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# Introduction

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# 1 Frameworks

> 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 a chain 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 brewing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This 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.[1]

> For I am convinced that though they (the French) had no inkling of this, they took over from the *ancien régime* not only most of its customs, conventions, and mode of thought, but even those very ideas which prompted our revolutionaries to destroy it; that, in fact, though nothing was further from their intentions, they used the debris of the old order for building up the new. Thus if we wish to get a true understanding of the Revolution and its achievement, it is well to disregard for the moment the France of today, and to look back to the France that is no more.[2]

Alexis de Tocqueville has achieved a certain kind of iconic power. He can bear the burden. The real ordeal rests on those who appeal to or reject him. If they do either, they must reckon with his instinct and genius for locating the links between the past and future of his own time. We are left to debate whether he was right to say that, in the modern world of democratic equality, people would either face or turn away from the paradoxes of private and public liberty, and that they might prove either able or unable to meet the challenge of crafting the political weapons to make the decisions affecting them all as a community. The engagement with such a sweeping responsibility could, he was convinced, be found only in a

[1] Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," Thesis IX, in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York, 1969), pp. 257–58.
[2] *OC*, II, pt. 1, p. 69.



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culture that stressed the importance of origins, laws and transcendent goals. But none of the latter could be known without the historical imagination that would open modern self-consciousness to their importance and that needed the help of clear-sighted guides. Tocqueville counted himself among these select few.

Tocqueville was not one of those thinkers who prepare and identify their life's work along a single axis. Most who have written about him have adopted a specific aspect of his thought, whether it be political philosophy, sociology, morals and religion, the history of early American democratic institutions or the coming of the French Revolution. His major works are largely treated as separate units in his life, with the result that they stand like solitary and isolated figures in our mental landscape. Tocqueville's own compass was always much wider. No matter what inquiry he undertook, it was invested with a taste for its distant horizons where he could let his mind wander freely over problems that nest within rich layers of meaning. Any analysis oriented toward one of those isolated points of light is thus certain to be limited, especially if, in tracing the sources of his complexity as a thinker, it succeeds merely in reaffirming that he is an important thinker – a fact we all know but don't know as fully as we might.

This book is an attempt to consider and to support Tocqueville's claim in the last decade of his life that it was principally as a historian that he wanted to be remembered. Only the study of history, he came to believe, promised the route to an unraveling of the meaning of the democratic age, whose most urgent need was to set in place a foundation for avoiding its tendency to put on trial and exhaust the capacities of modern men to preserve and enhance the conditions of their liberty. Present historical consciousness could not live without this foundation, and the study of the past would show how liberty and history needed each other.

The extraordinary power of Tocqueville's thought may be illumined by looking at his view that the wholeness of his ideas, transcending its discrete and constituent parts, contained certain important truths of the world, and that these truths rested on understanding them historically. Studies of his ideas about the past have been restricted for the most part to *L'Ancien Régime*. A few modern assessments stand out from the rest. Alfred Cobban leaves us in no doubt that for him Tocqueville's work owes its enduring quality to the fact that he was a "man who had thought long and deeply on the problems of government, and that it was also the first history to be based upon a study of some of the administrative records in which the *ancien régime* was so rich."[3] As for Tocqueville's philosophy of

[3] Alfred Cobban, *Aspects of the French Revolution* (London, 1968), p. 42.

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history, Cobban does not refer to *L'Ancien Régime*, but to the *Souvenirs*, lending weight to my view that it is not only in his last work that one may find answers to his thoughts on history. Cobban further anticipates my own arguments for a synthesized view of an individual's ideas, whether they are to be found in one work or scattered throughout several. He uses Tocqueville's musings on the weaknesses of his fellow-historians' and fellow-politicians' failure to give more than token importance to causation, reducing it either to the activities and intentions of individuals, or to more enigmatic, hence irrecoverable, first causes.[4]

François Furet underlines why Tocqueville might command renewed interest on a new plane altogether.[5] Beyond Tocqueville's literary skills, and the Tocquevillian thesis that the Revolution carried the centralizing tendencies of the French monarchy to new heights, and therefore was not revolutionary enough – both of which ideas figure prominently in Cobban – Furet sees in Tocqueville a thinker who gave extended importance, not only to the social and administrative, but to the primacy of the political and the ideological, sources of the old society in crisis. Tocqueville initiated the idea that one had to look at the evolution of the specific dialectic between the state and civil society in order to grasp why France uniquely succumbed to revolution. Cobban takes the line that social and political factors were more significant than ideas in launching the Revolution on its course.[6] Furet does not disagree with the first part of Cobban's position, and he gives the political even more weight. But he disagrees that ideas had only a secondary role. He is also far more probing in his analysis of Tocqueville's knowledge and understanding of the *ancien régime*'s administrative structure, and critical of his idealized version of the aristocracy's self-image. In Furet's overall evaluation, Tocqueville powerfully intuited how the "veil of ideology hides most completely the real meaning of the events from the protagonists" and that this insight was the "fundamental contribution of *L'Ancien Régime* to a theory of revolution."[7] Tocqueville's failure to enunciate a fuller theory of the Revolution lay, according to Furet, in his inability to tie events in themselves to the ideologies that rationalized and justified them. He did not succeed, in short, in grasping the operations of the cultural dynamic that transformed minds and values, because he had become too wedded to the idea that administrative structures are in the end more determining.

Like Furet, Lynn Hunt stresses the political dimensions of the crisis facing a besieged monarchy anxious to retain its authority. She implies, in

[4] Ibid., p. 94.
[5] François Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution*, trans. Elborg Forster (Cambridge and Paris, 1981).
[6] Cobban, *Aspects of the French Revolution*, p. 20.
[7] Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution*, p. 159.

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addition, that Tocqueville's main point was that, after emasculating the aristocracy, the crown had little room to maneuver, thereby opening up space for revolutionaries of all types to continue the process of consolidating state power. Almost as an afterthought, she challenges Furet's failure to appreciate Tocqueville's narrative intentions and force, but she adds little to Furet's critique of Tocqueville's failed attempt to bring events, actors and structures into a coherent whole. For Hunt, by implication more open to breaking the law-like chain, Tocqueville was a prisoner of "the necessary course from origins to outcomes,"[8] so that he consequently stood on, but could not cross, the threshold of a political interpretation of the Revolution itself. George Armstrong Kelly resolutely says that Tocqueville turned his back forever on the perspectives of historical actors, because it was subversive of modern history writing to which he was committed in his conscious repudiation of aristocratic modes of historical reconstruction. There is for him, in short, no problem for Tocqueville after this putative decision.[9]

Both in an older work, but more emphatically in a more recent collaborative essay, Theda Skocpol appears to be the most faithful follower of the Tocquevillian idea that the Revolution transformed France into a more highly centralized and bureaucratic state.[10] Revolutionary France moved in that direction as much from the impact of international as from internal conflict – perhaps, even, more from the former. Tocqueville is praised for identifying the bureaucratic state and the movement toward modernity as the most enduring legacy of the Revolution, while Lynn Hunt is criticized for not perceiving the links between that achievement and French revolutionary politics. Skocpol and Kestenbaum argue for a closer fit between Jacobin political mobilization and the mobilization for international war. Tocqueville may have erred in drawing a direct line from the proclivities of old régime state power to revolutionary bureaucratization, but that does not affect his major achievement as a theorist of modern state formation. Tocqueville emerges from the Skocpol–Kestenbaum analysis primarily and most importantly as a sociologist of revolution, rather than as a historian concerned with such questions as intentionality and their intersection with long-term historical forces.

[8] Lynn Hunt, *Politics, Culture and Class in the French Revolution* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, 1984), p. 10.

[9] George Armstrong Kelly, *The Humane Comedy: Constant, Tocqueville and French Liberalism* (Cambridge, 1992), pp. 232–35.

[10] Theda Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia and China* (Cambridge and New York, 1979), and Skocpol and Meyer Kestenbaum, "Mars Unshackled: The French Revolution in World-Historical Perspective," in *The French Revolution and the Birth of Modernity*, ed. Ferenc Féher (Berkeley, Los Angeles and Oxford, 1990), pp. 13–29.

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One may see that a crucial anxiety is at work in Hunt's account as in Cobban's and Furet's, but far less so in Skocpol – namely, the problem of how Tocqueville's sense of history was clearly marked by the problem of how to deal with individual choice and larger structures. Françoise Mélonio, who traces Tocqueville's overall reception down to the present time, also remarks on, but takes for granted, Tocqueville's supposed lack of interest in political actors in *L'Ancien Régime*.[11] What is, however, just as significant, from my point of view, is that these historians did not take this question further, because they confined themselves to interpretations of Tocqueville as historian of the Revolution's origins.

One of the obstacles to the assessment of an individual's thought that may in some way do justice to its totality (which is my task in this book) lies in the danger into which an inquirer might be lured by the hope of valorizing the subject's critical self-consciousness to the point of imagining that it exists independently of what he experiences; or in the acts in which the subject, inquiring about his own past, himself engages. While people try to bring sense to their thoughts and actions over time, their efforts combine the haphazardness of memory, the temptations of rationalization and, no matter how much care is taken to avoid it, some form of tunnel vision – all of them risks shared by subject and investigator alike. But, for subject and critic both, these risks, embedded in the nature of the enterprise, need not, Tocqueville rightly believed – and I concur – induce paralysis or an extreme skepticism. His way of thinking will only be intelligible when as many of its facets as can be dealt with under a broader canopy are brought together. I do so on the supposition that there was an intellectual structure to start with.[12]

Tocqueville plunged into the problems raised by the mounting attacks throughout the eighteenth century on the seemingly imperishable, integrative power of custom, which ended in revolution, with its after-shocks of unpredictable severity. This study explores how and why Tocqueville thought the problems of post-*ancien régime* society undergoing change were formed both by particular and concrete events and by law-like structures and processes. Historians often, if indeed invariably, plot their inquiries along one, not both, of these trajectories. Tocqueville tried to

[11] Françoise Mélonio, *Tocqueville et les français* (Paris, 1993), pp. 146–56. See also Mélonio, "Tocqueville: aux origines de la démocratie française," which is not confined to *L'Ancien Régime*, in *The Transformation of Political Culture*, Vol. III, *The French Revolution and the Creation of Modern Political Culture*, ed. François Furet and Mona Ozouf (Paris, 1989), pp. 595–611.

[12] As I worked on this study, I found much to agree with in Karl Jaspers's Introduction to his study of Nietzsche, *Nietzsche: An Introduction to the Understanding of His Philosophical Activity*, trans. Charles F. Wallraff and Frederick J. Schmitz (Tucson, 1965), especially pp. 4–5, 15 and 17.

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travel along both. At both the particular and macrostructural levels, Tocqueville's idea of history is cradled, to a degree which has hitherto not been fully perceived, in an intellectual structure embracing purpose, choice, necessity and historical indeterminacy or contingency – questions that he tried to grapple with all his life. Focus on these elements exists in the foreground in my analysis of all of Tocqueville's works. His reflections on the sources of revolutionary change brought these metahistorical elements in his ideas to the surface and made them an integral part of his thought. For me, it is clear that his ideas will remain accessible only at a superficial level if we ignore the fact that these elements had a real place in his imagination, the positions he took on continuity and change and in his speculations on the future course of democracy.

To see Tocqueville as a thinker intellectually engaged in this way might be viewed as granting greater importance to him as a theoretical thinker than is warranted by his professed disdain for philosophy and, as one might argue, his limitations as a full-fledged philosopher of history, or finally by the contention that his ideas are more interesting in their details than in their conclusions.[13] It is impossible to ignore, but it is also possible to exaggerate, his own earliest declarations of alienation from philosophy. He wrote in this vein to a few of his friends from America where he was trying to confront the juxtaposed realities of the old and new worlds. Philosophy, he told Le Peletier d'Aunay, was the "essence of all gibberish,"[14] and to Charles Stoffels he characterized it as "an agony that man chooses and agrees to . . . inflict on himself."[15] The fact is that he inflicted it on himself. Even as he made these confessions, he told Ernest de Chabrol how frightened he was by the fact that human beings are capable of acquiring only infinitesimal fragments of certainty:

> There is no subject that is not enlarged in proportion to the [energy] with which one penetrates it, neither fact nor observation at the bottom of which one cannot discover some doubt. All the objects in this life appear to us, like certain decorations in the opera, only through a veil, preventing us from apprehending their contours with precision. There are people who enjoy living in this perpetual twilight; as for me, it tires and depresses me; I would like to hold the political and moral truths the way I hold the pen . . . I place human misery in the same order of chronic illness, death and doubt.[16]

Encapsulated in this passage is a reluctant but resigned submission to doubt in human affairs, but also some resistance to the depression that concern with ultimate questions induced in him. Just as unmistakably,

[13] For the last view, see Jon Elster, *Political Psychology* (Cambridge, 1993).
[14] Draft of a letter from Tocqueville to Le Peletier d'Aunay, November 8, 1831, *BYT*, B.I.a. (1–2). [15] Tocqueville to C. Stoffels, October 22, 1831, *Beaumont edn.*, VI, p. 370.
[16] Tocqueville to Chabrol, November 19, 1831, *BYT*, B.I.a. (1–2).

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the letter to Chabrol offers more than a hint that the veil needed to be pierced, not by accepting the clichés and pieties that obscured life's meanings, but by questioning them. And the immediate and long-term lessons that the journey to America gave Tocqueville, lessons to which he returned for the remainder of his life, will be missed unless his need to get as close to the bottom of the doubt as possible is recognized. Much of this book is devoted to Tocqueville's struggle with this and related questions.

## II

In assembling the pieces of an argument signifying the many themes in Tocqueville's approach to history, the question of how each of them might be unpacked, enlarged and glossed had to be faced. I had no problem in deciding to place the conceptual issues to the fore and deliberately to avoid the more traditional chronological conventions. Following the latter approach in fact tends to obscure the quality of Tocqueville's interpretive powers. Furthermore, in deciding that the *Souvenirs* are absolutely central to Tocqueville's handling of the tensions between individual choice and historical structures, I am taking the next step and wagering that there is some considerable advantage in treating them not in the chronological order in which Tocqueville's works appeared. The *Souvenirs* captured a personal record of a major political crisis. They brought together many formerly tentative ideas with which Tocqueville felt he had to come to terms. While the proximate and long-term meaning of the Revolution of 1789 was never far from his thoughts, the *Souvenirs* proved to be a decisive turning point in that they led directly to his study of the breakdown of the *ancien régime*. They acted as a kind of prism through which he could see into the past and into the future, sometimes with a clarity that startled him. The second reason for avoiding a straight chronology is that it runs the risk of distorting how many people actually order their ideas and conduct their inquiries. Tocqueville felt no commitment to obeying the dictates of a traditional chronology that would nurture the belief that events follow a system and an order. His very deep need to reach out for psychological verisimilitude and to assert his intellectual integrity fought against such an approach.

There is, in other words, a better way to achieve a reenactment of Tocqueville's concerns. There are foundations to be unearthed, as he was fond of saying when he evoked Georges Cuvier's paleontological research,[17] but many of the disinterred pieces take on their sharp edges only after several revisits, not only to their original sites, but to the new

[17] Tocqueville to Beaumont, November 22, 1836, *OC*, VIII, pt. 1, p. 175.

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sites where Tocqueville fitted the pieces into his continuing imaginative rediscoveries of the themes that filled his life. The ten years ending in 1850 gave him newer ways of seeing the past than at the time he was writing the *Democracy,* especially in his belief that he had something even more meaningful to say about how human beings act in the mass.[18] It was not that he had any sense, as he grew older, of repudiating any of the fundamental principles that he had laid down in the 1830s. There were "irrevocable propositions and maxims" which formed the gritty ingredients common to all serious ideas. What eluded him, and remained a mystery, he remarked wryly, was how his own mental transformations over a lifetime had occurred.[19] He came somewhat closer to solving this enigma by speaking about how work and continuing relationships and interest in the world insulated the soul against the cold hand of death and presumably made him more patient. To succeed demanded, as he said repeatedly, constant scrutiny of the ideas that guided life in the past in light of the ideas that were changing society and thoughts about it.[20]

To convey some notion of what this meant for Tocqueville, it is therefore best to make the journey from the narrative of the *Souvenirs* to *L'Ancien Régime* by means of apparent detours to lines of inquiry he had started when he was younger. If necessary, the same terrain will be crossed more than once to ensure that the insights he collected and stored to bring them out at the right moment are not lost. As he candidly admitted, he had no expectation that his view of recapturing the past was either fully consistent or coherent. If striving for either consistency or coherency satisfied an aesthetic longing, the result should not, he felt, be confused with a notion that a final historical reality followed historical inquiry.

Lynn Hunt rightly intimates that Tocqueville does not entirely eschew the narrative form in *L'Ancien Régime*. His use of it in the *Souvenirs* presents a version of events and individuals interacting during periods of short duration, but he also shows that he knows they are being touched by underlying structural contexts, as in his constant appeals not only to the immediate past and future of what he narrates, but also to the more distant events of 1789 and 1830. His story should not therefore be seen exclusively as a narrative of short duration wherein quotidian choices are considered. The methodological boundaries supposedly separating that kind of narrative from the narrative of long duration are important but

[18] Tocqueville to Kergorlay, December 15, 1850, *OC*, XIII, pt. 2, p. 229.
[19] Tocqueville in a conversation of February 16, 1854, recorded by Mrs. Grote, *OC*, VI, pt. 2, p. 415.
[20] Tocqueville to Kergorlay, February 3, 1857, *OC*, XIII, pt. 2, p. 325.

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not impermeable. If this view is plausible, his description of the durable and slowly changing structures of the *ancien régime* should itself therefore be seen in no small part as a narration of events that brings those structures to historical consciousness and cognition. Together these two aspects – though they are not totally distinct – of narrative enable one to grasp important features of Tocqueville's conception of history. He did not, it seems to me, wish to free himself entirely from what Furet calls the "tyranny of the historical actors'" own conception of their experience; and the difficulty of the "mingling of genres" – the mixing of narrative and analysis – troubled him a good deal.[21]

My use of "narrative" also denotes not only what Hayden White conveniently sums up as "the way in which a historical interpretation is achieved and the mode of discourse in which a successful understanding of matters historical is represented."[22] White finds support from Louis Mink's description of it as "a primary cognitive instrument . . . rivaled, in fact, only by theory and by metaphor as irreducible ways of making the flux of experience comprehensible."[23] I believe it is also particularly useful to conceive of narrative in a wider sense as carrying with it an ideological load, especially, as we shall see, the high degree to which Tocqueville's tastes and political preferences provide the energy of his *Souvenirs*. In arguing for the presence of the argumentative idiom in historical narrative, Alasdair MacIntyre casts additional light on what I believe were Tocqueville's intentions. "A tradition not only embodies the narrative of an argument, but it is only to be recovered by the argumentative retelling of the narrative."[24] Once Tocqueville chose narrative as his methodology for the *Souvenirs*, he came face to face with the structure of a preexisting narrative. He worked within it but not without making it work for him, shaping it by selecting and omitting incidents, events, char-

[21] I am questioning the first of Furet's views, and greatly qualifying the second. See *Interpreting the French Revolution*, pp. 15, 18. Reinhart Koselleck reminds us that no privileged status should be ascribed to historical narrative. He isolates the theoretical differences between narrative and description, coupling the first with "events," and the second with structures. At the same time, he points out that in practice the boundary between the two methods is not sealed tight. See his essay, "Representation, Event and Structure," in Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. Keith Tribe (Cambridge, Mass., and London, 1985), pp. 105–15.

[22] See Hayden White, "The Politics of Historical Interpretation: Discipline and Desublimation," in *The Politics of Interpretation*, ed. W. J. T. Mitchell (Chicago and London, 1983), p. 122. Tocqueville was understandably not concerned with, nor could he have been cognizant of, "the conceptually underdetermined sort [of historical knowledge] that appears in the form of a conventional narrative."

[23] Louis Mink, "Narrative Form as a Cognitive Instrument," in *Historical Understanding*, ed. Brian Fay, Eugene O. Golob and Richard T. Vann (New York, 1987), p. 185.

[24] Alasdair MacIntyre, "Epistemological Crises, Dramatic Narrative and the Philosophy of Science," *Monist*, 60 (1977), p. 461.

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