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## THINKING ABOUT REVOLUTIONS

### ALEXIS DE TOCQUEVILLE AND THE EXPERIENCE OF 1848



Horace Vernet, *Barricade dans la rue de Soufflot, à Paris, le 25 juin 1848*, 1848-1850.  
From Wikimedia Commons, accessed on June 12, 2021.

## SUMMARY

In the twenty-first century, Tocqueville is everywhere. Historians and social scientists use *Democracy in America* to explain and criticize contemporary populism, individualism, or the welfare state... Yet are Tocqueville's theories universal enough to be used and re-used in our century? Tocqueville himself changed his mind about some of his predictions. His experience of 1848 contradicted his views on revolutions in the democratic age. As he used to explain them in a monocausal way, discovering the multiple variables that caused the 1848 revolution forced him to nuance his approach. He ultimately studied revolutions by themselves, with their unique dynamic and their unique set of causes. In 1848, he encountered a new world – the industrial society and its egalitarian intellectuals – and changed a key prediction of *Democracy* because of his lived experience. One should therefore be cautious, before applying Tocqueville's theories almost two centuries after his life, to not denature the views of the writer.

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## INTRODUCTION

On the 24<sup>th</sup> of February 1848, King Louis-Phillipe of France abdicated after two days of violent insurrections in Paris. What started as a campaign for the extension of suffrage led to the proclamation of a new republic. The transition started smoothly; yet the new regime failed to content everyone, and a fringe of the Parisian population rebelled again in June. The Republican army violently crushed the revolt.<sup>1</sup> These events sparked many “crises of consciousness”<sup>2</sup>. French intellectuals – Balzac, Michelet, Renan for instance – confronted their views on revolutions, mainly determined by the legacy of 1789, sometimes by the experience of 1830, to the unpredictable events of 1848.<sup>3</sup> Some writers directly participated in the movement : Alphonse de Lamartine of course, but also Alexis de Tocqueville. Despite being a thinker of long-term processes, Tocqueville reflected on his short-term experiences and they “denoted a great change”<sup>4</sup> in his thinking. The political philosopher, facing unexpected insurrections, changed his theory on revolutions. In *Democracy in America*, his most famous work, for which the first volume was published in 1835 and the second one in 1840, he developed an argument on revolutions in the democratic age. 1848 contradicted it. In *Souvenirs*, written in 1850-1851, he reflected on how to adapt his concepts to his new observations; in the *Old Regime and the Revolution* (1856) he crafted an adjusted theory of revolution, still acknowledged as an unescapable view on 1789.

However, *Democracy* remains his most widely used work. As Françoise Mélonio and Charlotte Manzini explained, “it continues to warn us about the diseases of our societies”<sup>5</sup>. Contemporary populism, mainly, has been explained through its enlightening pages, on the

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<sup>1</sup> Inès Murat, *La Deuxième République 1848-1851* (Paris: Fayard, 1987), 66-94/268-286.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 296 (my translation).

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 89/144/241/296.

<sup>4</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Recollections of Alexis de Tocqueville*, trans. Alexander Teixeira de Mattos (London: H. Henry & co, 1896), 11.

<sup>5</sup> Françoise Mélonio and Charlotte Manzini (eds), *l'Abécédaire de Alexis de Tocqueville* (Paris : l'Observatoire, 2021), 9 (my translation).

tyranny of the majority, but also on the attractiveness of authoritarian regimes.<sup>6</sup> There are “references to Tocqueville in a multitude of writings used for different preoccupations”<sup>7</sup>. Yet, this contemporary use of his thought, to talk about problems unknown to him, hides the risk of instrumentalizing his works, sometimes for causes he would fight against. Hence the role, before studying his thought, of understanding its development. Jean-Louis Benoit tried to reflect on what surrounds his philosophy, yet he ended up with a biography of “an engaged man, written by an engaged man”<sup>8,9</sup>.

1848 appeared, for Tocqueville himself, and historians like François Furet and Marcel Reinhard, as a game changer of his views on revolutions.<sup>10</sup> Yet these authors did not explain why. Furet nevertheless tried to explain the genesis of *Old regime* through Tocqueville’s experience of 1848, acknowledged the difference with *Democracy in America*, but did not dive into his *Souvenirs* enough to fully explain the reasons for that change.<sup>11</sup> Analysing the development of Tocqueville’s thought requires a more inclusive study of his works. Studying his way of theorizing the new revolution and confronting it to his pre-1848 reflections is a way, first, to assess the universality of his philosophy, on which its use is nowadays based on, and secondly, to reflect critically on his actual theories on revolutions, their contradictions, and the genesis of his 1856 masterpiece.

*Why did Tocqueville adjust his previous theory of revolutions after February 1848?* First, it was the acknowledgement of an intellectual failure. Despite an undeniable clear-sightedness, he failed to foresee the coming revolution and its characteristics. Secondly, it was owing to Tocqueville’s ability to requestion himself. Finally, it was the influence of unique contexts. What kind of democratic societies did Tocqueville talk about? Raymond Aron made a distinction between the mercantile society Tocqueville visited in his early life (United States), and the industrial world (Paris) he experienced in the late 1840s.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> See Ewa Atanassow, “Illiberal democracy ? A Tocquevillian perspective” in Boris Vormann, Michael D. Weinman (eds), *The Emergence of Illiberalism : Understanding a Global Phenomenon* (New York: Routledge, 2020); or Nicolas Baverez, *Le Monde Selon Tocqueville : Combats pour la Liberté* (Paris: Seuil, 2020).

<sup>7</sup> Serge Audier, *Tocqueville Retrouvé : Genèse et enjeux du nouveau Tocquevillien Français* (Paris: EHESS, 2004), 8-9 (my translation).

<sup>8</sup> Jacques Coenen-Huther, “A propos du Bicentenaire de Tocqueville : Ambiguïtés d’une découverte aux résonnances multiples,” *European Journal of Social Sciences* 44, n°126 (2003) : 156 (my translation).

<sup>9</sup> Jean-Louis Benoit, *Tocqueville. Un destin paradoxal* (Paris: Bayard, 2005).

<sup>10</sup> François Furet, *Penser la Révolution française* (Paris: Gallimard, 1978), 230-231; Marcel Reinhard, “Tocqueville historien de la révolution,” *Annales historiques de la révolution française* 32§, N°161 (July-September 1960) : 260.

<sup>11</sup> Furet, *Penser la Révolution*, 230-231; François Furet, « Tocqueville » in François Furet & Mona Ozouf (eds), *Dictionnaire Critique de la Révolution Française*, vol 5 : *Interprètes et Historiens* (Paris: Flammarion, 1992): 261-266.

<sup>12</sup> Raymond Aron, *Penser la Liberté, Penser la démocratie*, ed. Nicolas Baverez (Paris: Gallimard, 2005), 1205.

Only through a careful use of sources will we arrive at defining the great change better than Tocqueville himself. His *Souvenirs*, in which he interpreted 1848, are a seminal reading, especially as memoirs written for no other than himself. “I write them for myself alone”, they are “not a picture painted for the public”<sup>13</sup>. He finally accepted the requests of his friends to publish them, yet only after the death of every individual described in his enlightening portraits. As Claude Lefort explained, “(i)t is the writer-philosopher that we admire in the *Souvenirs* more than the political actor”<sup>14</sup>. Published in 1896, twenty-seven years after Tocqueville’s death, they do not fairly represent his political actions, nor his spontaneous reflections during the revolution. Yet, his correspondence, and his parliamentary speeches in 1848, will help us to grasp these spontaneous thoughts. The explicit focus on his memoirs and his correspondence shifts the focus of Tocquevillian scholarship from *Democracy* to works that are closer to his life, his everyday experience, and therefore, the man himself. Furthermore, as mentioned before, fully understanding the change requires an inclusive study of his entire *oeuvre*. Comparing how Tocqueville reflects on revolutions prior to 1848 with his post-revolutionary theories is a key step to assess the nature of the change.

The objective is therefore to explain his own crisis of consciousness, thanks to a more inclusive study of his reflections. The relevance of such a topic lies, on the one hand, in its situation in the contemporary enthusiasm about Tocqueville. It helps to clarify his ideas, recontextualize them, illustrate how Tocqueville himself questioned them, and therefore, reflect on their universality. On the other hand, where eminent authors failed to explain the “great change”, I aim to bring clarifications to it in order to explain the way Tocqueville’s thought on revolutions evolved. Furthermore, new insights can be brought to Tocquevillian scholarship by bringing *Souvenirs*, rather than *Democracy*, to the foreground.

In a first chapter, I will compare Tocqueville’s theory on revolutions before and after 1848 in order to map the extent of the change. In a second one, I will assess the role of 1848 in its development. I will dive into the revolutionary processes, confront them with Tocqueville’s interpretations, sometimes outdated, but always useful, as he remains one of the brightest minds of the nineteenth century.

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<sup>13</sup> Tocqueville, *The Recollections*, 3-4.

<sup>14</sup> Claude Lefort, Preface to Alexis de Tocqueville, *Souvenirs* (Paris: Gallimard, 1999), L (my translation).

## CHAPTER ONE : TOCQUEVILLE, THEORIST OF REVOLUTIONS

From the first volume of *Democracy in America* to *The Old Regime and The Revolution*, Revolutions were at the core of Tocqueville's reflections on democracy and French history. He theorized their future and their causes. Yet, the young and the old Tocqueville did not use the same words, and, whilst not disagreeing on everything, had different views. When nuancing his thoughts, Tocqueville refined his previous theory, and solved unsettled problems.

This chapter compares the views of his early life to his later reflections, in order to map the extent of the change. I will argue, following Marcel Reinhard, that Tocqueville, from essayist, changed into a historian.<sup>15</sup> By nuancing his thoughts on causality, reflecting on the uniqueness of historical events, and contradicting his lawlike view on the development of democracy, he replaced premonitory ambitions by historical erudition.

### I – The End of Great Revolutions

Where Eric Hobsbawm divided the “long nineteenth century”<sup>16</sup> into three ages – revolutions, capital, and imperialism – Tocqueville witnessed the beginning of the age of democracy. This was the accomplishment of a long-term equalization of conditions. He considered that the post-Napoleonic world marked the beginning of an era, where individuals were equal before the law, where money replaced heredity, where a middle-class overshadowed *Ancien Régime* inequalities. New behaviours and worldviews characterized the new society. Modern individuals had different preoccupations. Revolutions were not one of them.

As Tocqueville considered that equality had been achieved through the advent of democracy, he believed that revolutions, produced by drive towards equality, would become rare, if not disappear. In *Democracy in America*, he wrote: “if you can find a state of society in which each has something to keep and little to take, you will have done much for the peace of the world”<sup>17</sup>. Tocqueville saw inequality as the essential force behind a revolution. The more equal the conditions, the smaller the chances of revolutions. In democratic ages, when everyone owns something, and wants to protect it, a violent change is not in the interest of anyone.

The idea of ownership is seminal. Tocqueville explained that, despite the existence of inequalities in democratic societies, the main class, a middle-class, equally distant from richness

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<sup>15</sup> Reinhard, “Tocqueville historien,” 260.

<sup>16</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes : The Short Twentieth century 1914-1991* (London: Abacus, 1995), 13.

<sup>17</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy*, 599.

and poverty, sought at protecting this material well-being: “the majority of citizens do not see clearly what they could gain by a revolution, and they feel at each instant and in a thousand ways what they could lose from one”<sup>18</sup>. New mores are not revolutionary, they are prudent. Property-owning also represents a key characteristic of democratic citizens; a majority of them are owners and nothing is easier to seize in a revolution than property.<sup>19</sup> This fear of loss has been seen by Marx, putting the following in the mouth of the French bourgeoisie: "Only the chief of the 'Society of December 10' [Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte] can now save bourgeois society, only theft can save property, only perjury religion, only bastardy the family, only disorder order!"<sup>20</sup>. The worst evil in a democratic society, is the one threatening property.

Similarly, Tocqueville saw the democratic age as the golden age of commerce. As people are equal under the law, their main activities to acquire a higher social status becomes economic. “The desire for wealth will take the place of the desire for glory or ambition.”<sup>21</sup> Owning material goods becomes an end in itself. Producers of those goods increasingly become an aristocracy, however very unstable as dependent on their workers but also their clients. Yet, Tocqueville knew

nothing more opposed to revolutionary mores than commercial mores. Commerce is naturally the enemy of all violent passions. It likes even tempers, is pleased by compromise, very carefully flees anger. It is patient, supple, insinuating, and it has recourse to extreme means only when the most absolute necessity obliges it.<sup>22</sup>

Because of the equalization of conditions, and its consequences such as mass property owning, the rise of a middle class, and the new commercial mores, “the social state of these [democratic] nations does not bring them to revolutions, but rather moves them away from them”<sup>23</sup>. The only cause with revolutionary potential, inequality, has vanished. Françoise Mélonio explained that

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 601.

<sup>19</sup> Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson built on this assumption to study the economic origins of democracy. The rich, seeking to protect their property, have to make compromises with the poor to prevent a revolution. They have three options : policy concessions, democratization, or repression. From Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson, *The Economic Origins of Democracy and Dictatorship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

<sup>20</sup> Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (Gutenberg Books, 2013), 104.

<sup>21</sup> Aron, *Penser la Liberté*, 774 (my translation).

<sup>22</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy*, 601.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 603.



this society should be characterized by “inertia”<sup>24</sup>. However, Tocqueville surprisingly adds that democratic citizens could be “carried along toward revolutions without their knowing it”<sup>25</sup>.

Both Tocqueville and Marx saw that democratic, or bourgeois, societies had to regularly experience soft revolutions; yet they end up justifying the social order. Marx considered the bourgeoisie as an inherently revolutionary class, changing its bases over time to match the evolution of the means of production.<sup>26</sup> For Tocqueville, democratic societies are constantly changing. “(A)n eternal motion reigns in the heart of such a society and that no one knows repose in it; but I believe that men in it are agitated within certain limits that they scarcely ever exceed.”<sup>27</sup> The unsafeness of new aristocracy makes the new order incomparable to the old nobiliary society: a hierarchy exists but it is fragile and never last long. Permanent movements, from “obscurity to greatness”<sup>28</sup>, change the new hierarchy without questioning its structure. “(W)hile constantly moving, humanity will no longer advance.”<sup>29</sup> The end of 1789 marked the beginning of unrevolutionary revolutions.

## II – The French Revolution from 1789 to 1830 ?

As a young aristocrat, Tocqueville had mixed feelings about the French revolution. In the liberal tradition, he embraced its first year – “I broke with a part of my family, with dear affectations and precious memories to embrace the cause of 1789”<sup>30</sup> – and aimed at preventing its values to turn into a new “oppression”, the tyranny of 1793.

Tocqueville, in *Democracy*, in a chapter on “Great revolutions”<sup>31</sup>, had the French revolution of 1789 in mind. “Although I very rarely spoke of France in my book. I did not write one page of it without thinking about her and without having her, so to speak, before my eyes.”<sup>32</sup> This revolution significantly preoccupied his thoughts. Its role in French democratization makes it a central event for Tocqueville. In 1836, he even wrote an essay on the French social and political state before and since 1789 in which he mixed his thoughts on democracy to his interpretation of the French Revolution. He explained:

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<sup>24</sup> Françoise Mélonio, *Tocqueville et les Français* (Paris: Aubier, 1994), 25 (my translation).

<sup>25</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy*, 603.

<sup>26</sup> Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (London: Vintage books, 2018), 27.

<sup>27</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy*, 602.

<sup>28</sup> Aron, *Penser la Liberté*, 774 (my translation).

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, 608.

<sup>30</sup> Letter to Hyacinthe Corne, 13<sup>th</sup> of November 1845, in Mélonio and Manzini, *L'Abécédaire*, 211 (my translation).

<sup>31</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy*, 599-608.

<sup>32</sup> Letter to Louis de Kergolay, 18<sup>th</sup> of October 1847, in Alexis de Tocqueville, *Selected Letters on Politics and Society*, trans. James Toupin (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 191.

All that the Revolution has done would have been done, sooner or later, without it. It was but a violent and rapid process, by the aid of which the changes already effected in society were extended to the government ; laws were made to conform themselves to manners ; and the direction already taken by opinions was communicated to the outward world.<sup>33</sup>

The events that started in 1789 were evitable. The equalization of conditions was going on during the monarchy, and the revolution only made it an institutional reality through unnecessary violence. Therefore, Tocqueville defined the revolution by the long-term process of which it is part of; it is part of a democratization process that will end in the world described in *Democracy*. He assured his reputation as a thinker of long-term processes and assumed the existence of a cause of revolutions *par excellence* : (in)equality.

Logically, Tocqueville could not explain the revolutionary process and the flow of events starting in 1789. He therefore progressed within his long-term approach and assessed the role of the old regime in the outbreak of the revolution. He already partly sketched the thesis of his later work: because of a unique centralization, France was a country more homogeneous in wealth than its neighbours, “comprising fewer poor, fewer rich, fewer powerful individuals”<sup>34</sup>. All this coupled with a “taste for equality”<sup>35</sup>. The revolution came out of its past; this past defines the revolution. Consequently, he ignored the uniqueness of the revolutionary process and crafted a long-term theory of a revolution that, for him, started in 1789, but did not end before 1830.

The problem of periodizing the revolution illustrates the limits of Tocqueville’s thought. Like François Furet, who placed the end of the revolution in 1880, Tocqueville considered that, during most of his life, the revolution was still an ongoing reality.<sup>36</sup> In 1830 though, with the July Monarchy, and the pejoratively called government of the *Juste-Milieu*, he changed his mind. The new regime was seen by contemporaries as centrist, moderate, and obedient to individual economic interest: a union of leftist and rightist bourgeoisies.<sup>37</sup> Most of its visible characteristics matched Tocqueville’s predictions about the democratic world – and probably influenced them. Developed during the July monarchy, his views on the calm democratic

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<sup>33</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Memoir, Letters, and Remains*, vol. 1, trans. N.p. (Boston: Ticknor & fields, 1862), 252.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, 250.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>36</sup> François Furet, *La Révolution française*, vol 2 : *Terminer la Révolution, De Louis XVIII à Jules Ferry (1814-1880)* (Paris: Hachette, 1988), 4-5.

<sup>37</sup> Éric Anceau, *Les Elites Françaises, Des Lumières au Grand Confinement* (Paris: Passés Composés, 2020), 116-133.

society were probably inspired by this calm regime driven by property-owning. Unfortunately for him, this peace only characterized the higher strata of the society; he overly universalized his American observations. In 1831, he asked: “(a)midst all the miseries of the present time and amidst the attack of high fever that the July Revolution gave us, do you not find in all this reasons for hope that we will finally arrive at a social state that is settled?”<sup>38</sup>. He started believing that the *Trois Glorieuses*, the revolutionary days that replaced the regime of Charles X by the July Monarchy, created a government where all privileges had been destroyed but the one of property, hence the beginning of the tranquil society of the democratic age.<sup>39</sup>

Nevertheless, Tocqueville remained unsure. Great revolutions are finished but the democratic transition continues. Even though he did not explicitly mention it, the census suffrage, for instance, did not match his expectation of a society based on civic equality. On the 14<sup>th</sup> of July 1840, he shared his doubts to a friend: “(t)his day fifty-one years, the French revolution commenced; and after the destruction of so many men and institutions we may say that it is still going”<sup>40</sup>. The “we may say” suggests an embarrassment, but the possible continuation of the revolution despite his belief in the end of revolutionary uprisings induces two contradictory definitions: on the one hand, revolutions are long-term processes – equalization of condition, and adaptations of laws to democratic mores – and, on the other hand, they are rapid cultural changes. François Furet will later analyse both definitions, explaining that Tocqueville, in *Old Regime*, had two objects of study: the long-term administrative centralization, and the short-term cultural shift of 1789.<sup>41</sup> Where young Tocqueville focused only on the first aspect; the writer of *Old Regime* tried to conciliate them.

### **III – The Historian’s craft : Old Tocqueville and the Revolution**

In order to explain what points of Tocqueville’s theory of revolution changed in 1848, I must look at his last years of intellectual work. Tocqueville changed his object of study and nuanced his positions. Concluding a comparison between the 1836 essay and the 1856 masterpiece, Furet explained :

Nothing indicates that Tocqueville clearly resolved the problem he faced in 1836: elaborate a theory of the revolutionary dynamic. The difference with 1836 is that, in the last years of

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<sup>38</sup> Letter to Hippolyte de Tocqueville, 4<sup>th</sup> of December 1831, in Tocqueville, *Selected Letters*, 66.

<sup>39</sup> Letter to Eugène Stoffels, 28<sup>th</sup> of April 1850, in Tocqueville, *Memoir*, 400-401.

<sup>40</sup> Letter to Eugène Stoffels, 14<sup>th</sup> of July 1840, in Tocqueville, *Memoir*, 388.

<sup>41</sup> Furet, *Penser la Révolution*, 253-254.

his life, he presents it as a research direction : it is the true testament of this great uncompleted book.<sup>42</sup>

The abstract, long-term approach of revolutions Tocqueville defended in his early age, reducing them to the sole power of inequalities, collapsed in his later life as he tried to dive into what makes revolutions unique: their dynamic. Answering this question was the problem of his later life, even after publishing *Old Regime*. In 1858, he summarized it to Louis de Kergolay:

There were violent revolutions in the world, but the immoderate, violent, radical, desperate, audacious, almost mad, and nonetheless powerful and effective character of these revolutionaries is without precedent, it seems to me, in the great social agitations of past centuries. From whence came this new race? What produced it? What made it so effective? What is perpetuating it?<sup>43</sup>

This focus on revolutions themselves, rather than the long-term process they are part of, illustrates the main change in Tocqueville's mind. It is also visible in his vocabulary. In his later theory of revolution, Furet noted, he abandoned most of his key concepts: he made a scarce use of the word "democracy".<sup>44</sup> By escaping his abstract concepts, he crafted a comprehensive theory, tried to understand historical events in their uniqueness.<sup>45</sup> Unfortunately, Tocqueville died in 1859, leaving nothing but allusions to what could have been a masterpiece on the revolutionary dynamic.

"Notably, there is something extremely arbitrary in the idea of a cause *par excellence* as opposed to mere 'conditions'"<sup>46</sup> said Marc Bloch. That is what Tocqueville acknowledged with time. When studying the causes of revolutions, he started by placing (in)equality above everything else. In *The Old Regime*, after defining the "essential content"<sup>47</sup> of 1789, he divided its causes into two intertwined categories : ancient-general, and recent-particular causes.<sup>48</sup> None of these have priority over the other, each respectively benefiting from a third of the book. The

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 255-256.

<sup>43</sup> Letter to Louis de Kergolay, 16<sup>th</sup> of May 1858, in Tocqueville, *Selected Letters*, 373.

<sup>44</sup> Furet, *Penser la Révolution*, 230.

<sup>45</sup> A speech held on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of April 1852 at the *Académie des Sciences Morales et Politiques* seems to confirm this new approach. He criticized the comparison between the glorious revolution of 1688 and 1830 by defending the uniqueness of historical events. He indirectly attacked François Guizot, proponent of such a comparison. From "Alexis de Tocqueville," *Académie des Sciences Morales et Politiques*, Institut de France, accessed on June 6<sup>th</sup> 2021, [https://academiesciencesmoralesetpolitiques.fr/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/1852\\_tocqueville.pdf](https://academiesciencesmoralesetpolitiques.fr/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/1852_tocqueville.pdf).

<sup>46</sup> Marc Bloch, *The Historian's craft*, trans. Peter Putnam (New York: Vintage Books, 1953), 193.

<sup>47</sup> Furet, *Penser la Révolution*, 222 (my translation).

<sup>48</sup> Ibid; Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the French Revolution*, trans. Gerald Bevan (London: Penguin books, 2008), 23-25.

tendency to associate Tocqueville's preference to the general cause of the administrative centralization lies in the originality of this argument. He nevertheless considered the influence of the *philosophes* as equally important. The long process of centralization cannot solely explain the uniqueness of the revolution, even when mixed with the envious character of the French. Tocqueville believed in the influence of an "ideological distortion"<sup>49</sup>.

During his re-assessment of 1789, Tocqueville used primary sources to nuance his views. For his 1836 essay, he did not go to the archives and study the *Cahiers de Doléances* the same way he did after 1850. In *Old Regime*, he therefore attributed the clergy a bigger role; and gave a lesser place to the bourgeoisie.<sup>50</sup> This last point reveals the importance of the change in his thoughts: Tocqueville omitted the class supposed to lead the democratic society. Was the French revolution emancipating from the laws of the equalization of conditions? That is what Tocqueville seemed to suggest as he even touched on the existence of a "nobiliary revolt"<sup>51</sup> in 1789.

The study of primary sources led Tocqueville to change his views : in the words of Marcel Reinhard, "the historian rose under the essayist"<sup>52</sup>. From the long-term study of the equalization of conditions, Tocqueville arrived at studying revolutions as an articulation of long-term processes and great cultural changes, hence emancipating from the monocausal whiggish view on the development of democracy. Young and old Tocqueville had different theories of revolutions; the latter being interested in the uniqueness of revolutionary processes rather than deterministic long-term developments.

His study of primary sources was not the only cause for that change. Bloch considered that a historian has to read history "backwards": "(f)or the natural progression of all research is from the best (or at least badly) understood to the most obscure"<sup>53</sup>. The first task of the historian is to observe "the present landscape"<sup>54</sup>. What is best, for Tocqueville's formation as an historian of revolutions, than experiencing one ?

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<sup>49</sup> Furet, *Penser la Révolution*, 224 (my translation).

<sup>50</sup> Reinhard, "Tocqueville historien," 259-262.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, 260 (my translation).

<sup>52</sup> Ibid (my translation).

<sup>53</sup> Bloch, *The Historian*, 45.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, 46.

## CHAPTER TWO : A PHILOSOPHER IN THE STORM

22<sup>nd</sup> of February 1848. The people of Paris rebelled for the third time in sixty years. Louis-Phillipe abdicated after two days of panic. Lamartine proclaimed the Second Republic. An idealistic spirit conquered the French capital... followed by disillusionments culminating in the June days and the bloody repression of Cavaignac.

The “spirit of February” aimed at an idealistic greater good, from freedom of press to abolition of slavery. The provisory government also sought to remedy to working-class unemployment by creating the *Ateliers Nationaux*, supposed to provide a paid work for everyone in public services. They were economically disastrous, and the government abolished them. Parisian workers rebelled in June. The General Eugène Cavaignac violently crushed the insurrection, shocking the public opinion, but allowing the institutions to stabilize.<sup>55</sup>

Tocqueville roamed around Paris on revolutionary days, was a deputy at the end of the July Monarchy, and got re-elected in the constituent assembly. He had a privileged position to reflect on the uprisings. This experience profoundly changed his theory of revolutions. This chapter tracks the steps of the “great change” while linking them to the events of 1848. I argue that, through a discovery of the industrial world, an analysis of socialist ideas, and permanent questioning, Tocqueville abandoned his old theory of revolutions in 1848. His later views on the uniqueness of events and multicausality can be traced back to this experience.

### I – The First Contradictions

Tocqueville believed that 1830 created the “society in which each has something to keep and little to take”<sup>56</sup> : the democratic world, incompatible with Great Revolutions. When reflecting on 1848, he acknowledged his mistake :

(A)lthough I was far from imagining that the catastrophe was so near at hand and fated to be so terrible, I felt a distrust springing up and insensibly growing in my mind, and the idea taking root more and more that we were making strides towards a fresh revolution. This denoted a great change in my thoughts; since the general appeasement and flatness that followed the Revolution of July had led me to believe for a long time that I was destined to spend my life amid an enervated and peaceful society.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Murat, *La Deuxième République*, 64-286.

<sup>56</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy*, 599.

<sup>57</sup> Tocqueville, *The Recollections*, 11.

Tocqueville retrospectively explained that he progressively recognized the possibility of a revolution, and that is where he found his intellectual failure. Instead of having a society of property owners, he encountered a divided world, where only the upper strata of the society lived in the stagnating democratic life. In lower classes, “political life began to make itself manifest by means of feverish and irregular signs, of which the attentive observer was easily able to seize the meaning”<sup>58</sup>. In January 1848, he shared this observation to the assembly : “we are at this moment sleeping on a volcano”<sup>59</sup>. Because of a cleavage between upper and lower classes, a rising critique of property-owning, social rather than political ambitions, a revolution was near. Yet, despite saying in his speech that he was “convinced”<sup>60</sup> of such a development, he explained in his *Souvenirs* that he did not really “expect such a revolution as we were destined to have”<sup>61</sup>. Tocqueville witnessed a contradiction with his theory but struggled to requestion himself.

After the outbreak of the revolution, he had to change his theory. In March 1848, he adjusted his preface to *Democracy*, adding that the contestation of property was the last stage of the equalization of conditions.<sup>62</sup> He tried to supply his old thesis with new observations; yet incompletely as the revolution did not only requestion his view on a property-owning society, but also on the inertia of the democratic world. He did not use his experience of a violent uprising (February) to criticize his view on peaceful democratic societies. He ignored this inconsistency. He explained in a letter that “the fears of civil war and foreign wars are either disappearing or receding”<sup>63</sup>. Despite the events of February, he tried to keep up with *Democracy*, explaining that the future will either be a “good” or a “bad republic”<sup>64</sup>, echoing his ideas on liberal and despotic democratic regimes.<sup>65</sup> He made the same mistake as in 1830 and the June days proved it to him. He failed to see the contradiction between his theory and his observation. He started the year 1848 with rigidity.

Tocqueville failed to apprehend the new revolution using his old theories, just like he was not able to see it coming. Aron tried to explain his errors by the different societies

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Speech at the National Assembly, 27<sup>th</sup> of January 1848, in Tocqueville, *The Recollections*, 14.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Tocqueville, *The Recollections*, 18.

<sup>62</sup> Lefort, Preface to *Souvenirs*, XXII-XXIII.

<sup>63</sup> Letter to Paul Clamorgan, 7<sup>th</sup> of March 1848, in Tocqueville, *Selected Letters*, 202.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, 201.

<sup>65</sup> In *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville explained that the regimes of the democratic age could take two forms: either liberal, guaranteeing the freedom of the citizens at the expense of equality, or despotic, possible consequence of placing equality as the priority. Due to the inevitable reinforcement of the state, democratic societies will remain free, or become tyrannical. From Tocqueville, *Democracy*, 473-476.

Tocqueville thought about.<sup>66</sup> The idea of a stagnating democratic society mainly came from the example of the United States in the 1830s, a merchant nation. He might have been right in saying that these kinds of societies were moving away from revolutions. However, was France in the late 1840s a comparable mercantile country? Tocqueville was torn apart between two different societies, hence the difficulty in apprehending 1848. His progressive discovery of the industrial society paralleled an acknowledgment that a new theory was necessary.

## II – New Perspectives

New original ideas appeared in his correspondence after May 15<sup>th</sup>, when a protest for Polish independence ended up in an invasion of the National Assembly. He abandoned the idea of a stagnating society and predicted an age of revolutions :

We are in the midst of a general revolution of the civilized peoples, and I believe that none of them will escape it in the long run. There is only one way to avert and attenuate this revolution, which is to do everything that is possible to ameliorate the lot of the people before being forced to do so.<sup>67</sup>

The word “attenuate” meant that he was scared of something violent, not the permanent movement of democracies. He probably abandoned this idea rapidly as nowhere in his *Souvenirs* did he make such a point, but it proves how confused Tocqueville was while the events were precipitating. More importantly, his preoccupation shifted from democracy to revolutions. He finally acknowledged his intellectual failure; it was the first step of the change.

The idea of a new age of revolution in the democratic world echoed the views of Marx and Engels about the inevitability of socialist insurrections in the industrial age.<sup>68</sup> Tocqueville, in fact, discovered the industrial world – “it was like the discovery of a new world”<sup>69</sup>. In 1840, he explained that he did “not like to talk about the middle-class, the higher class, and the lower class” but liked to “talk about the general interests of France”<sup>70</sup>. According to him, the French society should not be divided, categorized into groups. This speech revealed his misunderstanding of industrial class relations. The disunion of the French society, in the early

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<sup>66</sup> Aron, *Penser la Liberté*, 1205.

<sup>67</sup> Letter to Lord Radnor, 26<sup>th</sup> of May 1848, in Tocqueville, *Selected Letters*, 212.

<sup>68</sup> Marx and Engels, *Communist Manifesto*, 39-42.

<sup>69</sup> Tocqueville, *The Recollections*, 129.

<sup>70</sup> Speech at the Chambre des Députés, 7<sup>th</sup> of February 1840, in Mélonio and Manzini, *L'Abécédaire*, 51.



nineteenth century, was more than the product of semantic habits, but a socio-economic problem. Parisians were hostile to provincial workers, victims of the rural exodus. The petty bourgeoisie was hostile to the higher bourgeoisie able to pay the voting tax. Artisans were hostile to industries. Miserable factory workers were hostile to their employers. The French society was divided, even within its classes. The economic crisis caused by the terribly bad harvests of 1845-1846 crystallized oppositions, uniting farmers against state officials, urban workers against bankers and the higher bourgeoisie.<sup>71</sup>

Urban groups, reuniting artisans, factory workers, students, and the petty bourgeoisie were the main actors of the 1848 insurrections.<sup>72</sup> This is the industrial world Tocqueville discovered. In his *Souvenirs*, he started again talking about classes : he was struck by “the uniquely and exclusively popular character of the revolution that had just taken place ; the omnipotence it had given to [...] the classes who work with their hands over all others”<sup>73</sup>. Tocqueville was surprised to see that, unlike in 1789 where the bourgeoisie played a significant role, 1848 reunited Parisian hand workers. As he defined the revolutionaries by their work, he also recognized the socio-economic division of the society. He incompletely discovered the industrial society – forgetting the role of the small bourgeoisie in February – but his observations still forced him to change his theory: the new industrial world will lead to new revolutions.

Industrial class relations dismissed the universalization of his American experience. Tocqueville therefore tried to think about what is specific about the situation in France. He went back to 1789. What if the new revolution was part of the old one? What if what he believed to be “the end of the play [1830] was nothing more than the end of an act”<sup>74</sup>? 1848 stopped incarnating a universal development, as it was now part of a long-term French process:

One would have thought in 1789, in 1815, even in 1830, that French society was stricken by one of those violent maladies after which the health of the body becomes more vigorous and more durable. But do we not see today that it is a matter of a chronic complaint; that the cause of the illness is deeper; that the illness, in an intermittent form, will be more durable than had been imagined; that it is not only such a government that seems impossible, but any durable government whatsoever, and that we are destined to oscillate

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<sup>71</sup> Murat, *La Deuxième République*, 10-44.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid, 66-94.

<sup>73</sup> Tocqueville, *The Recollections*, 92.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid, 12.

for a long time between despotism and liberty, without being able permanently to support either?<sup>75</sup>

The new revolution, contradicting his predictions, first led him to change his thesis while staying in the *Democracy* paradigm. Yet, the progressive discovery of the French industrial society forced him to study a “new world”<sup>76</sup> and he looked for its roots: the French revolution. Did 1789 create a social order but failed to give it appropriate institutions? That is how he explained the permanence of revolutions, and the reason they did not end in 1799, 1815, nor 1830...<sup>77</sup> Questions on revolutions, and the specificities of the French first nineteenth century, replaced universal thoughts on democracy. The topic of his 1856 book replaced his first object of study: the idea of living a “permanent revolution”<sup>78</sup> overshadowed the advent of democracy. The new revolution led to the study of the old; it was the second step of the change. However, Tocqueville saw it as part of a long-term, yet revolutionary, process. Again, experience forced him to nuance his views.

### III – A Great Ideological Distortion

Tocqueville interpreted the new revolution in three different ways: 1848 was first the last step of the equalization of conditions, then it became the first step of an age of Revolutions, last, it ended as a stage of the revolution of 1789. Each of these interpretations placed the new revolution within a broader process. Yet, despite different beliefs in the nature of 1848, one feature remained over time. When the revolution was the last step of democratization, he called it “contestation of property-owning”<sup>79</sup>. Socialist ideas, parallel to his rediscoveries of the new revolution, increasingly came to the foreground of his reflections about 1848. He started believing in the key role of ideologies, and their proponents.<sup>80</sup>

As early as January 1848, he warned the parliament about the thoughts of the working class: “(d)o you not hear them repeating unceasingly that [...] the present distribution of goods

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<sup>75</sup> Letter to Eugène Stoffels, 21<sup>st</sup> of July 1848, in Tocqueville, *Selected Letters*, 215.

<sup>76</sup> Tocqueville, *The Recollections*, 129.

<sup>77</sup> Letter to Eugène Stoffels, 28<sup>th</sup> of April 1850, in Tocqueville, *Memoir*, 400-401.

<sup>78</sup> Mélonio and Manzini, *L'Abécédaire*, 213 (my translation).

<sup>79</sup> Lefort, Preface to *Souvenirs*, XXIII.

<sup>80</sup> As will be shown in this section, Tocqueville reported that one of the main causes of the 1848 revolution was the spread of socialist ideas. He emphasized the role of the intellectual, echoing the views of Antonio Gramsci. In the Twentieth century, this Italian communist thinker attributed to intellectuals a key role in creating a cultural context without which no revolution is possible. From Jean-Yves Frégné, *Antonio Gramsci : vivre, c'est résister* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2017).

throughout the world is unjust; that property rests on a foundation which is not an equitable foundation?"<sup>81</sup> Without really thinking about the reality of a violent revolution, he tried to scare the government by highlighting a risk of conflict. What struck him was the new thought, of a new revolutionary class: socialism. The worse-offs of the industrial world had new ideas about the abolition of property, spread by the new *philosophes* of the modern age: "(f)or ten years, in books and today in the street, doctrines [socialist and communist ones] have been preached whose application is irreconcilable with the general laws that today regulate production and property"<sup>82</sup>. The heads of the working class "have been filled"<sup>83</sup> with "false ideas"<sup>84</sup>. While Tocqueville tried to force the new revolution into broader models, he witnessed a new ideology, strong enough in the minds of the lower class to start an insurrection.

Among the Socialist pamphlets that were published after *Democracy*, the most important were probably *L'Organisation du Travail* by Louis Blanc, *De l'Humanité* by Pierre Leroux, and *Qu'est-ce que la Propriété ?* by Pierre-Joseph Proudhon. These books were published around 1840 but were repeatedly re-edited the following decade. They testified of the division between social classes, and aimed at social reform, often through state control of industry, and the abolition of property. These ideas spread in the French working class in the decade before 1848, making Paris the "Mecca of Socialism"<sup>85</sup>. Heinrich Heine called the French "the chosen people of the new religion"<sup>86</sup>.

The more Tocqueville witnessed the importance of socialist ideas, the more he shifted his focus from democracy to revolutions. Similarly, he slowly acknowledged the ideological character of revolutionary dynamics. They were more than part of long-term processes: they had a spirit of their own. (In)equality relations had less influence than the theories told about them:

The revolution was not brought about by the misery of the working classes. This misery surely existed in certain respects, but in general one could say that in no country, in no time, had the working classes been in a better condition than in France. [...] Not needs, but ideas brought about this great upheaval: chimerical ideas on the relative condition of

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<sup>81</sup> Speech at the National Assembly, 27<sup>th</sup> of January 1848, in Tocqueville, *The Recollections*, 14.

<sup>82</sup> Letter to Paul Clamorgan, 7<sup>th</sup> of March 1848, in Tocqueville, *Selected Letters*, 202.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Tocqueville, *The Recollections*, 42.

<sup>85</sup> Murat, *La Deuxième République*, 54 (my translation).

<sup>86</sup> Heinrich Heine, in Murat, *La Deuxième République*, 54 (my translation).

worker and capital, exaggerated theories on the role that social power could fill in the relations of worker and master.<sup>87</sup>

Tocqueville suggested that ideas caused 1848, while trying to place it in a longer process. That is another way to explain his argument on the coming age of revolutions: new ideas, new consequences. He nevertheless tried to understand the new revolution in itself as he considered it as the first of a new age of socialist revolutions. He studied its uniqueness: this is the third step of the change.

His reflections on socialist ideas clarified over time. He reflected on a genealogy of anti-property ideas: Socialist thinkers were the grandchildren of Gracchus Babeuf who, under the Directory, advocated for a collectivisation of the land and the means of production in what became known as “the conspiracy of equals”<sup>88</sup>. Tocqueville, on the 27<sup>th</sup> of May 1848, in front of the constituent assembly made it explicit: “(t)he abolition of individual property and the establishment of the great national community was the final goal of his labor (of Babeuf)”<sup>89</sup>. The invocation of Babeuf implied the link with the great French revolution. Again, the study of the new brought him to the old...

Socialism also had an influence on the feelings of the lower classes. According to Tocqueville, not only did they drive them to rebellion, but they did so through “envy”. In *Democracy*, he explained that the greater part of democratic societies was composed of “similar men who, without being precisely either rich or poor, possess enough goods to desire order and do not have enough of them to excite envy”<sup>90</sup>. However, after 1848, in *Souvenirs*, he explained that the new revolution was partly caused by the “democratic disease of envy, which was silently permeating”<sup>91</sup> the multitude. More importantly, ideas caused this envy : “economical and political theories [...] which strove to prove that human misery was the work of laws and not of Providence”.

Not only ideas partly caused the revolution, making its outbreak unique, but they also drove its dynamic. Tocqueville lingered on what happened *during* the revolutionary process. He made an explanation of the June days:

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<sup>87</sup> Letter to Nassau William Senior, 10<sup>th</sup> of April 1848, in Tocqueville, *Selected Letters*, 206.

<sup>88</sup> Sylvia Neely, *A Concise History of the French Revolution* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008), 228-229.

<sup>89</sup> Speech at the Constituent Assembly, 27<sup>th</sup> of May 1848, in Aurelian Craiutu and Jeremy Jennings (eds), *Tocqueville on America after 1840 : Letters and Other writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 400-401.

<sup>90</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy*, 600.

<sup>91</sup> Tocqueville, *The Recollections*, 81.

It was not, strictly speaking, a political struggle, in the sense which until then we had given to the word, but a combat of class against class, a sort of *Servile War*. It represented the facts of the Revolution of February in the same manner as the theories of Socialism represented its ideas ; or rather it issued naturally from these ideas, as a son does from his mother.<sup>92</sup>

Like Engels, who described the June days as a “Roman slave war”<sup>93</sup>, Tocqueville described them as a conflict between the worse-offs and the higher strata of society, caused by socialist ideas. The actual composition of the rebellious forces was more complex. Inès Murat explained for instance that there was an “antagonism of generations”<sup>94</sup>, between a lesser paid youth and old workers whose salaries declined with the expansion of the labour market. The role of artisans in the insurrection is also not to be underestimated. Nevertheless, the shift in Tocqueville’s thought remains clear: he focused on the uniqueness of the event and tried to explain the revolution in its causes but also in its process; it was fourth step of the change. *Old regime* was almost there.

While trying to make 1848 fit in a broader development, Tocqueville tried to analyse its peculiarities, what made it unique, and lingered on socialism. By doing so, he acknowledged the possibility that revolutions were caused both by long-term processes, and short-term ideological developments. Ideas could cause and conduct revolutionary dynamics. Tocqueville outlined the division between ancient-general and recent-particular causes.

#### **IV – The Causes of the 1848 revolution**

Because he acknowledged the co-existence of two main causes rather than the unique force of inequality, Tocqueville opened Pandora’s box. If 1848 was both part of a long-term process, and triggered by socialist ideas, a revolution could be caused by multiple variables. In his *Souvenirs* he tried to articulate the conditions that triggered the revolution, sketching the division used in *The Old Regime*. “The Revolution of February, in common with all other great events of this class, sprang from general causes, impregnated, if I am permitted the expression, by accidents.”<sup>95</sup> This section aims at summarizing Tocqueville’s view on the causes of 1848 in order to show how far he got from his early view on the causes of revolutions.

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid,

<sup>93</sup> Friedrich Engels, as cited in Murat, *La Deuxième République*, 269 (my translation).

<sup>94</sup> Murat, *La Deuxième République*, 279-280.

<sup>95</sup> Tocqueville, *The Recollections*, 81.

## 1. General causes

“It is surprising that what today appears so easy to see remained as tangled and hidden as it was even to the most far-sighted observers”<sup>96</sup> explained Tocqueville in *Old Regime*. These hidden features that survived the revolution of 1789, but were present beforehand, are the long-term causes, the continuous character of a nation’s history. For France in 1789, one of these was the administrative centralization. What about 1848? After hesitating between the democratic process of equalization of conditions, the class struggle – possibly violent – of the industrial world, he settled on the persistence of 1789. The great revolution, by violently creating a new social order, failed to give it an institutional organization. The successive regimes of the nineteenth century sought to build such a system; in the words of Emmanuel de Waresquiel, “*c’est la Révolution qui continue*”<sup>97</sup> – it is the revolution that continues. 1848 is nothing but an attempt at creating order: it “is the French Revolution beginning over again, for it is still the same one”<sup>98</sup>.

Another long-term cause was French people. For Tocqueville, they have a taste for equality rather than liberty; they prefer living equal in despotism, rather than unequal and free. Tocqueville would have agreed with his uncle, François-René de Chateaubriand : “(d)aily experience shows that the French are instinctively attracted by power; they have no love for liberty; equality alone is their idol”<sup>99</sup>. Tocqueville also developed that “the warlike nature of the French, their long experience of insurrections, and particularly the military education which the majority of the men of the people in turn receive” prepared them for using a “strategic science”<sup>100</sup> in urban warfare, but also made them hot-blooded enough to fight.

Other important causes were the oppositions between the worse-offs of the society and the bourgeois, fuelled by socialist intellectuals. The new egalitarianism, of which Paris became the centre, according to Tocqueville, drove the working class to rebellion through envy and shaped the nature of the revolutionary process. The efficiency of this intellectual subversion lied in the fact that “in no country, in no time, had the working classes been in a better condition

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<sup>96</sup> Tocqueville, *The Old Regime*, 53.

<sup>97</sup> Emmanuel de Waresquiel, *C’est la Révolution qui continue ! La Restauration 1814-1830* (Paris: Tallandier, 2015), 13.

<sup>98</sup> Tocqueville, *The Recollections*, 86.

<sup>99</sup> François-René de Chateaubriand, *Memoirs from beyond the Tomb*, trans. Robert Baldick (London: Penguin Classics, 2014), 284.

<sup>100</sup> Tocqueville, *The Recollections*, 189.

than in France”<sup>101</sup>. As Raymond Aron noted, “all the observers of revolutions, Tocqueville, Pareto and the others, knew that the most revolutionary element is not the one situated at the very bottom of the hierarchy, but the intermediary one, the one who got high enough to see the space to cross in order to reach the summit”<sup>102</sup>. The French industrial development promoted the rise of such a class. Eric Anceau also noted the influence of the petty bourgeoisie, excluded by the census suffrage and envious of their immediate hierarchical superiors.<sup>103</sup>

Lastly, the political centralization of the kingdom “reduced the whole revolutionary movement to the overmastering of Paris and the seizing of the machinery of government”<sup>104</sup>.

## 2. Particular causes

In such a context, only a spark was needed to light up the fire. Tocqueville called it “accident”. Here fits the crucial role of agency. The importance of Louis-Phillipe was, for instance, matching his inability to predict the events: “his weakness was due to his excessive surprise; he was overwhelmed with consternation before he had grasped the meaning of things”<sup>105</sup>. Besides psychological descriptions, Tocqueville inferred that the revolution could have taken another form if the king had been better prepared.

Furthermore, Orleanist parliamentary opponents to the current ministers also had their role to play. According to Tocqueville, “the passions of the dynastic Opposition, which brought about a riot in proposing a reform”<sup>106</sup> were part of the “principal accidents” leading to the revolution of February. Left-wing supporters of the July Monarchy, incarnated by Odilon Barrot, organized a series of *banquets* all around the kingdom. Joined by the centre-left of Adolphe Thiers, the campaign aimed at lowering the electoral tax. The movement gained in strength, bringing a new vitality to pamphlets, and newspapers of the opposition. Republicans followed the trend and attended the *banquets*. The campaign radicalized until Guizot forbade one of its demonstrations in Paris. Moderate organizers retreated too late, and the reunion of the 22<sup>nd</sup> of February 1848 became the first day of the revolution.<sup>107</sup> Individual behaviours had a key role in the outbreak of the insurrection, from the incapability of Louis-Phillipe – echoing

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<sup>101</sup> Letter to Nassau William Senior, 10<sup>th</sup> of April 1848, in Tocqueville, *Selected Letters*, 206.

<sup>102</sup> Aron, *Penser la Liberté*, 644 (my translation).

<sup>103</sup> Anceau, *Les Elites Françaises*, 135-143.

<sup>104</sup> Tocqueville, *The Recollections*, 81-82.

<sup>105</sup> Tocqueville, *The Recollections*, 83.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid*, 82.

<sup>107</sup> Murat, *La Deuxième République*, 38-44/71-80.

the reactions of his remote cousin, Louis XVI, in a similar situation – to the irresponsible ardour of the dynastic opposition.

Yet, Tocqueville did not expand on the economic crisis, caused by terrible harvests that turned into an industrial and banking depression. The underconsumption due to the frumentary crisis led to bankruptcies in provincial industries and spread into Paris. Unemployment rose and financial speculation turned a situation that could have been resolved in 1847, with the return of good harvests, into an enduring crisis. This depression revealed the cleavages of the French society.<sup>108</sup> Fernand Braudel contrasted Tocqueville's indifference towards the economic crisis to his sociological descriptions of the French society. Because of a focus on mentality rather than materiality, he considered him as a precursor of the *Annales* School.<sup>109</sup>

Moreover, Tocqueville placed the role of intellectuals in the general causes whereas in *Old Regime*, he attributed them a “particular and recent”<sup>110</sup> place: his thoughts still slightly changed after 1848. What is visible though is that his general causes of the new revolution are numerous, more complex than conflicts over (in)equality, and based on his experience of 1848. The new revolution brought him to the old one, his discovery of the industrial world forced him to reflect on multicausality. Furthermore, the experience of a revolutionary process encouraged him to study the uniqueness of events and their dynamic.

Tocqueville's emphasis on the psychology of the actors – Louis-Phillipe for instance – also catches the eye. Would old Tocqueville agree with the words of Bloch again? “Historical facts are, in essence, psychological facts.”<sup>111</sup> That I cannot say. Yet he would certainly agree on saying that unique events induce a unique set of causes, and that these causes cannot be assumed, but looked for.<sup>112</sup> Tocqueville established “complexity and diversity where a serene and powerful conviction used to reign”<sup>113</sup>. He replaced reasoned assumptions by research-based erudition. In 1848, Tocqueville, from essayist, became a historian.

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid, 9-10; Furet, *La Révolution Française*, 141-143.

<sup>109</sup> Marc Lazar, Krzysztof Pomian, Philippe Raynaud and Marc Sadoun, “Tocqueville chez les Historiens,” *Raisons Politiques* 1, n°1 (2001): 112-113.

<sup>110</sup> Tocqueville, *Old Regime*, 156.

<sup>111</sup> Bloch, *The Historian*, 194.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid, 197.

<sup>113</sup> Reinhard, “Tocqueville historien,” 258 (my translation).



## CONCLUSION

Nowadays, Tocquevillian scholarship mostly focuses on *Democracy in America* due to its supposed universality. Indeed, Tocqueville's predictions on the twentieth century were impressive: welfare capitalism, individualism, mass totalitarianism, unrevolutionary revolutions... Yet is he really a thinker of all democratic centuries? If Furet and Reinhard noted a significant change in his thought linked to the revolution of 1848, it means that his philosophy was not totally applicable in his own age. I aimed at detailing that change, map its extent in order to see how universal Tocqueville is. Revolutions being a key object of his studies, studying his way of thinking about them revealed the theoretical rupture that occurred in 1848.

In his early age, Tocqueville believed in the end of revolution. He considered that the *Trois Glorieuses* led to an "enervated and peaceful society"<sup>114</sup>. Enervated because of a permanent movement of wealth punctuated by unrevolutionary revolutions. Peaceful because of mass property-ownership and commercial mores. He explained that the French revolution had come to an end with the advent of the *Juste-milieu*, as 1789 was nothing more than a step of the long-term process of equalization of conditions. This process finished, individuals of democratic societies being more equal than ever, great revolutions will cease to exist.

The main problem was that Tocqueville experienced a revolution. First, he struggled to requestion himself: 1848 was just the end of the equalization of conditions, and then the world was bound to be peaceful. He then slowly discovered the industrial world, saw a violent insurrection again on May 15<sup>th</sup>, and radically changed his ideas by predicting an age of revolutions. Further reflections, on the uniqueness of the new French revolution, and socialist ideas, encouraged him to see 1848 as a stage of the unfinished revolution of 1789. Socialism also determined the nature of the revolutionary process and forced Tocqueville to craft a multicausal approach of the events. 1848 resulted from general causes, such as human condition in the industrial world, coupled to "accidents" like human actions.

From the unique cause of (in)equality, Tocqueville came explain revolutions by a complex set of intertwined explanations. He now studied revolutions in themselves rather than as part of a general long-term process. In *The Old Regime and the Revolution*, he incorporated his lessons: 1789 was caused by ancient-general causes, like the administrative centralization, and recent-particular ones, like the influence of the *philosophes*. He unfortunately died before finishing his work on the revolutionary dynamic.

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<sup>114</sup> Tocqueville, *The Recollections*, 11.

What can I say about the universality of *Democracy* then ? It appears that after 1848, Tocqueville himself stopped believing in the universality of one of his early views. The experience of the nineteenth century proved him wrong: revolutions were not finished, making long-term prediction appeared less enlightening than historical erudition. Tocqueville's views are not universal as they did not fit in his own century. Was Tocqueville ahead of its time? Was he a thinker of mercantile societies? Young Tocqueville was probably more of a twentieth-century philosopher, stuck in the body of a nineteenth-century essayist.

Bringing his *Souvenirs* and his correspondence to the foreground led to a re-evaluation of his thought. Revealing the step-by-step process of the great change brought us close to his spontaneous interpretations. Tocqueville's theory of revolutions changed progressively in 1848 through his permanent questioning and planted the seeds of a career as a historian. Yet, I only focused on one aspect of his *oeuvre*: revolutions. Fully assessing the universality of his philosophy requires more objects of study. Proving that his theory of revolution changed in 1848 does not suffice to dismiss the universal application of *democracy*. It is nevertheless a necessary step. Every aspect of his first major book should be studied through his lived experience: for instance, reflect on the tyranny of the majority by looking at his views on the election of Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte. In any case, one should discuss with the theorist before applying his concepts.

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