

In remarking thus briefly on the influence of de Tocqueville's works in England, America, Germany, and Italy it has not been at all my intention to anticipate some future historian in the task of estimating the great French philosopher's influence. My main object throughout has been to present the content of Alexis de Tocqueville's political philosophy with a running commentary, and I hope that my work will shortly be followed by other and more broadly-based treatments of the subject.

The time is ripe for an understanding of de Tocqueville. Any such more comprehensive research must naturally go more deeply than I have done into the intellectual influences affecting his thought, more especially his relationship to Edmund Burke and Royer-Collard. On this subject a few words may, however, be in place here. It is not difficult to discover from a careful reading of *The Ancien Régime and the Revolution* that it is in one aspect a running commentary upon Burke's *Reflections on the French Revolution*. De Tocqueville, I think, quotes from Burke more often and more exhaustively in this book than from any other writer in all the rest of his works. But the differences between the two thinkers are greater than their likenesses. Both are profoundly religious, and are agreed that states lacking the secure foundation of a religious belief are doomed to destruction. They also agree in emphasizing the traditional factor in the historical

five-and-twenty-year-old Walter Bagehot, one of the keenest English political analysts of the nineteenth century, won his first journalistic spurs with his *Letters on the French Coup d'État of 1851*, addressed to the editor of an English newspaper called *The Inquirer*.

I re-edited Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire* in 1932 and Constantin Frantz's *Louis Napoleon* in 1933: I now propose in the following paragraphs to analyse these almost forgotten letters of Walter Bagehot.

The letters are reprinted in the third volume of Walter Bagehot's *Literary Studies*,¹ and my references are to the edition prefaced and edited by Richard Holt Hutton in 1903. There are seven letters, to which the editor has added a short essay which Bagehot first published in the *Economist* under the title of *Caesarism as it existed in 1865*.

The first letter deals with dictatorship. Bagehot thinks a military dictatorship necessary and appropriate in France as the only means of preserving society and the State from collapse. Palmerston's too hurried recognition of the new French *régime* was based on a similar opinion. A great national emergency justifies dictatorship, but it is another question whether dictatorship can be justified when the emergency may be considered as passed. 'You will, I imagine, concede to me,' writes Bagehot to the editor of *The Inquirer*, 'that the first duty of a government is to ensure the security of that industry which is the condition of social life and civilized cultivation.' And the sober English critic establishes to his satisfaction

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