

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-71891-2 - Tocqueville: The Ancien Regime and the French Revolution

Edited by Jon Elster

Excerpt

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Foreword

This book is not a history of the French Revolution, which has been recounted too brilliantly for me to contemplate doing it again. It is rather a study of that Revolution.

In 1789 the French tried harder than any other people has ever done to sever their past from their future, as it were, and hollow out an abyss between what they had been and what they wished to become. To that end, they took any number of precautions to ensure that they would carry over nothing from the past into their new condition. They imposed all sorts of constraints on themselves so that, in fashioning the people they were to be in the future, they would not resemble their fathers. They spared no effort to make themselves unrecognizable.

In this singular enterprise I have always thought that they were far less successful than people outside France generally believe and than the French themselves believed initially. I was convinced that, unbeknownst to themselves, they had taken from the Ancien Régime most of the feelings, habits, and ideas that guided the Revolution which destroyed it, and that, without intending to, they had built the new society out of the debris of the old. Hence, in order to understand the Revolution and its achievements properly, we must temporarily avert our eyes from the France that exists today and begin our investigation at the tomb of the France that is no more. That is what I have tried to do here, but the task has proved more difficult than I could have imagined.

The early centuries of the monarchy, the Middle Ages, and the Renaissance have been extensively researched and have given rise to weighty tomes, from which we can learn not only what happened in these different periods of history but also what laws and customs prevailed and

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what spirit animated the government and nation. Until now, however, no one has delved as deeply into the eighteenth century. We think we know the French society of that era quite well because we are familiar with its glittering surface and, in minute detail, with the lives of its most famous personages, and because we have read clever and eloquent critiques of the works of its great writers. But as for the way in which public business was conducted, how institutions actually worked, how the various classes truly related to one another, the condition and feelings of those segments of the population that still could be neither seen nor heard, and the true basis of opinions and customs, we have only ideas that are at best confused and often misleading.

I have tried to strike to the heart of this Ancien Régime, so close to us in years yet hidden from us by the Revolution.

To that end, I have read more than just the celebrated works of the eighteenth century. I also sought to study many works that, while deservedly less well known, are perhaps more revealing of the true instincts of the age for the very reason that they were rather artlessly composed. I steeped myself in public records that reveal the opinions and tastes of the French as the Revolution approached. The minutes of meetings of the estates and, later, of provincial assemblies shed a great deal of light on these things. I made extensive use, moreover, of the *cahiers*, or grievance books, drawn up by the three orders in 1789. These grievance books, the original manuscripts of which are collected in a series of many volumes, will endure as the testament of the old French society, the supreme expression of its desires, the authentic manifestation of its last will. It is a document without historical parallel. But even that did not satisfy me.

In countries where the governmental apparatus is well developed, scarcely a thought, desire, or grievance can arise, scarcely an interest or passion come into being, without sooner or later coming under close scrutiny by the government. By visiting governmental archives, one acquires not only a very accurate idea of how the government works but also an overview of the country as a whole. A foreigner granted access today to all the confidential correspondence that fills the cartons of the Ministry of the Interior and the prefectures would soon know more about us than we know about ourselves. In the eighteenth century, as readers of this book will discover, the French governmental apparatus was already highly centralized, very powerful, and prodigiously active. We find it constantly offering assistance, raising obstacles, granting permission. It had much to promise and much to give. It already exerted its influence

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in a thousand ways, not only on the general conduct of affairs but also on the fate of individual families and the private lives of individual citizens. What is more, it operated in the shadows, so that people were not afraid to come before it to reveal the most private of infirmities. I spent a great deal of time studying its surviving records, both in Paris and in a number of provinces.*

There, as I expected, I found the Ancien Régime come to life, with all its ideas, passions, prejudices, and practices intact. Individuals spoke freely in their own idiom and gave voice to their most intimate thoughts. I was thus able to acquire many ideas about the French society of old that contemporaries did not have, because I had before my eyes evidence that they had never seen.

As I progressed in my study, I was astonished to find again and again in the France of that time any number of the features that would strike an observer of France today. I discovered a host of sentiments that I thought had been born with the Revolution, a host of ideas that I believed to have been revolutionary ideas, and a myriad of habits purportedly bequeathed to us by that great event alone. Everywhere I found the roots of today's society firmly implanted in the soil of the old. The closer I came to 1789, the more distinctly I perceived the inception, birth, and development of the spirit that made the Revolution. The entire physiognomy of that Revolution revealed itself to me little by little. Its temperament, its genius, could already be divined; it was already itself. I discovered not only the logic that would guide its first steps but, perhaps more important, early hints of its long-term aftereffects. For the Revolution went through two distinct phases: a first phase during which the French seemed to want to abolish everything from their past, and a second in which they would recover part of what they had left behind. Many of the laws and political traditions of the Ancien Régime suddenly disappeared in 1789 only to reappear a few years later, much as certain rivers plunge underground only to reemerge somewhat farther on, bringing the same waters to new shores.

The purpose of this book is to explain why this great Revolution, which was in gestation throughout most of Europe in this period, erupted in

* I made particularly heavy use of the archives of a few large intendances, especially Tours, which are very complete and pertain to a very large généralité located in the center of France and inhabited by more than a million people. I want to thank the young and able archivist in charge, M. Grandmaison. Other généralités, including those of Île-de-France, demonstrated to my satisfaction that things worked in the same way throughout much of the kingdom.

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France rather than elsewhere, why it emerged fully formed from the society that it was to destroy, and, finally, how the old monarchy could have fallen so suddenly and completely.

As I conceive the work, however, there is more to be said. If time and energy permit, my intention is to follow, through the vicissitudes of the Revolution, the same Frenchmen with whom I lived on such familiar terms under the Ancien Régime that formed them and to observe how events changed and transformed them without altering their nature and how, despite certain modifications of their features, their faces remained recognizable.

I shall begin by exploring with them the Revolution's opening act, in 1789, when love of equality coexisted in their bosoms with love of liberty; when they hoped to establish institutions that were not only democratic but also free; when they sought not only to destroy privileges but to recognize and consecrate rights. This was a time of youth, enthusiasm, and pride, of generous and sincere passions, which will be eternally remembered despite its errors and which for many years to come will trouble the sleep of those who seek to corrupt and subjugate mankind.

In addition to briskly recounting the course of the Revolution, I will try to point out the events, errors, and miscalculations that led these same Frenchmen to abandon their original goal, liberty, and narrow their desires to but a single wish: to become equal servants of the master of the world. I will explain how a government more powerful, and far more absolute, than the one the Revolution overthrew then seized and concentrated all power, suppressed all the liberties for which such a high price had been paid, and put useless imitations in their place. I will show how this government applied the name "popular sovereignty" to the suffrage of voters who were unable to educate themselves, organize, or choose and how it applied the term "free vote" to the assent of silent or subjugated assemblies. And I will show how this government, even as it deprived the nation of the ability to govern itself, of the principal guarantees of law, and of the freedom to think, speak, and write – in other words, of the most precious and noble prizes won in 1789 – continued to invoke the august title "revolutionary."

I will end at the point where, in my view, the Revolution's work was all but finished and the new society had at last been born. I will then consider that society itself. I will try to identify the ways in which it resembled what preceded it and the ways in which it differed, and I will describe what we lost in this immense upheaval and what we gained. Finally, I will try to offer a glimpse of what lies in store for us.

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Part of this second work has been sketched out, but it is still unworthy of being set before the public. Will I be granted the time to finish it? Who can say? The destiny of an individual is even more uncertain than that of a nation.

I hope to have written the present work without prejudice, but I do not claim to have written it without passion. It would hardly be possible for a Frenchman to write about his country or contemplate his times dispassionately. I confess that as I wrote about the various segments of the old society, I never entirely lost sight of the new. I sought not only to diagnose the illness to which the patient succumbed but also to ask how it might have been saved. I proceeded as doctors do when they examine defunct organs in the hope of discovering the laws of life. My goal was to paint a portrait that would be not only strictly accurate but also perhaps educational. Thus, each time I discovered in our forefathers one of those manly virtues that we so desperately need but no longer possess – a true spirit of independence, a yearning for greatness, faith in ourselves and in a cause – I tried to call attention to it. Similarly, when I found in the laws, ideas, and mores of that earlier period traces of the ills that, after devouring the old society, still eat away at the new, I took pains to point them out so that readers, apprised of the damage already done, might better understand the ravages that might yet lie ahead.

Because men are no longer tied to one another by bonds of caste, class, guild, or family, they are only too apt to attend solely to their private interests, only too inclined to think exclusively of themselves and to withdraw into a narrow individualism that stifles all public virtue. Despotism, far from combating this tendency, makes it irresistible, for it deprives citizens of all common passions, all mutual needs, all necessity to reach a common understanding, and all opportunity to act in concert. It immures them, as it were, in private life. They were already apt to hold one another at arm's length. Despotism isolated them. Relations between them had grown chilly; despotism froze them.

In this type of society, where nothing is fixed, everyone is racked constantly by the fear of falling lower in the social scale and by the ardor to rise. And since money, even as it has become the principal mark of class and distinction, has become unusually mobile, passing constantly from hand to hand, transforming the status of individuals, and raising or lowering families, virtually no one is exempt from the constant and desperate obligation to keep or acquire it. The most common passions are therefore the desire to acquire wealth in any way possible, a predilection

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for business, the love of gain, and the lust for material comforts and pleasures. These passions have spread readily to all classes, even those in which they were previously alien, and if nothing stops them they may soon enervate and degrade the entire nation. But it is of the very essence of despotism to encourage and spread such debilitating passions, which help it achieve its ends. They divert attention from public affairs, occupy the imagination of the people, and make them shudder at the very idea of revolution. Despotism alone has the power to create the secrecy and the shadows in which greed can thrive and dishonest profits can be amassed in defiance of dishonor. Without despotism these selfish passions would be strong; with it they rule.

Only freedom can effectively combat the flaws natural to societies of this type and keep them from sliding down a slippery slope. Only freedom can rescue citizens from the isolation in which the very independence of their condition has mired them. Only freedom can compel them to come together and warm each other's spirits through mutual exchange and persuasion and joint action in practical affairs. Only freedom can save them from the worship of Mammon and the petty vexations of their private business, enabling them to sense the constant presence of the nation above and alongside them. Only freedom can substitute higher, more powerful passions for the love of material comforts and supply ambition with goals more worthy than the acquisition of wealth. Only freedom, finally, can create the light by which it is possible to see and judge the vices and virtues of humankind.

Democratic societies that are not free may yet be rich, refined, ornate, and even magnificent, powerful by dint of their homogeneous mass. One may find in such societies many private virtues, good fathers, honest merchants, and worthy landowners. One may even come across good Christians, since the true Christian's homeland is not of this world and the glory of the Christian faith is to have produced good people in the midst of the worst corruption and under the vilest governments. The Roman Empire in its uttermost decadence was full of them. But what one will never find in such societies, I make bold to assert, is great citizens, much less a great people, and I maintain without fear of contradiction that the common level of hearts and minds will steadily diminish so long as equality and despotism remain conjoined.

I thought and said as much twenty years ago. Nothing has happened since then to make me think or say differently. Having expressed my high

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opinion of liberty at a time when it was in favor, I can hardly be blamed for standing firm at a time when others are abandoning it.

Mark well, moreover, that in this particular respect I am less different from most of my adversaries than they may assume. Is there any man of soul so base that he would rather be subject to the whim of a man no different from himself than obey laws that he himself helped to make, provided that he believed his nation to possess the virtues necessary to make wise use of its freedom? I think not. Not even despots deny that freedom is an excellent thing, only they wish to keep it all for themselves and insist on the utter unworthiness of everyone else. Thus, people differ not as to the opinion that one ought to have of liberty but as to the smaller or greater esteem in which one ought to hold one's fellow man. Hence, it is rigorously accurate to say that one's liking for absolute government is strictly proportional to one's contempt for one's own country. I ask to be allowed a little more time before accepting such a view of France.

Without boasting unduly, I think I may say that a great deal of labor has gone into this book. One brief chapter alone cost me more than a year's research. I might have cluttered my pages with notes, but it seemed better to keep relatively few in the text and place the rest at the end of the volume with references to the relevant pages. Examples and evidence may be found in these endnotes. I could provide more if anyone deems this book sufficiently valuable to ask.

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Book I

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I.1 – Contradictory Judgments of the Revolution at Its Inception

Nothing is more apt to remind philosophers and statesmen of the need for modesty than the history of the French Revolution, for no event was greater or longer in the making or more fully prepared yet so little anticipated.

Not even Frederick the Great, for all his genius, sensed what was coming. He was in contact with it yet failed to see it. Indeed, his actions were in accord with the spirit of the Revolution before the fact. He was its precursor and, in a manner of speaking, its agent. Yet he did not see it looming on the horizon, and when at last it did show its face, the remarkable new features that would set it apart from a host of other revolutions initially went unnoticed.

Outside of France the Revolution aroused universal curiosity. It made people everywhere think that new times were coming and stirred vague hopes of change and reform, but no one yet suspected what it was to become. Princes and their ministers lacked even the shadowy forebodings that agitated the masses. At first they regarded the Revolution as one of those periodic maladies to which the constitutions of all nations are liable, whose only effect is to afford new opportunities to the policy of their neighbors. If by chance they hit upon the truth about the Revolution, they did so unwittingly. To be sure, the sovereigns of the various German states, meeting in Pillnitz in 1791, proclaimed that the danger that imperiled the French monarchy was common to all the old powers of Europe and that all were just as vulnerable as France. At bottom, however, they did not believe it. Secret documents from the period reveal that they

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viewed such declarations as cunning pretexts with which they masked their real intentions or colored them for the sake of the crowd.

The princes and ministers themselves were convinced that the French Revolution was but a fleeting, local incident and that the only serious challenge it posed was how best to take advantage of it. To that end, they hatched plans, prepared for action, and entered into secret alliances. They vied over how to divide the prospective prey, fell out with one another, found common ground. There was virtually no contingency for which they did not prepare, except what actually happened.

The English, who, thanks to their own history and long practice of political freedom had a better understanding of what was happening, recognized as through a thick veil that a great revolution was under way. But they could not make out its form, and the influence that it would soon exert on their own fate and the fate of the world remained hidden from them. Arthur Young, who was traveling in France on the eve of the Revolution and recognized its imminence, had so little inkling of its significance that he wondered whether the result might not be to increase privilege. "As to the nobility and clergy," he said, "if a revolution added anything to their scale, I think it would do more mischief than good."¹

Burke, whose mind was sharpened by the loathing that the Revolution inspired in him from its inception, was nevertheless hesitant at first about what to think. What he predicted initially was that France would be sapped of its strength by the Revolution and all but destroyed. "We may assume," he said, "that France's military might will be extinguished for some time to come, and that in the next generation men will echo the ancient dictum, *Gallos quoque in bellis floruisse audivimus*" [We have heard it said that the Gauls, too, once excelled in war].

Judgment close to an event is no better than judgment from afar. In France, on the eve of the Revolution's outbreak, no one yet had a clear idea of what was about to happen. Only two of the innumerable grievance books indicate any apprehensiveness in regard to the people. What did arouse fear was the likelihood that the royal government, or "court," as it was still called, would retain the preponderance of power. What worried contemporaries was that the Estates General were weak and short-lived. There was fear that they would be vulnerable to violent intimidation. The nobility was particularly alarmed by this possibility. Any number of

¹ The quotation can be found in Arthur Young, *Travels in France* (London: George Bell and Sons, 1906), p. 98.