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Tocqueville

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Poisonous Medicines

In an early discussion of how the legislator should craft laws in *Spirit of the Laws*, Montesquieu gives the reader the following example of what not to do:

“Phaleas of Chalcedon devised a way of rendering fortunes equal in a republic where they were not equal. He wanted the rich to give dowries to the poor and to receive none from them, and the poor to receive silver for their daughters and to give none. But I know of no republic that adopted such a rule… *it is sometimes good for laws not to appear to go so directly toward the end they propose*.” (Montesquieu 46, emphasis added).

One cannot simply tell human beings what you want them to do and expect them to do it; they’re just too stubborn. The legislator can only achieve his result indirectly. Tocqueville at one point declared that “I do not know if the jury is useful to those who have lawsuits, but I am sure that it is very useful to those who judge them” (262)—so it seems like would probably not take issue with this legislative strategy.

When it comes to philosophic legislation, how to achieve one’s desired result, without indicating exactly what it is, becomes harder. Montesquieu himself, of course, seems to have escaped this pitfall: no one has ever accused him of going too directly towards anything.

But Tocqueville is not Montesquieuan in this regard—at least, not overtly. He is not shy about telling readers about what they should be most afraid of, and why, and how to avoid it--in fact, he is just full of apocalyptic pronouncements. It sometimes feels like one finds a bit too many “greatest perils.”

I began to wonder if Tocqueville’s perils were not, in themselves, a sort of slight of hand. After all, what better way to comfort those worried that democracy is just too wild than to publish a book warning vigorously that one day, democracy will die from *mildness*?

To uncover the nature of Tocqueville’s rhetoric, I will focus on understanding the organization and role of perils in *Democracy in America* Volume II. When unpacked, the organization and the odd rhetorical strategy reveal that Tocqueville might be doing some serious legislative work through his “impartial” description of a “providential fact.”

Approaching Volume 2

Tocqueville suggests the book is organized based on theme. The first part focuses the impact of democracy on the intellect, the second on the sentiments, the third on the mores, the fourth “on the influence that democratic ideas and sentiments exert on political society.”

Without even considering the content of each part, one begins to wonder at these distinctions. After all, these divisions are pretty artificial—mores are sentiments and ideas and habits, all rolled into one. Why separate them?

And, when one gets into the content, the divisions begin to look stranger. Maybe it does make sense to divide up democracy’s influence on the soul into the categories of ideas, sentiments, and mores. But Tocqueville does not divide the content accordingly. The defining intellectual doctrine of the age—self-interest well understood—is found in the section on sentiments. Additionally, in 2 and 3 especially, there seem to be a quite of lot of overlapping themes, which are, curiously enough, treated slightly differently. Both discuss the restiveness of American societies, the propensity to withdraw into one’s own private sphere, and the relationship between work and honor. If the work was organized thematically, wouldn’t these thematically identical discussions be consolidated?

The coherence and plan of Volume II begins to fall into place when one gives up the idea of separation along the lines of themes. Volume II is organized *iteratively*. 4 carries out the logic of 3, 3 carries out the logic of 2, and 2 carries out the logic of 1—and that is without mentioning the developments to democracy that take place within each section. Each new section adds a layer of maturity to nascent democracy.

The design of the work is hidden, though, because at each point Tocqueville hides his additions and modifications, claiming that he is only exposing the essential characteristics of the democratic revolution like the good, unbiased political scientist he is. But, the democratic revolution might not be nearly as well defined as Tocqueville suggests.

The State of War

I have suggested that Volume II is iterative, altering democracy before our eyes. But to what end?

One understands Tocqueville as a thinker who directs mainly by telling readers what not to do, rather than what to do—in other words, he defines the goals of politics negatively. The big, glaring negative goal of Volume II is to be found in part 4, in Tocqueville’s depiction of tutelary democracy. And yet, if my argument is correct and 4 requires what Tocqueville introduces in 3, 3 requires the content of 2, 2 requires 1—then why doesn’t he just stop adding things to democracy before it reaches soft despotism?

There may be a discernable positive pole in Volume II, but it still is best understand as reacting to a negative pole: the violent side of the democratic revolution. In his notice, Tocqueville says that “the Americans have a democratic social state that has naturally suggested to them certain laws and political mores. This same social state has, in addition, given birth to a multitude of sentiments and opinions among them that were unknown in the old aristocratic societies of Europe. It has destroyed or modified relations that formerly existed, and established new ones…. I treated the first subject in the work I published five years ago. The second is the object of the present book” (399).

The subject of the first book was the peaceful foundation of equality of conditions; the subject of the second appears to be the violent version. It seems to me that the goal of this book is to get democracy as far away from this initial starting point as one can.

If the movement away from a state of revolution seems to put Tocqueville’s project deeply in line with other liberal thinkers, maybe it should. Back in volume 1, Tocqueville acknowledged the existence of a negative pole worse than despotism—which he describes, and this cannot be an accident, as a “natural state.”

“One is surprised to perceive the new nations of South America agitated for a quarter of a century in the midst of constantly reviving revolutions, and each day one waits to see them reenter what is called their *natural state.* But who can affirm that the revolutions are not, in our time, the most natural state of the Spanish of South America? In that region, society struggles at the bottom of an abyss from which its own efforts cannot make it rise. The people who inhabit this beautiful half of a hemisphere seem obstinately attached to tearing out each other’s entrails; nothing can turn them from it… *I am tempted to believe that for them despotism would be a benefit*. But these two words could never be found united in my thought.” (216. Second emphasis added).

His evocation of Hobbes’ absolute negative pole in this passage—along with the implication that it is worse than despotism—suggests the supreme importance of moving away from this state. But it is also interestingly absent from any discussion Tocqueville makes of the dangers of democracy. If Tocqueville does secretly include something that looks a lot like the state of nature, for some reason or other, he feels the need to conceal it.

Instead of the shapelessness of anarchy the state of war promises, the providential democratic revolution that Tocqueville announces has certain well-defined features within it. By the end of volume 2, Tocqueville will have us believe that equality of conditions carries with it, necessarily, a kind of perpetual agitation, a turn to material goods, a love of commerce, a withdrawal into the private sphere, a softening of morals. Tocqueville implies throughout the book that the goal of the legislator is to navigate between freedom and despotism, because in the modern era there is no “middle term between the sovereignty of all and the absolute power of one alone” (52). In fact, he explicitly says that “I am convinced that anarchy is not the principal evil that democratic centuries will have to fear, *but the least*” (640 emphasis added).

The example of the Spanish, however, suggests that maybe the positive tendencies equality of conditions carries within it might not be quite as necessary as Tocqueville suggests. It might simply mean *not aristocracy*.

In Volume I Tocqueville explains that “almost all the colonies of America were founded by men equal among themselves or who became so from inhabiting them. There is not a single part of the New World where Europeans have been able to create an aristocracy. Nevertheless democratic institutions prosper only in the United States” (292-293). Although the Spanish, like the Americans, were without neighbors and did not need an army—and although they never went any sort of violent revolution to get to their equality—they were hardly led towards peace: “that isolation did not prevent them from keeping armies. They made war among themselves when foreigners were lacking.” Additionally, “if, for peoples to be happy, it were enough to have been placed in a corner of the universe and to be able to spread at will over uninhabited lands, the Spanish of southern America would not have to complain of their lot.” Despite their seeming material well-being, “there are nevertheless no nations on earth more miserable than those of South America” and so he sadly concludes that “South America cannot support democracy.” (293). Despite having equality of conditions, no revolutionary mores, and plenty of opportunity for commercial exploits, the Spanish don’t budge from the state of nature. The democratic revolution had no inherent directionality—not even towards despotism.

The State of Nature—this directionless, meaningless condition the Spanish so often seem to be in—also seems to be a fair description of France. In France, “the laws of moral analogy have been abolished” (11) and “nothing seems any longer to be forbidden or permitted, or honest or shameful, or true or false” (12). Notably, the second use of the term “natural state” in volume I is used in describing France. Though only speaking of religion, I believe we can extend Tocqueville’s remark more generally: “In the midst of these tepid friends and ardent adversaries, I finally discover a few of the faithful ready to brave all obstacles and scorn all dangers for their beliefs… disbelief appears to them to be a new thing, and they envelop all that is new in the same hatred. They are therefore at war with their century and their country, and in each opinion professed there they see a necessary enemy of faith. Such ought not to be the *natural state* of men in the matter of religion in our day.” (281, emphasis added).

The great social revolution is identical to the state of nature, which really has no nature at all. If this is the case, then Tocqueville has far more freedom as a legislator than he admits.

By moving quickly through parts 1 and 2, we can see a number of alternative ways the democratic revolution could have gone that Tocqueville rejected—all with the goal of moving as far away from the state of nature as possible.

Hidden Danger 1: The State of Nature

Volume 2, Part 1, Chapter 1 (2.1.1) places the reader in what looks a lot like the state of nature. Only, Tocqueville does not indicate what he is doing.

What he does tell us is that the Americans follow a Descartes’ philosophic method without knowing it; “they follow his maxims because this same social state naturally disposes their minds to adopt them” (403). The Cartesian method is not American—it is inherent in the nature of the social state. So, the first thing we are told naturally flows from equality of conditions is the fact that democratic men relies solely on “their own reason as the most visible and closest source of truth” (404).

This is not just because they have an absolute faith in their own judgment, but rather, because their reason tells them they can’t believe in anything else. This philosophic method means that “men who live in such a society can no longer draw their beliefs form the opinions of the class to which they belong, for there are, so to speak, no longer any classes” (403); in addition, they are no longer able to draw their beliefs from other men: “not only is trust in such and such a man destroyed, but the taste for believing any man whomsoever on his word” (404). We also discover (though this is in the next chapter) that these men “conceive a sort of instinctive incredulity about the supernatural” and “they will find the principal arbiter of their beliefs within the limits of humanity, not beyond it” (408).

Tocqueville also suggests that this philosophic method—the first fact that comes from equality of conditions—is essentially synonymous with the revolution itself. (In fact, the ordering of this chapter might even suggest that it caused the revolution.)

It was a singularly powerful tool during the revolution, because it was “not only French, but democratic, which explains why it was so easily accepted in all of Europe, whose face it has contributed so much to changing. It is not because the French changed their ancient beliefs and modified their ancient mores that they turned the world upside down; it was because they were the first to generalize and to bring to light a philosophic method with whose aid one could readily attack all ancient things and open the way to all new ones” (405).

Tocqueville implies that the difference between this method in America and as an instrument of revolution is simply in degrees. In considering “why in our day this same method is followed more rigorously and applied more often by the French than by the Americans” (405) Tocqueville gives two reasons: the Americans had Christian dogmas, and they never had a revolution. Tocqueville lingers on his description of the intellectual state during a revolution, describing it as follows:

“When conditions become equal following a prolonged conflict between the different classes forming the old society, envy, hatred and scorn of one’s neighbor, haughtiness, and exaggerated self-confidence invade, so to speak, the human heart and make their home there for a time…Each then undertakes to be self-sufficient and finds his glory in making for himself beliefs that are his own about all things. Men are no longer bound except by interests, not by ideas; and one could say that human opinions form no more than a sort of intellectual dust that is blown around on all sides and cannot gather and settle.” (406).

Therefore, he warns, that “one ought therefore to distinguish carefully the kind of intellectual freedom that equality can produce from the anarchy that revolution brings” (406-407). But, it seems, when one considers his original line of inquiry, this divide is artificial. His explanations were in response to a question of degree, not kind—he was trying to explain why the French used the Cartesian method more rigorously, that’s all. There is something revolutionary in the base of the new social state.

In the second chapter, he tells us that “without common ideas there is no common action, and without common action men still exist, but a social body does not. Thus in order that there be society… it is necessary that all the minds of the citizens always be brought and held together by some principal ideas; and this cannot happen unless each one of them… consents to receive a certain number of ready made beliefs” (407). What is on the line is the existence, or failure, of society itself. Immediately after describing a lengthy description of the intellectual features of anarchy, Tocqueville confronts readers with the possibility that society could not exist at all.

This is how Tocqueville evokes the state of nature without calling it by name.

First, we are shown the Cartesian method, the fundamental fact of equality, is largely defined by the fact that it rules out all traditional sources of belief, leaving only the individual.

Secondly, we are told the entrance into society is not presented as a given—it is contingent on the accepting of dogmatic beliefs.

To make matters worse, our example—the Americans—cannot provide a model of what to do. The source of their dogmatic beliefs, and therefore their society, came from something alien to the democratic revolution—religion. “The Americans, having accepted the principal dogmas of the Christian religion without examination, are obliged to receive in the same manner a great number of moral truths that flow from them and depend on them. That restricts the action of individual analysis within narrow limits and spares from it several of the most important human opinions” (406).

It seems that nothing inherent in the nature of the Cartesian method leads to society.

Still, there is a ray of hope: individual caprice could be controlled by the fantasy of the larger society: “common opinion [is] the sole guide that remains for individual reason among democratic peoples” (409). Tocqueville states that:

“Public favor seems as necessary as the air that one breathes, and to be in disagreement with the mass is, so to speak, not to live. [The mass] does not need to use the laws to bend those who do not think like it. It is enough for it to disapprove of them. Their sense of isolation and their impotence immediately overwhelms them and drives them to despair… *This marvelously favors the stability of beliefs*” (615 emphasis added).

Of course, this is also a terrifying power to have as one’s only intellectual authority; it can be so strong and willful as to crush any trace of individuality.

But, it is clear, the Cartesian Method doesn’t necessarily lead to one consenting to the power of the majority. The doctrine of individual reason is a necessary component of the new stability, it is not sufficient to establish stability on its own. Something new has to be added to it.

The difference between this reliance on individual reason in its destructive form and in its constructive form is the perception of one’s strength as an individual.

When speaking of the revolutionary version of the method, Tocqueville describes a certain “haughtiness, and exaggerated self-confidence” as well as the fact that “each then undertakes to be self-sufficient and finds his glory in making for himself beliefs that are his own about all things.” (406). On the other hand, men who have consented to the rule of the majority “when he comes to view the sum of those like him and places himself at the side of this great body, he is immediately overwhelmed by his own insignificance and weakness” and is in fact left “without defense against the action of the greatest number” (409).

To inculcate dogmatic beliefs, it seems first beliefs have to be weakened. This is easily done—the motion of a democratic social state will cause doubt b itself: ,”As their situation changes constantly, they are never held firmly to any of their opinions by the very immobility of their fortune. Men who inhabit democratic countries therefore often have vacillating thoughts.” Therefore “men who live among [democratic peoples], being often left to the individual efforts of their intellect, are almost always nagged by doubt. (285).

What leads to the establishment of the doctrine of popular sovereignty is doubt, weakness, and confusion. The result of the addition of these things looks something like this:

“It has been remarked that in centuries of religious fervor, men sometimes change belief, whereas in centuries of doubt each obstinately guards his own... All social theories having been contested and combated in their turn, those who have settled on one of them guard it not so much because they are sure that it is good as because they are not sure that there is a better one. *In these centuries, one is not made to die so easily for one’s opinions; but one does not change them, and one encounters at once fewer martyrs and fewer apostates*” (180 emphasis).

So there is a way of making the Cartesian method into something compatible with society—and yet, one should recall that this method carries a whole bunch of dangers in itself. The opening two chapters of Volume II give the readers two evils to choose from: anarchy and unopposed majority rule.

Tyranny of majority, for all its faults, cures the problem of anarchy-- assuming that one wants a society, the better of the two evils is tyranny of the majority.

Tocqueville chooses to stress the dangers of his cure, though, saying: “if democratic peoples substituted the absolute power of a majority in place of all the diverse powers that hindered or retarded beyond measure the ascent of individual reason men would not have found the means of living independently; they would only have discovered—a difficult thing—a new face for servitude” (410).

This is not just rhetoric—tyranny of the majority is a real danger for democratic societies. But, as we will see, every cure you can apply to a sickly social state will introduce a new danger and new imbalance—nothing is purely good for a society in excess. So, Tocqueville is not lying to us about the danger of tyranny of the majority, he is certainly misleading us and giving it undue weight. Tocqueville does not say a word about the greater evil, the possibility of continued anarchy—in fact, he brushes the possibility aside, saying: “it is therefore always necessary however it happens, that we encounter authority somewhere in the intellectual and moral world…. Thus, the question is not that of knowing whether [or not] an intellectual authority exists in democratic centuries” (408). This sounds like bad reasoning and it is: just because it’s necessary for society doesn’t mean intellectual authority must exist. It could be that society ceases to exist.

Here’s what’s been done: from the initial state of war, we have moved into society governed by the lone principle of the sovereignty of the people.

The newly introduced danger is: despotism resulting from the tyranny of the majority.

The transformation done to democracy has been: the addition of doubt.

Hidden Danger 2: The French Revolution

One would think that after establishing the necessity of a degree of tyranny of the majority, Tocqueville would turn to ways to curb that tyranny. Instead, the next chapter (2.1.3.) speaks about the democratic penchant for general ideas.

While it is true that an intellectual limit has been established in a way, it is only really half complete. While men no longer follow their fancies on an individual level, there are no limits on them as a collective.

The French, after all, particularly love general ideas: “among us the taste for general ideas has become such a frenetic passion that one must satisfy it at every turn” (412). One sees the doctrine of the sovereignty of the people even “at the foundation of the most bizarre utopias. The human mind pursues these images even when it dreams” (642).

In 2.1.4, Tocqueville reminds us of what could happen if no limits are set on the moral imagination of the majority by bringing up the French Revolution:

“Although Americans have infinitely more general ideas enter into legislation than the English, and although they are much more concerned with adjusting the practice of human affairs to theory, political bodies in the United States have never been as enamored of general ideas as were our Constituent Assembly and Convention; never has the whole American nation become passionate for theses sorts of ideas in the same manner as the French people in the eighteenth century, nor has it displayed as blind a faith in the goodness and absolute truth of any theory.” (415).

Elsewhere in the book, we are told ways in which the French abused the doctrine of sovereignty of the people: “until our time, it had been thought that despotism was odious, whatever its forms were. But in our day it has been discovered that there are legitimate tyrannies and holy injustices in the world, provided that one exercises them in the name of the people” (380). The orientation towards general ideas that comes naturally from the Cartesian method, and its association with the French revolution, foretell of a extremely dangerous utopian potential in democracy.

But, despite evoking a very serious danger indeed to attentive readers, Tocqueville proceeds to write it off as no big deal. Tocqueville suggests that democratic institutions cure this dangerous tendency pretty much on their own: “therefore, when there is a subject on which it is particularly dangerous for democratic peoples to indulge in general ideas blindly and beyond measure, the best corrective one can employ is to have them occupy themselves with it every day in a practical manner” (416).

But the next section makes it clear that this solution is entirely impotent. “There is almost no human action, however particular one supposes it, that does not arise from a very general idea that men have conceived of God, of his relations with the human race, of the nature of their souls, and of their duties toward those like them. One cannot keep these ideas from being the common source from which the rest all flow…. General ideas relative to God and human nature are therefore, among all ideas, the ones it is most fitting to shield from the habitual action of individual reason and for which there is most to gain and least to lose in recognizing an authority” (418). So God is “therefore is the matter about which it is most important that each of us have fixed ideas; and unfortunately, it is also the one in which it is most difficult for each person, left to himself, to come to fix his ideas solely by the effort of his reason.” (417). If this is the thing that has to be most protected from human reason, there is no conceivable way applying oneself to “practice” could moderate the love of general ideas.

The next way to limit the majority in this regard is through religion, which can provide “a solution to each of these primordial questions that is clear, precise, intelligible to the crowd, and very lasting” (418). But religion quickly shows itself to be powerless against the majority and the temptation of general ideas. “as men become more alike and equal, it is more important that religions… not collide unnecessarily with the generally accepted ideas and permanent interests that reign among the mass; for common opinion appears more and more as the first and most irresistible of powers” (423). Within a few chapters, Tocqueville is describing the temptations of Pantheism to the democratic intellect; surely indicating the complete concession of religion to the penchant for general ideas.

When we reach chapter 9, however, there is a shift of tone. Earlier, we were told that the Americans combat the tendency toward general ideas through practice; now we are told that they have absolutely no propensity towards ridiculous things like “theories.” Now, ostensibly having exhausted the subject of general ideas, Tocqueville says that “there is almost no one in the Untied States who gives himself over to the essentially theoretical portion of human knowledge.” Additionally, “equality… diverts men from the depiction of the ideal;” “imagination is not extinguished, but it is given over almost exclusively to conceiving the useful and representing the real” (459).

This is puzzling: only a few chapters ago Tocqueville spoke of an “excessive taste for general theories in political matters that equality puts forward (416), and a tendency to “abuse these sorts of ideas and indiscreetly become inflamed over them” (415). There, too, Tocqueville was making a general claim about the nature of equality.

Between 8 and 9, something has changed. Tocqueville has redefined equality in such a way that utopianism is no longer a problem.

Simply put, he has added commercial passions into the mix. Instead, we see that democrats are too obsessed with utility to ever consider theoretical knowledge. “The more a nation is democratic, enlightened, and free, the more the number of these interested appreciators of scientific genius is going to be increasing and the more the discoveries immediately applicable to industry will bestow profit, glory, and even power on their authors…. One can easily conceive that in a society organized in this manner, the human mind is insensibly guided to neglect theory and that it must, on the contrary, feel impelled with unparalleled energy toward application” (437).

But Tocqueville quietly makes it clear that the industrial spirit might not be quite so natural to democracy as he makes it sound. He admits he has a different fear:

“I am not afraid that the poetry of democratic peoples will prove timid or that it will stay very close to the earth. I am apprehensive rather that it will lose itself in the clouds at each moment and that in the end it will depict entirely imaginary regions. I fear that the works of democratic poets will often offer immense and incoherent images, overloaded depictions, and bizarre composites, and that the fantastic beings issuing from their minds will sometimes make one long for the real world” (464).

Those who were inculcated with the taste for ideal beauty would become “very polite but very dangerous citizens… is evident that *in democratic centuries the interest of individuals as well as the* *security of the state requires that the education of the greatest number be scientific, commercial, and industrial rather than literary*” (451 emphasis added). Tocqueville indicates here that the orientation towards practice is absolutely a choice the legislator can make---or and unmake.

Tocqueville ends 9 with a pronouncement of doom – a sure sign that he’s doing something manipulative. In this chapter he says that “because Roman civilization died following the barbarian invasions, we are perhaps too much inclined to believe that civilization cannot die any other way.” (438). Utility and well being will smother the human spirit of innovation and lead to despotism. The problem that legislators will have to address, Tocqueville suggests, is not an excessively innovative population – it’s not enough spirit of innovation. The majority, while still the only moral authority around,

Like before, Tocqueville loudly opposes the lesser evil (practical orientation) and simply pretends the greater evil (utopianism) was never there at all. But the parallels between the spirit of the French Revolution and America linger—the only difference is that now they show themselves in commerce:

During the wars of the Revolution, the French introduced a new tactic into the military art that troubled the most aged generals and nearly destroyed the oldest monarchies of Europe. They undertook for the first time to do without a host of things that until then had been judged indispensible to war; they required new efforts of their soldiers that well-ordered nations had never demanded of theirs; one saw them do everything on the run and without hesitation risk the lives of men with a view to the result to be obtained….The Americans have introduced something analogous into commerce. What the French did for victory, they do for low cost.” (386)

For the American: “the idea of the new is therefore intimately bound in his mind to the idea of the better. Nowhere does he perceive any boundary that nature can have set to the efforts of man; in his eyes, what is not is what has not yet been attempted... For an American, one’s entire life is spent as a game of chance, a time of revolution, a day of battle.” (388).

Let us stop to sum up Tocqueville’s reinterpretation of equality made over the course of Part 1. The first step away from the state of nature came through making people feel their own weakness and waver in their convictions. This was done by inducing doubt, which was done by making them part of a perilous and fast-paced society. Next, industrial passions were added, in order for the human mind to be directed firmly away from any strange utopias.

The fact that everything has to be scrambled before it can start to be re-established explains a formerly mysterious passage from Volume 1:

The French of Canada, who have faithfully preserved the traditions of old mores,… will soon be prey to the miseries of old nation*s*. In Canada*, the men who have the most enlightenment, patriotism, and humanity make extraordinary efforts to disgust the people with the simple happiness that still suffices for them.* They celebrate the advantages of wealth, just as among us they would perhaps vaunt the charms of an honest mediocrity, and they put more care into spurring the human passion than elsewhere one makes efforts to calm them. To exchange the pure and tranquil pleasures that the native country offers even to the poor for the sterile enjoyments that well-being provides under a foreign sky; to flee the paternal hearth and the fields where one’s ancestors rest; to abandon the living and the dead to run after fortune—there is nothing that merits more praise in their eyes” (272)

Uprooting, inculcating greed, disconnection from the past—all of these problematic features are the necessary building blocks of Tocqueville’s new regime.

Hidden Danger 3: Tyranny of the Majority

2.2.1 begins much as part 2.1.1 did—with an observation about a foundational feature of the age. “The particular and dominating fact that makes [democratic] centuries unique is equality of conditions; the principle passion that agitates men in those times is the love of this equality.” (480) “Men, therefore, do not hold to equality only because it is dear to them, they are also attached to it because they believe that it will last forever” (480). In addition to being the passion that defines the era, it completely unstoppable: “all men and all powers that wish to struggle against this irresistible power will be overturned and destroyed by it” (482).

When I first encountered this chapter, I was unable to understand why such an important and defining passion was placed in part 2, while Part 1 insisted on going through things as minor as democratic theatre. (And, one should note, there was no hint of this defining passion in the pervious section).

But now it seems clear to me that this passion is the result of the social conditions Tocqueville arranged in Part 1. To get people to consent to the doctrine of popular sovereignty (and therefore leave the state of war) and to limit the doctrine of popular sovereignty (and therefore escape the French revolution), the democratic social state must be characterized by doubt and focused on commerce and material well-being.

This utter misery caused by this social state is what 2.2 covertly addresses.

In the crucial chapter 17, Tocqueville lists “times of equality and doubt” as a unit, as well as “democracy and disbelief.” (523). “The instability of the social state comes to favor the natural instability of desires. Amid these perpetual fluctuations of fate the present grows large; it hides the future that is being effaced” and “it seems that from the moment the despair of living an eternity, they are disposed to act as if the will exist only for a single day” (523). “The same equality that permits each citizen to conceive vast hopes renders all citizens individually weak. It limits their strength in all regards at the same time that it permits their desires to expand” (513).

Tocqueville indicates that when the people find that their desires are impossible to obtain quickly and easily, they lash out politically. Tocqueville warns that “whatever a people’s efforts, it will not succeed in making conditions perfectly equal within itself; and if it had the misfortune to reach this absolute and complete leveling, the inequality of intellects would still remain, which, coming directly from God, will always escape the laws” (523). Of course, this warning implies that somewhere along the line people would want to try to completely level intellects.

These dangers are extremely reminiscent of problems Tocqueville described in Volume I. There, the people were carried away with the lack of checks on their sovereignty: “the difficulty that democracy finds in defeating the passions and silencing the needs of the moment in view of the future is noticed in the United States in the least things. The people, surrounded by flatterers, come to triumph over themselves only with difficulty” (215).

While Part 2 seems to be about the excesses of the private sphere, the private sphere—introduced by the doctrine of self-interest well understood--what is being created, and used to make the many become a little less miserable. 2.2.8-2.2.17 strongly suggest this: Tocqueville alternates between explaining how the ability to defer desires is central to happiness and explaining that liberty is necessary from the perspective of material well-being.

He has to create the middle class, who have moderate, not burning desires.

But once again, the excess he describes—which he pronounces as a sure sign of approaching democratic doom—is actually his prescription for what democracy needs.

Violent Revolutions

I think the iterative pattern continues: Part 3 begins with the new primary feature of the age that is now possible given the sum of Tocqueville’s additions to democracy in 1 and 2. However, for the interest of saving space, I will not follow this pattern until its culmination in soft despotism.

Part 3 is worth examining, though, because in it, Tocqueville includes a chapter that more or less confirms my suspicions about his project. In 2.3.21, Democracy has been successfully revolution-proofed. This might be perhaps the most revealing chapter in the book—and the chapter that confirmed to me that I wasn’t completely crazy.

I have argued that Tocqueville’s descriptions of democracy – and particularly his fears—have been extremely misleading. At every point, he seems to be changing the nature of the democratic revolution through describing it; adding certain features, exaggerating certain tendencies, and suggesting that each of his additions were part of the essential nature of the opposable democratic revolution to begin with. However, the democratic revolution didn’t actually have that much of a essential nature to begin with—everything positive about it has been added by Tocqueville.

Tocqueville explains that democracy is not disposed to revolution at all. Although he says that “we live in a period that has seen the most rapid changes work on the minds of men. Nevertheless, it could soon happen that the principle human opinions are more stable than they have been in previous centuries of our history; this time has not come, but perhaps it approaches” (616).

What is particularly interesting is why Tocqueville claims democracy will be stable.

The first reason is that there is a large middle class who is attached to their material things and “there is no revolution that does not more or less threaten acquired property.” They value their property so highly because there are not quite poor and not quite rich, and “there is none in which the passions to which property gives rise are more fierce and more tenacious than in the middle classes… men who live in an ease equally distant from opulence and misery put an immense value on their goods. As they are still very near to poverty, they see its rigors from close by and they dread them; between it and them there is nothing but a small patrimony on which they immediately fix their fears and their hopes.” (608) “Thus in democratic societies 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.” (608).

Secondly, independent of these middle class mores, commercial mores are resistant. “’Commerce is naturally the enemy of all violent passions” (609). People just are too busy trying to make money to care about justice: “do not speak to him of the interests and rights of the human race” because his commercial ambition “makes him wish to put off public agitations to some other time” (609). “Not only does that prevent them from making revolutions, but it diverts them from wishing for them. Violent political passions have little hold on men who have so attached their whole soul to the pursuit of well-being. The ardor they put into small affairs calms them in great ones” (609).

The third reason is because revolutionary ideas simply could never be fully accepted. Intellectually, America is completely immobile.

Americans, as discussed in part 1, just don’t really engage in contemplation and theorizing. They rethink things already before them, but they never discover new principles. So: “I believe it will rarely happen within a democratic society that a man comes to conceive in a single stroke a system of ideas very far removed from that which his contemporaries have adopted.” In addition, there is no reason someone who did discover a new system would be believed: “if such an innovator presented himself, I imagine that he would in the first place have great trouble in making himself heard, and more still in making himself believed.” (613). Mainly, though, they’re just too busy to care: “democratic peoples have neither the leisure nor the taste to go in search of new opinions” (614).

But, all the “more powerful reasons opposed to working a great change easily in the doctrines of a democratic people” have to do with the fact that “the power exercised by the mass on the mind of each individual is very great” (614). Individual men, in all their weakness, just don’t have the confidence in their own judgment to be capable of truly opposing the majority.

So the reasons revolution is simply implausible in democracy are: the attachment to the private sphere, love of material well-being, their focus on practice over theory, and the intellectual power of the majority.

None of these things, it seems to me, were originally present in the nature of the democratic revolution. All of these checks against revolution are the result of Tocqueville’s reinterpretation of democracy.

They are also four things Tocqueville has warned of, insulted, and criticized as enfeebling souls or leading towards tyranny. They do eventually do all of the things that Tocqueville accuses them of; he’s not lying, per se, just giving them undue weight.

The overall effect is quite in line with Tocqueville’s manner of understanding how to manage democracy. Every cure, it seems, has a potential despotic outcome when carried to it’s logical extreme. Therefore, by insisting that only the desirable outcomes are possible—in spite of their unfortunate drawbacks—Tocqueville draws democratic legislators down the desired path while keeping them vigilant for when the cure needs a cure. Additionally, part of his project is clearly to convince the French that democracy might not be so crazy as it seems. Tocqueville keeps all eyes on the best worst case scenarios, so to speak, and makes the worst that could happen seem not so bad. It also doesn’t hurt that by criticizing democracy so much, he comes off as an impartial observer of the democratic era--not one of its legislators.