

From: Alan Macfarlane, **The Riddle of the Modern World: Of Liberty, Wealth and Equality** (Macmillan, London, 2000).

LIBERTY, WEALTH AND EQUALITY

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

He admired the optimism and progressiveness of his American hosts, their 'belief in the wisdom and good sense of mankind; the perfectibility of the human race is contradicted by few, if any.'³ Yet his own experience and that of his parents showed that this Rousseauite or Godwinian utopianism was a delusion. The best one could do was to choose between evils, as in his advice in relation to France. It was no longer possible to return to the old, aristocratic, world. The Revolution had happened and so 'the only choice lay between two inevitable evils; that the question had ceased to be whether they would have an aristocracy or a democracy, and now lay between a democracy without poetry or elevation indeed, but with order and morality; and an undisciplined and depraved democracy, subject to sudden frenzies, or to a yoke heavier than any that has galled mankind since the fall of the Roman Empire.'⁴

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

Tocqueville was fully aware of the negative effects of the peculiar commercial and manufacturing

¹Tocqueville, **Journeys**, 150

²Tocqueville, **Memoir**, I, 390

³Tocqueville, **Memoir**, I, 305

⁴Tocqueville, **Memoir**, I, 398

developments in England and America. One was a human cost during the growing industrial and capitalist process which was pitifully obvious half a century on. There was the increasing inequality of wealth generated by machinery replacing human labour, a theme later taken up by Marx as one of the principal reasons for the inevitable collapse of capitalism. Tocqueville noted in Manchester that 'In this factory wages have a tendency to go down. Labour-saving devices are constantly being invented and, by increasing the competition among the workers, bring down the level of wages.'⁵ He saw the destitution of workers, in particular the migrant Irish in slums in the midland and northern cities and wrote, 'Here humanity attains its most complete development and its most brutish; here civilisation works its miracles, and civilised man is turned back almost into a savage.'⁶ There was a contradiction between increasing efficiency and increasing inhumanity, as Adam Smith had realized.

* * *

Yet the subject which obsessed Tocqueville above all others was the threat to individual liberty posed by the new form of civilization which he saw revealed in America. From his family's experience during the Revolution, and from his political experience during the various upheavals in France, he was well aware of the danger. Like his mentor Montesquieu he was terrified of the tendency towards absolutism and political repression. He believed that eternal vigilance was the price of freedom; '...to live in freedom one must grow used to a life full of agitation, change and danger; to keep alert the whole time with a restless eye on everything around; that is the price of freedom.'⁷ The difficulty was that political freedom consisted of walking a tightrope. Monarchical governments, as Montesquieu had shown, tended towards absolutism. The history of continental Europe had shown that.⁸ What is new about Tocqueville's thought is that with the experience of America he could see that the supposed antidote to this, democracy, was just as dangerous.

Tocqueville's awareness of the fragility of liberty and his pessimism is shown throughout his life. He believed that "'To be free one must be able to invent and persevere in a difficult enterprise, to be able to act on one's own; to live free, one must become accustomed to an existence full of agitation, movement and peril...'"⁹ For 'political liberty is easily lost; neglect to hold it fast, and it is gone.'¹⁰ For my part, I owe that I have no confidence in the spirit of liberty which seems to animate my contemporaries.'¹¹ He

⁵Tocqueville, **Journeys**, 97

⁶Tocqueville, **Journeys**, 96

⁷Tocqueville, **Journeys**, 106

⁸ Tocqueville, **Democracy**, I, 52-3; Tocqueville, **Journeys**, 30

⁹Drescher, **Tocqueville**, 127

¹⁰Tocqueville, **Democracy**, II, 649

¹¹Tocqueville, **Democracy**, II, 895

believed that there was a natural tendency towards political absolutism which lay embedded in the drive towards democracy itself. The tendency was not in doubt. 'Reflecting on what has already been said, one is both startled and alarmed to see how everything in Europe seems to tend toward the indefinite extension of the prerogatives of the central power and to make the status of the individual weaker, more subordinate, and more precarious.'¹² Anyone observing current affairs 'will see that in the last half century centralisation has increased everywhere in a thousand different ways. Wars, revolutions, and conquests have aided its advance...'¹³ Hence '...the social power is constantly increasing its prerogatives; it is becoming more centralised, more enterprising, more absolute, and more widespread.'¹⁴

The State is a predatory institution which sucks more and more power to itself. 'Thus the state is by no means satisfied by attracting all business to itself, but is more and more successful in deciding everything by itself, without control and without appeal.'¹⁵ It almost automatically increases in power. 'Society, which is in full progress of development, constantly gives birth to new needs, and each one of them is for government a new source of power; for it alone is in a position to satisfy them.'¹⁶ Thus the tendency towards increasing centralization and absolutism did not need a conscious plan on the part of would-be dictators. As he noted of the centralization in France, 'There is nothing to show that, to achieve this difficult result, the government of the "old order" followed a plan carefully thought out before hand; it only gave free play to the instinct, which leads every government to wish for the exclusive management of everything, an instinct which remained always the same despite the diversity of its agents.'¹⁷

The danger is all the greater because the process is simple and almost invisible. 'If the lights that guide us ever go out, they will fade little by little, as if of their own accord.'¹⁸ Despotism is the easy path. 'Thus the art of despotism, once so complicated, has been simplified; one may almost say that it has been reduced to a single principle.'¹⁹ Freedom is hard, despotism easy. 'It cannot be repeated too often:

¹²Tocqueville, **Democracy**, II, 882

¹³Tocqueville, **Democracy**, II, 892

¹⁴Tocqueville, **Democracy**, II, 893

¹⁵Tocqueville, **Democracy**, II, 888

¹⁶ Tocqueville, **Ancien**, 65

¹⁷ Tocqueville, **Ancien**, 64

¹⁸Tocqueville, **Democracy**, II, 595

¹⁹Tocqueville, **Democracy**, II, 881

nothing is more fertile in marvels than the art of being free, but nothing is harder than freedom's apprenticeship. The same is not true of despotism. Despotism often presents itself as the repairer of all the ills suffered, the support of just rights, defender of the oppressed, and founder of order. Peoples are lulled to sleep by the temporary prosperity it engenders, and when they do wake up, they are wretched. But liberty is generally born in stormy weather, growing with difficulty amid civil discords, and only when it is already old does one see the blessings it has brought.²⁰ What Tocqueville foresaw, in fact, was a new kind of bureaucratic despotism, based on mind-numbing routines rather than brute force and fear. 'Having thus taken each citizen in turn in its powerful grasp and shaped him to its will, government then extends its embrace to include the whole of society. It covers the whole of social life with a network of petty, complicated rules that are both minute and uniform, through which even men of the greatest originality and the most vigorous temperament cannot force their heads above the crowd.'²¹

Having seen the dangers, Tocqueville dedicated much of his life to opposing this tendency. "'To explain to men how to escape tyranny, that is the idea of both my books.'²² His urge to do so arose from two sources. Firstly he loved liberty above everything else. Like Montesquieu, he saw it as more important than wealth, equality or anything else. Near the end of the second **America** he wrote 'I think that at all times I should have loved freedom, but in the times in which we live, I am disposed to worship it.'²³ He loved it because of what it did for individuals and for the nation. "'For me, it is self-evident that liberty is the necessary condition, without which there has never been a truly great and virile nation.'²⁴ Liberty of the individual from governmental control leads to 'the ripening of individual strength which never fails to follow therefrom. Each man learns to think and to act for himself without counting on the support of any outside power which, however watchful it be, can never answer all the needs of man in society. The man thus used to seeking his well-being by his own efforts alone stands the higher in his own esteem as well as in that of others.'²⁵ On the contrary bureaucratic absolutism led to the crushing of individual responsibility and imagination, and ultimately set the citizen at odds with the state machine.

Tocqueville summarized his deep attachment to liberty in the following moving passage. 'That which in all ages has so strongly attached to it the hearts of certain men as its own attractions, its own charm, quite apart from any material advantages; it is the joy of being able to speak, to act, to breathe, without restraint under no sovereign but God and the law. He who desires in liberty any thing other than itself is born to be a servant. Certain nations pursue it obstinately through all kinds of peril and misfortune. It is not for the material blessings, which it brings, that they love it; they regard

²⁰Tocqueville, **Democracy**, I, 296

²¹Tocqueville, **Democracy**, II, 899

²²Tocqueville, quoted in Hearnshaw, 'Tocqueville', 109

²³Tocqueville, **Democracy**, II, 903

²⁴Drescher, **Tocqueville**, 191

²⁵Tocqueville, **Journey to America**, 51

liberty itself as a blessing so precious and so necessary, that no other good could console them for its loss, and with its enjoyment they console themselves for the loss of everything else. Others grow weary of it in the midst of their material prosperity; they let it be snatched from their hands without resistance in fear of risking by an effort the very well-being, which they owe to it. What is wanting to those last to remain free? Why? The very desire for freedom.²⁶

Tocqueville realized that while liberty also brought long term benefits, in the shorter term one might have to choose between liberty and other desirable things. The true love of liberty pursued it as an end, and not as a means. I no longer think that the true love of liberty is ever born from the mere view of the material comforts that it secures; for this view is often darkened. It is very true that in the long run, liberty always brings to those who know how to retain it, ease, comfort, and often riches; but there are occasions, when for the time being, it disturbs the enjoyment of these blessings; there are other occasions, in which despotism alone can give the transient enjoyment of them. Men who only prize liberty for these blessings have never long preserved it.²⁷

Tocqueville's passionate love of liberty would have been useless if he had felt that the situation was hopeless, the tendency to absolutism an inevitable progression. In fact he had some hope. In a letter of 1831 he wrote 'I avow that nonetheless I still hope more than I fear. It seems to me that in the midst of our chaos I perceive one incontestable fact. This is that for forty years we have made immense progress in the practical understanding of the ideas of liberty. Nations, like private people, need to acquire an education before they know how to behave. That our education advances, I cannot doubt.²⁸ Towards the end of the second **America** he explained that 'I have sought to expose the perils with which equality threatens human freedom because I firmly believe that those dangers are both the most formidable and the least foreseen of those which the future has in store. But I do not think that they are insurmountable.²⁹ He believed that 'Providence did not make mankind entirely free or completely enslaved. Providence has, in truth, drawn a predestined circle around each man beyond which he cannot pass; but within those vast limits man is strong and free, and so are peoples.³⁰

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

²⁶ Tocqueville, **Ancien**, 178

²⁷ Tocqueville, **Ancien**, 177

²⁸ Tocqueville, **Letters**, 66 (1831)

²⁹ Tocqueville, **Democracy**, II, 911

³⁰ Tocqueville, **Democracy**, II, 916

human sheep, and who indeed are often worse.³¹

* * *

What then could he do to help to avoid the growing dangers? The first step was to show that the very force which many people thought was delivering mankind from old style despotism contained within itself a tendency towards an even greater and more powerful tyranny. Tocqueville saw that, as part of that inevitable tendency towards equality of opportunity, there would also be an inevitable tendency towards some sort of political participation or 'democracy', rule by the people. Thus he wrote 'The century is primarily democratic. Democracy is like a rising tide; it only recoils to come back with greater force, and soon one sees that for all its fluctuations it is always gaining ground. The immediate future of European society is completely democratic; this can in no way be doubted.'³² Yet this merely filled him with apprehension. Writing of America he warned that 'This effect of democracy, joined to the extreme instability, the entire absence of coherence or permanence that one sees here, convinces me every day more and more, that the best government is not that in which all have share, but that which is directed by the class of the highest moral principle and intellectual cultivation.'³³ He believed that 'The realistic doctrine carried into politics leads to all the excesses of democracy; it facilitates despotism, centralization, contempt for individual rights, the doctrine of necessity.'³⁴ 'I therefore think that despotism is particularly to be feared in ages of democracy.'³⁵ 'For I am convinced that no nations are more liable to fall under the yoke of administrative centralisation than those with a democratic social condition.'³⁶

In a draft of a letter he summarized the message of the first part of **Democracy in America** as follows. "I had become aware that, in our time, the new social state that had produced and is still producing very great benefits was, however, giving birth to a number of quite dangerous tendencies. These seeds, if left to grow unchecked, would produce, it seemed to me, a steady lowering of the intellectual level of society with no conceivable limit, and this would bring in its train the mores of materialism and, finally, universal slavery. I thought I saw that mankind was moving in this direction, and I viewed the prospect with terror...My aim in writing [my] book was to point out these dreadful downward paths...to make these tendencies feared by painting them in vivid colours...to teach democracy to know itself, and thereby to direct itself and contain itself."³⁷ Thus 'To show men if

³¹ Tocqueville, **European Revolution**, 309-310.

³²Tocqueville, **Journeys**, 52

³³Tocqueville, **Memoir**, I, 311

³⁴Tocqueville, **Memoir**, II 53

³⁵ Tocqueville, **Democracy**, II, 903.

³⁶ Tocqueville, **Democracy**, I, 117.

³⁷Quoted in Jardin, **Tocqueville**, 273

possible how in a democracy they may avoid submitting to tyranny, or sinking into imbecility, is the theme of my book...³⁸

* * *

One of Tocqueville's great achievements was to see the way in which two planes which were normally held apart, the vertical one of social stratification, and the horizontal one of inter-personal relations, were actually part of the same thing. He realized that the changes he saw from a basically status (birth) based society to a contractual (achievement) one had immense effects on social relations. His basic insight was that there was a tension, inconsistency, mutual exclusion between two of the great themes of the French revolution, namely equality and fraternity. The essence of the problem was that 'Equality puts men side by side, without a common link to hold them firm.'³⁹ Instead of being links in a chain between past and future, or members of a group, they were 'free', but totally isolated individuals. Thus the danger of the new world that was emerging was that 'Men being no longer attached to one another by any tie of caste, of class, of corporation, of family, are only too much inclined to be preoccupied only with their private interests...to retire into a narrow individualism'⁴⁰ This was the new form of individualism which had been proclaimed in eighteenth century Enlightenment philosophy, in the work of Montesquieu, Smith or the other French philosophers. It was a world of 'no grades in society, no classes distinct, no fixed ranks; a people composed of individuals almost alike and wholly equal.'⁴¹

He believed that this was a relatively recent phenomenon, certainly in France. 'Our ancestors had not got the word "Individualism" - a word which we have coined for our own use, because in fact in their time there was no individual who did not belong to a group, no one who could look on himself as absolutely alone.'⁴² French society in the past had been based on exclusive and inclusive groupings, separate and antagonistic. Thus 'each of the thousand little groups, of which French society was composed, thought only of itself.'⁴³ His distinction between the older form of group 'selfishness', and the new individualism is put in the following passage. "Individualism" is a word recently coined to express a new idea. Our fathers only knew about egoism. Egoism is a passionate and exaggerated love of self which leads a man to think of all things in terms of himself and to prefer himself to all. Individualism is a calm and considered feeling which disposes each citizen to isolate himself from the mass of his fellows and withdraw into the circle of family and friends; with this little society formed to his taste, he gladly

³⁸Tocqueville, **Memoir**, I, 330

³⁹Tocqueville, **Democracy**, II, 657

⁴⁰Tocqueville, **Ancien**, xv

⁴¹Tocqueville, **Ancien**, 172

⁴²Tocqueville, **Ancien**, 102

⁴³Tocqueville, **Ancien**, 103

leaves the greater society to look after itself. Egoism springs from a blind instinct; individualism is based on misguided judgment rather than depraved feeling. It is due more to inadequate understanding than to perversity of heart.⁴⁴

Thus Tocqueville was very keen to distinguish 'individualism', which saw the person as part of a set of mutual responsibilities, from egoism, which was pure selfishness. He put this in terms of an aphorism. "So wrong is it to confound independence with liberty. There is nothing less independent than a free citizen"⁴⁵ If the citizen became too independent and egotistic, he would stop being a citizen. 'If the citizens continue to shut themselves up more and more narrowly in the little circle of petty domestic interests and keep themselves constantly busy therein, there is a danger that they may in the end become practically out of reach of those great and powerful public emotions which do indeed perturb peoples but which also make them grow and refresh them.'⁴⁶ On the other hand, citizens should have some personal free space. 'From this derives the maxim that the individual is the best and only judge of his own interest and that society has no right to direct his behaviour unless it feels harmed by him or unless it needs his concurrence.'⁴⁷ It was a difficult balance and one which he thought the Americans were more successful in achieving than his French contemporaries. 'Every American has the sense to sacrifice some of his private interests to save the rest. We want to keep, and often lose, the lot.'⁴⁸

What Tocqueville thought was that the growing equality would lead to a surfeit of egoism. This would be disastrous politically, but it would also have other undesirable effects. For instance, as we have seen, it altered man's sense of history, making him present-centred, e-historical.⁴⁹ Thus, especially in America, the roots were cut off and society was constantly being reinvented. It was not just that it was a new country, but the social structure led people to start again in each generation. Secondly, it led directly into that **Lonely Crowd** which David Riesman, one of Tocqueville's greatest disciples, analysed so well. 'Thus, not only does democracy make men forget their ancestors, but also clouds their view of their descendants and isolates them from their contemporaries. Each man is for ever thrown back on himself alone, and there is danger that he may be shut up in the solitude of his own heart.'⁵⁰ The loss to humanity would be immense. 'I fear that the mind may keep folding itself up in a narrower compass for ever without producing new ideas, that men will wear themselves out in trivial, lonely, futile

⁴⁴Tocqueville, **Democracy**, II, 652.

⁴⁵Drescher, **Tocqueville**, 197

⁴⁶Tocqueville, **Democracy**, II, 836

⁴⁷Tocqueville, **Democracy**, I, 79

⁴⁸Tocqueville, **Democracy**, II, 680

⁴⁹Tocqueville, **Democracy**, II, 653

⁵⁰Tocqueville, **Democracy**, II, 654.

activity, and that for all its constant agitation humanity will make no advance.⁵¹ Yet it would only be a temporary state, for in the weakness of atomized individuals there would be a tendency for the power of the State to increase. 'As the extent of political society expands, one must expect the sphere of private life to contract.'⁵²

The real problem was 'How to reconcile equality, which separates and isolates men, with liberty? How to prevent a power, the offspring of democracy, from becoming absolute and tyrannical? Where to find a force able to contend against this power among a set of men, all equal, it is true, but all equally weak and impotent?'⁵³ The danger was that since all power tends to corrupt, there would be a drift towards centralization and hence towards despotism. Tocqueville had seen this happen in France in relation to bureaucratic centralization: '...a taste for holding office and a desire to live on the public money is not with us a disease restricted to either party, but the great, chronic ailment of the whole nation; the result of the democratic constitution of our society and of the excessive centralisation of our Government; the secret malady which has undermined all former governments, and which will undermine all governments to come.'⁵⁴ The danger was aggravated by the passions and desires of men.

In a marvellous passage Tocqueville lays out the tendency towards benevolent despotism implicit in American civilization. "I am trying to imagine under what novel features despotism may appear in the world. In the first place, I see an innumerable multitude of men, alike and equal, constantly circling about in pursuit of the petty and banal pleasures with which they glut their souls. Each one of them, withdrawn into himself, is almost unaware of the fate of the rest. Mankind, for him, consists in his children and his personal friends. As for the rest of his fellow citizens, they are near enough, but he does not notice them. He touches them but feels nothing. He exists in and for himself, and though he still may have a family, one can at least say that he has not got a fatherland. Over this kind of men stands an immense, protective power which is alone responsible for securing their enjoyment and watching over their fate. That power is absolute, thoughtful of detail, orderly, provident, and gentle. It would resemble parental authority if, fatherlike, it tried to prepare its charges for a man's life, but on the contrary, it only tries to keep them in perpetual childhood. It likes to see the citizens enjoy themselves, provided that they think of nothing but enjoyment. It gladly works for their happiness but wants to be sole agent and judge of it. It provides for their security, foresees and supplies their necessities, facilitates their pleasures, manages their principal concerns, directs their industry, makes rules for their testaments, and divides their inheritances. Why should it not entirely relieve them from the trouble of thinking and all the cares of living?"⁵⁵

This portrait puts flesh on his idea that 'the type of oppression which threatens democracies is

⁵¹Tocqueville, **Democracy**, II, 836

⁵²Tocqueville, **Democracy**, II, 783

⁵³Tocqueville, **Memoir**, I, 10

⁵⁴Tocqueville, **Recollections**, 33

⁵⁵Tocqueville, **Democracy**, II, 898

different from anything there has ever been in the world before.⁵⁶ The difference between the despotism of the old tyrannies and the new bureaucratic State was that, 'Under the absolute government of a single man, despotism, to reach the soul, clumsily struck at the body, and the soul, escaping from such blows, rose gloriously above it; but in democratic republics that is not at all how tyranny behaves.'⁵⁷ A further contrast lay in the new material affluence which was in itself a product of liberty. As Boesche points out, the 'very prosperity that accompanied bourgeois society might, in Tocqueville's opinion, give birth to the conditions that make this new despotism possible, like a plant whose flowering moment also signals its demise. "One must take care," wrote Tocqueville, "not to confuse political liberty with certain effects it sometimes produces." Political liberty leads to prosperity, but prosperity leads to "the taste for material well-being" and to a "passion for making fortunes"; these in turn threaten to "extinguish" the very political liberty that gave them birth.'⁵⁸ 'The men of the eighteenth century hardly knew that kind of passion for material comfort, which is, so to speak, the mother of servitude, an enervating but tenacious and unalterable passion, which readily mingles with and twines itself round many private virtues such as love of family, respectability of life, regard for religious beliefs, and even the assiduous if lukewarm practice of the established worship, which is partial to respectability but forbids heroism, which excels in making men steady but citizens mean-spirited. The men of the eighteenth century were both better and worse.'⁵⁹

His deepest worry was that the growing equality and individualism put people in a particularly weak position to stand up to the State. The practice of divide and rule had been a conscious tactic in the old order. 'Almost all the vices, almost all the mistakes, almost all the fatal prejudices which I have just described owed, in fact, either their birth, or their continuance, or their development, to the practice pursued by most of our kings in dividing men in order to govern them more absolutely.'⁶⁰ Yet in the new order, such division between individuals became institutionalized. Thus 'when the citizens are all more or less equal, it becomes difficult to defend their freedom from the encroachments of power. No one among them being any longer strong enough to struggle alone with success, only the combination of the forces of all is able to guarantee liberty. But such a combination is not always forthcoming.'⁶¹ Thus he reported that 'What I find most repulsive in America is not the extreme freedom reigning there but the shortage of guarantees against tyranny.'⁶² He saw that there could very easily be a

⁵⁶Tocqueville, **Democracy**, II, 898

⁵⁷Tocqueville, **Democracy**, I, 315

⁵⁸ Boesche, **Tocqueville**, 258-9

⁵⁹ Tocqueville, **Ancien**, 125

⁶⁰ Tocqueville, **Ancien**, 144

⁶¹Tocqueville, **Democracy**, I, 67

⁶²Tocqueville, **Democracy**, I, 311

switch from the 'sovereignty of the people' to the sovereignty of the State. 'So, for a people who have reached the Anglo-Americans' social state, it is hard to see any middle course between the sovereignty of all and the absolute power of one man...the social state I have just described may lead as easily to the one as to the other of those results.'⁶³ He saw that Montesquieu's earlier warnings might apply here. 'Montesquieu has noted that nothing is more absolute than the authority of a prince who immediately succeeds a republic, since the undefined powers that had been fearlessly entrusted to an elected magistrate then pass into the hands of a hereditary sovereign. This is true in general but applies more particularly to a democratic republic.'⁶⁴

Tocqueville's solution was, as with equality, to suggest a balance. Too little equality was as bad as too much. The balance must be between too much centralization and too little. He put the continuum clearly as follows. 'There are two great drawbacks to avoid in organizing a country. Either the whole strength of social organization is centred on one point, or it is spread over the country. Either alternative has its advantages and its drawbacks. If all is tied into one bundle, and the bundle gets undone, everything falls apart and there is no nation left. Where power is dispersed, action is clearly hindered, but there is strength everywhere.'⁶⁵ This idea of a balance became his central concern. As he recalled 'I had conceived the idea of a balanced, regulated liberty, held in check by religion, custom and law; the attractions of this liberty had touched me; it had become the passion of my life...'⁶⁶

This balance reminds one very much of Montesquieu's solution of the balance of the contending forces of law, religion and other institutions. The judicial power was very important as a check to the administration. 'The necessity of bringing the judicial power into the administration is one of those **central** ideas to which I am brought back in all my researches to discover what allows and can allow men the enjoyment of political liberty.'⁶⁷ Likewise the balance between the secular and the religious was also important. Tocqueville warned of the danger of a pact, when religion and politics entered into a union which crushed all liberty. He noted that at the time of the rise of absolutist monarchies in Europe 'the Catholic clergy throughout Europe had become both a religious and a political body.'⁶⁸ He warned of a dangerous slavery 'where the Church is so thoroughly in the hands of the State as to become an instrument of government; of this Russia is an example.'⁶⁹ The danger had, as Montesquieu knew, been

⁶³Tocqueville, **Democracy**, I, 66

⁶⁴Tocqueville, **Democracy**, I, 495

⁶⁵Tocqueville, **Journeys**, 4

⁶⁶Tocqueville, **Recollections**, 72

⁶⁷Tocqueville, **Journeys**, 83

⁶⁸Tocqueville, **Journeys**, 11

⁶⁹Tocqueville, **Memoir**, II 355

manifest in France. The Church of France, under Louis XIV, was both a political and a religious institution.⁷⁰

* * *

Tocqueville's central obsession was with the balance between the centre and the periphery. In illustrating his important argument here he drew above all, as Montesquieu had done, on the English case. America was too new and de-centralized to provide a case study. The Continental states had clearly fallen off the tight-rope. The problem was how to 'unite liberty to the already existing equality', he 'searched eagerly in a democratic country for the fundamental conditions of liberty.'⁷¹ He found these conditions in England. He believed that it had managed to walk the narrow path between too much and too little centralization, with only a few false steps, for a thousand years.

Tocqueville wrote a summary of the situation in 1835. 'There is a great deal of centralization in England; but of what sort?' To this he answered, 'Legislative and not administrative; governmental rather than administrative.' 'The mania for **regimentation** ... is found here as elsewhere', but unlike France, it had little effect. This is 'because the **centralizing** power is in the hands of the legislature, not of the **executive**.' Among the 'Lucky consequences' of this were the following: 'Publicity, respect for rights, obligation to refer to local authorities for the execution of the law; natural tendency to divide administrative authority so as not to create too strong a rival power. Centralisation very incomplete since it is carried out by a legislative body; **principles** rather than **facts**; **general** in spite of a wish to be **detailed**.'⁷² The '**Greatness and strength** of England' was 'explained by the power of centralisation in certain matters.' On the other hand the '**Prosperity, wealth, liberty** of England' were 'explained by its **weakness** in a thousand others.'⁷³ This mixture was even shown in relation to the Indian Empire. England was "'the most powerful in some things, and the weakest and most embarrassed in some other; which keeps eighty million people under its obedience three thousand leagues away, and does not know how to get out of the smallest administrative difficulties; which excels at taking advantage of the present, but does not know how to foresee the future. Who can find a word to explain all these anomalies?'"⁷⁴

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

⁷⁰Tocqueville, **Memoir**, I, 211

⁷¹Tocqueville, **Memoir**, I, 35

⁷²Tocqueville, **Journeys**, 98

⁷³Tocqueville, **Journeys**, 98-9.

⁷⁴ Quoted in Drescher, **Tocqueville**, 89.

way 'to subject the centralising power to publicity' and 'to have its **local** decisions carried out by **elected** authorities', Tocqueville would see 'no objection to extend its power as much as you like...'⁷⁵

He described this balance on several other occasions. The 'English government is strong although the localities are independent.'⁷⁶ He quoted Dr. Bouring to the effect that 'England is the country of decentralisation. We have got a government, but we have not got a central administration. Each county, each town, each parish looks after its own interests.'⁷⁷ In comparing France to England, Tocqueville wrote in 1853, 'in England you have an aristocracy and powerful local influences, while we in France have nothing of the sort. You have no centralization, while we have centralized the administration more than perhaps has ever been done in a great country. Whence it results that in England corruption and intimidation are the instruments chiefly of the great landowners, and of the rich in general, while with us corruption and intimidation can be made use of only by the Government.'⁷⁸

The heart of the difference lay in the fact that the English had centralized the judicial but not the administrative system. 'The English are the first people who ever thought of centralising the administration of justice. This innovation, which dates from the Norman period, should be reckoned one of the reasons for the quicker progress which this nation has made in civilisation and liberty.'⁷⁹ In France, the early divisive tendencies of feudalism went in the other direction. The barons became too powerful. 'That is what happened in France, where the barons went so far as to abolish the right of appeal to the king's courts. That is what did not happen in England. William, master of all, gave lavishly but kept still more.'⁸⁰ Ironically, Tocqueville's Norman predecessor, William the Conqueror, managed to steer a middle course. Faced with too much or too little centralization, Tocqueville wrote, 'I don't know if a mean between these extremes can be found, but it would seem that William did find it.'⁸¹

The contrast with his three other cases, America, France and China, was instructive. In America there was as yet an almost complete absence of centralization. 'There is nothing centralised or hierarchic in the constitution of American administrative power, and that is the reason why one is not at all

⁷⁵Tocqueville, **Journeys**, 98-9; final dots are Tocqueville's.

⁷⁶Tocqueville, **Journeys**, 85

⁷⁷Tocqueville, **Journeys**, 45

⁷⁸Tocqueville, **Memoir**, II 226

⁷⁹Tocqueville, **Journeys**, 75

⁸⁰Tocqueville, **Journeys**, 4

⁸¹Tocqueville, **Journeys**, 4

conscious of it. The authority exists, but one does not know where to find its representative.⁸² Thus 'Nothing strikes a European traveller in the United States more than the absence of what we would call government or administration.'⁸³ That is because 'there is no central point on which the radii of administrative power converge.'⁸⁴ The problem lay in the future, for as the country grew wealthier and more populous, there would be a tendency towards bureaucratic centralization.

On the other hand France and other continental powers represented the other extreme. The height of centralization had been reached in France in the later seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. 'Under Louis XIV France reached the greatest possible degree of centralisation of government that can be conceived, for one man made the general laws and had the power to interpret them, and he represented France abroad and acted in her name. "I am the state," he said, and he was right.'⁸⁵ But after the disruption of the Revolution, Napoleon has been quick to start the process again and now 'I assert that there is no country in Europe in which public administration has not become not only more centralised but also more inquisitive and minute.'⁸⁶ 'Among all the nations of continental Europe, one may say that there is not one that understands communal liberty. However, the strength of free peoples resides in the local community.'⁸⁷ The new socialist movements which were sweeping across Europe provided no alternative to this. As Drescher writes, 'In socialism he saw only the logical culmination of an omnipotent centralizing urge combined with a contempt for man as individual and citizen. It was "a new form of servitude".'⁸⁸

Tocqueville saw China as the extreme of bureaucratic centralization. He noted that China had benefited from long periods of peace and order. 'China...had existed in peace for centuries; her conquerors had adopted her mores; order prevailed. Material prosperity of a sort was visible everywhere. Revolutions were very rare and war, one might almost say, unknown.'⁸⁹ Yet there was the famous stagnation. 'Three hundred years ago, when the first Europeans came to China, they found that almost all the arts had reached a certain degree of improvement, and they were surprised that, having

⁸²Tocqueville, **Democracy**, I, 87

⁸³Tocqueville, **Democracy**, I, 85

⁸⁴Tocqueville, **Democracy**, I, 89

⁸⁵Tocqueville, **Democracy**, I, 106

⁸⁶Tocqueville, **Democracy**, II, 885

⁸⁷Tocqueville, **Democracy**, I, 74

⁸⁸Drescher, **Tocqueville**, 144

⁸⁹ Tocqueville, **Democracy**, II, 596

come so far, they had not gone further. Later on they found traces of profound knowledge that had been forgotten. The nation was a hive of industry; the greater part of its scientific methods were still in use, but science itself was dead.⁹⁰ This withering away of curiosity and creativity was very puzzling. The Chinese, following in their fathers' steps, had forgotten the reasons which guided them. They still used the formula without asking why. They kept the tool but had no skill to adapt or replace it. So the Chinese were unable to change anything. They had to drop the idea of improvement. They had to copy their ancestors the whole time in everything for fear of straying into impenetrable darkness if they deviated for a moment from their tracks.⁹¹

Tocqueville's solution to the puzzle was to blame a centralized and uniform bureaucratic system. 'China seems to offer the classic example of the sort of social prosperity with which a very centralised administration can provide a submissive people. Travellers tells us that the Chinese have tranquillity without happiness, industry without progress, stability without strength, and material order without public morality. With them society always gets along fairly well, never very well. I imagine that when China is opened to the Europeans, they will find it the finest model of administrative centralisation in the world.⁹² He touched on a couple of aspects of this system. One was the overwhelming desire for bureaucratic office. 'There is no need for me to say that this universal and uncontrolled desire for official appointments is a great social evil, that it undermines every citizen's sense of independence and spreads a venal and servile temper throughout the nation...⁹³ The avenue to such offices was through the examination system. 'In China...no man graduates from one public office to another without passing an examination. He has to face this test at every stage of his career... Lofty ambition can hardly breathe in such an atmosphere.'⁹⁴

It was not that Tocqueville was against government as such. He was not an Anarchist. He believed that strong government and administrative centralization were different things. 'In our day we see one power, England, which has reached a very high degree of centralisation of government; there the state seems to move as a single man.⁹⁵ Yet it was a free and wealthy country. 'England, which has done such great things in the last fifty years, has no administrative centralisation. For my part, I cannot conceive that a nation can live, much less prosper, without a high degree of centralisation of government. But I think that administrative centralisation only serves to enervate the peoples that submit to it, because it constantly tends to diminish their civic spirit.'⁹⁶ Tocqueville also saw the English solution as

⁹⁰ Tocqueville, **Democracy**, II, 595

⁹¹ Tocqueville, **Democracy**, II, 596

⁹² Tocqueville, **Democracy**, I, 111, note 50

⁹³ Tocqueville, **Democracy**, II, 821

⁹⁴ Tocqueville, **Democracy**, II, 816-7

⁹⁵ Tocqueville, **Democracy**, I, 106

⁹⁶ Tocqueville, **Democracy**, I, 107

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

* * *

Like Montesquieu, Tocqueville attempted to elaborate a number of the institutional checks on the tendency towards absolutism. In early notes he quoted an Irish priest who said that 'Freedom of the press, Sir, is the first and perhaps the only efficient weapon which the oppressed has against the oppressor; the weak against the strong; the people against the government and the great.'⁹⁷ In relation to America he wrote 'The more I observe the main effects of a free press, the more convinced am I that, in the modern world, freedom of the press is the principal and, so to say, the constitutive element in freedom.'⁹⁸ It was particularly important in a democracy. 'The press is, par excellence, the democratic weapon of freedom.'⁹⁹ It allowed individuals, weak and fragmented, to coalesce into an imagined community and hence to act as a counter-balance to the State. 'For this reason freedom of the press is infinitely more precious in a democracy than in any other nation.'¹⁰⁰ Thus, as he explained, 'the more equal men become and the more individualism becomes a menace, the more necessary are newspapers. We should underrate their importance if we thought they just guaranteed liberty; they maintain civilisation.'¹⁰¹

As important as the freedom of the press was the nature of the legal system. As a trained lawyer himself, and a disciple of Montesquieu, Tocqueville was well aware of the power of the law. He saw several features of the Anglo-American system which particularly attracted him. One was the jury system. In his *Journal* while visiting America he wrote 'The jury is the most direct application of the principle of the sovereignty of the people.'¹⁰² Or as he put it in the finished book: 'Therefore the jury as an institution really puts control of society into the hands of the people or of that class.'¹⁰³ He saw the jury as having a double role. 'The jury is both the most effective way of establishing the people's rule and

⁹⁷ Tocqueville, **Journeys**, 162

⁹⁸Tocqueville, **Democracy**, I, 234

⁹⁹Tocqueville, **Democracy**, II, 906

¹⁰⁰Tocqueville, **Democracy**, II, 906

¹⁰¹Tocqueville, **Democracy**, II, 667

¹⁰²Tocqueville, **Journey to America**, 174

¹⁰³Tocqueville, **Democracy**, I, 336

the most efficient way of teaching them how to rule.¹⁰⁴ In fact it was the second of these that he most strongly commended. 'Juries teach men equity in practice. Each man, when judging his neighbour, thinks that he may be judged himself.'¹⁰⁵ Thus he believed that 'Juries are wonderfully effective in shaping a nation's judgment and increasing its natural lights. That, in my view, is its greatest advantage. It should be regarded as a free school which is always open and in which each juror learns his rights...'¹⁰⁶

Another crucial power was the independence of the judiciary, and in particular the institution of justices of the peace. 'The power of the courts has been at all times the securest guarantee which can be provided for individual independence but this is particularly true in ages of democracy.'¹⁰⁷ As for independent magistrates, 'When a justice of the peace has a share in the administration, he brings with him a taste for formalities and for publicity, which renders him a most inconvenient instrument for a despotism; but he is not the slave of those legal superstitions which make magistrates so little capable of administration.'¹⁰⁸ Thus the judiciary should be brought into the administration as much as possible. Independent justices, rather than paid bureaucrats, were essential. "'The necessity of introducing the judicial power into the administration is one of those **central** ideas to which I am led by all my investigations concerning the sources of political liberty.'¹⁰⁹

Of course there are still dangers. The tendency of the State to grow ever more powerful may mean that it starts to corrupt the judges. 'Thus the government is daily more able to escape the obligation to have its will and its rights sanctioned by another power. Unable to do without judges, it likes at least to choose the judges itself and always to keep them under its hand.'¹¹⁰ The protection against this is to divide the legislature up into several parts. He wrote of 'the principle of the division of legislative power; henceforth the need to share legislative activity between several bodies has been regarded as a demonstrated truth. This theory, hardly known to the republics of antiquity, introduced into the world almost by chance, like most great truths, and misunderstood by several modern nations, has at last become an axiom of political science in our day.'¹¹¹

¹⁰⁴Tocqueville, **Democracy**, I, 341

¹⁰⁵Tocqueville, **Democracy**, I, 339

¹⁰⁶Tocqueville, **Democracy**, I, 339

¹⁰⁷Tocqueville, **Democracy**, II, 907

¹⁰⁸Tocqueville, **Democracy**, I, 91

¹⁰⁹Quoted in Drescher, **Tocqueville**, 83

¹¹⁰Tocqueville, **Democracy**, II, 888

¹¹¹Tocqueville, **Democracy**, I, 104

The best example of this system at work was in New England. 'All the general principles on which modern constitutions rest, principles which most Europeans in the seventeenth century scarcely understood and whose dominance in Great Britain was then far from complete, are recognised and given authority by the laws of New England; the participation of the people in public affairs, the free voting of taxes, the responsibility of government officials, individual freedom, and trial by jury - all these things were established without question and with practical effect.'¹¹² They had also adopted the other great check on abuse of power, the ability of the people to dismiss the rulers through elections. 'An arbitrary power to dismiss public officials is the only guarantee of that sort of active and enlightened obedience which no judicial sanction can impose. In France we seek the ultimate guarantee in the **administrative hierarchy**; in America **election** fills that role.'¹¹³ All these checks and balances of a formal nature were not, however, enough. Tocqueville devoted much attention to two other areas. One was the necessity for religion, a second was how to mitigate the dangers of individualism through forming associations.

* * *

Tocqueville's views on religion are surprising for they contain another paradox. While too much religion, that is religion formally enforced by the State, is disastrous, too little religion is equally dangerous. One might have expected him to advocate a complete separation of politics and religion, but in fact he does not do this. He saw that religion and politics must be combined in some way: '...the real greatness of mankind must arise from the combined action of liberty and religion; the one to animate, the other to restrain.'¹¹⁴ He particularly admired the way in which this was done in England. Again implicitly echoing Montesquieu's remark about the combination of wealth, liberty and piety, he wrote that 'I enjoyed too, in England what I have long been deprived of - a union between the religious and the political world, between public and private virtue, between Christianity and liberty.'¹¹⁵ Indeed he makes the further connection when he writes 'So there must be a hidden relationship between those two words: **liberty** and **trade**. People say that the spirit of trade naturally gives men the spirit of liberty. Montesquieu asserts that somewhere'¹¹⁶, and further suggests that 'I think it is above all the spirit and habits of liberty which inspire the spirit and habits of trade.'¹¹⁷ But how did England manage to combine wealth, liberty and religious enthusiasm? How was it that England was so surprisingly active in mixing the latter two, being a country where, for example, 'Great political parties, as always happens in free

¹¹²Tocqueville, **Democracy**, I, 50

¹¹³Tocqueville, **Democracy**, I, 94

¹¹⁴Tocqueville, **Memoir**, II, 238

¹¹⁵Tocqueville, **Memoir**, II, 397

¹¹⁶Tocqueville, **Journeys**, 105

¹¹⁷Tocqueville, **Journeys**, 105-6

countries, found their interest in uniting their cause with that of the Church.¹¹⁸

The nearest Tocqueville comes to solving the apparent contradiction is by showing that the English made the separation not between religion and politics, but between the public and the private. Politics belonged to public life, religion to the private. The case was illustrated by English Catholics. 'In fact, I never met with an English Catholic who did not value, as much as any Protestant, the free institutions of his country, or who divided morality into two sections, one consisting of public virtues, which might be safely neglected, and the other of private duties, which alone need be observed.'¹¹⁹

His insights into the necessary connection between liberty and religion came out of his observations of England and America. 'I have already said enough to put Anglo-American civilisation in its true light. It is the product (and one should continually bear in mind this point of departure) of two perfectly distinct elements which elsewhere have often been at war with one another but which in America it was somehow possible to incorporate into each other, forming a marvellous combination. I mean the **spirit of religion** and the **spirit of freedom**.'¹²⁰ He noted that 'One cannot therefore say that in the United States religion influences the laws or political opinions in detail, but it does direct mores, and by regulating domestic life it helps to regulate the state.'¹²¹ Thus he advocated the importance of religion. 'Despotism may be able to do without faith, but freedom cannot.'¹²² Or again, 'Society has nothing to fear or hope from another life; what is most important for it is not that all citizens should profess the true religion but that they should profess religion.'¹²³ As he put it in one of his aphorisms, 'For my part, I doubt whether man can support complete religious independence and entire political liberty at the same time. I am led to think that if he has no faith he must obey, and if he is free he must believe.'¹²⁴

Yet he was also aware from his own Catholic background that there was a tendency in religion to move towards absolutism and indeed be its main support. 'Montesquieu, in attributing a peculiar force to despotism, did it an honour which, I think, it did not deserve. Despotism by itself can maintain nothing durable. When one looks close, one sees that what made absolute governments long

¹¹⁸Tocqueville, **Ancien**, 163

¹¹⁹Tocqueville, **Memoir**, II, 398

¹²⁰Tocqueville, **Democracy**, I, 360

¹²¹Tocqueville, **Democracy**, I, 360

¹²²Tocqueville, **Democracy**, I, 364

¹²³Tocqueville, **Democracy**, I, 359

¹²⁴Tocqueville, **Democracy**, II, 569

prosperous was religion, not fear.¹²⁵

How could the danger of too much religion be avoided? Again it was best if there was a division into balanced and competing units. Following Montesquieu and Smith he took the view that tolerance in religion arose from powerlessness. One religion in a State, for instance Catholicism, would be disastrous. Even if there were two, equally powerful, it would be hopeless. 'If two religions faced each other, we should be cutting each others' throats. But as none has as much as a majority, all need toleration. Besides there is a general belief among us, a belief which I share, that some religion or other is needed by man as a social being.¹²⁶ With its proliferation of sects, in America even the Catholics preached toleration. 'The Catholics are in a minority, and it is important for them that all rights should be respected so that they can be sure to enjoy their own in freedom.'¹²⁷ Thus each religious sect was thwarted in its political ambitions.¹²⁸

The result was that in the world of sectarian America or England, the separation between formal religion and formal politics had been effected. 'Religion regards civil liberty as a noble exercise of men's faculties, the world of politics being a sphere intended by the Creator for the free play of intelligence. Religion, being free and powerful within its own sphere and content with the position reserved for it, realises that its sway is all the better established because it relies only on its own powers and rules men's hearts without external support.'¹²⁹ Tocqueville had noticed this modesty when he visited England as well. 'I was struck this time in England, as I had previously been, to see how a religious sentiment conserved its power, without becoming something that absorbs and destroys all other motives of human action.'¹³⁰ Indeed he believed that the two were linked. Religious faith was much more active and sincere if it eschewed an alliance with the State. For 'any alliance with any political power whatsoever is bound to be burdensome for religion. It does not need their support in order to live, and in serving them it may die.'¹³¹

Thus religious faith was needed to unite and animate a democratic peoples, to provide an ideological alternative to the overbearing State and to give ideals and confidence. 'The longer I live the

¹²⁵Tocqueville, **Democracy**, I, 115

¹²⁶Tocqueville, **Journey to America**, 31

¹²⁷Tocqueville, **Democracy**, I, 357

¹²⁸Tocqueville, **Journey to America**, 150

¹²⁹Tocqueville, **Democracy**, I, 55

¹³⁰Tocqueville, **Letters**, 356 (1857)

¹³¹Tocqueville, **Democracy**, I, 368

less I think that the peoples of the world can ever separate themselves from a positive religion...¹³² Yet religious institutions must not become so powerful that they became, as in many ancient despotisms, the most potent force for tyranny.

* * *

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

The English case puzzled Tocqueville. It appeared to be once again somewhere between the birth-status groups of traditional France, and the individual-associational extreme of America. A contradiction between individual's interest and that of the association seemed to him to be present in England. 'Two spirits which, if not altogether contrary, are at least very diverse, seem to hold equal sway in England.'¹³³ He could not 'completely understand how the "spirit of association" and the "spirit of exclusion" both came to be so highly developed in the same people, and often to be so intimately combined.'¹³⁴ He decided that 'On reflection I incline to the view that the spirit of individuality is the basis of the English character. Association is a means suggested by sense and necessity for getting things unattainable by isolated effort. But the spirit of individuality comes in on every side; it recurs in every aspect of things.'¹³⁵ People in England were ultimately individuals, but were prepared to associate as the only means to attain their ends. 'That being so, the need to club together is more generally felt, because the urge to get things is more general and stronger.'¹³⁶ For instance, 'Example a club; what better example of association than the union of individuals who form the club? What more exclusive than the corporate personality represented by the club? The same applies to almost all civil and political associations, the corporations...'¹³⁷

¹³² Tocqueville, **European Revolution**, 206

¹³³Tocqueville, **Journeys**, 74

¹³⁴Tocqueville, **Journeys**, 74

¹³⁵Tocqueville, **Journeys**, 75

¹³⁶Tocqueville, **Journeys**, 75

¹³⁷Tocqueville, **Journeys**, 74-5

Curiously, therefore, the extreme individualism of the English led to more co-operation between people for specific purposes than the group-mindedness of the French. The absence of any alternative structures 'prompts people to pool their efforts to attain ends which in France we would never think of approaching in this way. There are associations to further science, politics, pleasure, business...'¹³⁸ In France, on the other hand, before the Revolution, the country was divided 'into a great number of sections, and within each of these small enclosures there was seen to speak a distinct society, which was only concerned with its own particular interests, and took no part in the life of the whole.'¹³⁹ Somehow the Anglo-Saxon peoples, including of course the Dutch, managed to combine individualism and co-operation in an unusual way.

Thus Tocqueville saw the associational forms as having their 'point of departure' in England. 'The English, though the divisions between them are so deep, seldom abuse the right of associations, because they have had long experience of it.'¹⁴⁰ It then spread to America. 'The right of association is of English origin and always existed in America. Use of this right is now an accepted part of customs and of mores.'¹⁴¹ This was in contrast to the trend on the Continent. In the remote past there had been as many 'associations' in Germany or France as in England. Yet while they had continued and blossomed in England and then America, they had been destroyed on the Continent and their powers absorbed by the increasing power of the Absolutist state. 'The point I want to make is that all these various rights which have been successively wrested in our time from classes, corporations, and individuals have not been used to create new secondary powers on a more democratic basis, but have invariably been concentrated in the hands of the government.'¹⁴² This was disastrous. Like Montesquieu, Tocqueville believed that numerous 'secondary powers', that is associations of free individuals into organizations for running their own affairs, were the major protection against tyranny. Using a metaphor of a dyke used to prevent the flood of despotism he wrote 'In countries where such associations do not exist, if private people did not artificially and temporarily create something like them, I see no other dyke to hold back tyranny of whatever sort, and a great nation might with impunity be oppressed by some tiny faction or by a single man.'¹⁴³

* * *

The encounter with Tocqueville adds further elements to a possible solution to the riddle we are

¹³⁸Tocqueville, **Journeys**, 74

¹³⁹Tocqueville, **Ancien**, 83

¹⁴⁰Tocqueville, **Democracy**, I, 238

¹⁴¹Tocqueville, **Democracy**, I, 236

¹⁴²Tocqueville, **Democracy**, II, 883

¹⁴³Tocqueville, **Democracy**, I, 236

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

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

Particularly important for our purposes, he supplements Montesquieu and Smith's historical account by giving the most detailed and convincing analysis not only of the difference between England and France, but of how that difference occurred and evolved. He showed the origins of the American system in mediaeval and early modern England, the difference between French peasant social structure and English agriculture, the entirely different political history of the two countries, with revolution and rigidity in one and flexible evolution in the other. He noted the absence of a nobility in England and the entirely different meaning of the words 'gentleman' and 'gentilhomme'.

* * *

We can see that by the time of Toqueville's death in 1859 the questions concerning the recent development of human civilizations had been clearly posed and a plausible set of hypotheses to answer some of them had been put forward. These answers will probably strike many today as surprisingly different to those with which they are familiar. This is because much of the subsequent work during the century and a half since then has buried both the questions and any possible answers under a heap of alternative approaches so that the earlier work has become increasingly obscured. This inquiry has largely been an excavation to unearth something which was once widely known but is now largely forgotten.

In order to understand both the very great difficulties facing contemporary scholars, and also the continuing vitality of the Enlightenment questions and answers, it is worth briefly considering one last major thinker. He was a man whose work spanned almost all of the second half of the twentieth century and like his Enlightenment predecessors absorbed many of the great traditions of western thought. He was in a certain sense one of the last representatives of the great alternative tradition whose answer to the riddle of how the modern world emerged has been the theme of this inquiry.