

Stephen Holmes

Treasures of Hate and Envy: A Reading of Tocqueville's *Ancien régime*

No phrase has been more frequently cited by Western commentators on the end of communism than Alexis de Tocqueville's remark, "Le moment le plus dangereux pour un mauvais gouvernement est d'ordinaire celui où il commence à se réformer." Flabbergasted to observe their subject-matter dissolve before their eyes, Sovietologists and students of the East Bloc have reached out for guidance to *L'Ancien régime*. There they learn that half-reforms can be expected to trigger an uncontrollable process that leaves the half-reformer helplessly behind. When a regime openly declares itself in retreat, dissidents and protesters naturally escalate their demands. Better than any other theorist, Tocqueville helps explain why chaos and regime-collapse occur when a mighty autocracy, however tentatively, lifts the lid or loosens its traditional controls. Even if his answers are out of date, the questions he poses are strikingly pertinent to present-day events: Why was the shattering of the old order wholly unforeseen by all parties? Why did an apparently all-powerful system collapse so quickly and almost overnight? And why did it collapse so totally, so thoroughly, en bloc? Why did the élites of the old regime fail to defend themselves more vigorously? And, finally: Will a people trained in submissiveness, when faced with anarchy and economic crisis, have a tendency to revert back to authoritarian rule? These are the very questions that preoccupy us today.

The purpose of this lecture is to determine in greater detail what students of large-scale and dramatic social change can learn from Tocqueville. We cannot be satisfied with citing his beautifully crafted phrases about the difficulty of controlling processes of reform. What conceptual tools does he offer that might help us grasp the current world in upheaval? The only intellectually responsible way to answer this question is to reconstruct Tocqueville's argument as a whole. The differences between 1789 and 1989, of course, are so massive and unmistakable that they preclude any cite-and-run approach. For one thing, the collapse of the Soviet Empire was not merely triggered, it was also managed, from above (from

abroad in the case of Eastern Europe). Put differently, the Bolshevik autocracy was not overthrown by a revolutionary populace. The role of the mobilized masses was sometimes admirable, but always modest. Moreover, as several observers have pointed out, the post-communist states today are eager to *join* the pre-existing European order, while the French revolutionaries saw themselves as providing a wholly different model, a novel pattern for the rest of Europe to imitate (or perhaps to accept at gunpoint). Because of these and other disanalogies, it is not surprising that Western commentators have been selective or choosy in their reliance on *L'Ancien régime*. No commentator on the fall of communism, for instance, has stressed Tocqueville's amazement at the way a totally inhumane revolution emerged from a morally advanced civilization. Few observers (so far) have described 1989 as a breakdown of a highly refined cultural system and an outbreak of bureaucratic murder.

The undeniable dissimilarities between 1789 and 1989 make it ultimately pointless to decorate one's essays with Tocqueville citations, wrested haphazardly from their original context. Only when we consider Tocqueville's approach in its entirety, in fact, can we judge its usefulness as a key to the upheavals of the present. And so today I am going to present, in a succinct way, the basic argument of *L'Ancien régime*.

The Two Tocquevilles

The first thing to say is that the book is extraordinarily slippery, complex, and even contradictory. The most economical way to move to the heart of the argument, as a result, is to make a couple of radical, even crude, distinctions. I will distinguish, first, between two Tocquevilles and, second, between two basic themes of this work. (As you will see in a moment, these two distinctions overlap.)

First, there are two Tocquevilles. To stress how ready I am to simplify here, I will call the first one interesting and the other one boring. It is the failure to distinguish sharply between these two characters, I believe, that accounts for the puzzling lack of focus besetting most Tocqueville scholarship, at least in the United States. The boring Tocqueville is well-known. He is the purveyor of moral clichés, the sermonizer who warns his readers against shameless cupidity, chastises them about egoism, commercialism, and materialism. He laments the decay of moral fiber among his contemporaries and tells them to be manly or virile, and to make sacrifices. People should have "higher" ambitions than wealth, he declaims, should rise up above narrow interests and pursue the greatness of France!

Alongside this finger-wagging and bombastic Tocqueville, who has wearied generations of students to distraction, there is another. This second Tocqueville is the most subtle and creative social scientist of the 19th century, who, with unparalleled genius, describes and explains the psychological complexity of human interaction and, in this case, the genesis of class conflict, class hatred, and the mutual ignorance of classes in eighteenth-century France. (Most Tocqueville scholarship is unsatisfying, in my view, because it assumes that the former should be taken just as seriously as the latter.) While the two Tocquevilles co-authored *L'Ancien régime*, I will focus, to your relief, almost exclusively on the second.

Two Explananda

Now for the two themes of the book. Much of the literature on *L'Ancien régime* is also inadequate because it fails to distinguish clearly enough between the two principal things Tocqueville is trying to explain.¹ This is a significant defect because his two main explanatory aims, to some extent, work at cross purposes. Tocqueville aims to explain both the outbreak of the Revolution of 1789 and the emergence, in 1851, of the Second Empire, what he calls "la société actuelle". He asks: why did the Revolution occur? and also: Why did it eventually yield to autocracy? (He assumes, incidentally, that the causes of the second Bonapartism were more or less identical to the causes of the first).

You might object to the crude bifurcation I am making here, of course. Tocqueville's endeavor to understand "la société qui a fait la Révolution", you might protest, is an attempt to understand simultaneously how eighteenth-century France spawned the Revolution and how it foreshadowed the administrative centralization characteristic of nineteenth-century France. You could also say that Tocqueville's real explanandum is neither the Revolution nor Bonapartism but rather the instability of French politics between 1789 and the 1850s, the seesaw between revolution and autocracy, ironically invoked when he discusses "les neuf ou dix constitu-

Notice that, besides his two principal explananda, Tocqueville attends to many sub-explananda as well. For example: Why was feudal law so similar in different countries? Why did feudal law tend to disappear everywhere at the same time? Why did medieval municipal institutions decay? How account for the spectacular growth of Paris? Why did materialistic attitudes spread everywhere by the 18th century? How did France grow rich despite inefficient administration? Why was anticlericalism so strong in 18th century France? And so forth.

tions qui ont été établies à perpétuité en France depuis soixante ans". To understand the typically French combination of self-abasement and riotous insubordination, to comprehend why his contemporaries are "à la fois révolutionnaires et serviles", Tocqueville surely must ask both questions at once: what caused the Revolution? and why did the Republic yield to autocratic rule?

In the abstract, this is true. But concretely, the tasks of explaining the outbreak of revolution in 1789 and the turn to Bonapartism in the 1850s are assigned to different authors. The second job is given largely to Tocqueville the sermonizing moralist. True, this Tocqueville's explanations possess certain subtleties worth reconstructing *en détail*. But their core is that the French are moral cowards, listless, docile, puny, weak, dead, privatized, trained in dependency, seduced by materialistic temptations, and so forth. In other words, Tocqueville's explanation of renewed Bonapartism continuously veers into an anti-bourgeois diatribe: the typical bourgeois has no high ambitions, cannot sacrifice himself, is afraid to die for a cause, does not want fame, and so forth. Worse yet, when explaining the origins of the Second Empire, *L'Ancien régime* offers an edifying moral lesson: if you had only been good, then you would have been saved. France was damned because it was morally bad. Tocqueville complains bitterly about "le lieu sourd où nous vivons". He laments the corruption of French souls by "les passions débilitantes". And he often lapses into simple hectoring: Don't be servile! Stand up like a man! Love liberty for its own sake! Be a hero! That sceptical readers have been estranged by such banalities, delivered from on high, is not particularly surprising.

Tocqueville's explanation of the Revolution, by contrast, is almost wholly unspoiled by sighs and exhortations. The sections that deal with this causal question, indeed, seem to issue from a different hemisphere of his 'brain. They are dryly descriptive, paradoxical, subtle, imaginative, and refreshingly devoid of the need to preach at his fellows or save France from herself. This second Tocqueville provides a brilliant analytical framework for the study of class conflict in the making. He forgets to warn us against moral decadence and tells us instead about the genesis of hatreds and mutual ignorance among status-groups in eighteenth-century France. It is this aspect of Tocqueville's argument that makes his book an unrivaled classic of social theory.

The Revolution as a Break with the Past

My approach to Tocqueville, in sum, will be deliberately selective or partial. A final justification for a one-eyed look at *L'Ancien régime* is this. Tocqueville's two explanatory aims are not only different; they also interfere with each other. When he is trying to explain the genesis of Bonapartist France, he is driven to characterize the Revolution as a kind of parenthesis, as a momentary hiccup interrupting the unremitting march of administrative centralization from Louis XIV to Napoleon III. Naturally enough, this tendency to view the Revolution as a negligible intermezzo in an ongoing concert tends to becloud or belittle the great question: Why did the Revolution itself occur?² This Revolution-diminishing strand of the book is so powerful, in fact, that it leads some highly intelligent readers (such as François Furet and Albert Hirschman³ to conclude that Tocqueville's principal interest is *the self-delusion of the Revolutionary generation*. But is this really what concerned him most? Is his main point that the Revolutionaries thought they were breaking radically with the past, while (alas) their actions were futile or self-defeating because all they did was give France more of the same? I think not. This plausible-sounding interpretation of the book is ultimately misleading. Its inadequacy can be shown by citing chapter and verse. The Revolution, according to Tocqueville, was marked by a "grande destruction du passé". Those who saw the Revolution as massively destructive of the past were not at all deluded, therefore. Tocqueville is not describing a hiccup when he writes of "une des plus vastes et des plus dangereuses révolutions qui aient jamais paru dans le monde" and "une des plus grandes perturbations qui se soient jamais

² Bizarrely enough, Tocqueville asks how the old regime died, even while he tells us that it is still alive. The rhetorical confusion here is lessened when we realize that there are two old regimes that died: one, the 18th-century monarchy killed by the Revolution and the other, the feudal regime killed by the monarchs (in this case, the Revolution guillotined a corpse); so, when he is demoting the revolution to the status of a parenthesis, he can say that the old feudal regime remains dead at the hands of centralizing power, while the old monarchical regime has been resurrected. Another textual ambiguity is worth noting here. Sometimes Tocqueville claims that centralization was just as great in the 18th century as it is now; at other times he says it was much less advanced, otherwise men would have been servile then, and no Revolution (requiring personal courage and rebelliousness) would have occurred.

³ François Furet, *Penser la Révolution française* (Paris: Gallimard, 1978); Albert Hirschman, *Reactionary Rhetoric* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991).

rencontrées dans l'histoire d'un grand peuple" and "le plus vaste bouleversement et la plus effroyable confusion qui furent jamais".

I want to focus, then, on Tocqueville's theory of the causes of this cataclysmic event, which is anything but a meaningless parenthesis. He is no monocausal theorist, of course. His generic account of the revolutionary upheaval emphasizes many different factors. But I will focus on those factors I judge to be most important, and I will neglect others that are, perhaps, more often discussed. One consequence worth noting (and a potential ground for criticizing my reading) is, that by privileging 1789 over the 1850s, I give somewhat less attention than most interpreters to *the evils of centralization*. In my reading, centralization is an important factor for Tocqueville, but, oddly, more a peripheral than a central one.⁴

The principal historical question posed by *L'Ancien régime* then, is this: Why did the Revolution break out in France and not elsewhere? Why not in England or Germany for instance? why "en France plutôt qu'ailleurs"?⁵ Subsidiary questions in the same vein are: Why was the Revolution stronger in some parts of France than others? Why was resistance to the Revolution stronger in the Vendée than elsewhere? And why was there more sympathy for the Revolution in some parts of Germany than in other parts? What these questions tell us (obviously enough) is that Toc-

⁴ There are three problems that need to be addressed in any serious examination of Tocqueville's thinking about centralization: (1) centralization created the France that Tocqueville passionately loved; (2) there is something psychologically weird about Tocqueville's decision to make *the Prefect* rather than *the Guillotine* the symbol of the Revolution, given that his father was a Prefect; (3) centralization was a *product* of the Revolution only in a negative sense; it was a *residue*; the Revolution permanently wrecked the entire ancien régime *except* for centralization; the latter survived a rigorous process of weeding-out; administrative centralization is "la seule portion de la constitution politique de l'ancien régime qui ait survécu à la Révolution"; as a result, Tocqueville "explains" the 1850s largely by invoking a stubborn holdover of structural patterns; his approach to explaining 1789 is quite different, focusing on newness.

⁵ One important reason, in Tocqueville's view, is admittedly centralization. For instance, there was a revolution in France and not in England because Paris dominated France more thoroughly than London dominated England. (In Germany and the United States, of course, no vulnerable nerve-center of the regime could be isolated for attack.) The centrality that Paris had gained by the end of the eighteenth century — referring to the capital city, Tocqueville writes: "en 1789, it est déjà la France même" — helps explain why the French monarchy, after having withstood many violent shocks through the centuries, was toppled by "une émeute" or urban riot.

queville's method is not accidentally comparative, but essentially so. He says it bluntly, in fact. You cannot understand the French Revolution if you have studied only France. The scientific study of society (unlike, say, the study of Universal Grammar) begins with the observation of *exceptionalisms*. While it resembled in some ways its neighbors, England and Germany, France was the only great Western land to experience a massive Revolution at the end of the eighteenth century. How can this, its unique destiny, be explained? By approaching the Revolution in a comparative perspective, Tocqueville forces himself to focus on precisely those aspects of pre-Revolutionary French society that distinguished it from its neighbors, and that may therefore help explain its singular fate. He thus brings into the foreground variables and causal factors (such as the all-importance of Paris) that a historian attending to France alone would probably not have considered so decisive.⁶

Blaming Rationalism

So what were the causes of the French Revolution, according to Tocqueville? One often-discussed candidate is the Enlightenment. Indeed, Tocqueville calls eighteenth-century philosophy "une des causes principales de la Révolution". And he blames the *philosophes* for importing an abstract literary style into political life. More specifically, he sometimes asserts that the ideas of popular sovereignty and equality before the law were "les causes de la révolution française". Public attacks on religion increased peasant and bourgeois frustrations by depriving people of a palpable consolation for their social inferiority.

Unlike England, France had been deprived of a ruling aristocracy. As a result, there was a leadership-gap, a vacuum at the top. Unique to France, this void was filled by inexperienced men of letters who conducted a "sorte de politique abstraite et littéraire". Above the real society, the *philosophes* constructed "une société imaginaire, dans laquelle tout paraissait simple et coordonné, uniforme, équitable et conforme à la raison". The French

⁶ Tocqueville is quite aware, incidentally, that every society is "exceptional", and that there is no normal or standard path of development; he therefore uses the rule/exception or normality/deviation scheme in a wholly nominalist manner, making (say) England the rule from which France deviates in one passage and France the rule from which England deviates in another. The idea of a *Sonderweg*, in his hands, is simply a technique for focusing attention on social forces and institutional patterns that would otherwise be neglected.

nation, having read the *philosophes*, "transporta dans la politique toutes les habitudes de la littérature." The revolutionaries, in particular, had acquired a penchant for abstract theories from the Encyclopedists. They had the same taste for complete systems of legislation, the same disdain for "des faits existants," the same naive trust in theory, the same utopian dream of social equality, the same desire to remake the constitution totally according to the rules of logic and a single plan rather than trying gradually to amend its parts.

But this *trahison des clercs* -view of 1789, while admittedly present in *L'Ancien régime*, is less important than many readers have imagined. In fact, Tocqueville is not really inclined to a *c'est la faute à Jean-Jacques* -approach. He does not, ultimately, advance an intellectualist theory of the origin of the Revolution. For one thing, he is far from being a conservative enemy of rationalization. Even a desultory reading shows that Tocqueville was not a militant anti-rationalist. Despite a few misleading passages, he seldom defends ramshackle custom against rules based on reason.⁸ He passionately favors attempts to rationalize taxation, criminal procedures, punishments, conscription, promotions, poor relief, and so forth. The worst aspects of the Revolution, he argues, resulted from too little, not too much reform.

For instance, the Revolution slavishly copied the old regime's total lack of protections for suspected criminals on trial. Fouquier-Tinville was no innovator. Under the *ancien régime*, during states of emergency, police arrested people in pre-dawn raids on the basis of informants, and kept them in prison for long periods without bringing them before a judge. In other words, the Revolution learned its methods not from the Encyclope-

⁷ Taine and other conservatives who *did* advance this causal theory, never wrote with such uninhibited enthusiasm for the Revolution as Tocqueville. No counterrevolutionary anti-rationalist would ever have written: "C'est 89, temps d'inexpérience sans doute, mais de générosité, d'enthousiasme, de virilité et de grandeur, temps d'immortelle mémoire, vers lequel se tourneront avec admiration et avec respect les regards des hommes, quand ceux qui l'ont vu et nous-mêmes auront disparu depuis longtemps." Unlike counterrevolutionary theorists, horrified by Fronde-like disobedience, Tocqueville considered servility (or the bent knee) to be much more deplorable than insubordination.

⁸ There is some textual basis for this misunderstanding, admittedly. Concerning the Encyclopedists and their revolutionary heirs, he wrote: "Tous pensent qu'il convient de substituer de règles simples et élémentaires, puisées dans la raison et dans la loi naturelle, aux coutumes compliquées et traditionnelles qui régissent la société de leur temps"; but his enlightened contempt for cruel and absurd pre-revolutionary practices is displayed throughout the book.

dists, but from the Encyclopedists' enemies, those who had organized show trials, exceptional tribunals, and summary procedures — all without chance for appeal. The Jacobins learned to abuse police powers by imitating the last two centuries of the monarchy. The Revolution added nothing but "l'atrocité de son génie".⁹ In penal law, then, Tocqueville never suggests that eighteenth-century France was afflicted by too much Enlightenment, too much rationalization, or too much reform.

In other areas, too, Tocqueville was a rationalist. Consider his embrace of the basic rationalistic principle of modern society, which was also at the core of the Revolution: "le grand principe de la société moderne, que tout le monde doit être également sujet à l'impôt". When he denounces "l'inégalité ridicule et insensée qui existait en France au moment de la Révolution", he means to endorse, among other things, a more equitable tax code. The Terror could have been avoided, he believed, if there had been more opportunity for the piecemeal reform of blatant fiscal injustices. Revealing his thorough dislike of the institutions of the old régime, finally, he writes that "aucune de ces institutions détestables n'aurait pu subsister vingt ans, s'il avait été permis de les discuter." Why did the pre-revolutionary system collapse? Because it was so stubbornly closed to rational reform.

Given all this, what positive causal role in the outbreak of the revolution does Tocqueville attribute to eighteenth-century rationalism? To answer this question, we must notice that for Tocqueville, the main ideas of the *philosophes* were not new. Philosophers throughout history had criticized inherited traditions in the name of reason. Religious scepticism and utopian ideas of social justice, however, had previously been safely contained "dans la tête de quelques philosophes". They became dangerous only when popularized, only when they seeped into "la foule". Enlightenment thinking cannot be *the* cause of 1789 for the simple reason that Enlightenment thinking has always existed. The historically important question therefore, is: Why did such old notions suddenly "catch on" in eighteenth-century France? Why were these perennial ideas, for the first time, accepted by large numbers of people? The *philosophes* may have lit the match, but why was the straw so dry? Tocqueville's causal question concerns the straw, not the match. He does not ask, for instance: Why did *philosophes* attack religion? (He assumes that philosophers have always done that.) What he asks is rather: "pourquoi ont-ils trouvé, plus que tous leurs prédécesseurs, l'oreille de la foule toute ouverte pour les entendre et son

⁹ Remember that Tocqueville went to America in 1831 on a quintessentially Benthamite mission, to learn lessons for the reform of the prison system.

esprit si enclin à les croire?" Philosophical treatises about equality too, were important only because they caught fire in the popular mind. They resonated with "la haine violente et inextinguible de l'inégalité" of those who had suffered for centuries under the old system. To explain the revolution therefore, it is never sufficient to cite utopian works by progressive writers. It is not enough to blame irresponsible intellectuals. What must be explained, principally, is popular receptivity to intellectual utopianism. What caused, for example, the peasant's "propres fureurs" which gave philosophical ideas their social weight and force. The crucial motives here are less cognitive than emotional. The important actors are not the producers but the consumers of egalitarian and irreligious ideas. Tocqueville's emphasis, as a consequence, falls on the hatred and envy amassed in the hearts of so many Frenchmen against their own nobility.

The Dangers of Economic Improvement

Tocqueville's remarks on impractical Enlightenment rationalizers and dreamers therefore, are less important than his paradoxical claim that the most violent attacks on the old regime occurred in those regions where conditions were best. Why, Tocqueville asks, did an antifeudal revolution break out in the European country where the burdens of feudalism were the lightest? Why was feudalism hated more in its reduced and weakened form than when it was robust? His answer, as is well known, is that the Revolution broke out in France *because* the burdens of feudalism in that country were relatively light. To understand this paradox is to understand the basic argument of *L'Ancien régime*.

Tocqueville is notoriously addicted to paradoxes. He views them in an almost aesthetic way. In fact, he has a disconcerting tendency to heap one upon another or to collect them like jewelry. The revolutionary movement, he tells us, was centered in those parts of France where the standard of living was most improved: "Les parties de la France qui devaient être le principal foyer de cette révolution sont précisément celles où les progrès se font le mieux voir." (He means, especially, the Ile-de-France area, where the *taille* was less onerous than elsewhere, where the *corvée* had been abolished, and where freedom and prosperity were better assured than in any other *pays d'élection*.) In addition, resistance to the Revolution was greatest in parts of France where feudal burdens were heaviest, where there had been the least improvement in social conditions. Similarly, sympathy for the Revolution was greatest in those parts of Germany (the Rhine valley) where feudal burdens were lightest.

These paradoxes draw their force, obviously enough, from background

expectations. We would normally expect that the most unjust and oppressive social arrangements would incite the most hatred. But this, Tocqueville tells us, is not the case. The objective degree of injustice in a society is one thing, subjective sensitivity to injustice is another. Delinquences may be old, but irritation may be new. The odiousness of an institution resides not in the institution itself but in the way it is perceived and interpreted, that is, in the sensibilities of those grated by it. To cite one of Tocqueville's examples: under Louis XVI, minor pinpricks proved more painful — "produisit plus d'émotion" — than did the *dragonnades* of Louis XIV. Oppressions were objectively less severe, in other words, but skins had simultaneously become less thick. Indeed, the second transformation occurred more quickly than the first. Touchiness about wrongs varies independently of the extent of these wrongs. In many cases, in fact, inequality and resentment of inequality vary inversely.

A conventional approach would suggest a simple explanation for this phenomenon. A more oppressive system is, indeed, hated more than a less oppressive one, but it also disposes of the means to inhibit all outward signs of protest and discontent. A less oppressive regime is, logically enough, less hated, but nevertheless provokes greater howls of dissatisfaction and even more open revolt simply because it ceases clamping down on individuals with such ruthless force. Tocqueville would certainly not slight such considerations. But he insists that aims and motivations, not just the actions based upon them, are shaped by the social opportunities that an actor perceives to be available. His belief that will is shaped by understanding, that desires are a function of perceived opportunity, leads him to a theory of psychological wounds. Or, as an historian of ideas might explain, he takes a theory of psychological wounds, developed by seventeenth-century French moral psychologists, and applies it to the explanation of large-scale social change.

Put abstractly, the leading question of *L'Ancien régime* is this: Under what conditions is inequality perceived as an intolerable injury? And Tocqueville's answer, again formulated abstractly, is that inequality is perceived as a greater injury when there is less of it and when status relations in general are in flux. This is the central paradox of the work. More concretely, the situation of the German peasant was much worse than that of the French peasant: serfdom still existed in parts of Germany and dependent labor in the countryside was treated very badly. But it was the French peasant who revolted, not the German. From a German perspective, then, the French Revolution was a revolt of the privileged. Why did this occur? Because feudal burdens seemed heaviest where they were in fact the lightest: "Leur joug a paru le plus insupportable là où il était en réalité le moins lourd." But why?

We might expect the greatest social frustrations to erupt when conditions are going from bad to worse, *de mal en pis*, as in Los Angeles in 1992. But the French experience (Tocqueville says) suggests the contrary lesson, that a people who have suffered great oppression will take up arms against their oppressors when they feel the pressure relaxing: "Il arrive le plus souvent qu'un peuple qui avait supporté sans se plaindre, et comme s'il ne les sentait pas, les lois les plus accablantes, les rejette violemment dès que le poids s'en allège." Thus, paradoxically, the growing prosperity of the reign of Louis XVI actually helped bring about the Revolution.¹⁰ Tocqueville summarizes this finding with his fine phrase: "Les Français ont trouvé leur position d'autant plus insupportable qu'elle devenait meilleure."

So, why did the Revolution occur in France and not England or Germany? Why did it happen at the end of the eighteenth century and not earlier? There are many contributory factors, several of which I will mention in passing, but Tocqueville's basic answer revolves around "les trésors de haine et d'envie" stored-up in the hearts of the people. Put simply, the 18th-century French nobles were envied by the bourgeoisie and hated by the peasants more than were their contemporaries in Germany and England and their counterparts in earlier periods of French history. This thesis can be conveniently divided into five sub-topics: bourgeois envy, peasant hatred, the anaesthetic of inevitability, the perception of noble privilege as a quid-pro-quo, and the anaesthetic of anonymity.

Bourgeois Envy

Man is a comparing animal. He is interested, above all, in his "position relative". Class differences become more galling as they become more narrow because a narrowing of differences invites comparisons. If I am otherwise similar to a person who possesses much more than I do, I ask: Why does he benefit instead of me? This question adds a subjective bitterness to the objective difficulties of my situation. An eighteenth-century French bourgeois read the same books, attended the same Parisian salons, and enjoyed the same pleasures as a noble. Status differences were perceived as more humiliating and demeaning precisely because the nobility did not seem like a different race: they were just like the bourgeoisie, only privi-

¹⁰ During the two decades *before* the Revolution, he claims, national prosperity made great forward strides — much greater, in fact, than between 1789 and 1810; Tocqueville is not perfectly clear about the consequences of a long-term improvement being punctuated by a short-term decline; even though this seems to have been a crucial factor in the outbreak of the Revolution.

leged. In Germany, too, bright and educated functionaries were not considered *hoffähig*; they could appear at court on rare occasions, but never with their families: "Comme en France, cette infériorité blessait d'autant plus que chaque jour cette classe devenait plus éclairée et plus influente." Social exclusion was especially humiliating because those excluded were equal to their excluders in education and bureaucratic function. And this phenomenon, Tocqueville says, was even more widespread and socially explosive in France. He summarizes his point in the following way: "le bourgeois et le noble étaient plus semblables" than earlier and were therefore more alienated from each other.

This analysis, it should be noticed, suggests again that Tocqueville's etiology of revolution is not primarily intellectualist. The *concept* of equality becomes plausible or widely accepted only after human beings have become similar enough to make comparison seem vaguely plausible. A universalistic or egalitarian conception of justice will simply have no grip on the imagination of human beings raised in radically hierarchical societies, where the upper classes rotated in a detached social orbit. If men are too dissimilar from each other they cannot even conceive of a law applicable to all. Such a law would be incomprehensible: "Il y a des temps où les hommes sont si différents les uns des autres que l'idée d'une même loi applicable à tous est pour eux comme incompréhensible."¹¹ Egalitarian ideology alone cannot destroy a hierarchical society. On the contrary, a hierarchical order has to have already crumbled halfway before egalitarian ideas can begin to take hold.

¹¹ Not social levelling alone, it should be said, but also Christianity prepared human beings to view each other as equals; Tocqueville notes that the revolutionary wars resembled less the wars of one kingdom against another than the wars of religion in the wake of the Reformation. There was the same proselytizing and propaganda, and the same crossing of borders. Tocqueville attributes this curious similarity to the abstractness of the conception of man shared by Christians and Encyclopedists! Both Christianity and the rights of man have a cosmopolitan appeal because both abstract from local "moeurs"; the French Revolution "a considéré le citoyen d'une façon abstraite, en dehors de toutes les sociétés particulières" while "les religions considèrent l'homme en général, indépendamment du pays et du temps." How this analysis relates to Tocqueville's worries about Enlightenment atheism, which he deplors for having destroyed religious consolations for poverty, is unclear.

Peasant Hatred

To explain bourgeois envy of the nobility, Tocqueville stresses an interpersonal contrast effect. To explain peasant hatred of the nobility, on the other hand, he invokes status-inconsistency or intrapersonal contrast effect.¹² The peasants were not similar enough to the nobles to compare themselves with them and thus to envy their privileges. But they did hate the nobles whose animals destroyed peasant crops and who flagrantly consumed the food that the peasants labored so hard to grow. The French peasants hated the nobles more than did their German counterparts, however, not because they were treated worse, but because they were relatively better off, that is, because they were landowners. This situation was unique in Europe, "un pareil état de choses ne se trouvait alors nulle part ailleurs qu'en France". As a result, Tocqueville seizes on the economic privileges of the French peasantry as a good candidate for helping explain France's exceptionalism. It is the peasant's ownership of land, primarily, that explains "les trésors de haine et d'envie qui se sont amassés dans son cœur". The peasant does not compare himself with his superiors, but instead makes a comparison of some with other aspects of his own life. French peasants are free in so many domains: Why should they be unfree in others? Because they own land, moreover, they are affected directly by the tithe, from which the nobles are conspicuously exempt. Owning land, they pour their heart and soul into growing crops.¹³ All the more sickened and incensed do they feel therefore, when the nobleman's rabbits chew their lettuce to shreds.

¹² Tocqueville's explanations are always complex and multi-layered, of course.

For instance, he also invokes an intrapersonal contrast effect to explain bourgeois hatred of the nobility. Talented members of the middle classes were increasingly powerful and well-educated. Thus, they naturally perceived their lack of honor as a form of status-inconsistency, jarring with their widely recognized social importance.

¹³ Tocqueville presents the inordinate desire to own land, notable among the French peasantry, as an irrational passion, similar to the passion for office among the French bourgeoisie. The value of land-ownership is determined not on economic grounds, as a means of maximizing wealth, but by a cultural belief about what sort of life is worth living: "Ce petit coin du sol qui lui appartient en propre dans ce vaste univers le remplit d'orgueil et d'indépendance." Owned land is a kind of sense organ, moreover, magnifying the peasant's sensibility to noble delinquencies. Propertyless peasants would have been "insensible" to many of the abuses that caused the French peasantry to revolt.

The Anaesthetic of Perceived Inevitability

Man is a comparing animal. So far we have seen how interpersonal and intrapersonal comparisons can affect the subjective interpretation of objective inequalities and injuries. We can now turn to a third point, the role of change. Tocqueville contends that evils become more hurtful when we believe that they are avoidable. As he puts it: "Le mal qu'on souffrait patiemment comme inévitable semble insupportable dès qu'on conçoit l'idée de s'y soustraire."¹⁴ Inequalities, therefore, are more difficult to bear, for example, when status relations in general are undergoing significant changes. Every palpable change suggests that further changes are in the offing. So much the worse do the disadvantaged feel when expected improvements do not occur. This pattern explains, in part, why the process of reform is so difficult to control. Reform is a Pandora's box, not a safety valve. By reforming one abuse, the reformer raises popular consciousness that abuses in general are reformable: "Tout ce qu'on ôte alors des abus semble mieux découvrir ce qui en reste et en rend le sentiment plus cuisant." And expectations are likely to proliferate faster than the reformer's ability to satisfy them.

Something similar can be said about social mobility. The fiction that our lowly social rank is necessary or inevitable acts as a kind of anaesthetic, numbing us to the humiliation of our position. But once we begin to think that we do not have to remain where we are, once we begin to see escape or upward mobility as a real possibility, the numbness wears off. The greatest source of painful envy in the old regime, therefore, was the openness of the nobility, that is, the tradition of ennobling commoners. The practice of ennoblement worsened the condition of the middle classes, not objectively but subjectively, by reminding them that they remained stigmatized inferiors and, at the same time, making their continuation in that position seem arbitrary or contingent: "Le système des annoblissements, loin de diminuer la haine du roturier contre le gentilhomme, l'accroissait donc au contraire sans mesure."¹⁵ (A Tocquevillean would assume that the chance to emigrate from the GDR, however small, would

¹⁴ In his 1836 essay on the political and social condition of France, Tocqueville made the contrary point: watching others climb out of difficult circumstances can be a solace because it suggests that one's own turn may be next.

¹⁵ There was, naturally, more animosity toward new than ancient nobles, "plus d'irritation contre les annoblis que contre les nobles"; according to Tocqueville therefore, the "annoblis" asked for ennoblements to be stopped not only to pull the ladder up behind them and to increase the value of their recently acquired privileges, but also to prevent an upsurge in dangerous envy.

increase the pain of those left behind. It would increase the pain of their situation because it would raise a frustrating thought: it could have been me! 16)

Envy-Avoidance through Quid-pro-quos

Tocqueville's fourth point is that resentment of inequality is partly determined by cultural norms. A nobleman's privilege is hated less, so he claims, when it is perceived as a quid-pro-quo, as part of a package. The advantages that accrue to high status are more acceptable when coupled with onerous responsibilities and obligations. Unlike the English nobility, the French *noblesse* ceased being an aristocracy and became a caste. "L'Angleterre était administrée aussi bien que gouvernée par les principaux propriétaires du sol." The same cannot be said of France, and this basic difference between the two countries helps explain why an anti-noble revolution occurred there and not in England. (Just as the France-Germany contrast dominates his discussion of the peasantry, so the France-England contrast dominates his discussion of the nobility.)

When peasants are governed by their *seigneur*, they view his privileges as earned. In France, by the eighteenth century, churches were repaired, schools were built, justice was administered, and the poor were succored not by the local landed nobility but by the agents of the crown. (This is the point where centralization begins to play a significant role in Tocqueville's account.) In fact: "à mesure que la noblesse cesse de faire ces choses, le poids de ses privilèges paraît plus lourd, et leur existence même finit par ne plus se comprendre". Inequalities are resented less if they are perceived as just recompense for the exercise of political power. Taxes in the countryside were made unbearable not by their objective heaviness, then, but because peasants were no longer governed by local nobles.¹⁷ If the French peasants had still been under their local lord's control, they would not have seen feudal rights as so obnoxious. These rights would not have *stood out* so painfully. They would not have been highlighted by a contrast effect. The peasant would have seen these privileges as integral to the con-

16 Envy caused by comparison with those who are already in a better situation should be distinguished from envy caused by comparison with those moving from an inferior to a superior position.

17 "Ces charges étaient pesantes sans doute; mais ce qui les leur faisait paraître insupportables était précisément la circonstance qui aurait dû, ce semble, leur en alléger le poids: ces mêmes paysans avaient été soustraits, plus que nulle part ailleurs en Europe, au gouvernement de leurs seigneurs."

stitution of France: "Si le paysan français avait encore été administré par son seigneur, les droits féodaux lui eussent paru bien moins insupportables, parce qu'il n'y aurait vu qu'une conséquence naturelle de la constitution du pays." In short, one and the same set of privileges are perceived as more injurious, are hated more, once their normative justification disappears.

Here too, admittedly, Tocqueville's argument often swerves into the moralistic and the preachy. The French nobility was so spineless and myopic as to sell for a few measly tax exemptions their chance to administer localities and to participate in national or provincial Estates. By forfeiting real honor and power, they purchased the superficial thrill of prancing at Versailles. The English ruling class was much more hearty. It kept its right to supervise and preside. Indeed, "elle était prête à tout pour commander". The French nobility, in short, made a despicably craven bargain, exchanging a private good for a public one. They gained exemptions as individuals but lost the right to meet in Assemblies and act as a corps. They gave up their political power for financial advantage. This short-sighted exchange not only exposed them to the hatred and envy of the lower orders. It also led to the slow decay of their own characters and skills.¹⁸ This helps explain "l'étrange aveuglement avec lequel les hautes classes de l'ancien régime ont aidé ainsi elle-mêmes à leur ruine."

¹⁸ "La partie politique avait disparu; la portion pécuniaire seule était restée, et quelquefois s'était fort accrue." The abandonment of active political and administrative responsibilities, Tocqueville argues, not only subjected the old nobles to hatred and envy; it also acted upon their own characters, rendering them incompetent and ignorant. He emphasizes this debilitating process to explain why the nobility was so absurdly unaware of the destruction that was coming. They were so out of touch with public business and had so few contacts with the lower orders, that they were completely shocked to learn that docile-looking peasants could turn into brutal savages. Above all, having abandoned practical affairs for the vanities of courtiers, they lost "l'habitude de lire dans les faits." As a result, those with most to lose by a collapse of the old system were in the forefront of its destroyers; they were perplexingly myopic; they fell into a terrible revolution "sans la voir". Their blindness and lack of fact-mindedness resulted from their abandonment of political responsibility. The same cause led to their economic plight: "ils s'appauvrirent partout dans la proportion exacte on ils perdaient leur pouvoir"; "ils s'appauvrirent graduellement à mesure que l'usage et l'esprit du gouvernement leur manquaient"; "ils s'appauvrirent à mesure que leurs immunités s'accroissent." The mechanism Tocqueville invokes here is the following. As they lost power, the old nobility lost all opportunity to be practical, to calculate, and to hone their managerial skills. This

The Anaesthetic of Anonymity

Finally, Tocqueville discusses the way the subjective resentment of inequality is exacerbated by a clear causal consciousness of who brings about, and who draws advantage from, one's suffering. The same burden will feel lighter or heavier to the extent that we are less or more aware of specific individuals who produce and benefit from our pains. To the extent that the originators and beneficiaries of our torments remain anonymous or unidentified, we tend to interpret our suffering as *misfortune*. And with misfortunes we eventually learn to live. By contrast, once we know who causes our pain, and who is advantaged by it, we tend to interpret our suffering as *injustice*. And injustices are much harder to put behind us. The same situation will rankle more enduringly if we see it as an injustice rather than a misfortune. Injustice might even be defined as a misfortune that the victim cannot forget because he can, unluckily, blame it upon a specific individual. With this pattern in mind, Tocqueville lays part of the responsibility for the outbreak of anti-élite hatred and envy in the French Revolution on the political élite itself, not on the men of letters, but on the nobles and functionaries of the crown. The nobles in particular contributed to their own destruction by discoursing on the absurdity of all established customs, "pour passer le temps". Perversely enough, they put a spotlight on the sufferings of the peasant. "Ils composaient de tous ses abus un tableau effroyable, dont ils avaient soins de multiplier à l'infini les copies."

Like Mme Du Châtelet, who would strip naked in front of her manservant on the assumption that he was not a flesh-and-blood man at all, old-régime élites thought they could say anything they wished in front of a social inferior: "On se mit à parler devant lui de lui-même comme s'il n'avait pas été là." They spoke "à haute voix" about "des injustices cruelles". They painted the miseries of the poor in bright colors. In the corvées, they wrote, the poor man is forced to work "au profit des riches".¹⁹ The King, too, openly told the truth, speaking with more justice than discretion, uttering publicly "des vérités fort dures" and employing "singulière imprudence du langage". He said that existing corporations were a product of violence and greed. He also emphasized the injustice and

acquired incompetence, in turn, caused them to manage their own estates incompetently. The English upper classes, Tocqueville notes, did not grow poor. The reason is simple: they kept their managerial skills in shape by continuing to wield political power.

¹⁹ Only the rich benefit from long-distance highways.

inhumanity of the rich who don't care if the poor die like flies, even though they "doivent aux travaux du pauvre tout ce qu'ils possèdent". In the grain trade debate of 1772 between the King and the Parlement of Toulouse, "les deux contendants s'accusaient volontiers l'un et l'autre des misères du peuple". Their common and unrelenting message to the people was: your superiors are responsible for your suffering!

"Des semblables paroles étaient périlleuses" because they *sensitized* the lower classes to their oppression. But Tocqueville's most striking claim is that the upper classes increased the subjective misery of the lower classes by finger-pointing, by explaining that it comes from an identifiable person and not from heaven or fate. Emblematic of this process was the attempt of the central government to gather precise information on who was rich in each village, how rich they were, how much taxes they would pay if taxes were equalized, and so forth: "C'était enflammer chaque homme en particulier par le récit de ses misères, lui en désigner du doigt les auteurs, l'enhardir par le vue de leur petit nombre, et pénétrer jusqu'au fond de son coeur pour y allumer la cupidité, l'envie et la haine." Our suffering is less when both the originators and the beneficiaries of our suffering remain unidentified or unspecific. When fingers are pointed and names are named, our objective condition may remain the same, but our experience of personal misery becomes more acute.

The Problem of Attention

Why was feudalism more hated in reduced form than when it was strong? That is the leading question of *L'Ancien régime*. Tocqueville's answer is complex and overwhelmingly psychological. He knows that a less repressive regime may provide greater opportunity for the voicing of protest. But he is less interested in varying opportunities than in varying motives. Not the chance to protest but the desire to protest is what he wants to explain. Institutions are more disliked the less power they have to do harm: "Elles inspirent d'autant plus de haine qu'étant plus en décadence elles semblent moins en état de nuire." But why is this the case? The bravery of social critics swells when an oppressor is suddenly driven to his knees. (Most domestic protesters against fascism and communism revealed themselves *after* the regimes fell.) But Tocqueville has a different point in mind. We hate an institution not because it harms us but because we see it as harming us. And we see it as harming us because it stands out, for one reason or another. His central intuition is that when the mountains are levelled, even small hills begin to look important. Thus, as a society

becomes more equal, all remaining inequalities stand out glaringly against the levelled ground: "en détruisant une partie des institutions du moyen âge on avait rendu cent fois plus odieux ce qu'on en laissait". That is why feudalism was hated more in its vestigial and declining form than when it was a flourishing system penetrating all aspects of social life.

Why is the most dangerous moment for a bad government the time when it tries to reform itself? Tocqueville's answer again involves the psychological salience of certain social injuries. Reforms are dangerous, he says, under three conditions: (1) when they violate rights, (2) when they are introduced and then suddenly withdrawn, creating a general atmosphere of unpredictability and confusion, and (3) when they are *half-way* reforms. Here I want to stress the third point.²⁰ Half-way reforms are so dangerous, according to Tocqueville, because of the contrast effect that they produce. Every successful reform *draws attention to unreformed abuses* and creates a thirst for further relief or improvement that cannot necessarily be slaked.

This brings us, by way of conclusion, to the methodical core of Tocqueville's approach. As I mentioned at the outset, Tocqueville's genius lay principally in his persistent application of seventeenth-century French moral psychology to problems of massive political and social change. One of the central insights of French moral psychology was most lucidly advanced by René Descartes in his *Passions de l'âme* (1649). According to Descartes, the principal passion in the mind of man and the main source of human irrationality is the inability to control one's attention. Sometimes our minds simply become fixated on an object. This passion, says Descartes, flows into all subordinate or lesser passions, such as love, envy, hate, and so forth. Similarly, we attend or fail to attend to an oncoming danger, and there is no calculation involved. So why do some objects catch our attention, and others not? This is the question bequeathed to Tocqueville by Descartes. *L'Ancien régime* represents an extended answer. Tocqueville's analysis of class hatred hinges upon attention. Inequalities are injurious not when they are objectively great but when they are subjectively salient, that is, when they seize our minds or catch fire in our eyes. Inequalities capture the attention and thereby pain the mind when they are small enough to invite comparisons and when they are changing quickly enough to suggest that further change is possible soon.

20 Not just half-reform, but also piecemeal or step-by-step reform is very dangerous: "Pour arriver à donner aux villages une administration collective et un petit gouvernement libre, il eût fallu d'abord y assujettir tout le monde aux mêmes impôts, et y diminuer la distance qui séparait les classes."

Tocqueville's class analysis is fascinating, among other reasons, because it stresses the attention-grabbing or attention-deflecting qualities of different stratification systems. He invokes three distinct polarities: closed vs. open; interactive vs. closeted; and clear vs. vague. Class systems can be classified according to these alternatives. Social stratification can (1) admit or exclude inter- and intragenerational mobility across class lines; (2) encourage or discourage daily cooperation and contact across class lines; and (3) foster status certainty or status uncertainty. Tocqueville employs these categories to compare the class systems of Europe with an eye to explaining the *Sonderweg* of France. In England, he claims, class boundaries are vague but closed and encourage daily cooperation among classes, while in France they are open but precise, and discourage such cooperation. Burke is wrong, therefore. England does not have an "open" élite. There is little intergenerational mobility across class lines. Instead, England has fuzzy or murky boundaries dividing the classes, so that many commoners can reasonably believe that they already are within a higher class. The English upper crust, ostensibly, was saved by this blurriness. Because "sa forme était indistincte et sa limite inconnue" it was a less salient target for lower-class resentment and envy. Moreover, if an ambitious individual got anywhere near the upper class, he could (sort of) be part of it. The advantage of such an arrangement came "moins de ce qu'on pouvait y entrer que de ce qu'on ne savait jamais quand on y était". A socially prominent member of the middle classes could associate himself with the governing status of the gentry and get some "éclat" and some profit from its power. In any case, Tocqueville also claims that the English stratification system is marked by a huge grey area or dim penumbra where individuals do not know for sure to what class they belong. Such vagueness or uncertainty, obviously enough, is quite different from social mobility. The line between classes in England is vague, but not easily crossed. The opposite is true in France, where class lines are brightly etched but quite easily traversed — "facilement franchissable". French classes do not present a static caste system, therefore; but class boundaries are sharp, not fuzzy; and therefore crossings have a peculiarly great value or social significance. Where boundaries are hard-edged, instead of soupy, every little movement takes on enormous significance. As a result, class boundaries were much more frustrating in France than in England. In the former country, "la barrière" was "toujours fixe et visible, toujours reconnaissable à des signes éclatantes, et odieux à qui restait dehors". Those nearest the upper class felt sorely *excluded*, because dividing-lines were eye-catching and upward mobility was, in principle, possible. Class-lines in France burned the onlooker's eye because they injured his pride. For this reason, Tocqueville speaks of "privilèges ... onéreux et humiliants".

What rankles psychologically are not the class-lines themselves, but only their flagrant display. In England the display was less flagrant and therefore less humiliating because the lines between classes were wrapped in a cloud.

Finally, the same attention to attention is noteworthy in Tocqueville's approach to taxation. Taxation is so important for Tocqueville's analysis because, as it was managed in eighteenth-century France, it *called attention to class differences*. Taxes are unequal in all countries, but they are most detested in France. Why? The simple answer is that "il y avait très peu de pays où elle fût devenue aussi visible et aussi constamment sentie qu'en France". To the injustice of an unequal tax burden was added the humiliation of being the only social group stigmatized in this way: "mais surtout au sentiment qu'un si grand poids ne pesait que sur eux seuls, et sur les plus misérables d'entre eux, l'ignominie de la condition rendant ses rigueurs plus amères". Objective rigors were made more bitter by perceived humiliation. The psychology of humiliation, based on invidious comparisons, explains why revenue extraction is the key to history: "de toutes les manières de distinguer les hommes et de marquer les classes, l'inégalité d'impôt est la plus pernicieuse et la plus propre à ajouter l'isolement à l'inégalité, et à rendre en quelque sorte l'un et l'autre incurables". Every year, when taxes are assessed and levied, nobles notice that they have an interest in being different and apart. Similarly, taxpayers notice that they are being gouged while others are not. Taxes impossible to overlook, which is why Tocqueville writes of "le plus odieux de tous ces privilèges, celui de l'exemption d'impôt". The *taille*, especially, was a hateful, humiliating, degrading stigma — hitting the poorest, leaving the rich untouched.²¹ Such a tax virtually declared that "contribuables" and "non-contribuables" belong to different human types. Tocqueville therefore views the *taille* as a monstrous arrangement that made the Revolution inevitable. It was painful less as a financial injury than as a badge of inferiority.

As a master of comparative political analysis with a psychological bent, Tocqueville is a source of inspiration for students of massive social change,

21 The crown's strategy, according to Tocqueville, was quite clever: the nobles did not want to participate in political assemblies together with commoners who actually paid taxes; therefore, the government did not have to expend any extra effort to prevent the nobles from rushing to the assemblies and cooperating with commoners. A blatantly unfair distribution of the tax burden caused the nobles to withdraw voluntarily from their traditional cooperation with the lower classes.

especially at the end of the twentieth century. He does not teach us why communism collapsed when and how it did (how could he?). But he does point us toward a wide range of psychological mechanisms that may well play the same role today as they did two hundred years ago.