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Between Poetry and Positivism
Alexis de Tocqueville's "Social Science"

"When the old world is sterile
And the ages are effete,
He will from wrecks and sediment
The fairer world complete."[1]

In the introduction to *Democracy in America* Alexis de Tocqueville contended that the world was experiencing a democratic revolution. According to Tocqueville, the progress of equality throughout the western world was "something fated," and was "beyond human control."[2] Both the valuable and damaging aspects of the *Ancien Regime* were swept away by this inevitable progress toward democracy, creating the need for a new order. A such, Tocqueville's self-proclaimed duty was "to educate democracy."[3] Experiencing the same worldwide democratic revolution, Auguste Comte and Ralph Waldo Emerson derived different conclusions regarding the direction of democracy. These differences were reflected in their respective methodologies: in Comte's scientific positivism and in Emerson's poetic romanticism. In contrast, Tocqueville's methodology is a complex combination of both poetic descriptions and scientific evaluations.

Ultimately, both Comte and Emerson were more hopeful about the progress of humanity. Tocqueville, especially in his later writings, was more nostalgic for the past and grew weary of the idea of a fast-paced industrial, or theoretical, progress. As J.P. Mayer wrote in the foreword to the 1969 edition of *Democracy in America*, democratic societies are "still in flux" and need "the limits of growth."[4] Perhaps Tocqueville's concerns about the notion of progress are better suited for a twentieth century audience than one at the dawn of the Industrial Revolution. Certainly, the philosopher Walter

[1] Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Progress of Culture," *Selected Writings* 77
[2] Tocqueville *Democracy in America* (DIA) 12
[3] Ibid 12

Benjamin shared more of Tocqueville's concerns than did Tocqueville's contemporaries Comte and Emerson.

Tocqueville addressed his duty of educating democracy in his books *Democracy in America*, where he found useful models of liberty and equality of conditions, and in *The Old Regime*, where he looked to pre-Revolutionary France in order to understand the mores caused by and, to a large extent, still flourishing in France after the Revolution. In both texts Tocqueville's methodology is unclear and shifts between systematized studies of society as a whole and flowery descriptions of particular social moments. Tocqueville himself never explains his methodology and instead navigates between different stylistic methods throughout his writing. This seems partly intentional on his part. Instead of creating new abstract theories, Tocqueville had a political bent. By "educating democracy" Tocqueville professed that his duty was:

> to put, if possible, new life into its beliefs; to purify its mores; to control its actions; gradually to substitute understanding of statecraft for present inexperience and knowledge of its true interests for blind instincts; to adapt government to the needs of time and place; and to modify it as men and circumstances require.[5]

These tasks are largely political and practical rather than abstract or theoretical. Hence, his lack of a coherent methodology may not be a fault, as it reflects his self-imposed, political rather than philosophical purpose.

The urgency of this task is also important. At the time when he wrote *Democracy in America* Tocqueville claimed that the fate of the French was still in their own hands, but that it soon might slip beyond their control.[6] After he had written *The Old Regime* and returned to read his earlier writings, he was less optimistic. Instead of

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[4] Ibid ix
[5] Ibid 12

finding hopeful and useful models of liberty and equality in America, he found on every page of *Democracy in America* "a solemn warning that society is changing shape."[7] One can trace the development of this later pessimism throughout *The Old Regime,* where Tocqueville emphasizes the destructive causes and voids left by the French Revolution. Tocqueville opens this text with the proposition that the task of the revolutionaries was to "obliterate their former selves."[8] This destructive tone of the Revolution left France with a pile of debris that, ironically, the French used to rebuild their society. However, that which they could not easily reincorporate was precisely that which American democracy could not do without: liberty.

Since Tocqueville attempted to educate democracy via his writings, it is important to understand his interpretation of the achievements and failures of the French Revolution that have created a flawed form of democracy in France. Tocqueville maintained that the French Revolution was destructive of French society and politics irrespective of the particular value of specific institutions and mores. He claimed that this "political upheaval" swept away "both what was worst and what was best in the old system."[9] Tocqueville considered this the first of two phases of the French Revolution.[10] As he described in the foreword to *The Old Regime*, the first phase was destructive and necessitated a second phase of French social re-building. While most of this text related to the first phase, describing the events leading up to the Revolution, in the third part of *The Old Regime* his conclusions began to incorporate the present situation of France in the mid-nineteenth century.

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[6] Ibid 12
[7] Ibid xiii
[8] Tocqueville *The Old Regime* (OR) vii
[9] *OR* 167

This incorporation of his present political influences can be seen in his analysis of the "Physiocrats" or "Economists." His assertions about the economists set the stage for his disagreement with the positivists of his day, though he does not explicitly state such a relationship in *The Old Regime*. His description of the economists in the last section of *The Old Regime*, for instance, offered an appraisal of both pre-Revolutionary and post-Revolutionary France. The economists represented social scientists in the extreme sense for Tocqueville. He blamed socialism and democratic despotism on their prescriptions and on their meddling in political affairs. Positing them as major components of post-Revolutionary France, he stated, "the germinal ideas of practically all the permanent changes effected by the Revolution can be found in their works."[11] Tocqueville's interpretation of these works makes clear the reasons for his strong distaste of their "reforms." He asserted,

> According to the Economists the function of the State was not merely one of ruling the nation, but also that of recasting it in a given mold, of shaping the mentality of the population as a whole in accordance with a predetermined model and instilling the ideas and sentiments they thought desirable into the minds of all.[12]

While the economists may have supported a notion of equality, they also, according to Tocqueville, supported homogeneity. For Tocqueville, equality without freedom, as the economists proposed, was the worst kind of tyranny. He claimed, "to their thinking all men should be equal even if equality spelled servitude, and every obstacle to the achievement of this end should be done away with immediately."[13] According to Tocqueville, the economists' stronghold on the popular thoughts in France not only made the Revolution inevitable, but also had a long-term effect on the social order of France.

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[10] Later I will parallel the division of the Revolution into two phases to the same move made by Comte.
[11] Ibid 158
[12] Ibid 162

Closely linked to his criticism of the economists was Tocqueville's support of social liberty. According to Tocqueville, the French desire for liberty was the first to disappear and the last to be revived after the Revolution had destroyed the institutions necessary for its maintenance. It is in his discussion of liberty, throughout both *Democracy in America* and *The Old Regime*, that Tocqueville seemed most pessimistic about the fate of France. In *The Old Regime* he stated,

> By the time their ancient love of freedom reawakened in the hearts of the French, they had already been inoculated with a set of ideas as regards the way the country should be governed that were not merely hard to reconcile with free institutions but practically ruled them out.[14] (*OR* 165)

In his earlier description of the American value of liberty Tocqueville accentuated the need for liberty in a free democracy. Thus, his solemn portrayal of liberty in this passage revealed his fear of a despotic democracy in France's future.

While Tocqueville offered a unique interpretation of social liberty, his topic of Man's relation to society was anything but original. Rather, the subject matter of his insights can be understood via the broader projects of the modern period. As with many of his contemporaries, Tocqueville was interested in the relationship of Man to himself, to other men, and to Nature. These relationships are woven throughout his writings. As for the relationship of Man to himself, Tocqueville defined freedom in relation to political liberty rather than to self-interested liberty. Second, for Tocqueville only freedom constituted by social relations is valid. This freedom is secured by social mores rather than by laws, as supported by his observations of American democracy. Third, in terms of Man's relationship to Nature (or God), religion secured the possibility for freedom properly understood. Attacking the tradition of philosophy that undermined the

[13] Ibid 159

religious beliefs in pre-Revolutionary France, Tocqueville linked anti-religious sentiments to servitude.

As such, Tocqueville's work, while worthy of interpretation on its own grounds, has a peculiar place in its relation to the works of his contemporaries. A comparison between Tocqueville and positivists such as Comte and Saint Simon and between Tocqueville and romantic poets such as Emerson places Tocqueville's methodology between the extreme secularity and systematized living of positivism and the radical individualism and potential isolation of romantic poetry. Instead of conforming to either of these viewpoints, Tocqueville negotiates a balance between the two, more or less successfully offering poignant insights about the society in France's future. Ultimately, these insights seem inclined toward pessimism in his later writings, perhaps isolating his outlook, specifically on progress, further from those of his contemporaries.

Tocqueville's commentary on the causes of the Revolution and on American democracy support one of the characteristic beliefs of the modern period: that everything can and should be studied. While the positivists were interested in the same relationships as was Tocqueville, they also fixated upon "social science" and "human progress." Born only seven years apart, both Comte and Tocqueville shared a common starting point in the broken world of post-Revolutionary French society. Their description of this context is also similar. For instance both claimed that they lived during the second of two distinct phases of the French Revolution. Note the similarities in the following two passages. First, according to Comte,

> In this great crisis there are naturally two principal phases, of which only the first, or negative, phase has yet been accomplished. In it we gave the last blow to the old system, but without arriving at any fixed and distinct prospect of the new. In

[14] Ibid 165

> the second or positive phase, which at last is beginning, a basis for the new social state has to be constructed. The first phase led as its ultimate result to the formation of a sound philosophical system; and by this system the second phase will be directed.[15]

Compare this division to that presented by Tocqueville:

> The Revolution had, indeed, two distinct phases: one in which the sole aim of the French nation seemed to be to make a clean sweep of the past; and a second, in which attempts were made to salvage fragments from the wreckage of the old order.[16]

From these two excerpts it is clear that Comte and Tocqueville shared a common context, though their interpretations diverged. Both see themselves at the dawn of this second phase, and made it their task to study society in order to influence the new order of French social developments. Comte made this explicit in his development of positivism. However, for Tocqueville the tendency to study society in terms of science was less obvious, if present at all. In the introduction to *Democracy in* America Tocqueville argues, "A new political science is needed for a world itself quite new." While they shared a context, and broader purpose to a large extent, Comte and Tocqueville developed strongly divergent ideas addressed via different methodologies.

One distinct difference is that while Tocqueville looked to the past for answers to the problems facing France in the nineteenth century, positivists[17] like Comte and Saint Simon took their task to be forward moving and "progressive." Saint Simon described this sentiment well:

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[15] Comte, *A General View of Positivism* 63. Undoubtedly, this philosophical system is precisely that founded by the economists, of which Comte is a direct descendent.
[16] Tocqueville, *The Old Regime* x
[17] I am referring to the term "positivism" in its original form, as Comte invented it This should not be confused with 20th Century uses of "legal positivism" or "logical positivism." While 20th Century uses of the term "positivism" stem from some of the same beliefs held by Comte, they do not usually emphasize the categorization of human life in hierarchical models as Comte do. In this paper I have only defined positivism as Comte understood it.

> There will undoubtedly come a time when all the peoples of Europe will feel that questions of common interest must be dealt with before coming down to national interests. Then evils will begin to lessen, troubles abate, wars die out. That is the goal towards which we are carelessly moving, towards which the advance of the human mind is carrying us! But which is more worthy of man's prudence: to be dragged there or to hasten towards it?[18]

For Saint Simon this human progress was inevitable and its value was almost unquestioned. What was important for the positivists was the capability of the human mind to live a systematized life, a life that maximized human capacities.

The most important feature of the progressive life, according to the positivists, was the method used to achieve this life. Both Comte and Saint Simon were dedicated to the ultimate necessity of a "social science" whereby Man could understand society, and thereby could understand himself, in a way not unlike that of the natural sciences. When Comte devised the notion of positivism he had explicitly two ends in mind: to systematize the living of social life and to universalize social-scientific concepts about humans.[19] In these claims one can hear the echo of the economists of the eighteenth century, the very same theorists whom Tocqueville attacked. Already it is clear that Tocqueville and the positivists have fundamental differences, at least according to Tocqueville. These differences become clearest when one examines the components of positivism itself, which draw out a central difference about the notion of the third kind of relationship analyzed during this period, that between Man and God.

Both Comte and Saint Simon described different stages of human evolution in social terms. Probably influenced by concurrent advances made in biological theories about human evolution, the positivists ascribed universal traits to the progress of humanity. While they had slightly different divisions of the stages, either interpretation

[18] Henri Saint Simon, *Selected Writings* 129

reflects a scientific methodology vastly different from that of Tocqueville. According to Saint Simon the development of humanity rested on the "perfectibility" of the human intellect. In the first stage, men gained superiority over animals, in later stages developing different levels of political organization. The final stage of human development for Saint Simon relied on absolute notions of reason. Saint Simon stated,

> The general system of our knowledge will be reorganized on the basis of the belief that the universe is ruled by a single immutable law. All the systems of application, such as the systems of religion, politics, morals, and civil law will be placed in harmony with the new system of knowledge.[20]

According to Saint Simon, this immutable law could be derived by an exploration of human reason, via scientific methodology. Saint Simon described this methodology by reference to synthesis and analysis. He asserted, "every question of public interest, precisely because it is a question, must be decided in the same way as any other question."[21] Treating notions of public interest as an objective question, Saint Simon believed that these questions should be managed by the dictates of logic; in other words, social questions should be answered by the same method of analysis or synthesis used to answer questions of natural science. He stated, "a question has been treated with certainty and comprehensiveness only when it has been successively examined *a priori* and *a posteriori*."[22] Whatever this system of knowledge presented via reason would then determine norms against which all social actions would be judged. This kind of systematized epistemology was simply absent from Tocqueville's social observations.

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[19] Comte, *A General View of Positivism* 1-8
[20] Henri Saint Simon *Selected Writings* 125
[21] Ibid 132
[22] Ibid 132

Comte offered a similar interpretation of the progressive stages of humanity, though his interpretation diluted Man's intellectual evolution to three stages instead of the thirty or so found in Saint Simon. The goal of Comte's systematic view was to serve as a "basis for modifying imperfections."[23] The initial imperfection that Comte sought to correct became clear in the presentation of his first, lowest, stage of humanity: the theological stage. In the first section of *A General View of Positivism* Comte described this first stage as fictitious. In his modification of the religious imperfection of man, Comte offered a new, secular form of religion in the "Priesthood of Sociologists." As the name suggests, the sociologist-king would head a kind of religion, as well as the state itself.[24]

Comte's second stage was more abstract. Moving into a metaphysical stage, Comte situated the early modern philosophers and the economists in this stage. Here, the groundwork of theories poured the foundation for the final stage: positivism. In this last, scientific stage, humanity would live according to social scientific knowledge, guided by the experts: the sociologists.

As already mentioned, Tocqueville's strongest criticism of the positivists would reflect their different religious beliefs. The positivists only supported religion as far as it was useful in this first stage and aimed to replace spirituality with secular religion by educating people about the reasonability of a universal religion. Saint Simon asserted,

> I believe in the necessity of a religion for the maintenance of the social order. I believe that deism is outworn, but that physicism is not sufficiently developed to serve as the basis of a new religion. I believe that there have to be two distinct doctrines: physicism for the educated men, and deism for the ignorant.[25]

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[23] Comte *A General View Of Positivism* 8
[24] Comte's critique of religion was probably the least resolvable aspect of positivism for Tocqueville.
[25] Saint Simon *Selected Writings* 102

Tocqueville would have opposed this anti-religious sentiment.[26] First, whereas the positivists believed that the Revolution was focused against the antique nature of religion in the wake of technological advances, Tocqueville asserted that the Revolution was not due to the failure of religion in France. He argued that the Church was no worse off in France than in other countries not experiencing revolutions,[27] and that the real problem was the alliance between the Church and the State. Second, and more importantly, Tocqueville would have defended religion as the protector of liberty. In *Democracy in America* he stated, "Liberty regards religion as its companion in all its battles and its triumphs. It considers religion as the safeguard of morality, and morality as the best security of law and the surest pledge of the duration of freedom." In the next section he equated anti-religious sentiments with servitude.[28] In a broader sense, Tocqueville attacked the predecessors of positivism on a religious basis, asserting that the void left by religion was inadequately filled by the intellectual's use of reason and faith in science.[29]

Tocqueville could not wholly accept a scientific methodology because it did nothing to explain the interactions of citizens within a democracy, including their interactions navigated by a legitimate, for Tocqueville, faith in God. Instead, he wanted to explain the intangible attitudes and "mores" of citizens. Perhaps more in line with his descriptive tendencies is the methodology of a poet like Ralph Waldo Emerson.

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[26] I have to suppose this opposition because Tocqueville himself did not engage the positivists directly. Admittedly, the positivists were just gaining popularity during Tocqueville's life. However, it is a peculiar omission from Tocqueville's work, especially as Tocqueville attempted to support the need for religion in the new democracy of France.
[27] *OR* 150
[28] *DIA* 185
[29] *OR* 157

Emerson's project shifts the focus from Man and society to Man and Nature, also prevalent in Tocqueville's work.

Emerson is helpful in understanding Tocqueville's underlying epistemological beliefs: that is, his reliance on empiricism and his senses. Instead of appealing to a detached notion of reason Tocqueville relied on things he saw, conversations he heard, and societies he directly experienced, especially in *Democracy in America*. Emerson's writings are filled with description based on empirical learning: "I question not my corporeal eye any more than I would question a window concerning a sight. I look through it, and not with it."[30] In the first part of *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville seems utterly reliant on his senses in his description of the physical configuration of America. Here he described rivers that flowed into valleys, fertile fields of the plains, and the vast wilderness of the West.

Aside from the epistemological similarities between Emerson and Tocqueville, both also seem to share a similar notion of human experience. According to Emerson there is a universal history shared by all humans. As such, he believed that he understood all of humanity by understanding one individual life within humanity. In his essay "History" he claimed,

> There is one mind common to all individual men. Every man is an inlet to the same and to all of the same. He that is once admitted to the right of reason is made a freeman of the whole estate. What Plato has thought, he may think; what a Saint has felt, he may feel; what at any time has befallen man, he can understand.[31]

Certainly Tocqueville wrote under the assumption that he too could understand any human life, even if he did not explicitly develop arguments to support such a notion.

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[30] Ralph Waldo Emerson "Progress and Culture" 28
[31] Emerson "History" 1

A further implication of the notion of universal history for Emerson is the capacity for empathy inherent in the human experience of life. Since humans all share one common history, Emerson believed that each individual felt a connection with any other individual, regardless of the differences that divided them. Emerson articulated this well when he said, "All that Shakespeare says of the king, yonder slip of a boy that reads in the corner, feels to be true to himself."[32] In this way, Emerson believed that when we learn about the experience of specific social moments we naturally find a way to relate another person's experience of life to our own. In some sense this is precisely what Tocqueville asks his readers to do when he describes social moments in his writings. For instance, in his report of the three races inhabiting North America together, Tocqueville described a social moment in which a slave, an Indian, and a pioneer's daughter interacted together.

> All three came and sat down by the edge of the spring, and the young savage, taking the child in her arms, lavished upon her such fond caresses as mothers give; the Negro, too, sought, by a thousand innocent wiles, to attract the little Creole's attention. The latter showed by her slightest movements a sense of superiority which contrasted strangely with her weakness and her age, as if she received the attentions of her companions with a sort of condescension.[33]

In this moment, Tocqueville reflected upon the social condition of all of America. He magnified one experience in order to derive common characteristics about the experience of all slaves, Indians, and white daughters. His work is peppered with such anecdotes, or social moments, that serve as the evidence for his observations about America.

Furthermore, these social moments in particular reflect a similarity between Emerson and Tocqueville's style of romanticism. While this style is certainly clear in the

[32] Ibid 3
[33] *DIA* 320

early sections of *Democracy in America*, where Tocqueville described the physical wilderness, and more general appearance of North America,[34] it was also clear in his discussion of liberty. The concept of liberty was seldom made explicit by Tocqueville. Instead, only those who held it dear understood its inspiration as an unexplainable feeling. Tocqueville articulated, "Some nations have freedom in the blood and are ready to face the greatest perils and hardships in its defense."[35] Here he may have been referring to the American Revolution, as the Americans certainly had freedom in their blood according to Tocqueville. On the other hand, after the Revolution France had lost this love of freedom. Recall that one of Tocqueville's chief concerns about post-Revolutionary France was its lack of this love of freedom, and its appeal to reason as a justification for this void.

> It is easy to see that what is lacking in such nations is a genuine love of freedom, that lofty aspiration which (I confess) defies analysis. For it is something one must *feel* and logic has no part in it. It is a privilege of noble minds which God has fitted to receive it, and it inspires them with a generous fervor. But to meaner souls, untouched by the sacred flame, it may well seem incomprehensible.[36]

This romantic notion of freedom defied the kind of scientific methodology prescribed by Saint Simon through analysis and synthesis.

However, this poetic style modeled by Emerson is not ultimately satisfying for Tocqueville, as it is too individualistic and unpractical in its conclusions. In *Democracy in America* Tocqueville articulates his concept of the valuable way to think of liberty as situated within a social context. This social form of liberty directly conflicts with a

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[34] For instance, Tocqueville wrote, "All things considered, the valley of the Mississippi is the most magnificent habitation ever prepared by God for man, and yet one may say that it is still only a vast wilderness." *DIA* 25. Also, his description of the Indian in these early sections is highly questionable: "The Indian knew how to live without wants, to suffer without complaint, and to die singing. In common, too, with all other members of the great human family, these savages believed in the existence of a better world, and under different names worshipped God, Creator of the universe." Ibid 29

[35] *OR* 169

notion of individual liberty, as would be supported by Emersonian romanticism. For Emerson science cannot reach its own goal of understanding "Nature" because it cannot describe humans by mere categories and logic. In fact, Emerson claims that the poet is better suited to describe "Nature" than the scientist. "For poetry is science, and the poet a truer logician...Poetry is a new work of Nature, as a man is,"[37] according to Emerson. For Tocqueville however,

> Poetry is the search for and representation of the ideal. The poet is one who, by omitting parts of what is there, adding some imaginary touches, and putting together things actual but not found together, ennobles nature. It is, therefore, not the poet's function to portray reality but to beautify it and offer the mind some loftier image.[38]

What Tocqueville took for granted in asserting this was that there ever exists an objective view of reality. On the contrary, what Emerson contributes to this discussion is precisely the notion that poetry is creative, as is all observation. In his description of American landscape Tocqueville is not presenting the reader with reality any more than he is in the scene of the slave, the Indian, and the white girl. Perhaps against his own better judgment, Tocqueville did romanticize what he observed in some places. Emerson would not view this as a problem, since he believed that "If the whole of history is in one man, it is all to be explained from individual experience."[39] For Emerson the distinction between objective reality and subjective, poetic imagination is false. Instead, reality is subjectively situated; that is, the only objectivity is in the subjective experience of each, individual life, as each life composes one, universal history.

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[36] Ibid 169
[37] Emerson "Progress and Culture" 39-40
[38] *DIA* 483
[39] Emerson "History" 2

However, such an interpretation would probably be too egoistic for Tocqueville. This conflict pushes his methodology away from poetry, as he saw individualistic egoism as a danger to freedom in democratic nations. According to Tocqueville individualistic tendencies lead to democratic despotism, whereas as individualism subsumed by the value of social engagement secured freedom.[40]

Ultimately, while both social science and poetry seem to find their ways into Tocqueville's work in various places, neither is a consistent methodology. Tocqueville tends to waffle between poetry and positivism, creating his own, non-methodological style. In part it seems that his hesitancy to commit himself to any formal method of interpretation echoes his hesitancy to commit to teleology within the methodologies of Comte and Emerson. Comte's positivism asserts as its end the harmony of social science and social living. Emerson's poetry aims at the individual understanding of his own Nature, and thus of the universal human condition. They both look forward with hope for humanity, with a positive interpretation of progress. This seems reasonable considering that they lived during the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, a time when notions of scientific progress would be overwhelmingly exciting.

However, perhaps a century before his time, Tocqueville anticipated what has become a more accepted fear about the idea of progress, especially as it relates to technological progress. The mere fact that Tocqueville omits any discussion of these scientific advances before industrialization seems to point to his avoidance of this thought. Especially later in his writings, his pessimism about the future of France, and democracy in general shows its true colors:

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[40] *DIA* 506f

> Therefore the gradual progress of equality is something fated. The main features of this progress are the following: it is universal and permanent, it is daily passing beyond human control, and every event and every man helps it along. Is it wise to suppose that a movement which has been so long in train could be halted by one generation? Does anyone imagine that democracy, which has destroyed the feudal system and vanquished kings, will fall back before the middle classes and the rich? Will it stop now, when it has grown so strong and its adversaries so weak? Whither, then, are we going?[41]

This passage in his introduction to his most optimistic text for the fate of democracy paints a painfully unsettled picture of democracy. According to Tocqueville, there was hope for French freedom reviving, but this hope grows scarcer with time. When he read his own *Democracy in America* after having written *The Old Regime* his tone became more pessimistic:

> This work was written fifteen years ago with a mind constantly preoccupied by a single thought: the thought of the approaching irresistible and universal spread of democracy throughout the world. On reading it again, one finds on every page a solemn warning that society is changing shape, that mankind lives under changing conditions, and new destinies are impending.[42]

Again, the common themes in these passages are of the unpredictable, impending danger, and drastic changes on the horizon of democracy. Why is Tocqueville so fearful when his contemporaries approach the same future with a youthful enthusiasm for an unsullied, or innovative social experience?

One way to answer this question involves fast-forwarding, as it were, through a century of development to the thoughts of philosopher Walter Benjamin. Benjamin's notion of history serves as a useful allegory for the kind of prophetic pessimism found in Tocqueville's later writings. In Benjamin's essay, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," he described history and the notion of progress:

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[41] *DIA* 12
[42] *DIA* xiii

> A Klee painting named 'Angelus Novus' shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive chains of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.[43]

Immediately, this twentieth century reference rings true with the way Tocqueville described post-Revolutionary French society. The language of destruction is the same that Tocqueville used in the introduction to *Democracy in America*. The similarities in tone and imagery between Benjamin's essay and this passage from Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* speak for themselves:

> Carried away by a rapid current, we obstinately keep our eyes fixed on the ruins still in sight on the bank, while the stream whirls us backward—facing toward the abyss. The leaders of the state have never thought of making any preparation by anticipation for it. The progress has been against their will or without their knowledge.[44]

Tocqueville employs the same language of debris left in the past, a pile that must be abandoned because he is being swept away by the efficient, rapid progress brewing in the future. Unprepared for this progress, the future is unimaginable and we enter it without seeing it, still fixated on the past.

In this reading, Tocqueville's fear for the future of democracy is preempted by his inability to assert his "messianic" capacity to reform French mores, shaping the understanding of democracy such that it necessarily involves freedom. In Benjamin's picture, the angel wants to put together the pieces of history at his feet, but he cannot

[43] Walter Benjamin "Theses on the Philosophy of History" IX.
[44] *DIA* 13

resist the force pulling him forward. Thus the angel must leave history where it lies, in a growing pile at his feet. Admittedly, Benjamin's angel reflecting on the twentieth century Jewish mysticism cannot serve as a parallel to Tocqueville. Instead, Benjamin offers a way to understand the motivation for Tocqueville's avoidance of a clear methodology. Especially in the case of positivism, a methodology would presuppose an underlying theory and goal of the examination. Tocqueville's goal is politically motivated if anything, and as such his goal is not abstract but practical and particular. To impose a formal methodology on Tocqueville's writings would be foreign to his texts, and would be anti-Tocquevillean in the sense that he criticized the application of theory to politics and the faith in reason.[45]

Instead, Tocqueville falls somewhere between positivism and poetry, unwilling to wholly accept or reject either method completely. His insightful commentary and reflections need not conform to a method in order to be useful.

[45] Ibid 431-434

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